Black as the Forest

Lyv Aiken

STORYPDF

Complete English text · US Letter reading edition

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About this edition

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— Chapter One —

ORGANIZED MAYHEM

— Eveline —

I was lounging on an extremely comfortable chair, near by a pool, in my bikini, and taking in the sun. And the most marvellous thing about it all was that I'm paid for this.

I was quietly enjoying a scrumptious margarita, doing my best impression of bacon, sizzling under the heat of the sun.

I heard the steps before I saw him.

I tilted my head slightly in his general direction when he came into view, but I didn't rise, neither did I lowered my sunglasses.

"Enjoying this beautiful day, miss Devon?" he asked me.

"Obviously," I answered jovially.

He was a well-looking man, in his fifties, yet with still the signs of youth not completely erased from his eyes. He was one of those men who aged well—like wine—with salt and pepper on his temples, making him appear more sophisticated than old.

He sat on a lounge chair next to mine. Not lying down but sitting on its side, looking at me, elbows resting on his knees. Not many men can pull out a white suit, but he could. The last few buttons of his shirt undone, no tie. He looked quite at ease.

He'd been a bachelor all his life and it showed. Not the type of bachelor keeping himself mostly away from relationships, but more the type who walks into a club with a gorgeous woman on each arm—a bit of a player. He had a few kids—most Alphas tend to make sure they have an heir or two—but he's never settled down.

He's been flirting with me ever since I arrived—more out of habit or amiability than with any ulterior motive—though, I'm sure if I'd shown true interest, he wouldn't have hesitated.

I'm not vain or anything, but I know I look nice—all the money I give to my beautician is not for nothing.

Then again, I know he's not pursuing me seriously. No one ever does, or at least those who do either back off when they learn of my family, or are interested only because of my family. I'm generally approached or shunned because of my brother.

There are times when this sucks.

On the other hand, people have to be ridiculously stupid or ill-informed to attempt anything nefarious towards me, which has insulated me from a lot of crap.

But I can't really be mad at my brother for how others behave. Besides, he's the one who gave me this ridiculously nice job.

"Are you still leaving us tomorrow?" Alpha Garcia asked me.

"Unless there's a last-minute surprise, then yes."

He smiled at me. "How about a little last-minute surprise then?"

"What do you have in mind?" I answered with the same mischievous tone he aimed at me.

"There is a summit on the other coast. I've been asked to come, but it would be nice to have one as pretty as yourself to accompany me."

"Are you trying to gain bragging points by having a Devon as your plus one in a political shindig?" The corner of my mouth tugged upward a bit.

"Pretty much," he shamelessly admitted.

"Give me the details, and I'll call home. See how it goes," I said. "I do love a good party."

My brother was up North actually, so I didn't technically called home.

He was taking care of a conflict or another up there. Quite frankly, it's pretty hard to keep up with him. He's always going somewhere—to help an ally, or offer backup, stop a dispute, make deals, conquer some territory, or fight something or other.

This time it was shutting down a troublesome coven, I think. Or maybe that was last week?

He hasn't been home in a few weeks, going from one place to another, keeping check ups with me and home via calls.

Turns out, after he asked me a few questions—like who are some of the people going to this shindig—he told me he had to meet with one or two in person, and it would probably be easier there, than doing a bigger detour to their respective homes.

So I could go and have fun, and work on some business relations at the same time, while meeting up with him to leave together with him once done. And of course, being paid for it.

There are days when I really love my life.

— Darren —

The household was in chaos.

I tried to stay out of the way, but it was quite impossible. So I did what I do best and cleaned up the messes behind everyone.

I walked from place to place, picking up the slack, or just sorting things that were falling apart.

Organizing events, it's pretty much like that—a sort of organized mayhem. One that seems to be going nowhere until you reach the finishing line and somehow, everything strangely worked out. You ask yourself along the way, 'why the hell did you get yourself involved in all this?', but when all is said and done, you begin to wonder what could have been done better, what was great and should be kept as such, and all in all, planning for the next time.

My family is not indulging in massive events like these very often, and generally keeps things down a notch or three, and indulge in smaller meet ups. But hosting the Northwest Summit, or any such summit for that matter, is generally a strong mark of prestige, and most packs fights for the privilege each year.

This year, my father won.

The fact that he's been preparing to hand things down to my older brother Michael, as been a strong factor for his decision. I think part of him wanted to leave the scene at his peak. Most Alphas tend to give up their position before they get old enough—or worst, weak enough—to be challenged. That being said, giving the power to someone unprepared or too young is very risky too. In both cases, someone could just come in and challenge them. One fight could reverse everything, make them lose all status and power. Generations of work, lost in one fell swoop.

It used to be mostly the way to become Alpha in the first place. Back before human anthropologists even decided to call leaders of your run-of-the-mill wolf packs, Alphas. A lot before that.

But having the strongest couple mating together, kinda had the side effect of breeding stronger wolf. Back in nature, for wolves, other pups tend not to survive, so only the alpha pair tend to breed, but werewolves are different. Part of us is human, and weak or strong, as long as you have everything required for survival—like shelter and food—you can survive just fine. So werewolf packs don't have just a single breeding pair.

And the pups of Alphas have a better chance at being stronger. And like in every society, political marriages have been a thing. So now, an Alpha bloodline nearly always creates stronger wolves, which as led with time to nepotism and primogeniture.

Darwin and the laws of the jungle. For us, it gets a lot more literal than most.

Nowadays, nearly all Alphas are sons of Alphas. It was easier, you know who's gonna be the next in line from the get go. The Alpha can train his heir and prepare him properly. So the son becomes far better equipped for the position than anyone else, which is why they get rarely challenged.

Unless an Alpha is abusive, or dangerous for the pack, or getting too old, it rarely even happens. Even then, generations of selective breeding has made some bloodline far too disproportionately strong compared to others.

Someone like my father, even as an 80 years old, could still be potentially more powerful than some minor wolf in our pack at their prime.

But again, like in my family, some Alphas have multiple pups and succession wars have occurred. Those are the best positioned to take power. Most find it simpler to name the oldest has heir, and not put any ideas in any other son's head, but other families choose the most capable instead. Though, it often turns up that the oldest get more experience, so he gets there first anyway.

In my family, Michael, the oldest, is the one to be the proper heir.

He has spent his entire life preparing and training to become a perfect Alpha.

I think he's gonna be fine.

Our relationship hasn't always been great, but I respect him. He's a good guy, and he has a lot on his shoulders.

I found Michael in his office, crouching numbers and tearing his hair out.

He does that often, I fear he might go bald before he hits fifty.

"Need help with that?" I asked.

He raised his head to look at me. "Please, for all that is holy, save me please."

I laughed and took a look at his laptop.

"You know, there's not that much left to do," I said as I took the seat he gave me.

"Speak for yourself," he said while dropping on the small couch in pure exhaustion.

I went at it.

He had made a couple of mistakes which led to things not balancing properly, but it didn't take me too long to find it. It would have been a little faster if he'd tell me it wasn't balancing right to begin with, but by the time I got things moving, he was asleep on the couch, so I let him rest and dealt with it on my own.

After an hour marked only by the sound of my typing and occasional shifting of papers, Michael broke the silence.

“So, why are you helping me exactly?” He still had an arm over his face and stayed lying down, unmoving.

“Because you apparently need my help,” I said matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, because you’re just altruistic.”

I stopped.

“What do you accuse me of exactly?” Anger bubbling in my voice.

“Just that I think you have an ulterior motive,” he said still unmoving.

“Ulterior motive? Like what exactly? I spent all day helping whoever needed it most. You know, if you didn’t want any help you could have just said so. I just spent an hour doing your job to get accused of scheming whatever. That hurts man.” He got up halfway through my rant, sitting properly to look at me, his expression unreadable.

“Easy there. I’m not accusing you of anything,” he said.

“Oh! Really? Because that’s not what this sounds like,” I spat.

“I just thought you were looking for a good excuse to hide from Mom and Dad, I wasn’t implying anything worse,” he said apologetically.

I inhaled deeply before letting it out in a sigh.

“Aren’t you hiding too?” I finally asked, then resumed my work. I saw Michael wince in my peripheral.

“Aren’t we all?” he finally conceded.

“Then why accused me of it then?”

He shrugged.

I continued my work for a full ten minutes while he said nothing.

“I’m nearly done,” I finally said.

He raised his head promptly. “Yeah?” he said, hopeful.

“Yeah.”

“This quick?”

"I think if you've been sleeping more these last few nights, you'd been able to clear this quicker."

"Yeah, maybe," he conceded.

"This is stressing you out?"

"Maybe." He rubbed his face in his hands then glided his fingers through his hair all the way to the back, letting his head fall forward after, in a sign of weariness.

"Something else stressing you out?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"Things are gonna work out fine. You're gonna be fine. Mom and Dad's level of stress is gonna go down which is gonna be easier for everyone. Fred is gonna be back in time to give a hand. Kevin and Kate are like champs in the garden sorting things out. I mean, everyone is helping, even Max got this head out of his ass, which is quite an achievement." That got a smile on Michael's face. "And in a few days, it's all gonna be back to normal, we'll all return to annoying each other and a relatively normal peace. Dad would have made one of the best moves of his career, and it will open things properly for when you take over. Whenever that is. And if you're lucky, he's not gonna be on your ass too much then."

"You nearly make it sound nice."

"Isn't it? You having doubts?"

"No, just insecurities maybe. There are some preparations that are a little harder to get going."

"Like what?" I began, then it dawned on me. "Like a wife?" I asked. "And kids?"

"No one likes to put in power someone who can't have future generations."

"That's some medieval bullshit."

"That's exactly Dad's bullshit."

"True," I conceded. "He gives you a hard time for not finding a mate?"

"Not exactly. He's not really the type to say it out loud, just very passive-aggressive about it."

"Dude, not everyone settles early. You still have plenty of time."

"What if I don't have a mate?"

"What if you don't? No one is stopping you from finding someone you like. You can make that bond with anyone. You can even find a nice daughter of Alpha somewhere. Make it political and everything. That would give Dad a massive hard on."

He grimaced.

“What?” I asked.

“Made bonds are never as strong as a natural one. I mean, it’s fine and everything, but in my situation, it puts me in a weakened position. Which is not something Dad would handle well.”

“Firstly, if you find someone politically acceptable, it would put you in an advantageous situation, so that would cancel out whatever weakness it could possibly cause. Secondly, you’re ideally gonna spend years with that woman. You better not get someone just to please your own father. You’re gonna be Alpha, so make sure your backbone is in place because he’s never gonna respect you otherwise, and if he doesn’t respect you, then it’s gonna be hard for the pack to respect you. And thirdly, you don’t have to marry to become Alpha, for that matter, you don’t have to even have kids. For that matter, you could even choose a nephew as heir if you want to. You got five brothers, there’s a good chance you’re gonna get one or two of those eventually.”

“Some could see this as validation for a challenge.”

“Dude, everything can be validation for a challenge if you’re motivated enough.”

He laughed at that.

“How can you be so Zen about this? None of us are Zen about this.”

“You’re not because you have stakes in this, like our parents. Fred and Kev’ve been raised always on their toes to step in if anything goes to shit. So, they’re always waiting for the other shoe to drop. I don’t have stakes in any of it,” I explained.

“So does Tim and Max, yet…” He left the words hang as if that was self-explanatory, which kinda was.

“Tim found Anabella less than a year ago and he’s barely coming to the full realization of the implications of this, and he constantly wonders where he’s at. And Ana is a tornado and he can barely hang on for dear life. Max, well Max is young and stupid. If we’re lucky, he’s gonna grow out of it, but I’m not holding my breath or anything.”

Michael snorted at that.

“I don’t have a mate,” I continued. “Or expectations from anyone in my life. Not for my career, or position in the pack, or a significant other, not even from my friends, or family. It’s hard to get stressed when there’s no stakes.”

“Maybe.” There was an undecipherable emotion behind his features. He had nice features, pleasant, kind of a Joe average type face. Though, he had airs of assurances around him, his own brand of

charisma I guess, without it being overwhelming. A bit like a guy next door, though, one that could step it up if needed.

“I’m sure you’re gonna find your place soon,” he told me.

“Sure,” I said sarcastically.

— Chapter Two —

IN A DARK CORNER

— Darren —

The evening was going fairly well. I'd just escape the kitchen after the dishwasher broke down and I'd spent an hour fixing things, calling a last-minute repairman, and helping to organize things in the meantime. No events I've ever seen as ever gone without a hitch. That being said, if this was all that was to go awry, it wasn't too bad. It wasn't awesome in the kitchen right now, but it was under-control, and would be soon back to normal—no one the wiser.

I didn't even pass the message about the mess to my parents or Michael. They were all seriously busy, and could do without the worry. I might tell them later, but again, maybe it wasn't even necessary.

On the plus side, little things like that kept me from being bored to death.

Most of the talks with the guests were fairly superficial in nature. Especially when my interlocutor would realize I held no position, no title, I had no important job, and was here only because of birthright, and not usefulness.

Generally, in such events, either I try to find something to do, or do my best impersonation of a wallflower. I'd learn a ton of things this way. Observations are sometimes the best teacher. Nonetheless, I learned more gossip than useful skills. Which for someone in my position can be pretty useless for anything other than navigating figurative social landmines whenever exposed to the local politic of packs—of which I was not an active member to begin with.

Normally, I get pretty grumpy about those type of events, but strangely, I'd been pretty Zen about this one. I didn't even feel the need to force myself to be here, and was in a general uncharacteristically good mood.

I'd begone to think I might have suddenly grown more mature or something, until the real cause hit me in the face, or more specifically, the nose.

The first few sniffs, I didn't realize that something was even catching my attention, subconsciously—as I was too focused on my surroundings—until realization slowly dawned on me.

I'd picked up a smell. One that sidestepped my neurones all the way to my hindbrain.

That was no normal smell, and I couldn't stop myself from being drawn to it.

I'd just caught wind of my mate.

As far as these things went, finding your mate was either slowly building up, as a light pull at first until it intensified—that was generally when coming from someone you've long known and been exposed too. Or completely out of the blue—when being from a complete stranger you've never met.

Given the present situation and the fact that I'd never felt even the slightest of pull, meant I was facing the latter.

For a brief moment I froze.

I got caught in a tornado of emotions. Excitement. Worry. Fear. Wonder. Joy. It was hard to focus on any one of them.

Getting a mate meant a lot of things for a wolf. Partnership. Care. Support. There was even stories about not ever being able to reach one's own true potential without one. Though, this could have been just stories told to kids for them to accept better the facts that the whole process has always felt so random and convoluted, and out of your own control.

But there was something very enticing about the idea of having someone out there specially just for you. And the natural bond made a lot of things stronger, more intense. It wasn't necessarily a love at first sight type scenario, but it did steamroll the whole process.

However, the strong bond didn't made anything perfect, it doesn't change a person either. So an asshole, stays an asshole, with or without the mate bond. Which can make a relationship very complicated. The fact that the bond is seen as sacred culturally and blasphemous to reject, and that the rejection is physically and psychologically harmful, and leaves you permanently without the preternatural advantage that it could 'theoretically,' give you—meant that most refused to break them regardless. Even when things weren't working out too well.

Though, usually most tend to become infatuated fairly quickly, which made it a little easier, if not scarier, in and of itself.

But getting a mate could have a lot more implications.

I could suddenly be linked to someone from abroad. Does she moves in with me, or do I leave the country? If one of us as to move, you need to start over, new job, and everything—far from your family, and friends, and support system. If I'd been in Michael's position, she'd move in and automatically become Luna. But given my situation, it could go either way.

On the other hand, only high-ranking members of packs were present. If she was the daughter of an Alpha, maybe she expected to land a title—which I can't give. Or, if her father doesn't have a son, I could land the Alpha position. That could change everything.

But again, she could be just a personal assistant or something, not of high-rank. Or maybe a woman twice my age. For that matter, she could be hardly not my type. What then? Do I roll with it? Do I back off? Can I back off? The bond is a freaking strong thing, I might not even be able to back off. She could be a massive bitch, the type I'd never go for otherwise, but I might go for it now because of the freaking bond. I'm not really sure how much agency one has against a bond—at least until it is broken. And I might be far more motivated to make it work than I would otherwise, or at least try to. Which is a little terrifying. That can be a good way to run your life into the ground.

Maybe this would change my life for the best, maybe for the worst. Or maybe I'd stay pretty much where I am, only not single, or maybe single if I'm rejected, or I reject her.

Of all those possibilities, the one that weighed the worst on me was probably maintaining my life as is.

Which is sad.

I'm not happy.

I'm not fulfilled.

And I've been stalling for change.

Finishing my degree, has been a good enough excuse. My family and pack is here. My life is here. It's hard to find, choose, and join a pack without a mate as a justifiable reason too. Especially for someone of my pedigree.

This could be the kick in the ass I've been waiting for. But if this led me nowhere in this regard, it could feel like a let down. Which is probably a lot of weight to put on someone's shoulders. Even more so, one that I've never even met.

I tried to move quietly, tracking the smell, trying to pinpoint who it comes from—and the fact that the room was brimming with people was frustrating.

It also dawned on me that meeting her in the middle of the who's who of wolf society was probably not the best idea. It could easily become a bit of a spectacle, and going right or wrong, might not do me any good either way, whilst happening in the middle of a packed room. So I tried to take a distance. Move furtively not to attract any attention.

It could have gone faster, but I took my time, I had time.

Until I found her.

I moved around some, trying to make sure I was not mistaken. That I've pinpointed the smell clearly. But it was hard to look away from her, which confirmed my assumptions better than my attempt at triangulation.

She was pretty. Tall, jet-black hair, dark eyes and the skin tone of someone who spent a lot of time under the sun. She was talking to Alpha Jenkins or Jansen, I don't really remember, and it was hard to even care about who she talked to, or anything else for that matter.

Her, on the other hand, I had no idea who she was. I'd never seen her, in person or picture, online, social media, nothing.

She was wearing an elegant midnight blue dress that fell all the way to the floor and left her shoulders bare. It was simple, yet the fabric didn't look cheap and the fit was perfect enough to suspect professional intervention ratter than off-the-rack, which most probably meant some extent of wealth. Which mainly, in these types of settings, meant rank too.

I couldn't see if she was with someone in particular. I couldn't hear what she was saying amongst the constant buzzing of conversations around me, but I saw her smile a few times. It looked like a kind smile, not forced but genuine.

When she moved, I shook myself out of my reverie, and wondered for a moment what to do.

If I kept watching, I was moving slowly into stalker-ish territory—which I was not comfortable with—but if I approached her, she would automatically know what was going on, and it would happen right in the middle of the room.

I've seen once or twice people finding their mates. It's generally not subtle, and it includes a lot of staring. I've seen once a pair jump one another in public, and barely stopping themselves from ripping their clothes off and humping like rabbits right then and there.

I was pretty sure I could contain myself, as evident by my present behaviour, but that could also change after I've gotten physically closer.

And then what if she's with someone, and he gets pissed at me for this. I've heard stories of situations escalating to jealousy and violence pretty quickly.

My father would kill me if I started a territorial challenge with some Alpha or something, right in the middle of his perfect event.

And then I noticed her body language change. Her attention sharpened, focusing on nothing in particular, moving slowly at first, then stopping short, eyes wide, searching around.

She caught my scent.

I went into a mini panic-attack and moved out of the room, heading straight for the terrace.

All in all, it was probably not my greatest moment.

For a few seconds I felt like a complete idiot, standing outside alone.

There was a few people outside, but most were standing near the fire pits or sitting on the outside sofas, chatting quietly, laughing.

I decided it might be wiser not to stand around like an idiot, and just go and sit somewhere.

There were a few empty chairs near one of the fires, free of people, quiet, where I could sit and think about the next step. As I turned around to sit, I stopped dead, motionless.

She had just rushed out, her eyes a little wild, then she spotted me. I just smiled in what I'd like to believe was a suave way, but more realistically was probably a little awkward.

She smiled back.

"Hi." I said.

"Hi." Her voice was soft, a little deep and breathy.

She beamed at me and it was like the sun just rose. Well, so far so good, I guess.

I gesture to one of the chairs, and she moved in to join me.

"Erm, hi," she said again when she reached me, nervously pulling at her neckless.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Darren."

"Eveline," she said as she extended her hand. "But you can call me Eva."

I took her hand. The gesture simple. We'd both done it dozens of times tonight already. But there was nothing normal about it this time. A frisson ran from my fingers to the top of my scalp the moment our skin touched and there was a tingling feeling, reminiscent of the sensual caress on an erogenous zone during sex, where the contact lingered. I guess I know now why mates have so much difficulty keeping their hands off each other. If this was what a handshake was doing to me, it was hard to imagine the intensity of full body contact, skin against skin, deep kisses, and far more delicious endeavours.

I shook myself out of my day(wet)dream, and saw her do the same kind of shivering that I did, which made me smile even more.

I reluctantly let go of her hand, now completely unsure of my self-control if I didn't—of which she seemed to be saddened by—which cheered me up.

We slowly sat in front of one another, and I realized I had no idea where to start. Playing twenty questions was probably the most anticlimactic thing I could initiate, but otherwise, what then? We didn't know anything but our first names. How not to make a blundering mess out of myself.

She rubbed her hands nervously on her legs, smoothing the inexistent wrinkles on her dress.

"What do you want to do?" I asked her. Her eyes snapped to mine and I saw her hesitations—I think she might have thought along the same lines as me.

"Ehm. Maybe you can tell me a little bit about yourself?" she said tentatively.

"Well, this is my home. Stonewillow is my father's pack. And soon my eldest brother's." I added the last sentence afraid that she might get the wrong idea, and think she was becoming Luna here or something. "I'm working on finishing my degree, and doing an internship at the family's business. I come from a large family, I stay active, travel when I can, and enjoy good beer, and suck at ping pong."

She laughed. So, casual worked. One point for me.

"I'm from Blakemore. It's my brother's pack. I'm also from a large family. I didn't go to university mostly because I've no idea what to study, so, in the meantime, I work for my brother. Mostly I'm a glorified secretary and occasional ambassador. I'm not sure if I'm gonna make this my career but I kinda enjoy it. I travel a lot. Enjoy social events and the beach. And I'm terrible at team sports. All of them."

It was a little hard to focus on the words when she could do so much better thing with those lips.

Focus Darren.

She gave me a knowing smile.

"I want to kiss you so bad right now," I blurted. My thoughts had now bypassed my brain altogether, and gone straight to vocalization.

"Me too." That's all she said, and it short-circuited whatever reason was left in me.

I rose and pressed my lips against hers.

By the moon and nights, it was beyond anything I've ever expected. I'm pretty sure I sat next to her at some point, but I'm not too sure when it happened. But I know I put my hand on her waist and lifted her on top of me. Deepening the kiss. She let out a little squeal of surprise which I used as my way in. Moving my tongue against hers, which she answered with equal enthusiasm, and soon her hands were knotted in my hair while mine were roaming from her hair, and neck, and shoulders, to her waist, travelling up and down along her body. Whenever I touched her exposed skin, I felt the jolts, like static electricity, only pleasant. Very, very pleasant. It made her clothes suddenly very

annoying, and in the way of the sensation. But even through the clothes, there was a magnetism, a pull that was impossible to resist.

The heat of her body pressed against mine made me dizzy, and I could not form any coherent thoughts other than 'More'. That's all that I wanted. More.

Judging by the way she pressed herself against me—or how her body moved in slow sinuous motions—I guess she felt pretty much the same.

Somewhere in my brain, a little voice kept me from slamming her underneath me, and start ripping her clothes off to bury myself inside her. But it was a very tiny voice, barely audible, and oh so easy to ignore.

I managed to keep things PG-13, but only barely.

I'm not sure if our make-out session lasted ten minutes or ten hours, but when we finally came out for air, our breathing was laboured, our skin feverish, and our lips tingling from the prolonged activity. We just stared in each other's eyes, lips barely apart, our chests rising and falling rapidly in unison.

We began giggling like teenage girls.

I put feather light kisses everywhere I could reach. The corner of her mouth, her nose, and cheeks, and jawline. And she did the same. I moved slowly to her neck and collarbone, and judging by her reaction, I was doing great.

I was like a blind man putting to memory a person's face and body, only I decided that hands were not enough, and mouth was far more efficient at the task. And fun. So, so much more fun.

— Eveline —

I was sitting on a stranger's laps doing things no reasonable girl would do, at the workplace, amongst the most influential people around, and I couldn't care less.

I've had friends tell me about their mates, and how it was nothing like, well, anything or anyone else. And the stories always felt surreal, exaggerated, girl fantasies at best. Oh, how wrong was I?

After high school, my brother gave me an ultimatum, school or work. Kaden was always the one to give the ultimatums. He was older than me by fifteen years and was already Alpha when I was born. When I was young, I'd been infuriated by the fact that he was always the one doing discipline, telling me no. It's only after the triplets were born, and I was a little older, than I realize how chaotic things could get at home without it. Dad has had a health scare and had become super laid back with us. Or maybe it was a gender thing, or a responsibility thing. From what I learned, he's always been really harsh on Kaden. But my sister and I, we were like little princesses and Mom

was barely less indulgent than dad. They were having their second chance at a family, Dad was not Alpha anymore—giving the position away when he thought he was about to bite it—and he acted like he was on a constant holiday.

But when I began working after graduation, and saw a bit of what actually happens behind the curtain, I was blown away.

Kaden never asked me to keep up with his schedule, thanks the heavens, because I could never do 80 hours a week, seven days a week. A quiet week is maybe 60 hours, but some are even worse. On top of that, he trains and workouts whenever he can, and he's been doing it since he was a teen. Studying while working, and expending the businesses and pack. The last few generations of Alphas had done great for our pack, but none on the scale of Kaden. And that's not mentioning all the time he spends away.

No matter how many times he told me and the girls to get our shit together and do something more useful than shopping, or partying, or gossiping, or indulging in whatever. Never did I get a wake up call like actually watching him work.

It made me feel so wasteful of my time and efforts. It made most of my conversations, and activities, and hobbies suddenly sound so silly and pointless.

Transitioning to work was hard. Like really hard. And I kept messing up. He was surprisingly kind to me. I saw him bark orders all day and get angry at stupid mistakes at others. But he told me, "make the effort, and I'm gonna help you, mess around and I'll kick you out without a second thought". And I believed him.

It's been two years now, and it's kinda fun. And I really love the ambassador-like part of it. I think it plays to my strengths. I've put in the efforts, learn the faces and names, polished my appearance to something more mature, learned the parlance. And I've been rocking this ever since.

It's getting harder and harder for me to imagine doing anything else.

I was going to get myself another flute of Champagne, in a nice hall, surrounded by important people, and I was crushing this.

And then I smelled him.

It was like home, and the sun, and laughter, and the wilds bottled up in the most powerful cologne I've ever smelled. But ratter than overwhelm my senses to give me a headache—like a strong perfume would—instead it drew me in like a freaking Axe body spray commercial. Like pheromones, and hypnotism, and libido condensed in an irresistible air-current. I felt like Pepe LePew drifting in the air following behind someone I hadn't even seen.

I tried—really tried—not to make a fool out of myself. Not to start pushing people out of the way. I made a quick and polite excuse when someone tried to stop me to talk. At some point I thought I could smell him everywhere and got so confused.

Had I lost his tracks?

I was beginning to hyperventilate when a breeze from outside reached me.

I rushed out.

He was there, right there, in front of me.

I'd say a hair under six feet, so in my heels we were pretty close to the same height. Dark brown hair, brown eyes. His hair looked artfully tussled, his suit impeccable, his skin naturally tanned, and his smile contagious.

It was hard to believe that I was finally in front of my mate. I tried to recall everything people told me about mates, but it was like my thoughts were swimming in vodka-laced jello.

I tried to keep acting like a respectable woman, and was half afraid I'd do something ridiculous or stupid that would make him recoil. He was a few years older, I guessed, and was probably not into overgrown teenagers. So I kept everything in check.

Until he mentioned kissing me.

My legs became cold pastas which made the fact that I was sitting a blessing, but what followed… Whatever grace, and dignity, and maturity I was wrapping myself in tonight was gone. It took everything in me not to groan at the thoughts that crossed my mind.

"Eva!" came a familiar voice and I froze with my hands down Darren's shoulders, his lips right above my breasts. As if he could read my thoughts, he stopped and looked at me as I looked at Mads by the door.

His eyes were a little big and worried.

"Are you okay?" he asked, coming to me.

"Yes!" I said quickly.

Then I noticed Darren's hair going every which way. It looked like he had styled his hair with a lawnmower. I tried to smooth out the damages I did, then I noticed how this looked from Mads perspective. And I was still straddling Darren, my dress hiked up on my thighs. Nothing screamed respectable dignitary about me right now. And I could only imagine what he was thinking while watching the little sister of his boss getting freaky in the yard, with the son of our host at that.

He marched to us, and I quickly got up, put my dress down and tried to put my hair in place. Darren getting that something was happening, got up and took a look at Mads.

Mads looked at me suspiciously then said, "I just came to inform you that Alpha Devon is pulling in right now and would like to meet with you, before doing his meeting with Alpha Bjornson."

"Oh, crap!" I muttered. "I'll be right in."

He nodded at me, then moved back in, but I knew he was staying close. It was kinda his job to do so.

"Ehm." I turned to Darren.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"My bodyguard."

He raised an eyebrow at me.

"My brother doesn't like me to travel on my own, especially for business," I explained.

"I guess you have work to do?" He gestured at the door. He looked a little sad to cut this short. It was cute on him. And flattering.

"Yeah. I didn't think he'd be in this early."

He checked his watch. "It's pretty late actually."

I smiled sheepishly, which got his eyes to lower to my lips, which made my stomach do a backflip. But I couldn't contain the giggles at the ridiculousness of his looks.

"What?" he asked confused.

"It's your hair. I did quite a number on it."

He put his fingers through his hair, and I tried to help him tame it back while giggling, which got him smiling again. He didn't look too self-conscious and mostly let me do it, enjoying the whole thing.

I felt like I was overexerting my facial muscles in the best way so much I was smiling.

When I turned to go back in, I felt his fingers lace through mine as he joined me inside.

— Darren —

I had half a mind dragging her in a dark corner to do all sorts of things to that woman, but I guess ruining her career was not the best way to ease a woman into a relationship. So I railed everything in, and just enjoyed the feeling of her hand in mine.

Did I just think in terms of relationship?

Huh?

Once inside, her head whipped around and I checked what got her attention.

Some guy was walking in.

He was tall, like really tall, like a head above mine tall. Hair so black it was nearly blue, dark eyes, and a don't-mess-with-me expression on his face that seemed to be his default setting, or maybe he's just eaten something that wasn't fresh.

A few people got out of the way. Actually, he didn't have to waltz around people, they just parted for him. And then I heard someone close-by utter, "I was never told the bloody Hellhound was coming."

The Hellhound?

Well, fuck!

— Chapter Three —

THE EYES OF A PREDATOR

— Darren —

Not everyone has heard stories of the Hellhound, but I have. They say he was crazy strong, and dangerous, really dangerous. They say he's an Alpha. Some say with a pack, others without one. Michael says he has a pack of Alphas—whatever that is—and his pack is one of the biggest and most powerful in the world. The stories say he's also over seventy years old. Given that the man in front of me looked like he was in his thirties, either some of those stories were wrong, or he had an insane skincare regiment.

Or it wasn't him.

Although, he did look like he bench-pressed European cars every morning as a warm-up for the day, so if he wasn't strong, then at least he looked it.

I saw my father walk to the man, exchanged a couple of words, a handshake, then move on.

It's only when I felt Eva's hand leave mine that I realized she was moving towards the guy.

I felt a little uncomfortable and walked closer. I'm sure no one would do something blatant in front of everyone, but this guy's face screams dangerous.

And I stopped dead behind her as she hugged him, and kissed his cheeks.

I turned around slightly disoriented, and spotted Michael.

I went to him.

"Who is he?" I asked him.

"Alpha Kaden Devon," he smiled. "The Hellhound."

"He was invited?"

"Nope. But one of our guests had his little sister over, and invited her along. We got word today he would join us late to pick her up and leave in the morning."

Micheal looked at the guy like a kid catching Santa in the living room on Christmas night. While I began adding things Eva had told me, to what I was seeing, and what Michael had just said.

The realization of whom Eva is just floored me.

I don't know if I should be impressed, scared, or just worried.

After a few words, Eva left with the Hellhound, and I was left staring at empty space. I saw her look around as she left. I don't know if she was looking for me, but our eyes didn't meet, and that was it, she was gone. No hand wave, no goodbyes, nothing. I didn't know how I should feel about that.

"What's up with you man?" asked Michael.

"It was a pretty eventful night, I guess."

"How so?"

We headed to the bar to grab drinks.

"Well, for one thing, I found my mate. Gin tonic," I said to the barman then turned to watch Michael standing a few steps back with his mouth open. After maybe three seconds, he came to me.

"You sure?" Two of our brothers had found their mates, but not Michael, which had frustrated him a lot more than he let out. He was getting closer to thirty and generally, the older you get, the less likely you are to have one.

"Pretty sure."

"Who is it?"

"Eva." I racked my brain. "Eveline from Blakemore."

"Eveline Devon?" he asked carefully, his face a mask.

"She didn't tell me her last name, but her bodyguard mention meeting an Alpha Devon. She said she worked for her brother, seeing you called the guy she was kissing Kaden Devon, I suppose we could assume it's her name."

"You telling me your mate is the Hellhound's sister?"

"I guess," I said, emptying my glass after the third sip.

Then Michael burst out laughing.

"Yeah. Right. Keep this up. Real hilarious," he said, slapping his hand on my shoulder.

"I'm not pulling your leg," I said to his back, as he left me there.

I don't know if he heard me, or if he even cared.

"Jerk," I said to no one in particular, and ordered another drink.

I felt like crap. Maybe it was the revelation that my possible future brother-in-law was a guy more legend than fact, and whom terrified a lot of people. Or the fact that my brother mocked me for it. Or that my mate was not around anymore. Or even the fact that from what I heard, the Hellhound was really not from around here, and I didn't hear of a Blakemore pack in the vicinity, which meant the distance could very soon become an issue in this relationship, if relationship there was. Or that I was tired. Or drinking too much too fast. Or maybe it's just my natural disposition that was resurfacing now that Eva was not around anymore, and my Zen vibe died away.

Either way, it sucked.

And then I realized how a single woman that I barely knew could so suddenly, so thoroughly, affect my mood, which was a little unnerving—and my scowl soured some more.

I was so lost in my brooding that I didn't realize right away that bodyguard Mads was here.

"Mr Darren Thomas?"

"Yes." I brighten a little.

"Someone would like to see you. If you would follow me."

I didn't stall with questions and just went with it. If Eva was already up to seeing me again, that was good news. And it was late, really late, maybe she wanted me to join her in her room. Which cheered me up even more. It was weird that she sent her bodyguard to get me for that, but on the other hand, we didn't even take the time to exchange phone numbers, which occurred to me was a ridiculous omission on my part. Which I should correct has soon as possible.

I pulled my phone and began filling the contact page: Eveline, Devon, Blakemore pack. Then in the nickname box I wrote Eva with a little heart emoji, which I quickly erased.

What the Hell is wrong with me?

I saved the contact and raised my head as Mads was opening a door, and not to a bedroom, but to one of the drawing rooms.

On one of the big chairs in the middle sat Big Brother Hellhound, looking straight at me.

Gulp!

Is this how I'm gonna die?

I mean, I'm not too shabby myself. I learned how to fight. I'm from an Alpha bloodline, and thus my wolf was neither tiny, nor weak. But something about that guy made me reconsider my whole position regarding my own capabilities.

He gestured for me to take the seat in from of him, and I just obeyed.

I haven't always been known for my capacity at following orders, but somehow I was attached to the idea of living to a ripe old age, and this felt like a good way to achieve this goal.

I heard Mads close the doors behind us with an impermeable finality, leaving me alone with the man with the reputation of being one of the scariest wolf alive.

I mean, there's a freaking long list of nasty things' death that as been attributed to him.

The silence stretched for nearly a full minute as he looked at me. And me breaking it felt like betraying my emotions, so I just waited.

"My sister told me she found her mate," he finally said.

"If your sister is Eva, then yes."

"You're Alpha Thomas's son?"

"Yep."

"But not his eldest?"

"Nope." Good, I think I was slowly reconnecting with my spine.

"How far down?"

"Number four…"

"That's a lot of sons."

"…Out of six. So yeah, my father doesn't lack sons."

"You have a job?"

"Nope, just an internship."

"What are you studying?"

"Accounting."

"You don't sound like someone enjoying accounting?"

"Not really, but I'm not too bad at it."

"Then why do you study in accounting?"

"Because my father said it'd be more useful for his business than a business degree, and he's the one with the check-book, and Uni is ridiculously expensive."

"So you didn't study business?"

"I did, I just didn't finish."

"And what position are you to take in the pack?"

"None."

"It sounds wasteful."

"My eldest brother got trained to become Alpha after my father, the two next in line receive some training to replace him if something happens, or if another rank position get left without someone to take over. But my father considered this enough of a contingency plan, and decided to let the other three fend for themselves. Didn't pay for the ivy league like he did my brothers, didn't offer rank or anything. I'm pretty sure I'm not gonna be thrown with the Omegas, but that's pretty much it."

"And you're okay with this?"

"Not exactly, but there is a limit to what I can do. And tantrums aren't my thing."

"So no real plan for the future?"

That didn't sound good.

"Not yet," I corrected. "I don't just sit back and do nothing, I'm just not sure where to start. But once my internship is over, and I start bringing in money of my own, I'll get a little bit more flexibility to try my hand at options."

"You want Eva to join you here?"

I thought a few seconds before answering.

"She has a stable job. I just have an internship. And she seems to like hers. Financially and career-wise, hers seems a priority over mine, as for the rest—." I shrugged. "I don't know. We haven't talked about any of this yet. I guess she doesn't live around here."

"She doesn't."

"So we're gonna have to have this conversation sooner or later," I said.

"Maybe."

I hesitated. What did that mean?

"Unless you called me over to force me to reject her?" I asked him.

"And why would I do that?" His tone of voice was the same throughout the entire conversation, with the same kind of enthusiasm you have while shopping for a dishwasher. But his eyes, they were glued on me, and made me feel strangely little.

I shrugged. "I don't have a title. I don't have money, or a career. I'm from an Alpha bloodline, but that's pretty much it. For some, it could be not enough."

"Is that what you're looking for? Titles, bloodlines, career and money?"

"From a mate?" I took my time to answer. "Not really. I'd be lying if I said it's not worth consideration, because it is. It can change things." I looked him straight in the eyes. "But it's no deciding factor."

"And you expect me to interfere in my sister's love-life?"

"You called me here."

He thought for a second.

"I don't like making decision uninformed," he said.

"Wise enough."

The corner of his mouth rose in the faintest of smiles.

"What do you intend to do now?" He asked me.

"Get her phone number. I forgot to ask," I said truthfully. "Talk. See what she wants to do. Learn about her. We haven't talked for more than a minute or two."

"So I heard," he said dangerously.

I tried not to gulp audibly.

"I'd like to get to know her," I said.

"What if she doesn't want to leave her home?"

I shrugged. "Maybe I'll look into somewhere closer to finish my degree. Spend time with her. See if we can make this work."

"You'd leave home?"

"It's a possibility, yes."

"Won't you miss it?"

"Probably not as much as I'd like it too."

"How come?"

"I've a pretty limited future here."

"And it would be better elsewhere?"

"Maybe, maybe not. That what it means 'not to know'. I can only try."

"Wise enough," he mirrored. "But what if she doesn't want to?"

"What? Try?"

He gave me a single nod.

"That would suck," I blurted. "But I can't force her now can't I?"

"For your survival, I would advise you against it," he said. It wasn't a threat, but a fact. Like the sky his blue, the rain is wet, and you do that to her and you'll be hanged by your own entrails.

Of course I had no intentions of hurting her, but stalker-ish behaviours were not unheard of with mates. Especially when one is not as interested as the other. So I understood his reaction. If I had a little sister, I'd probably do something similar. Only, I'm pretty sure I could never speak so lightly, and make the other feel like there was a dozen little sniper red dots appearing on his chest, like I'm ready to blow his brain out, and it wouldn't even make me blink.

And this was scarier than any words he said. Those eyes were the eyes of a predator.

Wolves are natural predators, you get used to the feeling when you live in a pack. But this guy's eyes were something quieter, deeper, and more primal. What I felt was probably the kind of feeling other prisoners and criminals had felt when they brought Hannibal Lector inside the prison.

He looked like he hunted predators in his off time.

It felt like a whole new level of fear.

Given my Alpha blood, I've never scared easy, so this was a little new to me.

And again, maybe, the stories I heard were influencing me somehow, but my instincts told me not to mess with this dude.

"I would suggest you make sure of what she wants before you make any decisions. I'm not gonna push for a rejection. I wouldn't cause her that kind of harm. This is her life and her choice. But I will do everything in my power to protect her, and I will do so with extreme prejudice." He left his words hanging for a few seconds then rose up. "If you're up for it, and she wishes you too." I rose too and he pulled his wallet out. "Here." He gave me a business card. "I'm not gonna pull strings. Send your resume, if you cut it, you could transfer your internship. Or get a job. It's up to you."

Then he walked out.

I didn't know what this conversation would be, but I didn't quite expect this.

I looked at the business card.

It was of a company I didn't know. Well, I guess he just gave me options.

Cool.

Yet, I still didn't know where she lived. Could be on the other side of the Earth for all I know.

— Chapter Four —

THIS IS NOT HOPELESS

— Eveline —

I was so tired that I went to bed right after my meeting with Kaden. I had half a mind to go back to the event to see Darren, but when I saw that it was nearly two in the morning, I deflated. The place was probably emptying.

Actually, I'm pretty sure there was a lot less people in the room when I returned from being outside with Darren, than when I went out to meet him.

I didn't know when they closed things up. Two? Three? Or kept things open until the last one left.

But jet lag was hitting so hard right now.

We were leaving tomorrow, so I had still time to see Darren.

I looked at my phone.

I was so out of it that I didn't even think of getting his number, so I couldn't text him.

I thought I'd never be able to fall asleep after this evening, put it seemed my body decided to shut down, and let me worry about this in the morning.

* * * * *

I heard knocking.

I got up.

"Pack your things, we're leaving in two hours," said Mads when I opened the door to my room.

"What?" My brain suddenly un-congealed. "Already? So early?"

"It's noon, Eva."

"Holy crap." I rushed out, passed Mads, then twirled in confusion in the corridor. "Where's Kaden?"

He pointed at the door more or less in front of mine.

"Thanks," I said as I twirled one last time, aiming at the door, and rush in. Once I opened, I realized I'd forgotten to knock, and was still in my PJs.

Kaden was sitting at a desk working on his laptop. His bag was on the bed, closed and probably ready to leave.

“Do we really have to leave already?” I blurted.

“Yeah,” he said. He knew why I asked and I denoted a ‘sorry’ somewhere in his expression.

“Could we just extend a bit? If it inconveniences Alpha Thomas, there’s surely a hotel nearby.”

“I got a meeting tomorrow—”

“But I don’t,” I cut in.

“—But you leave for France in five days.”

“But I could leave from here?”

“There’s preparations required, Eva.”

“You don’t understand. I found my mate. I can’t just leave yet. You don’t get what this mean. You don’t know how this feels. We can’t separate just like that. You don’t know how painful that can be,” I raged at him, in panic.

“You think that I don’t know?” He never raised his voice, but I could hear the fury in it, and I regretted my outburst instantly.

“That’s not what I meant,” I said, my speech now muted.

I know he doesn’t look it, but he’s always been more than patient with my sisters and I. Never had he lost it unless there was a really good reason. And right now, I’d just attack his greatest pain.

“That’s exactly what you meant,” he cut in.

“It’s just that I’ve barely just met him. It’s like you’re keeping us apart.” My eyes widened. “Are you trying to make us reject?”

“Is that what you think of me?” His temper rose and so his voice. “Do you really think I’d force you to reject a mate? That I’d willingly hurt you. That I’ve no idea what living apart from a mate feels like?”

“I meant…” I mumbled.

“We are on a schedule, Eva. That’s what it means to work. It doesn’t mean to never see each other again. Nothing is stopping you from calling him, or to plan for a meeting at a more appropriate time. Which can give you time to know each other. This is the 21st century, people have phones and emails. After France, you don’t have anything abroad for weeks, I could replace you then.” He closed his laptop and rose from his chair. “I just came from a freaking battlefield, sent my men

home without follow ups about their well-being, to pick you up and do business most of the night and morning. I'm exhausted, and I'm reading email about hostile takeovers from allies asking for help, and the first thing you think of is that I want to hurt you. Me of all people would use a mate to hurt my freaking sister. Really?"

I never understood the depth of my fuckup until he finished talking.

"I'm sorry," I said meekly. "I didn't think."

"Clearly you didn't," he said taking another file from his bag to put on his desk. "But I thought I was talking to an adult, Eva. Someone I trust making good decisions, representing the pack. If you can control your emotions so little, I wonder if I was not too hasty in giving you this position."

"Please," I pleaded. "I'm sorry. I'm jet lagged. I just woke up confused, and finding my mate really scrambled with my brain."

He sighed and sat back, putting his elbows on the desk and running his palms over his face all the way through his hair.

"I should have never said what I said. I didn't mean it, I'm sorry," I said.

He sighed again and let his head fall back.

"I can ask Mads to pack your stuff, if you don't mind him doing so, so you can take that time to go to see him, and work out what's your next step."

"Thank you!" I jumped.

"Two hours, top," he said as I rushed out.

"Yes!"

"And put on some clothes!" he said after me.

"Hiiick!" I squeaked, realizing I was running in the corridor of a stranger's house in very thin cami and shorts, no bra.

I rushed to dress up, brush my hair and make myself look decent.

Two hours.

How could I get ready, and find him, and have a conversation in just two hours? Why did I wake up so late? Why didn't I put on an alarm clock?

I just hate myself right now.

I found someone to orient me, and I was reaching the dining room in less than an hour. I should have taken a shower, but I couldn't afford the time it would have taken.

I've never dressed up in more of a panic. The content of my bag was all over the place and I left all this for Mads to clean up.

My make up and hair was decent, but I could have done a much better job if I had a bit more time.

I tried not to run there. Half for the image, and half to make sure I would not be sweating all over when I'd arrive.

I had no idea what to say, how to begin. Or even how to tell him that I was just about to leave for another continent.

What if he freaked out?

What if he decided he couldn't do long distance?

What if he told me to stay here?

That's what most girls do. They leave their pack (if they're not from the same pack) to join their mate's.

I couldn't imagine myself living elsewhere and for a moment, it crushed my heart.

I loved home. I loved my pack and my family.

In less than a month I could be kissing it goodbye.

Could I even do that?

For someone that I didn't know.

Reality was dawning on me, and I was freaking out.

I'd been afraid for some stupid reason that Kaden could push for a rejection, but the most probable culprits for such a decision were Darren and I.

— Darren —

Michael didn't mention my mate in the morning, and I didn't bring it up either.

Actually, it could be a good thing to keep things on the down low until anything was settled. Just in case.

Him and Dad spent all morning dealing with guests and doing lots of PR.

I didn't see Eva all morning.

I asked an Omega about her, and was told her and her brother were still there and that he has had a meeting or two with some of our guess.

I know that Dad and Michael tried to have a talk with him but was told he was busy, and would see if he could make time before he left. Which is, I don't know when.

Maybe Eva talked to her brother and they came to the conclusion the two of us would not work out. Either way, I'd like to know before they left.

I nearly knocked on her door a few times, but I'd turn around before I even reached her corridor.

I didn't want to come as overbearing, or pushy. It was not a good way to start things. But I'm pretty sure I'd heard Michael mention this morning that they were leaving today. So, I've made up my mind to go and see her this afternoon after lunch.

I was lost in my thoughts and not listening to my brothers' nagging at one another, when I smelled her.

I tensed, lowered my fork and raised my head focusing on the patio door.

I saw Michael notice my reaction in my peripheral. I thought he was about to ask questions, when she appeared.

The others slowly notice her there too.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I don't want to both—"

I was already up and walked out with her on my heels

"Hi," I said as I turned to her once we were out of earshot. I couldn't stop myself from smiling.

Luckily, it seemed she was having a pretty similar reaction.

"I'm sorry, I was so jet-lagged that I slept all through morning."

"It's okay."

"Not really, we're leaving in little over an hour."

"Oh," was all I managed to say.

She twisted her fingers upon one another.

"First thing first." I picked my phone and opened her contact. "Could I have your phone number please?" I asked giving her my phone.

She beamed the sunniest smile and took my phone. She grabbed hers and unlocked it, then gave it to me before typing on mine.

When we switched phones back I saw she added her email and home address too.

Good.

This is not hopeless.

Then I notice the address itself.

Fuck!

We're not on the same continent.

I had a mini freak out.

"So … what then?" she asked.

My conversation from yesterday with her brother came back to mind.

"I want to know you. If you're willing? But we live apart. The commute is pretty hardcore. Long distance dating is hard, and mates only make it harder. I'm not against moving. But it's a pretty intense commitment so early on. I don't have a title to offer you. I live well, but it's my father's wealth, that my brother will inherit. I don't have much to my name. I'm still in school. I don't know what you're expecting or if you're expecting anything at all. What about you?"

She seemed to hesitate for a little.

"I don't think I'm ready to move." The word seamed to cost her.

I nodded. "Then it could be me. But I'm not making that kind of decision if it's half-assed. I want you to be sure what you want. We're moving into uncharted territory. I've been thinking all morning. About what to expect, about where this could go. What do you expect? What do you want?"

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

I nodded.

"I get it. It's a lot, and none of us expected this. You can take your time, we can talk in the meantime—get to know one another. The only thing I'm asking you is if you think that this is too much, or not going in the right direction. Don't stretch this out unnecessarily, don't wait until we've invested in this, don't wait until I crossed the ocean. If it's not working out, then let's just end it. Let's not prolong the inevitable, okay? And I can promise you to do the same for you."

She nodded. She looked torn.

This was not the direction I wanted this to take. But if we have only one hour to sort things out, we don't have the time to beat around the bushes.

“I don’t know where to start,” she said.

“Talk. To me. To someone else you trust. Nothing will get done without a conversation. Get a new perspective if you must. Take your time, think about the possibilities. What they mean.”

Her head perked up.

“Can I just go for a few minutes?” she asked. “I promised I’ll be back.”

“Sure. I guess.” This is not the reaction I was expecting, but again, I’ve no idea what I expected.

“Okay. Good,” she said in a rush. Then kissed my cheek, turned around and ran off. I felt the same tingle I’ve felt last night when her lips touched me.

“I’ll be back,” she said before leaving.

I just stared back at the place where she’d been for a few seconds, a little confused.

Eventually I decided to just go back in and finish eating lunch.

“What was that about?” asked my mother.

“Just a conversation,” I said.

“That was Eveline Devon, wasn’t it?” asked Michael while studying my expression. My father’s head perked up at the name ‘Devon’.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Is she really your mate?” he asked me.

The table got so silent I could nearly hear them think.

“Yes.” I took a mouthful of chicken.

“Devon as in Kaden Devon?” my father asked.

“Who’s that?” asked Fred.

“You found your mate?!” my mother nearly screamed. She normally barely ever raised her voice.

Everyone turned to her.

“Yes,” I answered.

“And?” she pursued.

“She seems lovely.” I stuffed my mouth again. I kinda hoped I could forgo the whole interrogatory, but for that, I suppose, I would’ve had to not return here to begin with.

“Is she related to Kaden Devon?” my father asked again, more insistent this time.

I chewed my food.

Michael eyed me. He knew exactly what I was doing, which is staling him. “Yes, that’s his sister,” he answered for me.

“Who’s Kaden Devon?” asked Kevin.

“An Alpha,” I replied then stuffed my face again.

“He’s not just an Alpha. He has one of the most powerful pack in the world,” Dad said.

“So a big shot,” Kevin concluded.

“That’s the understatement of the year,” said Michael.

“Maybe you could ask her to set up a meeting,” Dad suggested.

“You can’t be asking him to use her for politics,” Mom said.

I waved my hand at her in approval.

“Besides, they’re leaving soon,” I said.

“How soon?” Dad asked.

“In around an hour.”

He groaned. His plans were going down the drain.

“They don’t live nearby, you know,” Michael said to me.

“How far?” Mom asked.

“Very,” I said.

“What are you gonna do?” she asked.

“I don’t know yet, but I’m gonna have to sort it out.”

“Maybe I could talk to him. See what options are out there,” my dad suggested.

“I already did that,” I said.

“You met him?” he blurted.

“Last night. He probably wanted to know about is little sister’s mate as soon as possible.”

“And?” Michael asked. His eyes sparkling. I’m beginning to believe he’s a closeted fanboy.

“He mostly asked me questions. Warned me about messing up with his sister. Then gave me a contact if I choose to move.”

“Move? Why would you move? She can come to live here with us,” Mom said.

“I don’t have a career, she does. I don’t even have a position here either. I’m probably just gonna do accounting at the office and nothing more. It’s not really worth uprooting her life for.”

“But we could change that. I’m sure your father can find something better for you,” she said.

It’s only now that I realized how the possibility of me moving away would affect my family. Most faces didn’t seem fazed. Mostly weirded out. My family is traditional and so me doing it instead of her is not how they would do it, career and title or not. Au contraire though, for my mother it was emotional. None of us moved away. Most wolf stays with their elders, take care of them, especially the men. But my parents didn’t need all six of us to stay and care for them. That was our reality.

But my mother was not ready.

On the other side of the table though, my father didn’t seem enthusiastic about caving under pressure to give me anything as an incentive to stay or not.

“I’m not gonna bully anyone into giving me something just so I don’t leave. Besides, she told me she’s not ready to leave her home. And I’m not sure we’d be able to do long distance for long. So that leaves me to leave, or us to breaking it up.”

She looked insulted at the mere mention of breaking the bond.

“Of course not. You can’t just do that. But you could talk to her.”

“That’s what I just did.”

“And?” she asked.

“We’ll talk later. I think we both need time to process.”

“What did you tell him about our pack?” my father asked me, steering the conversation back to her brother.

“Nothing.”

“Did he tell you about his?”

“Not really.”

“You’re not very useful here, son.”

Ain’t that the story of my life.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Dad. He wanted to ask me a few questions about me, not the pack, nothing else. I’m his sister’s mate. Nothing else. He didn’t tell me about him or his pack, and I’m pretty sure he assumes his sister could tell me about herself, well herself. We didn’t talk for hours either. It was late. I’m sure he was even more tired than I was. And that’s it,” I told him. “I haven’t known for a full 24 hours. No decision has been made. And maybe, if I’m lucky, I’m gonna know in which direction this is going before she leaves,” I added for my mother.

“Now if you excuse me, I have a mate to go talk to.”

I rose and left the table in the direction of Eva’s room.

— Chapter Five —

WOULD YOU REGRET IT?

— Eveline —

He was right, I needed to talk, and I knew who would really know what I needed to know.

This time, I took the time to knock on Kaden's door.

"Yes," he answered.

"I didn't think you'd be back already," he said as I came in. "You still have some time." Then he hesitated, looking at me. "Are you alright? Did something happen?"

"It got a little heavy in there," I said

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we don't have much time, so it went straight to 'are we doing this?', 'will there be any moving?' and all that."

He nodded as he shut his laptop closed. "So what? It was too much? Not working out?"

"No. It's just. Can I ask you a few questions?"

"Sure," he said, putting documents in folders.

"Personal questions?"

He looked at me, put everything down, sat back down, and nodded.

I sat on the bed.

"Have you ever thought about your mate?"

"Yes."

"About what she'd be like? How things would go? These kinds of things?"

"Sure."

"What if she's not what you expected? Would you still want her? What if she's not the best match? What if things don't click? What would you do? Would you just dismiss her? After all this time? How far would you go? You must have thought a million times about this."

"I have," he said. He leaned back in his chair thinking. "My position is a little different than yours. I can't just decide to go and have a life elsewhere with my mate.

I know how the stories go. How your mate is supposed to be the right one for you and all that. But I've seen enough to know it's not always so straight-forward. No one fits perfectly in every aspect. Maybe someone would have the best possible personality to fit with mine, but could be a terrible Luna, or vice versa. Even if a few things works perfectly, there are plenty of others that could not. That's how relationship works to begin with. Bond or no bond.

I know a lot of people have a very romantic viewpoint on the whole thing, but if you don't make an effort, bond or not, a relationship can suffer."

"But you kept looking?"

"Sure."

"That's why you're always gone. Why you travel so much. Why you always involve yourself in all sorts of businesses everywhere."

"Kinda."

"Why?"

"It's complicated."

"You could have made the bond with someone else. Have pups. A family?"

"I can't have a made bond."

"Why?"

"Because you need to either never have connected with your mate, or reject her to be able to forge a new bond."

"But you've never met her."

He sighed. "No, I never met her. But I can feel her. The connection is not visual or physical, but it's there. And I can't reject her without getting in contact with her."

"But how is this possible? I've never heard of anyone else who can feel a mate without being able to find her."

"Me neither. I've researched, but never found anything plausible."

"So, it's like Darren and I never seeing each other again, but feeling the connection? For decades?"

"Mostly."

"That sounds like torture."

"It's like the pull is there. Like she's nearby. But the pull pulls me nowhere. It's … frustrating."

"So you still know nothing about her?"

"No."

"What if you find her and she's not what you wanted?"

"I thought about that. About her having bad health, or with a bad personality, or heavens forbid, ugly…" he gave me a joking smile, but it was a little sad. I've barely ever seen him smile, and I nearly always saw sadness in there. "… We could not get along. Not speak the same language. She could be much older or younger. She could not want me. Or be terrible with a position of leadership."

"What then?" I asked.

"It took me so long, so I think I'd try to make it work. See how it goes. Give it a chance. If not then shut this down and finally move on."

"What if she's sick, old, ugly, terrible with no leadership, and a bitch."

"Then I'd begin thinking that I'm actually cursed."

I chuckled. "Isn't it painful? The distance I mean," I asked. "They say the worst thing is the death of a mate, followed by rejection, followed by separation."

"It is."

"How do you cope?"

He shrugged. "It's been this way for so long."

"Does it get worse?"

"It does. Time makes it a lot worse."

"Does it affect you? Nana said once that being away for too long could be dangerous."

"It does and it is."

"How?"

"Look, I don't like to talk about it, Mom and Dad found out only last year, but I suppose if you're contemplating a distance relationship you should know. But I don't want you to spread this, okay?"

I nodded anxiously.

“Distance like that eventually takes a toll. At first, it seemed harsh, but in retrospect, it was nothing then. And in my case, I began feeling the pull very gradually for a very long time. It started around puberty. It got a lot worse a few years ago. My guess is that she’s younger. The number of years between when I began feeling it and when it intensifies would fit birth and puberty. But I could be wrong.

The biggest symptoms are psychological at first. But it becomes physical with time. I don’t know if occasionally meeting make things worse or easier. A lot of texts say conflicting information. Maybe not everyone experiences it the same way.”

“How physical?”

“Shortness of breath, trouble sleeping. It messes with your appetite and mood. I think it could potentially affect immunity and your ability to heal. Then it gets bigger. Attacks. A little like asthma attack or panic attack, heart attack.”

“Heart attack?” I nearly screamed.

“That’s how Mom found out. I had a massive one.”

I clapped my hands over my mouth in shock.

“My heart healed, I don’t have any sequelae.”

“But a heart attack, it’s dangerous,” I said, my body filled with dread.

“It is. And it’s not my first one. It was the biggest though.”

I was in shock. How could this have been happening without me even knowing?

“What did the doctor say,” I whispered.

“That the cause is not medical in nature. No change in diet, or medication, is gonna change anything. My general good physical shape, resilience, and the strength of my wolf has helped me, but I’m gonna have a much shorter lifespan. Most would not reach forty, but given my capacity, I might be able to reach that, maybe even fifty, if I’m lucky. But not to expect any more than that.”

Tears were falling down my cheeks and the only thing I could think of was to get up to give him a hug. I landed on his lap hugging the crap out of him, crying. He hugged me back, but didn’t cry. I felt he was comforting me more than me him.

“Why didn’t you try to find someone? At least to have a pup? You don’t even have an heir and you could be on a countdown.”

“It sounds pretty horrible to use someone just for procreation. But I can’t say I haven’t thought about it. But it’s hard to get invested with someone. It fucks with your brain. I could lose it before I die.”

“What can be done to stop it, or slow it down?”

“Nothing. Once I start getting organ failures, I’m not healing from that. I could easily live without a kidney, but if the heart fails first, then I’m going to go faster. But finding her could stop this. Though, I’ve been warned about rejection. My body could be ill-equipped to face it. It’s a fifty-fifty chance. Only if I give it time to heal from all those years first could it be a safe or safer option.”

“You could completely heal?”

“I’ve been told it’s a possibility. But I’m a bit of a rare case. It’s hard to know anything for sure.”

“Why you?”

“Bites me. Maybe I’ll know if I find her.”

“That’s why you’ve been looking so hard?”

“Mostly.” He wiped one of my tears. “Don’t tell the girls please. I don’t want everyone to look at me like I’m on my death bed. It would suck for everyone.”

I nodded.

“I told you because most people find their mate close to home, but not always. Like you. You have to think about what you’re okay to live with and accept, and what you’re not willing to accept. They say that we gain a lot from a mate, which is why we lose so much when away. I guess everything has a price. And now you have to think what price you’re willing to pay. But don’t hurt yourself unnecessarily. Try, or stop it, but don’t stay indecisive, going nowhere. It will only hurt the both of you.”

I nodded. “Thank you for telling me.”

He checked his watch. “Well, we’re leaving in fifteen, so—”

“WHAT?!”

“Don’t scream in my hears,” he complained.

“Oh, no. I have to talk to Darren.” I rushed outside in a frenzy.

When I stormed the corridor, I saw Darren resting against the wall next to my door.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. “I lost track of time.”

"It's okay," he said, but he looked a little down.

I opened my bedroom door and invited him in. At least I didn't have to run all over the place to find him.

Mads had cleaned up my stuff, my suitcase closed, everything inside, I presume.

I sat on the bed, and he sat next to me.

"It's just that I needed to sort a few things out," I explained.

"I understand."

I looked at him. "I'm not gonna do the long distance thing," I told him frankly. "We can take a few weeks to sort things out, but long term, I'm not gonna do that. Not to you, not to me. I don't think I'm gonna be able to leave home, but if you wanna do this give me a week to think about it."

"What if I'm the one who leaves?"

"You're seriously thinking about this?"

"Yes."

"Would you regret it?"

"I'm not necessarily saying moving in together. But getting closer … is different. My family and pack are my only strings attached, and I think I could deal with the separation. Actually, I thought about this before I met you, I just never thought of any place in particular to go to."

"Really?"

"Yes. But I want it to be clear before I move. Will it be just fooling around and having fun, or are we trying something more serious?"

"Well, it's hard to say what will come next, I know so little about you."

"No, I know. I'm not asking for certitude, just for what our aim is to be. If we don't have the same, one of us is gonna get seriously hurt."

"Oh! Right. Okay. Serious."

He blinked. "Okay. You sure?"

"You don't want that?" My eyes widened.

"No. Yes. I mean, that's not what I meant. I'm okay if you're okay."

I smiled. "I am if you are."

He smiled back.

“Will you need help? Moving, finding a job?” I asked.

“Your brother gave me a contact to move my internship. A job closer to you.”

“He did? You met him? When did this happen?”

“Yes, yes, and last night.”

I just hugged him and it’s like a mountain of stress just slipped off my shoulders.

“Remind me to kiss my brother.”

“Eh… I’m not sure I want to do that.”

I giggled and pulled away. It was hard, so hard. He smelled so sweet and his warmth was like the most comfortable things in the whole world, like everything would always be okay, no matter what.

“Why are your eyes red?” he asked me.

“Oh! I cried.”

He looked appalled. “Is it because of me?”

“No, no. I just had a bad news.”

“Anything I can do?”

“No.” I smiled at him. He already wanted to help me. And he was already ready to uproot everything for me. I might have gotten myself a good one. “But, thank you.”

He smiled at me again it made my stomach do a Cirque du Soleil routine. So I just kissed him.

It was slow at first, but the kissed deepened quickly. And I got lost in the movements, the exploration, my movements somewhat in sink with his. He pressed my body against his and it emboldened me. My hand began to roam against his. I wanted to feel everything.

Someone knocked twice and cleared his throat.

I disentangled myself from Darren a little shaken, and I felt him tense up and freeze.

At the door stood my brother, one shoulder against the doorframe, looking at Darren very intently. Next to him, a little behind, stood Mads, also looking at us.

— Chapter Six —

BOTH FUN AND TERRIFYING

— Ylva —

“Why am I doing this?” I asked no one in particular.

“Because Kaden asked you to,” said Sam matter-of-factly. I hate his good reasoning.

“He has a secretary. She’s here. So why am I doing this?”

“Because he needs you to do it.”

“But whyyyyyy?” I whined.

“Maybe Eva is too busy. Maybe she’s sick. Maybe she’s not qualified. Either way, you’re doing this.”

“This is some misogynistic bullshit. I’m a fucking bodyguard, not a fucking secretary. Vaginas doesn’t mean secretary material. Why aren’t you doing this shit?”

“I am. I’m the one reorganizing the whole schedule, and flights, and coordinating with Jayson. This is a team job Ylva. Stop thinking that everything is an attack on your female-hood, or that no one respects your skills at kicking ass. We all do. Kaden probably spent all night all through morning doing calls, and emails, and meetings. We’re all tired. But shit needs to get done, so stop bitching around and finish those calls, so that everything will be ready for us to leave the fuck out of here. In four hours we need to get gone, and I want to sleep the flight off. So stop annoying and delaying me.”

Of course, he was right. He tends to always be right. He probably sees more clearly than most. Doing chauffeur duty all quietly and shit.

Also, he’s one of the most mellow guy I know, so for him to get angry and cuss at me, I must have really pissed him off. I felt a little bad. Not bad enough to say sorry or anything like that, but a little bit bad.

So I got back to the stupid calls.

I hate talking on the phone.

I usually just say a couple of sentences, get straight to the core of whatever I gotta say, then move on. But these are not the type of calls I can do that.

Eva can. She can talk, and talk, and say nothing at all. She can be polite, and coy, and flirty, or whatever is needed, to appear nice, and friendly, and useful. This is fucking politics. I hate politics. Get me stuff to kill, heads to bash in, weapons to use, but flattering someone to get through a conversation? Or worst, smile? No, just no. Give me blood and gore. I hate smiling.

So I got back to the freaking calls.

Mostly, it's people at this event or whatever this is, requesting a meeting, which we don't have the time for, and then I set a schedule for a conference call, part of which will probably be during the flight, and the rest when we're back home.

There's also a bunch of other calls, dealing with the aftermath of the last few weeks, and preparation for next week.

If Brandon hadn't been injured, he'd be the one doing this crap.

"Aren't they cutting it a bit short?" I asked Sam.

He looked at his watch. "Yeah."

— Darren —

I got up sharply. "Hum."

Eva stood up next to me, not as fazed as I was.

"We need to go," said her brother, looking at me. Not scary at all.

"Hum, right." She turned to me. It took me a few seconds to focus back on her. I believe my instincts were telling me it was a better idea for my survival to keep this guy in my line of sight.

"We need to go. We can call and text. I'm gonna be off next week, so if you want I could come back? Maybe a couple of weeks? See how this works, and if you want, by the end of the month, if all goes well, you can check to move closer. I'll help you with the move, and job, and finding a place and everything." She was talking really quickly.

"That would be nice." Having her all to myself for a couple of weeks sounded really great, but her brother was still watching us, so I tried to curb my enthusiasm a bit. "I guess I might join your pack then?"

She smiled one of those sweet smile. The type you see on children being given a slice of chocolate cake.

"Maybe," said the Hellhound with an unreadable expression on his face.

She smiled again as if there was no hostility coming from her brother. Maybe there wasn't. Maybe I was easily intimidated. Maybe it's the reputation, or maybe it's just the older brother shtick.

Then she kissed me on the cheek. "Call me," she said and left, the two men right behind her, not sparing me a last glance or anything. Maybe it wasn't intimidation after all. Maybe I've just become a wuss.

I walked out and back to the main family quarters, and at that moment, it was like I had no direction for my life anymore. My comfort zone was gone. But at the same time, there was a sort of febrility. As the rush you get as you're preparing to go on a journey. Maybe that's what it was.

I didn't dislike this feeling.

I looked at the familiar scenery, and everything was now a little alien. Just like when you walk for the first time a path you know perfectly well in the darkness. You get disoriented. It's hard to find your landmarks, but at the same time, familiarity is just a step away, and it feels odd.

That's how I felt right now. Strangely detached. Maybe it was just the thought of leaving soon. Maybe I was just seeing things from a different angle, one I've not often explored.

I've spent so many years as a child, dreaming of leaving, exploring, finding a place of my own. In my fantasies, I'd rallied a bunch of wolves and built my own pack, or took over the one of an evil or neglectful Alpha, or maybe found a pretty girl inheriting a pack of her own, waiting for me to lead with her. A lot of my boyhood fantasies included becoming an Alpha.

Maybe it's because I've been raised under an Alpha. Another stronger reason is probably that it's all my father expected of my brother. That it's the biggest focus my father had on raising us. To have an heir. The rest, it's like our purpose was unclear. Hell, two of my brothers were raised mostly as backup for the oldest, which is kinda fucked up when you think about it. There's nothing else much that was asked of us, or expected.

All our life as been evaluated in relation to the possibility of becoming Alpha. So of course, all I could imagine in my youth was to find a pack that would want me, need me. Where I could be what I was born to be.

But the years had dulled the fantasy.

I've seen the strain it has taken on Michael. I'm not sure I would've been happy in his position. I've thought about it. What if I'd been born first? How different would things be?

I'd been angry for a while. Angry at Dad, angry at Michael. But quite frankly, I don't think Michael is happy.

Maybe he is, but he doesn't show it much. And he's going to have Dad breathing down his neck for years to come. Even after he becomes Alpha, Dad is probably going to put his nose in everything until the end.

So getting away sounds really nice right about now. Which is why I'd thought more and more about it since I finished high school. But it's a bit like bungee jumping, the idea sounds both fun and terrifying. It's an important experience, but sounds like unnecessary risk most of the time. And you keep walking, two steps forward, another backward until you finally reach the top.

I've been at the top for a few years now, but I just couldn't jump.

I think Eva is giving me a push in the back.

Let's just hope I'm not going to splatter at the bottom.

— Chapter Seven —

A TRAIL OF HURT AND CHAOS

— Kaden —

Eva's been bouncing all the way to the car.

It was nice to see that silly sfmile plastered on her face. But I'm pretty sure, she's going to be useless for a while. It took her ages to grow out of her teen drama, and to take anything seriously, and she looks like she's about to gossip about her love-life with her friends until she passes out. I'm probably going to have to send Marie with her to France to make sure she stays on track, then ask her and the team to pick up the slack for a few weeks after, at least.

She was getting kind of good at her job.

A lot of she-wolf just decide to leave everything for their mate when they find him. I did hear her say that she wanted to stay, but when it came to work, I'm not so sure. Then again, the guy has nothing but a name, so it'd be easier if they both work, but she's an adult, I can't force her. Besides, even if she keeps working, she might not be into travelling as much if it means being apart.

This is not the best time for this.

But again, I guess it never would have been.

There's a little pang in my chest, as my freaking little sister is getting her mate first.

It sucks. It sucks balls.

Sam had the car ready and Mads was loading the luggage in the truck when Ylva rushed to smack the cellphone I gave her yesterday in my chest then wiping her hand on her pants like the thing was covered in poop.

She looked pissed.

I mean, more than usual.

I guess she didn't like doing dual duties.

She slid into the front of the car next to Sam and Mads eyed her like she was doing this on purpose, which was probably the case. So Mads had to be at the back with Eva and I.

Even as spacious as this car was, it was a little tight with Mads and I. Mads said nothing. Eva was still beaming like an idiot and looking at her phone every fifteen seconds. I don't know if she was

looking at the time or possible texts. I mean, we haven't even left yet, he's not going to text this fast. Or maybe she'd already started her gossip column and was waiting for the incoming storm.

When the car began to move, I just laid my head back, closed my eyes, and went to sleep.

I was jerked awake by Eva two seconds later.

I looked outside a little confused.

Mads and Sam were moving our luggage to the plane, Ylva was nowhere to be seen and we had made the whole hour-long journey to the small airport we were using. The car was parked on the tarmac not far from the plane, and Eva, seeing I was awake, left the car to join the others.

My muscles had started to really ache now, the strain of the last few days catching up to me.

I moved slowly to the plane. I think I'm getting a little too old for this crap. I don't do lack of sleep as well as I used to, and my muscles don't keep up as well either. But again, I'm not training as much as I should lately. Maybe I should readjust my work-out routine. Or just not do battle for more or less three days straight. That's what a sane man would do.

The plane had a few seats at the front, a couple of bunks in the middle, then a kitchenette and an office at the back with a pull out bed. It wasn't what you normally see as a private jet, a little smaller than the fancy one you see on television, but it did cover all the essentials. I bought it nearly ten years back, and I use it often enough that it paid itself.

Eva was already sitting in one of the big chairs at the front. She had earbuds on and was texting furiously while smiling like it was the greatest moment of her life.

It's hard to believe it's the same girl who said a couple of years back that she hated it when one of her friends would find a mate, and she'd never let something like that changes her. She already walks like a five year old going to Disneyland, bouncing around and grinning hopelessly.

I sighed.

I grabbed Ylva's arm as she passed me by. "Any messages?"

She looked at me like I was declaring my interest in a career as a ballet dancer, which is … with disgust.

"What?"

"A bajillion," she said. "It's on your desk."

I sighed again.

"Can you walk me through it?"

If I didn't know her better, I would think she was about to skin me alive.

"Ylva, I'm tired. Don't make me beg?"

She reeled in shock. She turned to my office, and I think I saw a little guilt on her face. I guess *'beg'* is not a word I usually employed, but I'm too freakishly tired to pull rank right now. And it wasn't just physical exhaustion either. Maybe it's dwelling into the whole mate thing that got to me, maybe it's the talk with Eva. I hadn't planned on telling her about my health. I told no one until my last heart attack. Sam was there, Mom found out and told Dad. Since, I had a few talks with them, and there's the Doc who knew some of it, but that's it. Ylva doesn't know either. None of my sisters knew. If Eva spread it around, it could leave a trail of hurt and chaos.

I sat behind my desk, took out Brandon's work phone that Ylva's been using and looked at a small notepad she put on my desk, flipping through the page.

Five pages.

Five freaking pages of messages.

"Those with the little stars are those that looked a bit more pressing, the rest I told them would be called back today or tomorrow." She flipped a page. "David called." She pointed at the note. "It sounded important." Right next to David's message was *'John Thomas'* with *'6X'* written next to it. I pointed at that message.

"The guy called six times," she said.

"Alpha Thomas?" I asked. "From Stonewillow?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe I should have known about that one. That was our host."

She shrugged.

"Ylva," I chastised her.

"I'm not a secretary."

"I asked for help, not a change of career."

She looked down a bit.

"I'm gonna start with this one. Giving that I might be taking his son away and all."

"Why?"

"He's Eva's mate."

She looked a little disgusted. Ylva never had a great opinion of mates. Mostly because when she met hers, things went a little downhill. She kept it quiet. Most don't know she even found him. She rejected him, they both moved on. He's married now. She's definitely not.

"That explains why she's grinning like an idiot."

"Did Alpha Thomas say anything to you?"

"Not much, just that he wanted to talk."

"Okay. I'll call. Don't go too far. I wanna go through this as fast as I can, so that I can lay down a bit."

"Do you need help with that?" she asked with a little smirk.

"Maybe," I conceded.

"I'll grab a drink. I'll be back."

I dialled.

"John Thomas," the man answered.

"Hi, this is Alpha Kaden Devon. I just received your message."

"I called a few times. It could have been nice to talk in person."

"We were short on time, and my assistant has been injured and sent home. My bodyguard took the calls and didn't forward any. It's my mistake, I didn't give much detailed orders in that regard. Hope this doesn't cause a rift between our pacts given the situation."

"Not at all. My son only told me an hour before you left. It was short notice for me too."

"These things are always a little unexpected."

"Of course. Maybe this could be a good opportunity for us to work together."

"Maybe." I got a lot of that lately and I'm not as eager as I used to be.

"Maybe I could talk to you about—"

I cut him. "I haven't been home in a few weeks, I'm in the plane and don't have everything with me. How about, whatever proposition you have, you email it to me, I'll check it with a clear head and come back to you then."

"Of course." He sounded a little deflated. I gave him my email.

"As for your son—" I began.

“I’m going to talk to him. I’m sure your sister will love it here.”

“I’m sure. I’ll ask her to contact you when she knows the exact date she’ll be leaving to visit.”

“She’ll be visiting?”

“Yes, for a few weeks. If you’re okay with that?”

“Of course.”

“I hope you didn’t think she was moving in?”

“Isn’t it the way of the she-wolf?” I didn’t like his tone.

“I’m not very conservative. Neither is my family. I heard her say she wanted to stay, and he mentioned he was interested in coming over. If he does, unless he betrays any of our laws, he will have a place in my pack. But I will not force my sister to leave. She has a career. Your son, doesn’t.”

“He’s working in my company.”

“As a mere intern accountant. A job he doesn’t even like. That’s a waste of potential. He has no strings attached, she does. If they want to do it this way, they have my support, and I hope yours as well.”

There was a small silence.

I continued, “If it’s gonna be a problem, I will go against Eva’s visit.”

“It isn’t,” he said curtly.

“Good. Now if you excuse me, the plane is about to take off, and I have a few calls to make before I lose cell signal.” I hung up.

So, the father is old school. The son didn’t sound like it, but I guess I’m going to have to keep an eye out. There’s more than a few she-wolf who got tangled in difficult situations in conservative families. I don’t want her to push to be with a mate who’s going to make her miserable, and it’s a lot harder to keep an eye out when it’s happening on another continent.

I dialled David’s number.

“Hey man,” he said.

“Hey. What’s up?”

“A shit storm.”

“Great,” I said sarcastically. “Tell me.”

— Chapter Eight —

SOMETHING ELSE IS BREWING

— Kaden —

“Well, first I believe there are congratulations in order. I heard you kicked some serious vamp’s ass,” said David.

“Thanks man, but if you don’t mind, I’d like to get this going. Haven’t slept much in a while.”

“Okay, sorry ‘bout that. Right, so I’ve been in touch with Mariqueen—”

“Remind me who that is again?” I asked as I picked up a second notepad and began jotting down notes.

“Alpha Mariqueen Sumaya of Monaweard.”

“Okay,” I noted. “What’s up?”

“There’s been at least six more incursions on her territory. Hostile incursions. And the number of territories who have been targeted went from three to seven, and we’ve only begun surveilling in earnest. I’m sure there’s more. Kade, it’s not just a few spat between packs, or neglecting to acknowledge territory borders, I think something more is happening.”

“So you think it could be more than a possible hostile takeover.”

“Man, no one does hostile takeovers of seven packs simultaneously. It’s too risky to spread your forces like that,” he said. “You’d have the capabilities to do that, as they’re generally small minor packs, but regardless, I know you would not take such stupid risks, even with the type of force you have at your disposal. And most big packs would not be able to handle more than a couple at a time. It’s either ridiculously stupid, or something else is brewing.”

“Like what?”

“Hell if I know. But I like Mariqueen. I like her style. And being at the head of a small pack myself, I can relate. I know how hard it can get. I promised I’d help her. I know how much that kind of gesture can change things.” I know he referred to the few times I bailed him out of trouble. “But I don’t have your reach, or skills, or resources, or firepower, or—”

“I get it,” I said. “You want to help her and you’re gonna do it regardless, but you don’t think you can handle this, so you put yourself at risk, and then ask me to bail you out, and if your friend happened to be saved in the process, all the better,” I admonished.

“But you’re gonna help me regardless.” He knew that in the end I’d have his back.

“Fine, but I want more info.”

“I already sent you an email. You have maps with marks for all incursions, and when they happened, and contacts of all the packs, and everything. I do my research man.”

Yeah, this guy was thorough. That’s one of the reasons why I liked him. This man had brains. If I could have him in my pack, I would have already. But being at the head of his own pack, he preferred keeping his small independent *kingdom* to himself. But we’d help one another more than once. He was reliable, reasonable, shrewd, and could look at a situation with fewer biases than anyone I knew. He had a good head on his shoulders and gave some of the best counsel I ever had. We’ve known each other for a decade now, and I’ve always been able to rely on him.

If he needed help with those little spats that had the possible making of being more than just little, then yeah, of course, he could count on me.

While I finished sorting the last few kinks of the operation, Ylva came back to my office, a coffee in hand. I could smell the brandy in it all the way to my desk.

She sat on a big chair in the corner and waited for me to finish.

“Some upcoming battle?” she asked as I hung up.

“Possibly.”

“Cool!” she said cheerfully.

There’s always something dark brewing when Ylva is cheerful.

We went through a few more calls. I tried to limit myself to the essentials. I didn’t want to prolong too much. I do have a satellite phone and everything, but sometimes it’s not as reliable as I’d like while moving thousands of kilometres above the earth at more than five times the maximum speed of a car. The rest can wait for tomorrow.

“You got me one of those?” I asked her in between calls, pointing at her coffee.

“Nope.”

I gave her a look that said, ‘maybe you could get me one’.

She ignored me shamelessly and drank some more.

When I finished, I got up for a bathroom break and to get me a drink of my own.

When I returned, Ylva had packed the office—everything could fit into the walls, unfolding into a few possible configurations—and she was pulling out the bed. I watched her from the doorway, one shoulder against it, drinking from a mug.

"Ah! How sweet of you. You made my bed and everything," I teased, keeping my voice low not to get the attention of everyone in the plane.

"Nope. I made myself a bed, but you're free to join if you want."

I smiled.

I emptied my cup and I saw her grab hers on the side table and finish it too.

Ylva and I were not a thing. We just did things.

We got along. Fought well together, on the battlefield and out. We respected each other. And there were no complications between us.

There was a time, in my youthful youth when I tried a facsimile of a relationship.

It was complicated.

I've known I had a mate somewhere since puberty, which could easily put a wrench in any relationship. That or then she'd be the one finding her mate and bailing out. Or maybe it would be my position which would complicate things.

Most Alphas don't get into power as young as I, but my father got sick, sick enough to not be able to keep up with is duties, sick enough to prepare for an eventual funeral. Being Alpha—even more so when you're still in high school—is a pretty big responsibility. There are times, even back then, when it easily became a full-time job. I didn't have the time to date properly, go on dates, spend time together, invest in a relationship. And it's harder to find motivation when you know it's not meant to last. And giving my status, a lot of girls had expectations I was not ready to fulfill.

So I found a few, with whom I could indulge some, without any strings attached, without the expectations, or the investment prerequisite, or any of that.

Ylva was one.

I wasn't a major player or anything like that, but man, I'm in my mid-thirties, no one can expect me to live like a monk while waiting to possibly find a mate I may or may not ever find.

I'm not a saint.

I try not to be an asshole either. I don't give false expectations, or false promises. Everything is clear from the get go, and I don't get involved anymore with the type of women who might not be able to keep it that way.

So I closed the door and locked it as I moved to join Ylva, who was rapidly taking her clothes off.

There was nearly as many weapons as fabric pieces that fell on the floor.

What we did was not beautiful, or romantic, or passionate. It was more animalistic, primal. We both had a lot of pent-up energy to release, and we both knew some very nice ways to spend it.

Then we slept.

By the time I was awakened by knocks on the door, Ylva was gone and probably moving out of the plane with the others—as we had clearly stopped moving, the engines off.

I got dressed and moved out.

I didn't bother with making the bed, or picking my stuff up. I knew someone would take care of it, and rushed to the car.

The sun was rising.

Once everyone was in the cars, I picked the two notebooks, the one with Ylva's messages and the one with my notes, and began planning my day as we drove back home.

— Chapter Nine —

TRANSFORMS HAVOC INTO ORDER

—Eveline —

The return home was uneventful.

Or so until I couldn't contain myself.

I've been trying so hard not to scream at the top of all the hills that I had found my mate. I was on a constant high. I needed a release, so I rushed home to find the girls.

The triplets were by the pool, behind the house.

"Where's Nadine and Amy?" I asked them.

"Nadine's on the phone with Holly," said Jass.

"I think Amy is helping Mom with something," said Lisa.

"Why?" asked Gwen.

"I've something to tell you," I said.

"Did something happen?" asked Jass, eager for good gossip. "Tell, tell, tell."

I bit my lip. "Wait a sec." I texted the others.

Jass groaned in impatience, but I waited for them to join me before I said anything.

Everyone was antsy, probably because I was to begin with.

"I found my mate," I finally said the second Amy, the last of my sisters, walked onto the patio.

"I knew it," Nadine said, and sat next to me.

"What?" said Jass at the same time, clapping her hands against her mouth in shock.

Amy froze her eyes wide, before fast-walking to join in on the conversation.

"Who's he?" asked Lisa.

"His name is Darren."

"What does he do?" she continued. And it went on like that for a while. "Where does he come from?", "What does he look like?", "Is he nice?"

I answered everything, but at the same time I didn't know that much about him. I also told them about my plans to visit him in a week or so. We talked for hours.

I love my sisters. The six of us are really close. We were also born a lot closer together. I mean there's a huge fifteen-year gap between me and Kaden, but only two years between Nadine and I, the triplets were born the next year, and Amy two years later. We'd play together, and hang out together in school.

To begin with, we were Devons. Everyone knew we were the daughters of the Hellhound, and then later the sisters of the Hellhound (this nickname started with my grandpa actually, but followed through the generations) there as been a few notorious wolves in my family.

Being kids of Alphas can affect your life, but kids of infamous Alphas, it's on a whole different level.

There were always people approaching us because of that. There were also always others who ran away, for pretty much the same reasons.

We were popular in school, but at the same time, we didn't get that many deep and long-lasting friendships. But we had each other. No one could understand better. In school, we were clan Devon.

I don't know much how things were for Kaden though. He doesn't talk about it much. By the time I got to school he'd finished high school, had been Alpha for a while and was in college. I don't even know if he had the time for that kind of social life.

Us, however, we were free, wealthy, and in retrospect, pretty much treated like a bunch of princesses.

Today, we chilled by the pool, drank colourful drinks with little umbrellas and fruity decorations, and laughed, speculated, joked, and swam under the summer sun.

We got back in for dinner around six.

The packhouse was a communal space. It had all the amenities you could want plus a lot of luxuries. Including a big pool. Non-members of the pack were forbidden from using the packhouse, but it was open to anyone else. Behind it, on the same land, were a number of buildings including my parents' house. It had ten bedrooms, twelve bathrooms, and was by all consideration a very upscale thing.

Naturally, Mom insisted for Kaden to come and have dinner with us every Sunday that he was not away, or abroad—as he had his own house on the property.

I didn't usually work on weekends, but I had made an exception this week because of the meet-up—though, technically, it had been on Friday. By the moon, I was glad I went. If I hadn't, then Darren and I might have never met.

I sent him a quick text before entering the dining room. Jass saw it and smirked at me.

The girls and I were chatting quietly when Mom came in.

"Do you have a picture?" asked me Jass about Darren.

"No."

"About whom?" asked Mom.

"Eum." I saw Dad and Kaden walk into the room talking about something he used to do for the pack. I didn't stop pondering about telling my parents and immediately got anxious. "My mate," I said not too loudly.

"What is that?" asked my mother nonchalantly.

"Her mate," repeated Jass loudly.

Mom froze, her eyes wide, Dad stopped talking and joined us at the table.

"Sweetie, you found your mate?" she asked.

"Yes," I said instantaneously self-conscious.

"And?" she prompted.

"He seems nice," I admitted.

Dad realizing he was not getting much out of me fast enough, switched his attention to Kaden. "You met that mate?" Everyone turned to him.

"Yeah," he said grabbing his first bite.

"What's his pedigree?"

"Dad," "Sebastian," both Mom and I admonished.

"It's a legitimate question," he answered.

"Forth son of Stonewillow's Alpha. No title, no job, at college. Dropped out of a business degree, but is currently working on finishing his accounting degree. 26, brown hair, brown eyes, no visible scars, a relatively wealthy family, but he's not very high on the heirloom hierarchy. His father seems to be strongly conservative and trying to get something out of this—"

"What?" I interrupted him.

Dad scoffed.

"I talked to him on the plane," he said. "If he gives you a hard time, I need to know. Father or son. I can't do anything if I don't know."

"Do what?"

He shrugged.

"How conservative are we talking?" Dad asked.

"I don't think he's okay with the possibility of his son moving away to be with his mate, rather than the other way around."

"He's gonna come here?" asked Mom.

"Maybe," I said. "I'll go and see him for a couple of weeks, and then we'll decide."

"Will you move there otherwise?" asked Nadine.

"No. I thought about it, and talked to him about it, but I like it here. I'm not ready to leave. I like my job too. What would I do there?" I said. "And he's okay with this. He said he even thought of leaving before we met. It's just that we don't want to rush things too fast. And I know you gave him contact for him to finish his internship here," I said turning to my brother. "Thanks by the way. It's really nice of you."

He nodded to me. "Glad you want to keep working."

"Of course. Why would I not?"

He just shrugged.

Darren was pretty much the subject of conversation for the rest of the dinner.

Once it was over, I went straight upstairs to my room, locked it, and pulled my phone out.

He was probably sleeping at this point, so I just sent him one message and went straight to bed.

Jet lag knocked me unconscious in seconds.

The next days were mostly spent at the office.

Like most Mondays, it was busy right from the start.

As Brandon, my brother's assistant, or personal secretary—however you want to call his position—was on bed rest. He usually follows Kaden all over the place, but he generally refrain

from battlegrounds. However, the story was that the safe house had been attacked, and he got stabbed a few times. Thus, mandatory bed rest.

Only this guy is probably an even worst workaholic than my brother, and I know that he asked Marie to bring him his laptop and some documents. So he may be in bed, but I'm still unclear on the *rest* part.

I know all this, because the office is an incubator of gossip. And quite frankly, I like it. I'm in my right element. Granted, I'm not as hungry for gossip as my sister Jasmine. She, though, is a little excessive. I'm a healthy gossiper. She's a manic one.

Brandon was the subject of a third of the gossip going around in my department. The other third being the whole campaign my brother won, and the fall of the Coven of Ruthenia. The third being me and my mysterious mate.

I came to my desk feeling like a celebrity.

I didn't even tell anyone but my sisters and siblings. But given Jass's personality, I'm sure the whole of Blakemore knows by now.

Next to Kaden's office is Brandon's office, and next to it is the room with our desks.

Marie is more or less Brandon's assistant. She's the oldest of us and was Dad's secretary before. She's matronly with her salt and pepper hair and her glasses, and she's a no-nonsense kind of person. She also relays the office with Brandon when he's away. She's the one that make everything tick. She transforms havoc into order.

Julie as a similar job as mine most of the time. We set conference tables, makes sure everything that needs copying is copied, everyone has their coffee when needed, and generally does anything either Marie, Brandon, or Kaden, or any other ranked members needs us to do. The only difference is that I'm generally the liaison. I'm the one who interacts with visitors and guesses, or I travel to connect with Alphas, have contracts signed, those kind of things. Julie is a mousy brown hair wee little thing. If she could find out how, I'm sure she'd walk between the paint and the wall. She doesn't attract attention to herself, and does her thing at her own pace. She's good, but not the social butterfly that I am. Not even a social caterpillar.

Mike is more the secretary than any of us. He keeps calendars, and schedules, take the calls, emails, and forward everything to the right persons.

There are plenty of packs who don't even have a regular secretary, or have their Betas or Gammas do that type of work. But Blakemore is huge. We even have two Gammas, and even two Deltas. I've heard of only two packs with positions of Deltas.

But there's more than just the core pack to deal with.

There was a time when werewolves had pretty small packs. And we were pretty much seen as the representative of the low or middle-class citizens of the supernatural communities. But some packs lasted for a few generations. And we tend to get attached to land, acquiring any when we can. Some packs got *real* intense on the land acquiring business. And then the Industrial Revolution happened. Packs grew bigger, some as big as small towns. Some invested in industries to get their members work.

With things like compound interest, land values inflation, and multi-generational inheritance (either through family members, or pack members). Time alone became the driving force behind a lot of accumulated wealth.

Some of the better off packs either are very old, or have struck gold at some point, either literally or figuratively.

Blakemore has a bunch of businesses. Some old, some newer. Technically, they all belong to Kaden, he's the main investor, or chairman, or something alike for all of them, but he has managers, and CEOs and such for them all.

There are a lot of people to coordinate with, on the political agenda, or businesses, or just the pack members, making sure they're all okay. Packs are like societies within a society. Some have even some independence regarding the human local politics. Which is pretty amazing when you think about it.

I passed Mads and Stellan, chilling at their desks doing what security does best, which is not much when things are quiet. Come to think about it, Mads could have told them. He knows for sure about my mate.

I saw a few in the other offices get their heads together as I passed by. Others waving their hands more enthusiastically than usual.

"Hey there!" said Mike.

"Hey!" I answered jovially. I liked Mike. He had skin the colour of chocolate, and the most infectious smile I've ever seen. He's constantly joking around. There is something absolutely charming about a good-looking man with a sense of humour. If he'd been interested, I would've dated him in a heartbeat. But even though he liked his job and everything—I mean, he works for the Hellhound, he works with his sister too—but there is no way in hell he'd date the Hellhound's sister. I realized this as I jokingly offered to get him a date with one of my sisters. He wasn't rude when he turned it down, it was actually pretty smooth and a little funny, but it stung.

What stung the most was probably the fact that there are a lot of men thinking exactly the same thing.

Darren didn't seem to mind, but again, we haven't talked that much yet.

And then what Kaden said yesterday echoed in my head. His father might have an agenda. What if he does too. It would sting far worst to realize the only thing I attract are guys with an agenda.

"I just heard the news," Mike said.

"Does everyone knows already?" I asked him.

"Possibly, princess." He's been calling me that since we met a few years ago.

"Is the date fixed for France?"

"Confirmed, you leave early Thursday, and return late Friday."

"That's gonna be a quickie."

"Well, it's right before the weekend, so if you want to spend it there, you tell me now, so I can book your plane accordingly."

I thought about it some. "No. I'll return early."

"Really," he said surprised. "Anything to do with your boo?"

"Maybe, after France, I'm gonna take a few weeks off and go to see him."

"You gonna move there?" he asked more seriously. Julie passed us and went to her desk, listening intently.

"No. We're gonna see how things goes between us, but I'll come back. I keep my pack and my job."

"Cool. Girl power and all," he teased. "But it might be hard on a relationship. I don't want to pour rain on your parade, but long-distance sucks. My coz tried it, and it went south real quick."

"No long distance. If we work out, he moves in."

Julie smile discreetly at that.

We didn't have the time to discuss it much further as Marie came in, and distributed a bunch of documents to take care of. Then went through what I needed for France and surprised me by telling me she's coming with me.

The rest of the day flew by.

Whenever I had a few minutes free, I would text Darren.

We'd been talking like that since I left. Often minutes, or even hours in between texts, stuck each with work, or time zones.

I wanted to face-time at least, but our schedules didn't fit easily.

I got Mike to book my flight to Stonewillow for next Monday, giving me the weekend to prepare. I decided not to book my return yet, so that I could adjust on the fly.

The rest of the week was a strange mix of time flying by, intersected by moments that couldn't end soon enough.

I tried not to exasperate anyone, or be too much of a mess. I don't know how well I fared. I was distracted a lot. But everything worked out in the end.

— Chapter Ten —

FEAR IS THE GREATEST WEAPON

— Eveline —

“Allô, chérie!”

“Allô, Laeticia. How are you doing today?”

“Very well. Alpha Jean-Philippe is ready to receive you.”

“Thank you,” I told her.

It was the third time I visited Boisclair pack. It’s one of the oldest pack I’ve come across. There is rumours than one of Jean-Philippe Boisclair’s ancestors is the one who ended the reign of terror of the Beast of Gévaudan, which was, as per the rumours, either a werewolf who had been cursed by a warlock, or a werewolf with a severe advanced case of the rabies. Either way, there had been over 200 attacks and more than 100 deaths in the 1600s in France, which had freaked out the entire werewolf communities.

Many powerful wolves had been dispatched to stop the massacre.

Werewolves communities have always been quite secretive, and as history has told us, attracting human attention is always a bad decision. I mean, many don’t know this, but during the Inquisition, the second most hunted preternatural, after witches, had been werewolves. Some European werewolf trials have become quite notorious throughout history.

Generally, it’s one of the first thing werewolf pups are taught by their parents.

Be careful of humans. If you’re among them, blend in. Otherwise, make yourself scarce. And don’t shift or show any signs of being a wolf unless you’re safe on a pack’s territory.

It’s also why many packs are not very fond of having humans coming on their territories. Why so many of them are isolated.

Humans can jump the gun so easily.

They have this weird idea that they are at the top of the food-chain. And anything that can challenge this misconception terrifies them, and they want nothing but to destroy anything they can’t control, understand, or dominate.

Their ignorance is baffling.

Werewolves are so much more than humans, yet we are not even close to the top of the food-chain ourselves. The only big difference between humans and werewolves is that we don't fool ourselves as much about our place in the world.

The Boisclair pack had some of the best woods on their territories that I've seen. Every time I came here, I had to indulge in crazy runs.

The trees were ridiculously old and had those funky bends in them that made them stunning. And they were gigantic.

The first time I saw Jean-Philippe he was fifteen. His father had died the prior year, and he had been giving the full responsibility of Alpha. And as his mother was not of a strong bloodline, it had been considered better to put him in power right away.

But at fourteen, it's ridiculously young to put someone in such a position and challenges are nearly always inevitable when one gets that position before they hit eighteen.

But Jean-Philippe's father Marcel had worked a few times with my dad, and when Kaden began taking charge, the Moonhunters Brotherhood had decided to get on his back hard, and as dad was pretty sick, Marcel had taken it upon himself to back him up before the Brotherhood. Which had pissed more than a few people off, but had greatly helped Kaden solidify his position in the werewolf community and he'd helped with some of the politics.

Mom, at that time, was spending every moment free she had caring for Dad. Kaden had been mostly left to himself to care for everything, and Mom told me, he would never ask for anything or bother them, other than the designated periods every week Dad gave him to train him until he took full charge.

So when Marcel died and Jean-Philippe took over—around the same age Kaden did to booth—, of course, Kaden helped him. He'd even told him he'd champion for him on any challenge until he'd reach eighteen.

He did answer a few challenges for him. The first was from Boisclair itself—in front of the whole pack too. And, of course, my brother won without any difficulties. So it discouraged any others from trying the same thing.

The others were external challenges.

It's really appealing to challenge a weak Alpha when you can gain one of the richest packs in Europe in the process.

One of those challenges, I heard, had been pretty brutal, and Kaden came back home in a terrible state, but victorious.

I was there for the last challenge. It was the first time I came here. It wasn't the most brutal one, but it had opened my eyes to how violent they can get.

I mean, I've trained for combat, my parents and Kaden all insisted on me and my sisters to be combat capable, at the very least.

But there has not been a territory challenge in Blakemore or Blakewoods since Grandpa. I suppose the reputation of the Hellhound dissuaded most of those.

Grandpa has this idea that fear is the greatest weapon a wolf can wield. He would tell all sorts of stories. It reached a point where no one knows how much of this even happened. It's also him who started the whole 'Hellhound' thing. And he's the one who began calling Dad that, and later, Kaden. He's both the holder and giver of the title. He says the best battles are won without a fight, and if the fear of a name can end a war before it even begins, then that name should be cherished and fed until it grows so much, it only uttered in both fear and awe in hushed voices in dark corners.

Despite his thug identity, he's always had this weird philosophizing persona.

I think Dad and Kaden are a little like that. Kinda like closeted bookworms.

I can really say he's wrong about the whole fear of the name theory.

After traveling some, I've realized its power and used it a few times myself.

There was once this chick who decided she didn't want me in the same room as her mate. I never understood excessive feats of jealousy and possessiveness, I mean the guy can't even be in the same room as a girl without risking her throwing a fit—I'd dump someone like that in a heartbeat. Anyways, she was all about butt-kicking, and I was about to get to one of my first meetings abroad on my own, and I really wanted to do this right, not come in late and bloody—so I just told her, "You sure you want to start a fight with the sister of the Hellhound?" with the coldest stare I could muster, and just like that, I saw her deflate, and her boyfriend dragged her away in a hurry. I had been pretty proud of myself that day. I went into that meeting strutting like I'd just won a UFC cage match. So I guess I can understand the appeal of such power.

Jean-Philippe had been sixteen last time I saw him, so he should be around seventeen now.

The last time I'd seen him he had decided to live up to the Frenchman reputation at last, and was flirting like it was out of style.

It was kinda cute, until it became overbearing. I'd had to push it down a notch. If he wasn't such a nice guy, I might have taken offence, but he never went too far, just a little too much. But everything had seemed resolved when I'd left.

He lived in the pack house, which was a medieval castle that had seen major restoration during the renaissance, and other that the addition of plumbing and electricity, nothing more than maintenance had been done.

It was absolutely beautiful. The kind of place to give any girl fantasies. The little girl in me just couldn't get enough of this place.

Yet, winter night here were a brutal affair, and the brutality had nothing to do with violence and everything to do with the cold.

By the night, it was cold. And when you slept through the blaze in the fireplace, you were guaranteed to wake to frozen toes and nose, buried under a metric ton of blankets. Old fireplaces are not as efficient as modern wood-burning stoves, where the cheery fire died early enough, and there was nothing but cold ashes in the morning.

But it was charming. Everything was charming here. The food, the people, the architecture, the forest. Everything.

"Eveline!" I heard before I'd even opened the door of Jean-Philippe's office completely.

"Hi!" I said.

Wow! He'd fill in. He use to have the scrawny look about himself, but the shoulders had begun to take shape. He had the physic of someone who trained a lot too, which looked good on him. He'd probably started shaving too.

And when he got up I gasped and put my hand upon my heart mimicking surprise.

"Since when are you taller than me?" I asked in shock. Not only that, but he was taller than me in my heels. He'd always been on the small side. I'd teased him about it.

And now he looked like I'd given him the best compliment in the whole world.

He came to hug and kiss me on the cheeks.

I was right about the training assumption. He was fit.

Man, if this kept up, in a few years he would become one of the most attractive bachelors of the whole werewolf community.

Rich, handsome, living in a castle. Damn!

"You're about to become quite a catch," I told him.

"About?" he asked. His English was a lot better too. His accent had smoothed out and was far easier to understand.

I smiled at him. “If this keeps up, I might have to present you to my sisters.”

“What, not enough for you?” He smiled.

“I’m sorry, but I found my mate.”

His smile faltered. “I should have snatched you when I could.”

“Nah, I’m a handful. I’d wipe the floor with you.”

He smiled again. “Maybe that’s just my thing,” he said with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

I blushed.

Since when does little Jean-Philippe makes me blush.

“I brought tons of things for you to read, and sign, and be all Alpha-like with.” I change the subject.

I was always less formal with him.

“Mmh,” he said and took the mallet I gave him.

I had the feeling he wanted to say something more, but he didn’t. Actually, he got all business-like for a while, which was a nice change.

I suppose he had discipline drilled into him hard in the last few years. It makes a kid mature real fast.

Looking at him now, it was hard to think of him in terms of a kid.

At that point Marie came in. She was probably done with the paperwork with Laeticia, and we got to business.

We had a lot of documents to cover. And tomorrow morning I had to represent Kaden as a moderator in a territorial conflict between packs of which Jean-Philippe was another moderator and host for the negotiations.

It was the first time I’d ever done anything like that, and I was thrilled that Kaden thought I was up for the job.

I suppose with Mary here, it would help.

She’s seen those things more than a few times and would be able to guide me through it. But mostly I’d been told I was to sit around and listen. I wasn’t even the deciding party, and only there with one other to vote with Jean-Philippe if his decision was contested. And he had to decide only if the opposing parties in question couldn’t come to a decision by themselves.

Mostly, this was organized in a way to limit hostilities and the risk of war between two major packs.

Obviously, I drilled Maria all evening about what could happen, and all the possible outcomes, and how I should act. And I did so until exhaustion—Marie's I mean.

Mads was also here, of course, and I questioned him some, but he'd never been the biggest talker.

He'd been the one sent with me every time I'd gone abroad, and I'd learn to see through his facade.

He was a pretty decent guy.

He was in his late twenties, and not bad to look at. He had a permanent scoff on his face, but it was not attitude. Actually, I'd come to learn his biggest secret. The guy was shy.

It was mostly why he didn't talk much, why the scoff. It wasn't bad temper, just discomfort and social anxiety.

He liked that the job pretty much demanded of him to be no more than a shadow, lurking about, not talking to anyone, and looking intimidating.

I also discovered, after I saw a woman at a party a little too drunk coming at him a little too hard, that he blushed easily.

I had to really hold back the laughter when I saw this. But having him with me always calmed me. He always made me feel safe, no matter what. I knew he always had my back. So I didn't bother him too much about the ins and outs of tomorrow's meeting.

On the faithful day, well, I'd like to say it was interesting and all but it was terribly anticlimactic.

I nearly fell asleep during the whole ordeal, and they kept nagging about the smallest, most insignificant of things. It took so long that I thought I might have to delay my plane.

"Wait! You're leaving already?" asked Jean-Philippe after he learned of my early departure after our dinner. "I thought you'd be there for the weekend at least."

"I'm sorry, but I'm leaving for a few weeks on Monday, so I have to prepare this weekend."

He looked sour.

"I hope you hadn't planned anything?"

He didn't answer. I felt like he did.

"I'm really sorry. Maybe next time I'll stay longer. Could be there for the week."

"Maybe," he mumbled.

He hugged me and his smile returned.

We made our goodbyes, and were gone within the hour.

There was a febrility on Sunday evening that I don't remember ever feeling before traveling.

I wanted to spend all the time that I could with my family and friends, but the moment I was with them, I just wanted to be alone. My nerves were killing me. So much so that I had to take sleeping pills on the plane.

Mads was coming with me—per my brother's order—until he could assess my security and decide to return, or stay for the full duration if he wanted to. I don't remember seeing my brother going to such length for nothing. It got me a little worried, until I remembered that I'm the first to get her mate. So could just be him being all brotherly on me.

— Chapter Eleven—

ALL THE HOUNDS OF HELL

— Darren —

I was sitting in my car, waiting, near a small airport strip, for a plane to land.

I took my week off work so I could spend more time with Eva.

The private airstrip had no indoor waiting area or anything like that. There was a small traffic tower, and a few plane hangars, and that was mostly it. It was probably mostly used by smaller private crafts.

I put some music on to try to chill out. I was only half-successful.

Around one in the afternoon, I heard the roaring of the big engine coming.

I tried to keep my composure and not to run like an idiot out of my car. I didn't feel comfortable with excessive display of eagerness in public. I mean, we barely know each other, I can restrain myself. Right? So walked instead around to where the plane would stop, like a normal, mature adult.

Around fifteen minutes later, Eva rushed out and ran straight for me, without any composure whatsoever.

Which got me grinning.

She rushed into my arms and I hugged her harder than I initially intended.

I took in her smell, and holding her this way, it was the best I've felt in a long time. There was as much strength in her hug as in mine. And it made it even better.

Mads the bodyguard came a little later bringing a few bags, and I reluctantly disentangled from her to help him get them to my trunk. Once done, Eva hugged him.

"Thanks, I'll be okay from here."

He looked at her as if she'd just asked him to eat a full bowl of living worms.

"I'll be safe Mads."

"My job is to look after you."

"I doubt you planned to stay here for a few weeks?" she said.

"I'm to assess your security and stay as long as necessary," he said firmly.

"I can look after her, and the home of an Alpha is the best guarded house on the entire pack-land," I said. "But if you want to come and inspect the place, I won't stop you," I added after seeing his reaction.

"It's an hour of drive back, then you'll need a ride back here. So another back and forth for Darren, which means four hours of his day would have been driving rather than two. Plus the plane has to wait in the meantime, and it's taking a lot of place on this small strip. Maybe even stopping other planes from using it. This is not reasonable. I'm gonna call every day if you want. You can always come back if needed, and you're a lot more needed at home than here. I'm fine," she said.

Mads opened his mouth to argue but she cut him short.

"Nope. I'm fine. Goodbye Mads. We'll be in touch," she said then got inside the car and closed the door behind her, shutting the conversation for good.

"Sorry man," I said apologetically. "She'll be safe I promise."

"If she's not…" he began. "All the hounds of Hell will come for your ass. Anything happens, you tell me. You have doubts, you tell me. Anything fishy, you tell me." He gave me his business card. "And I'll be in touch with her, if I don't get contact for 24 hours, I'll be here and I won't be lacking transportation, or friends."

"Sure," I said a little higher pitched than usual. I got the threat clearly. I tried to get my voice back to normal. "Let's keep in touch." Then I got in my car and drove off with Mads gaze locked on us menacingly.

Eva waved at him enthusiastically, completely unaware and unshaken. And we made our way to my pack and home.

At least for now.

— Eveline —

We got to his place, and brought my luggage back to the guess's wing, and I was given a different room from last time.

There was something in Darren's face when he looked at my luggage that told me he was thinking I'd overpacked, but he said nothing. Good boy.

"Yes," said Darren after someone knocked on the doorframe, and we both turned to look at the newcomer.

“Hi,” said a man. He was a few years older than Darren, with similar dark hair and dark eyes. He was of a similar height than Darren and I was pretty sure he was his brother. They had similar square jaws and kind eyes. He didn’t have many distinctive features. He might not model for a career, but he was pleasant to look at. “I just wanted to see if you needed anything?” he asked us.

“Nah, we’re fine,” said Darren smirking at his brother as if there was something there lost on me. “This is Eveline Devon,” he said to him. “Eva, this is my oldest brother Michael.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said going to him to shake his hand.

“Pleasure is all mine,” he said sincerely. I couldn’t stop myself from smiling, and he smiled back at me.

“I hope you’re gonna have a good time here,” he told me. “Darren is going to take good care of you.”

“Thanks,” I answered. “I’m sure.”

“Well—” he began.

“She here?” asked another male voice from the corridor. We could hear steps coming our way.

“Really?” asked Darren, shaking his head.

“Oh! Hey!” said the second newcomer, walking in.

“Timothy,” said Darren to me, gesturing at him. “My second youngest brother.”

“Hi,” I said coming to shake his hand. He had the same dark hair and eyes than his brothers, a little taller and slimmer though. The corner of his eyes were crinkled like he’d just heard a good joke and was on the verge of laughter. It seemed like a natural expression on him.

“Hey!” said a woman rushing in the room after him and throwing herself at me before I could give Timothy a hand shake.

There was a mass of strawberry blond curls obscuring my eyes and a girl built like a gymnast hugged me.

“I’m so glad you’re here now. We’re in great need of estrogen here. There’s so little I fear I might start to grow a moustache. A big handlebar one,” she said finally pulling from me with her hand on my shoulders looking me up and down. She was a little shorter than I, pale-skinned with freckles everywhere.

“Hum. Hi,” I said to her.

“Let her breathe Ana,” said Timothy, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“And this is Anabella,” said Darren, coming to stand by me. “Tim’s mate.”

"Nice to meet you," I said.

"You Betcha," she said winking while clucking her tongue and making a finger gun at me. She seemed to have a personality that is very, *very* … well, yeah, very. I don't know what other word to use but *'very'*.

We chatted a little then Darren walked me around the property and his siblings let us have our little moment. Well, Anabella didn't seem like she intended to let us have any moment to ourselves, but Timothy railed her in. After a few tries.

We talked a lot, walking hand in hand. But eventually we moved back inside. Darren's mother, Michelle, made him promise I'd have dinner with the family. Which seemed to make Darren anxious, but he said nothing about it.

"Oh! Finally," Michelle said to me. "We get to meet. I was afraid Darren might keep you all to himself and hide you somewhere."

"Happy to meet you," I told her.

"Oh. Hi," said a girl around my age who walked in hand-in-hand with whom I speculated was another Thomas brother.

"I'm Catherine, but you can call me Kate," she told me as we shook hands. "This is Kevin," she said pointing at the man next to her.

"Eveline, but you can call me Eva."

"Nice to meet you Eva," they both told me and I replied in kind.

Kate was blond and a little shorter than I. She had eyes the colour of the winter sky. Kevin was a little shorter than his brothers and a little stockier too. He wore the additional weight naturally, but something in his face made me think he was the goofy type.

We took seats around the table.

Timothy and the energetic Anabella joined us soon after.

"How do you find the place?" asked me Kevin.

"It's quite charming."

"At least we're close to the city. My parent's pack is so remote we had to drive three hours to reach the first town. You'll be able to shop to your heart's content here," said Anabella.

"So you're from a different pack?" I asked her.

"Yep. Small too. Sixty-three members the last I checked."

“How about you?” I asked Kate.

“I come from here,” she answered.

“So you’ve known each other for a while?”

“My parents left, for work, when I was little. My father’s brother was Gamma here. He died a few years back, and my parents came back when his position was offered to Dad. So we haven’t known each other for that long. A few years,” Kate said.

“What about your pack?” asked me Anabella.

Two more men that I didn’t know entered the room to join us. One was wiry, maybe the tallest of them. The other looked much younger than the rest of them and still had the remnant of a baby face. They both had the same brown hair and eyes and tanned skin complexion had all the others. Like their mother.

She had her hair cropped in line with her jaw and wore nice but comfortable clothes.

“It’s pretty big actually. I’ve heard there might be bigger out there, but I haven’t seen one yet.”

“How big are we talking?” asked Kevin.

“It depends on how you divide it,” I said as two more men entered. One being Michael and the other an older man with salt and pepper hair. Which I assume was their father. I could see a little bit of each of his sons in him. His height was somewhere between Kevin and the youngest. He had Darren’s broad shoulders, Michael’s posture. The eyes of the wiry one, the nose of Timothy, and a beard hiding his jawline.

“What do you mean?” asked me Kate.

The last men sat, and a few employees brought the food to the table.

“Well, Blakemore itself has a little over a hundred members, but the under-packs have a lot of members. Blakewoods alone as a few thousand at least.”

“Wait. What?” asked Timothy. His father scoffed at him, and I saw him looking between me and his father confused. “Under-packs?” he muttered.

“Blakewoods?” asked Darren.

“It’s my father’s pack. The one my brother originally inherited,” I said. “It has grown significantly the last few generations, it has gotten a lot of alliances with other packs too, but when a few offers of fusions with other packs got on the table, Kaden let some of them keep their pack structure and hierarchy,” I began explaining.

“So what they say is true?” asked Michael. “Blakemore is a pack of packs?”

“What?” said the youngest.

“Max,” Michelle chastised him under her breath. “Swallow your food at least before you talk.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” I answered them. There was no light chatter around the table, and everyone was listening.

“So it’s Blakemore or Blakewoods?” Kevin asked.

“Blakemore,” said their father.

“She just said Blakewoods,” said Max.

“They’re two different pack?” Darren asked.

“Yes and no,” I said. “Dad got sick before I was born, really sick, so he began transferring Blakewoods early to Kaden, and made him Alpha two years later. Dad had expended a lot in his time, but not on the level of Kaden. And when he began combining multiple packs together. Well, it got big. By that time, Dad was healthy again. And he’s had six more kids. I think Mom asked Kaden to give him something to do because he was driving her mad. Retired life was never really his shtick. So Kaden gave him back Blakewoods. He made him Alpha again. And he built Blakemore. So all the packs have some level of autonomy and control, but all their rank members are also members of Blakemore, which is controlled by my brother.”

There was a short silence.

“So it’s a pack of Alphas?” asked Timothy.

I heard Max gulp audibly.

“Well, yes and no. Our entire family is in Blakemore, all the ranked members of the packs called the Council of Alphas, the Council of Elders—” I was counting them on my fingers. “—Which is all retired former ranked members—, the advisory council—which is a few key management positions—, and a few others. So Blakemore has not that many direct members, but when you consider all the packs under its control, then it’s a lot.”

“I never heard of packs like that,” said the tall wiry one.

“I don’t know if there’s another,” I conceded.

“That’s pretty badass,” he said.

“Fred. Language,” said his father. Fred lowered his head and focused on his food.

“I supposed that’s why your brother gets so many others on edge,” told Michael.

I shrugged.

“How many Alphas does your brother has?” asked Darren’s father.

“It depends. Active Alphas, thirty-six not counting himself. But there’s more from Alpha bloodlines. I don’t know the full number though.”

There was a collective freeze.

“Your pack has thirty-six, no thirty-seven Alphas? It’s made of thirty-seven packs?” murmured Michelle.

“Yeah. Well, the smaller packs generally got integrated within the bigger packs, so the number of original distinct packs could be considered more, but I don’t know how many that is.”

“I suppose one as to be a pretty a strong Alpha to make that many Alphas subservient,” said Kate.

I couldn’t stop from smiling. “No one sane would want to fight one on one with my brother.”

“I guess he’s not called the Hellhound for nothing,” said Michael.

Two of the brothers, Kevin and Fred’s head snapped to Michael at his comment. I guess those were the ones who’d heard of the nickname before.

I was a little more used to dealing with people who already knew about Blakemore, or at least some. They didn’t seem to know that much though. Other than my brother’s nickname, I supposed.

— Chapter Twelve —

A WOLF LIKE ME

— Mishka —

I was climbing the fire stairs up to my apartment. I don't take elevators unless I want to be spotted. Which is never when I go back home.

I was tired.

This last job had been a mess.

The only highlight of my day would be the couple of beers I was about to crack open the moment I'll step in.

I smelled something wrong, before I reached my door.

The broken bulbs in the corridor, and the damage on the door, were also excellent clues.

I took my time, listened for any suspicious sounds, and focused on the smells. There were a lot of them in the corridor, which made it harder to cipher through.

I heard TVs from other apartments, and some talks too, but nothing from mine.

I put my bag against the wall, careful not to make a sound, and grabbed my gun.

I pressed my back against the wall, on the side of the doorknob, took the safety off the gun, and gently pushed on the door.

I let it swing halfway open and listened.

The lock was unsalvageable, I wasn't sure the doorknob could be saved either.

There was no sound coming from inside.

There was a whiff of wolves though.

No human did this.

That pissed me off.

A stupid human, not knowing who they're robbing breaking into my home sucks, but a wolf…

They know it belongs to a wolf. They could smell it. But they did it anyways.

Fucking city wolves.

I moved slowly in. I kept the gun aimed down just in case. Those are fireproof floors with concrete slabs, and an accidental discharge would stop a bullet. Not the walls. This is an apartment building, and accidentally shooting your neighbours is not a good long-term strategy.

I scanned each room, moved methodically, clearing one at a time until I was sure no one was hiding anywhere.

Once I was done, I went to grab my bag outside, then closed the door the best I could.

The latch didn't seem to really work, so I put the nearest piece of furniture in front of the door to hold it in place.

Then I went to assess the damage.

Whoever they were, they didn't put much effort in holding back. They didn't seem to care that I'd notice the intrusion right away.

I went room by room, looking for what could be missing.

The TV was gone, and so was the sound system. Most of anything of value.

The safe in my closet was damaged. They had tried to get in, but when I checked inside, everything was untouched.

I should have installed cameras.

For my defence, I've been here only a few months, and I spent most of them working away from home. But still. This is a stupid oversight.

Maybe I should've gotten an apartment with security at the door.

I hadn't thought long term. I didn't even think I'd be here long enough.

I called the Alpha active in this territory.

I'm not part of his pack or anything, but I'd contacted him when I'd moved in. Gotten authorization to move into his territory, which was also supposed to give me some level of protection too. Granted, this is a city pack. Those tend not to have large territories, and navigate among the rest of the population. It's not like they can control who come and goes on their territories, there's like a bajillion humans and whatnot moving around all the time. They don't have a tight leash on anything. They don't have exclusive land either. Hell, some of them recruit their members on the internet. They tend to be an odd bunch to begin with.

Which is why I supposed, they didn't bother too much with a lone wolf like me. It's a good way to hide.

Rural packs and those with land tend to be a lot more skittish about who they let walk on their territories.

Some don't let any non-pack members live on their land. Some are even not fond of guesses either.

But they do tend to have much better security.

My conversation with the Alpha was a let down. He had no good answers. "I've heard of nothing." "I'll look into it." He probably won't find anything.

Fucking city packs.

I got my secured laptop out of the safe, as my other one was gone now and checked my mail.

I went to grab a beer in my fridge.

Of course, they found the beer.

Fucking thieves stole my fucking beer.

Fuck!

This day sucks!

I should set myself a little more permanently somewhere. This way I could have some proper security.

Finding a pack that'll take me would be a doozy. That or I set myself on some property on my own. It could be a passable retirement plan. I've considered it before. But it does include retirement. It's pretty hard to assure security of your own land when you're not on it.

I'm not sure I'm ready to settle. I mean, what would I do with my life? Learn macramé? Build bird houses?

I'd probably go insane within a year.

Besides, I'd need a bit more money to be able to settle like that.

The other option is a pack.

But what kind of pack would take a wolf like me?

My mail app pinged.

I got a new job offer.

I read the email, nice terms, possible multiple gigs. It mentioned a possible permanent position. Interesting.

Let's see what there is to it.

I answered them, then went to pack my stuff.

I got more ammo from my safe, and a few additional guns—just in case. Then I grabbed my machete—again, just in case. I shoved those in my bag and swapped the dirty clothes for clean ones.

Now I only have to do something about that damn door.

And find me some beer.

— Darren —

I got up early.

After last night's dinner, I asked Eva on a date. Our first.

We'll spend all day together, go to town, get to know one another.

I really want us to have a good time.

Last night's dinner took an unforeseen direction. I mean, I expected the curiosity, and the questions. She comes from a notorious pack. Has an infamous brother. But it got a little awkward in the end, and that's not what I wanted. At the same time, I was there with everyone, trying to wrap my head around Blakemore.

I'm kinda seriously considering moving there.

Coming from a relatively conservative household, Blakemore is pretty out there. I'm sure the sheer mental gymnastics required to consider its mere existence gave my father ulcers.

However, what got me thinking was what type of man build something like that from the ground up. And so early in his life.

He might become my Alpha, and brother-in-law. I can't just write this off as a novelty pack from far away, to gossip and speculate about when I'm bored.

On top of that, Eva's father is also an active Alpha.

In consideration, there's probably Alphas everywhere there. Maybe I'll just feel at home? Who knows?

I got to Eva's room early. I wanted to get a move on before Ana would get the brilliant idea to make it a double date, or a group thing.

If she sticks with us, she'd hack the whole day away from us, and we'll have to keep up with her pace.

I don't know how my brother does this. She's nice and all, but that woman drives me crazy.

"Ack!" I heard on the other side of the door, when I knocked.

"Hi! You're early," Eva said as she opened the door. Part of her hair was curled. Maybe a third of it.

"Well, I did say we could leave early."

"But this is early early." Her eyes were a little wide.

"It's too early?"

"Hem. It's okay, I just didn't plan for early enough."

"You want me to come back later?"

"I can hurry. If you don't mind waiting," she said with a doubtful expression. "Otherwise, if you have anything else to do, I can text you when I'm ready."

"I don't mind waiting," I said. And she let me in.

She went back to the little desk with the mirror and curler and makeup and other girly stuff, whatever those are. I could barely distinguish lipstick from hand cream.

In the meantime, I sat on her bed.

"You sure you're okay with waiting."

"Sure," I answered. "Quite frankly, I'm afraid to be spotted by Ana, so it's better if I hide here until you're ready."

"Why you hide from her?"

"To not get this day hijacked."

She snorted. "She's a little intense."

"A little? She drives everyone nuts. You've seen nothing yet."

"I don't know if I should be excited or terrified."

"I don't know about the former, but definitely the latter."

"Did you plan something for today, or we wing it?"

"A bit of both. I picked a few options, and dependent on what you like or if we feel like excitement or quiet, we'll choose. But if you have something in mind, I'm okay with improvising whatever."

"So you're okay with improvisation and last-minute changes?"

"It's mostly how I've survived so far. Dealing with the unforeseen is my nature."

"So you generally wing it?"

"I can plan. But I usually get a few plan Bs in case. And I won't panic if everything is scrapped and changed at the last moment."

She nodded and spend the next ten minutes finishing her hair.

Then she began makeup, so I picked up my phone and checked the news or whatever.

She continued her work in silence for half an hour until she rose and came to me.

"Ready," she said.

I closed my phone and rose from lounging on her bed.

"Wow," I said.

It took a while but I felt she'll turn a few heads today. She looked incredible.

She smiled smugly.

We tiptoed to my car as if we were a bunch of robbers sneaking around, which looked a lot like us goofing around more than anything else but to the finest trained eye, and we got in the car giggling.

We began our excursion to a nice little place with nice waffles and incredible home-roasted coffee. They even did the little designs in the froth, which got Eva cooing over it.

Then we went to the park that surrounds the lake, where there are a few water features, and large flower beds, and quaint little thickets of woods. We walked around the lake three times, talking about our families, school, work, hobbies, friends.

She was really close to her sisters. Had a thing for ice cream (but again, who doesn't). Had a few friends from high school she was close to, but none as close as she was with her sisters. Apparently she hasn't done that much dating, because her family and brother are intimidating, and most stayed away. And the few time someone didn't, turned out she was being used. Knowledge which gave me a whole new insight on us. She was used to being treated differently because of her circumstances. Which was not why I was interested in her, obviously, but my father though … he got me worried.

He spent all week asking me questions, asking me to ask her things.

I had to cut him short a few times yesterday evening. I tried to be as subtle as possible. But he was becoming less and less subtle himself. He wanted to use this as an opportunity.

I don't know if he had a plan, or if he was just fishing for something to gain out of this, but it really worried me.

He could easily get her spooked. Even more so if she's experienced being used in the past like this. I don't want him to screw this up, and make it seem like I'm into influence, or fame, or money, or title, or deals for my father, or pack.

I wouldn't want to be used like that either.

I just don't know how much I'm going to have to insulate her from him.

And I also know that if he doesn't get what he wants from me, he might conscript my brothers or anyone he can in his scheming. Blindsiding me.

I told her about my little crew of friends.

And she wanted to meet them. I don't know if it's cool or worrisome. But I guess she's interested in knowing more about me, so that's nice.

I haven't come out to my friends about my whole mate thing, and moving away, and all that. I've no idea how they're going to react.

We grabbed a bite at a cafe and went to eat it outside, picnicking in a smaller park where there's a small stage with street musicians playing. We snuck a bottle of wine that we drank secretly and chilled there for a couple of hours.

We went shopping in the afternoon, and I discovered she's really into shopping, I mean *really* into shopping.

After all that walking, we chose a cool place to eat where they have small table, nice bite-size meals, and comedians on stage.

We laughed. Had fun. I considered this pretty much a success.

Until my phone rang.

— Chapter Thirteen —

THAT KIND OF THINGS

— Kaden —

We arrived on Monaweard's territory around noon.

David was waiting for us.

"Glad you could make it early," he said to me as I got out of the car. "There's been another incursion a couple of hours ago, and two of the packs have missing people."

"There were no missing people before," I said.

"Not that we knew of, no."

"We know for sure this is linked to the incursions?"

"No, but the timing is awfully coincidental."

"I don't really believe in coincidences," I said.

"Me neither," David agreed.

We walked to the pack house. Which was not gigantic, but nice enough. Ylva and Stellan walked behind us, while Sam went to park the car.

"You're him," said a woman coming out from the house and walking to us, Mariqueen.

"I assume I am," I said.

She was pretty, with a South-East Asian complexion and almond eyes. She wore jeans and a white tank top.

We shook hand.

"Kinda tall aren't ya?"

"Kinda," I conceded.

"I got them all in, like you asked," she said.

"Debrief me," I told her.

"Sixteen incursions on this territory in the last two months. Nine led to altercations. All at strategic positions. They are testing our response time and forces. We've augmented the rounds, they've

adapted. The houses closest to the borders, 40% have been invaded or robbed. Always at different times. Day, night, doesn't matter. There was an attempted kidnapping of a pair of children. Got caught in time," she told me as we walked in.

"I made inquiries," she continued. "Every pack under 100 members within a 50km radius from here has had all incursions on their territories. Some worse than others. The number of missing members have risen. I assembled the Alphas of the eight small concerned packs closest. Everyone has had somewhere between 5 and 73 known incursions."

I frowned at that. That is a lot. Someone is targeting all the small packs, all at once.

We go through a set of French doors to a small conference room. There were more than a dozen people assembled there. Some sitting, or talking to one another, others pacing anxiously.

The Alphas and their entourage, I assumed.

"There's been a shift with the rogues too," David told me.

"More active?" I asked.

"Less. Either they're hiding, running, or disappearing."

That is a bad sign. Quite a red flag actually.

"Know of any lone wolf around?" I asked no one in particular as I took a seat.

"No," David said.

"I do," said one of the Alphas. Most took their seat. A few others stood behind their Alpha, not unlike Ylva and Stellan on either side of me, standing a little back.

"Any issues? Changes? Irregularities?"

"A lot of break-ins in big cities. It's a little harder to know much with city wolves. Even the packs, most are not really tight, or even organized, and not all territories are properly watched. But there's been anomalies, higher numbers of break-ins, or attacks, than usual. That kind of thing."

David sat next to me. Mariqueen next to him.

"Any knowledge of where they come from?"

"Not really," said a blond man with a lot of tribal tattoos sitting amongst the Alphas.

"Anyone knows which pack is doing this?" I asked.

Silence.

"Any guess how far they're traveling?"

Silence again.

“Is there an epicentre?”

“There seems to be more activity around the territory of Alpha Hirst of Bluerock,” said Mariqueen.

A black man, bald and a little rotund nodded at me.

“Ylva,” I said. She walked next to me. “Call a few warriors, the best and sneakiest. Coordinate with Hirst and anyone who has information about that region in particular. I want a full report, you go scouting.” Sam entered the room. “Sam,” I told him. “Join Ylva, get her whatever she needs and contact our tech team, I want all the aerial surveillance we can get. Ylva and Hirst will brief you.” He nodded and was joined by Ylva.

Hirst was a little slower at getting what was going on, but got up to join them.

“Also,” I continued to Sam. “Get surveillance on the other territories. Anything you can get. Get the net as wide as possible.” He nodded again. And the three of them left.

“Mariqueen. I want full details about all your warriors and those of every pack here. Plus any other willing to help.”

She grimaced like I was twisting her arm.

“What?” I asked.

“We’re small packs, and you want information about our defences? What is stopping you from using it against us to take over?” said the oldest Alpha around. His hair was pure white and looked like he styled it in a tornado.

“Nothing,” I said frankly. “I don’t even need that information to take over. All of your packs. All at once. If that was the plan, I wouldn’t waste my time here getting information that won’t change anything, and showing my hand. On the other hand—” I continued to everyone’s discomfort. “I could help you rearrange your fighting force and get them to coordinate with one another. It will also tell me how many warriors you need me to send you. If you don’t want them, it’s fine by me.”

“They’ll take them,” said David giving Mariqueen the eye.

“Sure,” she relinquished. “I’ll get you the information.”

“Give it to Stellan, he’ll work out how many you need and help with the organizing of the force.”

Mariqueen twisted her head to look at Stellan, he nodded at her.

“I also want full inventory on your weapons supply.” A few of them made noises. “Do you want more of them or not?” They shut up. “That’s what I thought.”

Things continued like that for a little while longer.

Mostly me telling them a list of things to do, and watching most of them squirm, or rush to write everything down before I moved to the next subject.

Though, as things went on, I got less and less resistance from the Alphas.

It's not like I don't know how to handle those, it's just that they tend to make things always a little more complicated. And the older they are the more stubborn they get.

Some of them probably never had anyone in their life tell them what to do, except maybe their wives.

By the time we've reached dinner time, my head hurt.

"Right," I finally capitulated. "Dinner."

And that was that.

Everyone grabbed their things and went their ways.

Sam came in and brought me some of the first aerial shots.

"What am I looking at exactly?" I asked him as the room cleared except for David.

And we went on for a while.

Someone brought us plates with food at some point, but I didn't notice who. Eventually we had to stop before food got cold. But as the new images came in, we added them to the makeshift map we were building.

Meanwhile, Stellan brought the first rough estimates about what resources they needed, and I got him to make the calls to get people and weapons here, at least to hold up the fort until we make a move and turn the situation around.

The biggest issue, I suspected, was the fact that we knew so little of the enemy—including who it is—, more that vanquishing them to begin with. You can't win a fight without knowing who you have to fight.

My biggest hope was to find visually an anomaly on our map, and then to wait on Ylva's scouting to learn more.

— Chapter Fourteen —

IN UNISON

— Darren —

Our date night ended at the hospital. Kate got in a fender bender and broke her wrist, and wasn't able to reach Kevin.

He eventually rushed to the hospital once the cast was set—once everything got settle, and we moved homeward, it was already two in the morning.

In the subsequent days, I tried to plan a date every other day, because I knew after that week I had to return to work, as I couldn't delay any further. Which would give us far less time to spend together.

I also began to dodge my father more and more.

It was at first just some comments. "It'd be nice to know about such and such." "Have you thought about asking about this and that?"

But after five days he ups the ante. And at that point I had to actively evade him.

I was getting really worried that when I'll not be around as much, he'll corner Eva to ask whatever of her.

It got me worried enough to decide to take preventive measures. So I sat her down and told her.

"If my father corners you and tries to ask anything of you, don't. And know that I'm against it."

"He wants something out of me?" she asked. "Or my brother?" she guessed.

"I don't know, maybe one, maybe both. I haven't questioned him much."

"My brother figured it out you know."

"Well, he's not being very subtle at this point."

"No. Your Dad called Kaden the day after we met and tried to get something out of him, or so my brother figured."

"Fuck!" I got up pumped. I knew he'd try something, but from the get go. Without me even knowing. Is he trying to mess it up? "I have nothing to do with this," I told her waving my finger around angrily at nothing in particular.

“Clearly,” she said incredulously.

“Sorry,” I said. “I need to take care of this now. Stay here.” And I rushed out.

I found my father lounging, reading a book.

“In your office, now,” I ordered him with the same tone he’d ordered us a million times.

Fred walked in and froze looking at my face, and I walked straight to my fathers office.

When he walked in he had a strange expression on his face. I had my arms crossed and was fuming.

“I don’t know what your plan is but drop it,” I ordered him.

“I don’t know wha—”

“Drop the bullshit!” That shut him up. I’ve barely ever cursed in front of him. “You’re after something with the Hellhound, or Eva, or both. I don’t care. Drop it.” I pointed my index at him. “You went behind my back and tried to get something out of him from day one. Well, guess what, he figured it out. Do you really think you’re the first one ever trying that one? Do you really think I’m gonna be a good prospect for Eva—her family—if my own family is trying to manipulate them? Do you think they’re gonna let me join Blakemore if you play that game?”

“This is completely stupid. Why would you go there in the first place?” he scoffed.

“Why do you think?” I scream. “You made a place here for only one of us. But if you haven’t noticed there are five more.” I got closer and he took a step back. He fucking took a step back. This little sign of weakness alone enraged me further. “What do you want me to be here, huh? Wall decoration? I’m not gonna have anything here. I’d prefer to leave.”

“What has she—” he began to say.

“She hasn’t gotten anything in my head. It was there all along. She’s just giving me a direction to take. And for that matter, I prefer to be title-less in a more open-minded pack, that being given anything here. I’m suffocating. We’re all suffocating. You’re strangling Michael by being on his ass constantly, or exploiting Fred and Kev like vulgar back-up appliances, and the rest is not worth shit other than bragging rights to say how great you are to have six sons. Why do you think Max is going nowhere and doing shit all the time?” My breath was getting heavy. “Now try to use Eva. Just once. Try it and I’m leaving. I’ll take her out of here and you won’t see us again. Whatever plan you have, it’s not working. You think the Hellhound can’t see through you. He has at least thirty-fucking-six other Alphas he deals with on a daily basis. Try it and he’s gonna eat you for breakfast.”

I walked to the door. “Now if you excuse me, I have better things to do than babysit you,” I said and slammed the door in his fucking face.

When I walked down, nearly everyone was there and their eyes were huge. No one was moving. They had clearly heard everything. I should have been worried. Worried about the ramifications of this. Of whatever is going to come after. But I didn't. All I wanted at the moment was ripping my father's head off, with my own teeth.

I was still fuming and I needed to calm down.

Eva was there, at the back of the room. Her eyes wide like everyone else, fixed on me.

I walked to her, grabbed her hand, and walked outside.

I walked for a little while, dragging her behind me.

I tried to slow my pace some, for her to keep up and not rip her arm out of its socket. It's not how you make a good impression. Especially after what just happened.

We were in the woods. I found a big rock, and sat down. She sat beside me. I just held her in my arms, placed my chin on her shoulder and mumbled, "I'm sorry. You shouldn't have seen this."

"I'm sorry to have caused a rift between you and your father," she apologized.

"You caused nothing that wasn't already there. Don't apologize."

"Still…"

I held her shoulders, pushed her a little further so I could see her eyes.

"Don't. Maybe there were things that should have been said a long time ago."

"I doubt this was the best way to say them."

I grimaced.

"You're probably right." I sighed. "But right now, I'm not gonna apologize. Maybe when the time is right."

"I don't think the time is ever right to apologize."

"Maybe. But I'm not the only one who should apologize. And you deserve some here."

"Don't involve me in this feud any further, please," she pleaded.

Well, now I felt like crap.

"Right, sorry. I won't. Let's talk about something else," I said.

We both turned and watched a couple of birds fly around in silence.

"Maybe I should apologize to your brother," I said.

She shrugged.

I ran my hands across my face in desperation.

“Did I fuck everything up?” I asked defeated.

She looked at my face, then put back a strand of my hair that I must have messed up at some point, and smiled a small smile at me.

I took her in my arms, her back against my chest, and we stayed like that for a while.

Later that evening I sent a quick text to her brother explaining the situation, and that it shouldn’t happen again, and to call me if he had any questions.

I didn’t feel like bothering him more than that. Eva said he wasn’t home and was helping a few packs in difficulty.

I accompanied Eva to her room like every evening. She looked at me strangely.

“Are you okay?” she asked me.

I shrugged.

“Come in,” she told me.

She opened the door and I followed her. Unsure of what came next. I wasn’t in the mood to have her tell me I should apologize again. Truthfully, I needed a few father-free days, at least.

Eva surprised me by pressing her lips against mines. For a few seconds there, my brain froze, then slowly the reboot process began. When functions returned, I decided that kissing was the best course of events this evening could go for.

— Eveline —

I was worried about Darren.

I never saw him this shaken or angry. And judging by the reaction of the rest of his family, neither did they. And I’m at the core of the whole problem. He spoke fondly of his family, especially his mother and brothers. If I break them apart, I will feel like crap about it, forever.

I wanted to do something for him. Cheer him up. Help him relax a little, until we could see what is broken, and what can and can’t be repaired.

I wanted to have encouraging words for him. Beautiful words about understanding, and tolerance, and forgiveness. But I’ve never been gifted with words.

I invited him in my room because I was afraid to watch him leave this upset. But when I turned to him I found myself at a loss for words, again.

He was not talking anymore, just shrugging and grunting.

So I kissed him.

At first he stopped moving, and I thought I might have gone too far. Maybe this wasn't the right thing to do at the moment. Maybe it was a misjudgement. I was probably making an awkward moment even more awkward.

After a few seconds, I decided to break it off and try to find a plan B. But before I could let our lips part, Darren wrapped his arms around me, and pressed me against him.

There was something in the intensity of it that stunned me.

Before I could get my baring, he swung me around, and dropped me on the bed.

Sooner than I'd finish bouncing, he was on top of me, kissing me.

It didn't take long for him to move his lips away from mine, roaming everywhere I had exposed skin.

Okay. That was not what I'd planned for.

But I couldn't find a single excuse for stopping him. Actually, this tingling feeling that took over me whenever he touched me was now so powerful I could barely notice where I was. My breath was ragged, his, warm against my skin.

I needed to touch him, but when I placed my hands on his shoulders, he promptly grabbed my wrists and pinned them on either side of my head. And the look he gave me, made me twist in anticipation. I bit my lower lip, and the grin he gave me was, dare I say, wolfish.

He teased me, letting his lips barely graze my hide, giving me shivers all over. And he kept at it until I whimpered.

He looked back at me, proud of himself. And so to wipe that grin off, I began moving my hips against his. And I saw his eyes darken.

He moved up my body until our eyes were level once more. Then he joined my hands above my head, holding them both with a single hand, and lowered the other against the side of my body.

I moaned uncontrollably, and extended my head to kiss him.

Our lips met and parted immediately. Our tongues dancing together in slow motion. The movements delicious, slow, and electric. The heat of his body pressed on mine, moving in slow waves that I answered in kind.

I got lost in that kiss.

It's only when it broke that I realized my hands were restrained no more, and he was undressing me. Pulling my top above my head. And the only response to this that came to mind was that neither of us was naked fast enough. And I decided to correct the situation by tugging at his shirt, pulling it above his head with unrestrained abandon. Which elicited a few laughters from him. By the moon and stars, I loved that laugh. I could dance to it. It was intoxicating.

We made quick order of our clothes.

I've never been the type to sleep with a guy I haven't known for a whole two weeks, but I couldn't even register this information at the moment. All I knew is that I wanted him badly, and every time he took his hands away from me to disrobe, made me ache for the loss of contact as if I hadn't been touched in decades.

He was at this moment the most beautiful man in the world, and I wanted him more than I wanted to breathe.

— Darren —

"Do you want to slow down?" I asked her. I thought it was the right thing to ask, but I was afraid of what little willpower I had left if she said yes.

The moon was bright tonight, and though the room was dark, I could see a sliver of silvery light move on her skin. I wanted nothing more than to run my tongue along it.

"I want to feel you inside me," she answered me. And I lost it.

I don't remember ever hearing anything sexier.

So I decided to indulge in painting her silhouette with my tongue, moving slowly downwards until I found what I wanted.

She mewled and it was beautiful.

I gave in to my impulses, kissing her sex until her body began to twist and contort. Then I kissed her mouth, sliding my fingers inside of her. She was warm, and wet, and inviting, and I was so hard it hurt.

I tried not to go too fast, as I pressed myself against her core—sliding in excruciatingly slow. She warped her arms around me, urging me, but I took my time, wanting to savour this—committing

this instant to memory. Her figure began undulating like the waves caress the sand, and I began to move in tandem. My rhythm gradually gaining in speed—her moans ringing in my ears in a crescendo, more beautiful than a thousand love songs.

I savoured her mouth, swallowing her screams as our activities gained in intensity. And soon enough I was moaning with her as we found our pleasure—her legs vices around me, her head tilted back, our bodies shuddering in unison. And peace swept over me as pleasure receded unhurriedly. And like an addict looking for another fix, I started to kiss the sweat off her skin, eager for more.

— Chapter Fifteen —

IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS

— Mishka —

"Your bed is here," said John, pointing to a room the size of my closet with an uncomfortable-looking camping cot against one wall and a tall slim dresser next to it for only storage. One of the walls didn't even have paint on it.

I looked at the guy as if he was mocking me. For what I costed him, I would assume they have some cash at hand. So either this is extremely temporary, or they don't have as much as they should for soliciting someone of my caliber. I completely took the possibility of them saving up their cash off of the cards as it sounded too far-fetched even for me.

There was an alarm bell ringing in my head and I didn't like it.

"Dinner in thirty. You'll be briefed after," he added before he left. I gave the back of his head a gimlet stare.

I got inside the closet-room, and just took a few of my clothes out of my bag, and put them in the dresser for easy access. I sat on the bed, my bag next to me, and got a grenade out and began working on the tripwire I was going to put on my door.

On the up side, I don't have to booby trap my window, because there is none. This room is deliciously gloomy and dank.

I slid my bag under my bed, put my trap in place as I closed the door, and slammed a taped piece of paper to the door stating, *"No room service or you go BOOM!"* then sauntered to the dining hall with my hands in my pockets, whistling.

John, the leader of this ragtag little group, was sitting at the table, one hand on the shoulder of a younger guy, barely out of boyhood that was named Elijah.

I met a couple of the guys when I came in and so far, I'm not impressed.

But hey, what do I know? Maybe they're a bunch of crouching morons, hidden badasses.

I dropped my ass on one of the chairs and analyzed the place.

It looked mostly like some abandoned factory that was turned into a makeshift uni dormitory.

There was one Middle Eastern-looking guy sitting on the couch tinkering with a glock named Amir. His eyes were sharp, he looked like he knew what he was doing with that gun, but he wouldn't scan a room when he walks in, which either mean inexperience or complaisance.

There was a black dude name Westley next to him smoking a joint. Drug consumption and professionalism never go hand in hand, especially when it involves weapons.

The room was large, which is not the best for defence, but it could be worse. There was a lot of dirt-blackened windows, which is bad, but they were really high, which was slightly better, but there were a few tall buildings a few blocks away that could have a view in. Relying on grime in the windows for secrecy is generally not my policy.

The furniture was old, not too solid. Nothing to reliably hide behind in a shootout.

There was a man of a least partial Latino heritage cooking something that smelled like tacos, good tacos—which is one of the best redeeming points I can afford this crew so far—and his name was Mateo.

"Who's the wiseass with the 'no room service' sign on his door?" said a new guy coming in.

"That would be me," I said swaying on the back legs of my chair and hanging my head backwards to get a view of the guy.

He walked like ex-military, which was an improvement on the others, though probably out for awhile judging by the length of his beard.

"Boom?" he asked.

"Tripwire," I explained. "Grenade." That got everyone's attention.

"Why take the job if you don't trust us?" asked a second guy coming in. He was even blacker than Westley. And I don't just mean in skin colour. He was a walking rapper stereotype, with baggy clothes, and everything. And bling, so much bling. At least Westley was more casual. Maybe a little too casual even.

"Don't get flattered Pumpkin, I don't trust anyone. Besides, my last place got jumped. I decided it would be the last time I wouldn't take thorough precautions. The warning is there to make sure no good-intentioned busy-body gets blasted inadvertently. See. I'm all caring about you guys and everything."

"You think you're the shit or something?"

"Nah, 50 cents, I'm just very careful. And efficient. That's generally why people hire me."

"Hired huh?" said soldier-boy. "I'm Ethan. That's Mason."

“Cool,” I said slamming the chair’s legs back on the floor. Which seemed to annoy John.

I like annoying people. It’s my favourite pastime.

“So … you’re not all hired muscles, I suppose?” I asked.

“Nah, just me and you, pal,” said Ethan. He called me pal and everything, but strangely, the word forgot to tell his face to mean it, I noticed.

So either I’m just being too obstreperous for him, or he has reasons. Which I will have to dig into.

Which is in big part why the attitude. It’s a good way to gage people. You get a better reading at what a person is really made of, when put under pressure, than under a controlled environment.

That, and I also enjoy it.

It’s the little things.

“So,” I continued. “How many more guys?”

“Just Brett and Karl missing,” Ethan said.

“Any women?”

“Sadly no.”

“Shoot,” I complained. “So a ten-man crew. Small. Is it for better sneaking around, or for lack of funds?”

“That doesn’t concern you,” said John.

I gave him a stare, but he was spared from more by tacos.

We ate quietly. Brett and Karl did join us eventually.

I couldn’t wait to see what that job was about.

Oh, and in case you haven’t noticed, I’m being sarcastic.

— Darren —

I was sitting in Zayn’s living room, which was in a small apartment in the basement of his parents.

He, along with Malik and Tyson, were stunned into silence, which is a pretty rare feat. And generally I would have enjoyed this achievement, and teased them about it, but it was kinda hard to do when they were rendered speechless by my big reveal. My (apparently secret) mate and plans to leave.

We all had beers, but I was now the only one drinking mine, and doing so to ineffectively fill the awkward silence that stretched between us.

“Did you have any intention to tell us before you left?” asked Malik.

“Didn’t I just do that?” I answered.

“When are you leaving?” asked Zayn.

“I don’t know. Officially, my moving has not been confirmed by anyone.”

“Unofficially?” asked Tyson.

“Unofficially, it’s getting harder and harder not to consider going.”

“So, you’re leaving to join a rich and famous family, and their fancy pack,” summarized Mal.

“That is not how I would have described it. And I have no idea about their financial situation.”

“Maybe you could ask?” he said matter-of-factly.

“How about, maybe I could just pull my own weight, get a job, and make my own money.”

“Dude, you don’t get it. If she’s rich, she’s used to a certain lifestyle,” he told me wisely. “I doubt you could keep up without Daddy Alpha’s help.”

“Please leave my father out of this.”

“You really had a go at your father?” asked Zayn, shaking his head in disbelief. “Getting yourself a woman as grown you some serious balls man. Cast iron balls.”

I winced. I stayed clear of my Dad for days. And going back to work has given me only additional excuses to stay away. I’ve grown since to dread the moment I will be confronted with the extent of damage I’ve caused.

I’ve kept my interactions with my brothers to a minimum, if at all, and I haven’t dared talk to my Mom. I’m afraid she’s going to find herself torn between my father and I, and I think she deserves better than this.

“She wants to meet you, you know,” I blurted.

“Who?” asked Ty.

“Eva,” I answered.

“Maybe we could go somewhere. Go to the Micro.” He meant the microbrewery we generally hanged out at after school or work.

"Sounds good. Maybe you could bring Daniella," I told Mal.

"Man you've been out of touch. Daniella is out of the picture," said Ty. "Then there was Taylor—"

"Skylar," Mal interjected.

"—But she's gone too," continued Ty. "Now he's looking for her replacement which is probably gonna be either Scarlet, Alison or Blair."

"Nah," said Mal. "It might be a new one."

"What's her name?" asked Ty.

"Sierra."

"Don't you think you could call a few, share maybe, give us options?"

I decided to ignore the two idiots and turned to Zayn.

"How's it been with Christi?" I asked him.

"Not good. She met her mate."

I grimaced. "Is it over?"

"I don't know man. She's torn, and actually ghosting us both."

"Maybe she's just afraid to make a decision," I suggested.

"Doesn't change the facts."

"No, it doesn't," I conceded, while Ty and Mal were arguing about who had the most epic ass in the pack. We both looked at them, as the assholes they were. Eventually they felt the hostility and turned toward us.

"So," said Mal, with something in his tone that made me cringe at the prospect of whatever shit he was about to spout. "What about your girl's ass?"

"Continue that train of thought, and I'm gonna force you to shift to wax you bald."

He looked at me unmoving. After a few seconds, he grabbed his beer mumbling, "You're just not fun."

"Yeah man, I'm gonna miss you too," I told him. And I saw all of them come to the hard realization that we would truly be a part. Most of us have been hanging out since elementary school—middle school for Tyson—, and we've never been apart since for more than a couple of weeks. But this was all about to change.

“Won’t you regret it?” asked Ty.

“No.”

Zayn recognized the look. He’d been the one I’d talked to the most. He knew how I felt. How I’ve been waiting for an opportunity to leave for a while now. It’s just that I never really motivated myself enough to make the jump.

“Maybe we’ll visit,” he told me, grabbing one of my shoulders in compassion, but not too long so we wouldn’t get too emotional or anything, and we just all took a sip of beer in silence.

— Chapter Sixteen —

SURVIVAL GUIDE

— Eveline —

We were seated on rickety chairs around tiny tables in a crowded mezzanine of a bar. The place was not big, and nearly half the space was for giant vats of stainless steel where they made their own brews, protected by large expanses of glass, separating the bar section from the factory side.

Darren was on my right on his own little rickety chair. On my left was a dark skinned Tyson. He had tight cropped black hair, a black t-shirt and jeans, and an infectious smile. He had a physique that screamed sport. Maybe football, or something physical. He wasn't much taller than Darren, but he was much wider. And all muscles.

He seemed to know nearly everyone here, which only reinforce my idea of a sports player. And he had the most outstanding blue eyes I've seen. With his dark complexion, it only made them stand out more, and I was sure he was a player.

I could see him watch every girl pass by, and he wasn't looking at their faces either.

In front of me were two guys. One was Malik. He was a little paler-skinned than Tyson, but darker in complexion than Daren. He had luscious curly hair falling above his ears, and the shape of a swimmer—all lithe muscles. He wore a shirt reading *'I speak fluent Sarcasm'*, and dark denim.

He was a loud man. The moment he entered the bar, everyone noticed. He moved around making jokes and faces, getting laughs along the way. He sat on the bench like he owned the bar. But he was a little surly.

When he'd come in, the three other guys asked him about his date, and he'd seemed to have been stood up. Which apparently was the most hilarious thing in the world to them. So funny in fact, that Darren was bent over, and Zayn was wiping tears off his eyes.

It took a while for them to explain to me that he's the most massive player, constantly bragging about conquests. Apparently he had a whole posse of girls waiting to date him. And the irony of the situation was not lost on them.

Opportunity which Tyson exploited to brag that he had a girl on her way to join them. "Glad I didn't rely on Casanova here to bring girls," he told us.

Zayn who was sitting on the bench between Malik and Darren seemed to be the quiet one of the three. He had red hair shaved on both sides of his face, and long and styled at the top, with an

equally red two inches beard, a white button-down and black slacks. He looked like a mix between elegance and bad-boy, with obvious tattoos on his arms, visible by his rolled-up sleeves.

They were Darren's crew.

When he spoke of them, he did so fondly.

When he's complaining about one of them, it was generally in good humour.

It was a little sad that distance was about to come between them. I was not particularly fond of the idea of putting a dent in his social life, but geography did complicate things between us.

Apparently, it was a thing to get a degustation set of all the different beers they brew here, which is surprisingly a lot. So Darren ordered, and we got a set of eleven small glasses of beer, going from a white, blond, pale ale, red, all the way to black, and a few fruity ones in between.

Darren helped me a little with them.

Tyson got a text and went to get his date at the door.

"Everyone, this is Megan," he wrapped his arm around her, facing us a little later. "Meg, this is Malik, don't trust him, he's a snake. This is Zayn, he's tolerable, but don't play pool with him, he's gonna skin you alive. And this is Darren. He's the asshole abandoning us for a piece of pussy. That here." He finally pointed at me. "This little beauty here is Eva. She's the one who ensnare my friend in a couple of weeks to drag him to the other side of the globe."

"Piece of pussy, hein?" I asked unamused.

"Careful there big guy," told him Megan. "You're real close to having a fist in the face."

"Nah," I told them. "I'm too nice for that. I'm gonna wait for him to be drunk and then I will set things in motion so he's gonna humiliate himself, and no one will see my hand in the matter, but everyone will see the video afterwards."

"Rock on!" she told me. "If you need help scheming, I'm your girl." And she high-fived me.

She was maybe as tall as me, with chestnut hair. She had a t-shirt that read across her breast *'small but real'*. I think I liked her.

"Hey!" complained Tyson.

"Shut up bitch!" Meg told him. "You started this."

"Won't you do something?" he told the other guys.

Zayn raised his hands palms up in a gesture that meant, 'I'm out of this one, mate'. Malik scoffed and said, "Never pick a fight with girls in a bar, everyone defends chicks and not one defend the guys. Even more so if the girl is cute. I know my survival guide."

Darren looked at him unimpressed. "I'm gonna see how this plays out as you're apparently losing, but if the girls want to kick you in the balls, I'll hold your arms back and let them."

"Traitor," whined Tyson, and he sat back down.

Megan wriggled in between Tyson and me, and grabbed a chair to sit. Clearly making it a message to Tyson, then she blew him a kiss, and gave him the finger before turning to me to start a conversation about the cool places to hang out around here.

— Daren —

Christi was obviously a no show.

I felt bad for Zayn. They were good together and I know he was getting serious. She's not a bad person, I kinda like her. But I also understand the situation. And now more than ever. Quite frankly, I'm not sure how I'd feel about it if I had a girlfriend, after meeting Eva. Things got serious quick. I'm kinda waiting for the moment when I'll realize this is not working out as well as I thought, only it's not happening.

I like waking up to see her there next to me, feel her skin against mine. She smiles and my heartbeat speeds up. The press of her lips is all I need to get hard. Her presence calms me when I'm upset, she gets me excited when I'm bored. It's like we've known each other for so long. I'd fight for that woman.

I know part of this can be attributed to the fact that we get along well, that we seem to have very complementary personalities. Which is pretty much what all the stories say about mates. That they are one made for us, or selected as the best person for us, and such. But there's also the bond itself. It does things to you. It affects you. There are times when it's even difficult to decipher which is the bond and which is just plain chemistry. Maybe they are more interconnected than I think.

But the bond is a powerful thing. It pulls you. I can know if she's in a room without looking. I can know if she's upset, or happy, or sad, or horny, without the need to ask, or look at her face. Every touch is like silk, and sex, and MDMA, all wrapped into one. I'm pretty sure erectile dysfunction can't occur to mates. There's something primal, that bypasses all your thoughts and goes straight into your spine. It's both conscious and subconscious. And it's so delicious that you don't want to fight it, just indulge.

It makes everything simpler.

I may have dwelled on moving away for a while, if it had been for another girl. Now, with her, it's hard to even slow things down. I tell myself I should take my time, be sure we're both okay with this. Anxiety and insecurities really take the back burner.

It took everything in me not to mark Eva the first night we were together. Maybe even the first time we met. It's like fighting instincts.

So for Christi finding her mate in someone other than her boyfriend… She may love Zayn. She may truly love him. But this is probably tearing her apart. He said she's ghosting them both. I'm sure seeing her mate would just shatter her willpower, and seeing Zayn would just break her heart on what's about to happen to them. So unless she rejects her mate, sooner or later this is over. I think they should move on. The quicker the better. But I'm not in any of their shoes. Thanks the heavens. I wouldn't trade places with any of them. Not for all the riches in the world.

The best would be for Zayn to find his mate, and they could all move on, maybe even stay friends. And I know my situation is just reminding Zayn of his. But I also wanted to spend time with my friends. It might be the last time in a while. And I wanted to share this with Eva. Maybe share a little of my life here with her before I leave most of it behind.

We were chatting, laughing. Eva seemed to connect with Megan. I was secretly thankful for Tyson to have brought her along. But that woman had a seriously foul mouth. I've rarely ever heard fouler. But she's hilarious.

She has shot down every come upon of Malik like a freaking sniper to everyone delights but Mal's.

Which may be why he decided to set his eyes on Eva instead.

I got a little worried, but when he tried to paint her in a corner one time too many, she didn't snipe him, she obliterated him. She burned him to a crisp.

That made me proud.

"What is wrong with you guys?" Mal whined. "Where the hell have you find girls like that. They're not normal. No one resists me like that. Are they witches? I swear they're witches."

Both girls burst off laughing. I just laid back with my arm on the back of Eva's chair and smiled. There's something inherently sexy in a strong woman.

At the end of the night, as we took taxis back home, Eva told me she liked my friends, even Mal, before she fell asleep on my shoulder.

It made me happy.

I knew they liked her. Everyone got a little too drunk at some point and kept telling one another how much we loved each other which was probably ridiculous to look at from anyone else's point of view.

I guess my incoming departure did weigh on our mind.

I was looking at her sleep with her mouth slightly open, snoring quietly, and I traced her nose and cheeks gently with my index finger.

I think I'm seriously falling for that woman.

And all this was a great distraction from facing my family, for which time was now slowly running out.

— Chapter Seventeen —

THE SMELL OF DEATH

— Ylva —

This was my fifth scouting mission in the last two weeks and I really hoped this would be the right one. I've never really been blessed with patience, especially when we're running in circles.

This was an island near the coast. Small, isolated, and perfect for secret stuff, and villainous ventures.

I brought five men with me, and we went all into different directions to get the best global overview. Except for one, who's using a drone as high has he could—so not to be detected—to get a better and more precise overview. Which was sent back on a live feed to Kaden back home.

We'd left Monaweard after a few days, once the forces and equipment arrived. I kinda went back and forth—between Monaweard, Blakemore, and wherever the Alpha sent me scouting.

I walked slowly between the brushes.

I can be pretty darn silent if I want to—and I wanted to. So I was doing my best impersonation of a ninja, slithering through the woods, slowly creeping closer to the centre.

I don't enjoy scouting as much as battles, but quite frankly, I do appreciate the fact that for sneakiness' sake, I was empowered to do quite a lot if necessary. It's mostly the main redeeming quality of scouting. That and being a crucial step before a battle.

So as long as it meant a future battle incoming, I was pretty open to scout as much as necessary, so that I could kick-ass at a later date.

My biggest issue was when we wanted information alone, and little else. I get the power of information and its use, but I'm not an intelligence agent, I'm a warrior, pure and simple.

After a few minutes of slow walking toward the core of the island, I noticed metal amongst the thick vegetation. As I sneaked closer, I saw the metal fence stretching on both directions before me.

Well, at least there are signs of life.

We hadn't seen the fence in the vegetation from the aerials, but we did see some buildings. Though, we couldn't tell if they were abandoned or occupied from above.

I checked the fence to see if it was electrified. It wasn't.

So I climbed silently, which also meant slowly, and moved further inland.

I saw the first buildings ahead after a few minutes.

Night was about to come which would hide my presence even better, but make scouting a little harder. Which is why we moved at dusk. Enough light to get a first overview of the land, but dark enough to hide our presence when we moved further in. Which, when timed right, can be pretty darned efficient.

I began moving in a slow circle around the buildings that i could now see before me. I kept in the shadows of the trees. I knew the guys would do mostly the same so we'd get a good general view first.

There was a lot of buildings. Mostly large ones. The place smelled of wolf hard. A lot of wolves passed through here. Young, old. But there aren't many noises. Usually, when you get such a strong smell, you get the activity with it. The slow rhythm of people moving about, the low buzz of voices, the clanking of objects being moved around and used. The quiet music of life and society. But this was mostly dead silence.

There was the rustling of leaves in the breeze, and the song of insects in summer, accompanied by the occasional birds. Small mammals moving around, squirrels, frogs. The distant rush of water against the shore. But not people.

It felt oddly like a ghost town.

A place that is empty without being empty.

It weirded me out.

As I completed my part of the circle, I felt a slow pressure against my skin. It was like nails on a blackboard, like a whole orchestra of bandsaws, like wails of pain, and the rattle of one's last breath. I felt death. And it was close.

Being part Valkyrie has its advantages.

You can hide the smell of death. But you can't hide its aura. Not to me.

And there was a lot of it.

I moved slowly until I spotted the building that set my teeth on edge.

The sun was not completely down yet, so I was really careful.

There were no windows, no opening of any kind for me to look into. Only one door.

I don't like building with only one access in or out. They can become easy traps.

They are also harder to sneak into.

I laid a hand against the outer shell of the building, half-closing my eyes, concentrating.

I'd heard no sound, smelled no one, so to be sure, I extended my senses. I let them seep into the fabric of the building itself. The coldness of death seeped under my skin in seconds. And so did a greasy, slimy, nauseating feeling. One of fear, of pure abject terror. There was despair too, a lot of it. I could feel darkness, like a mist crawling on the floor, clawing at the walls. And insanity assailing my mind.

I released my contact with the wall in a shudder.

I knew three things.

One. This was not the result of a battle, not of any kind. This had been an execution. Plain and simple. The lives that had been taken here had not even fought back for survival. I'm not even sure if they could have. Maybe they had been restrained, or drugged, or killed from a distance, or by gas. Either way, they've had no chances of survival.

Second. They were victims, that's the only word to describe them, and there had been many. The strength of this aura of death meant, at the lowest, dozens, maybe more. And not all of them so recent. Some could have been weeks ago, maybe even longer.

Third. Those who did this, I was sure, didn't know them. There was a disconnect between the killers and the victims. Maybe they never met before then. Or they were of a different specie. Or they were simply insane. Either way, there was something there about their state of mind that set my teeth on edge.

I enjoy a good battle, I might even indulge in the occasional bloodbath. This wasn't it. And it made me feel uncomfortable.

But I also knew a fourth thing. The building was empty. At least of the living.

So I moved to the door, careful not to be spotted, and slipped in.

The place had been scrubbed clean. There was a lingering smell of disinfectant.

No one could smell death from outside, but inside, a wolf's nose could get the lingering smell of blood. It was faint though, and if I hadn't been looking for it, I might have never noticed it.

I found nothing interesting from that building other that it's insanely creepy aura of death, so I moved on.

I retreated in the woods a little as the sun went down to connect with the rest of the crew.

We shared our findings so far, while we waited for dusk to settle.

When it got dark enough, I cut the meeting short and we moved to infiltration.

I took care of my part of the grid. Our drone guy doing lookout in case any problems occurred.

Most buildings were empty, their purpose not clear, but they all had the smell of being well used. Some with strong chemical smells, probably disinfectants, others with that of a lot of unwashed bodies crammed together for long.

I made short order of my part of the grid, and sent our faint click signal notifying the team I was done. It was quieter than speaking in our earpieces, so if one was sneaking close to someone else, then they wouldn't hear it. Even if they were werewolves with their supernatural hearing. We had our own codes, not unlike the Morse code.

I received the code of Anders wanting to talk to me, so I retreated to somewhere I was sure no one would hear me or sneak up on me, and opened communication.

"I think I have bodies here," said Anders.

"Seen any?" I asked.

"No. But I can smell them. I think they're underground."

"Want me to get your six?"

"Better safe than sorry."

"What's your position?"

He told me, and I made quick work of eating the distance between us.

Once there, we moved quietly inside a building not unlike any other infiltration I did tonight.

Inside, I got a whiff of decay. It was definitely decomposing meat. I also got something Anders probably didn't get. That same type of bone-chilling feeling I got at the creepy building.

It was a bit different. My feeling was less of an execution ground and more of a disposing facility. Given the smell, I think I was right.

We moved furtively inside. It took us a while to spot the trap door, but the moment we lifted it, the smell got stronger.

The basement was packed earth, and there was an old stone circle in the middle that looked like a disused well. The smell came from there.

There was also something else here. Something Anders could not feel. It was other than the pungent smell, and more powerful as we got closer. He probably had no clues about what I was sensing here. The buzzing against my metaphysical skin.

It was the remnant of souls. A lot of them. And other things too. Faceless things, invisible things. Things attracted by death, things that fed off this. On flesh, on rot, on death, and whatever lingers behind.

I knew that as long as I didn't put too much of my attention on them, they wouldn't notice me, but I didn't like it. Not at all. They were a lot of them. Abnormally so.

I could hardly suppress a shudder.

There are things in this world, far beyond what the mind can understand, and things no being of flesh and blood can defend themselves against.

Those things in the well made my skin crawl.

Anders didn't even notice my reaction as he got closer to the well.

I didn't.

He shone a light in it.

"Man, that's brutal," he said moving his nose away.

"You see anything?" I whispered.

"No. It's either real deep, or there's a room down there."

"We're not going down there. We don't need to. We know enough about this building, let's move on."

He nodded, not sad to leave this stinking hell.

We heard the steps first.

It took us barely seconds to move silently to the wall behind the stairs.

Someone walked slowly down, flashlight at hand. The heavy steps of a man.

We saw his feet first.

We stayed deep in the shadows so that he wouldn't notice us unless he put that flashlight directly on us.

I saw him shift around. He was probably looking for whomever opened the trap door.

I made a sign at Anders, not to change position as the man began to move the light in his direction. I glided in the opposite direction, keeping myself at the stranger's back.

When the light hit Anders, I took it as the perfect moment to strike, and while the man was focused on Anders I stood right behind him, moved my arm above his shoulders, and with my knife, slid his throat in one smooth motion, before he had time to react to either Anders presence or me. He didn't had the time to scream.

I put my other arm around the guy to stop the body from falling loudly on the ground, and used my knife hand to cut the sounds gurgling from his throat. I move my head in Anders general direction and signaled for him to check for any other intruders.

His night vision might have been compromised by having a light shone in his face, but he seemed to understand me.

It took a few seconds for the man to die as I dragged him closer to the well.

He was at his last moments when I shoved him over the edge.

I'm pretty sure if he's involved in whatever mess is going on here, I'm not gonna lose sleep on him.

I took the sword I have on my back out of its scabbard, and began scraping the bloodied dirt of the ground, then shoved it in the well too.

I tried not to have my head above it, not to attract anything's attention.

I don't know if people go down there sometimes, but it will at least give us time.

"Clear." I heard Anders mutter, and I moved back up.

We got clear of the building and moved back into the woods.

I signaled for others to rally up when done. We had designated a place for this before hand.

It took a little while for them all to join us, but in the end, no one was missing.

"Anything important?" I asked them.

"Prisoners," said Dodson. "A lot of them."

"Why didn't you signal?"

"Too much movement around. I would have been detected."

"You found MAM?"

"Yeah."

"Any others?"

"Yeah," two more men said.

“Can we get a good estimate?”

We spent the next hour jotting down information.

All of our communication was recorded, on top of the body cameras we had, so I was not surprised when Kaden called. He might have seen the whole thing.

And, of course, he had a few questions for us of which we didn’t have the answers, so we had to make a few additional runs to get everything down.

But we all agreed on one thing. This place was a prison, and execution ground. It was probably where some of the missing people have disappeared, maybe some of the missing rogues too.

And they were using them for something. They weren’t just killing them.

We didn’t find what they were using them for, but has the night was drawing to a close, Kaden called this quit, and we left before sunrise.

I will probably see a lot more of this place before the end of this story.

I can feel a war in the air.

— Chapter Eighteen —

NOT A PRINCESS

— Eveline —

Darren and I were sitting in the sunroom with Kevin, Kate, and Fred, chatting and drinking tea.

I liked Kate, she was a little older than me, but we seemed to get along well.

The sun was beginning to peek through the clouds after the rain spell we've had early this morning, and the day looked like it was to be pleasant—warm, but not too hot. There was a soft breeze sipping through the wide windows of the room. Darren was sitting next to me on the couch talking to Fred about some movie I haven't seen—his hand resting on my thigh, the side of my body pressed against his.

It was comfortable, natural. It's strange how rapidly these little things have become habits.

In the last week since the altercation between Darren and his father, we've stayed mostly away from the others.

We've spent some time on the packland, but also in town.

Darren has been spending his days at work.

He still had a little under two months to go before he could finish his degree.

During the days, sometimes I'd spend them here. I spent a little time with Ana and Kate. We are starting to get along pretty well.

Some days, I'd ask Darren to take me to town with him, so we'd travel together, and in the meantime, I'd shop, sit in cafes, or face-time friends or family.

His home did feel awkward at time. I found myself more at ease in town.

I met up with Megan one day and we went to a fabulous Spa to get ourselves pampered.

Ana decided to drag Kate and me to a water park not far outside of town, later that week. And on Thursday we went to the beach by a lake an hour from the Stonewillow land.

* * * * *

We spend all morning looking like six beached belugas on the sand. The sun was glorious and the beach crowded, but we found a nice spot with a bit of shade nearby a tree. Kate and Ana had invited me and I was already loving it. Beaches are my thing and the lake was gorgeous. Megan had

joined us and she invited Marigold—one of her friends—, Ana invited Daniella, and there was Kate and I, making it six.

It was a big lake. We could barely see the other side, and there was gentle waves, created by either the wind or passing boats.

We'd prepared a thermos of Piña Colada from which we refilled our own thermos-cups

"I could do this more often," said Daniella.

She was a soft-spoken jovial girl with brown hair in tight curls, giving her a sort of subdued afro.

Marigold not the other hand, had hair the colour of rainbows, she wore ginormous sunglasses and was taller than me, and had absolutely no timidity. When she'd come in she asked, "I heard this was a girl only thing. Can I qualify without a vagina?"

"You have tits girl," said Megan. "You qualify." Then she looked at us, daring us to say that anything was wrong.

I didn't mind whatsoever. None of the other girls seemed to mind either. And it was a good thing, because Marigold was a blast. She had the same potty mouth as Megan, combined with Anabella's energy, this was a pretty intense mix, and before long, one of us had Piña Colada sprouting up her nose.

"Hey there ladies," said a man that walked in front of us and paused to take the sight in.

"Hello handsome," said Megan loudly, stretching the syllables. It gave Daniella the giggles.

"This is quite the display you have here," he said. "Any chance I can join you?" I could smell he was human.

"It depends on what merchandise you have to offer," teased Marigold.

He looked at her, and realized he was not interested at all.

Megan took offence. Hard.

"It looks like we're not interested. You have a nice ass gorgeous, but your face bothers me. It's like there is this garbage smell you can't shake off. I think you should go."

And so he did.

"You didn't have to go so hard," Marigold told her.

"Yes, I did, sweetie," she said. "Yes, I did."

"Don't worry. I got a hunk to keep me warm tonight," Marigold told her.

“Aren’t you with Tyson?” asked Daniella to Megan. He reaction had not been that of someone in a relationship.

“We’re not exclusive. Weren’t you With Malik?” asked Megan.

“No one is with Malik for long,” Daniella answered.

“Did you want to?” asked her Kate. “Be with him for long, I mean?”

“I don’t know. He’s a little intense. I don’t know if I’d keep up,” she said. “I like him. We had fun. I’d take more if it was on the cards. But other than that…” She let the words hang in the air.

“It’s kinda hard to imagine how two guys like Darren and Zayn ended up hanging with oddballs like Ty and Mal,” said Megan.

“Yeah, Mal change girls like he changes underwear and Ty is not that much better. Zayn, on the other hand, is quite the romantic type, and Darren just cruised through life as if nothing can touch him,” said Daniella.

“Well, I’d say Darren is quite capable of romance,” I said.

“Oh! Pray tell!” Meg gushed.

“Let’s just say we’ve spent good times together so far.”

“Points for Darren,” said Ana. “So that means we won’t have to have the talk with him.”

“The Talk?” asked Kate.

“You know. ‘Before you stick anything in, make sure to take care of the surrounding area’ kinda talk.”

“It’s called a clit,” blurted Meg. “And yeah, any men who don’t know what to do with it, shouldn’t touch a woman until he’s ready to learn.”

“Well, I don’t have that problem,” said Marigold.

“By the moon. I didn’t think about this,” exclaimed Ana.

“What, that I have a dick? Most people don’t go around thinking about what other people have in their pants, girl,” said Marigold.

“No. That here is a woman here, who thinks like a woman, but has actual insight and knowledge about men.”

That got everyone’s attention.

Megan turned to Marigold dramatically, with her eyes like giant saucers. “Oh, please Great One, teach us the mystical wisdom of the perfect hand job.”

I couldn’t stop myself from laughing which got everyone to hoot along. Those girls were weird in the best of ways.

And Marigold, in good humour, did spend the next twenty minutes going into details about hand jobs, male anatomy lessons and how to spot which way one prefers it.

Then things devolved.

Kate had been laughing for probably six minutes straight, straightening up to find the others laughing then getting the giggles again, which renewed ours, while Marigold took the stage of this Male Anatomy 101 class. My ribs hurt.

“You should seriously write a column, or a book,” Daniella finally told her.

“Bien sure, ma chérie,” she said with a flourish.

“Oh. Your French accent is pretty good,” I told her.

“You speak French?” she asked me.

“No. But I’ve gone there a few times. I know some words, but don’t ask me to translate anything.”

“Oh. I’d love to see Paris,” said Ana. “How is it?”

“I didn’t go to Paris. I often travel for my brother, as a sort of emissary and liaison to other packs. I went to the Boisclair pack a few times.”

“Boisclair!” Meg perked up. “Met the Alpha?”

“Sure. Jean-Philippe. He’s nice.”

“Is he single?” she asked.

“Yes. He’s also pretty much the definition of jailbait. But in a year or two, he’s gonna break hearts.”

“Man, how many millions is that pack worth now?” asked Ana.

“I think they deal in billions now,” I said.

“You think you could set me a meeting?” asked me Megan.

“You do remember my mention of jailbait, right?”

She sighed. “You’re bursting my bubble.”

“So you dwelled in those spheres?” asked me Marigold.

“Oh, missy. She’s kinda a princess,” said Ana.

“I’m not a princess. Werewolves don’t have princesses.” I said defensively.

“Why wasn’t I informed?” said Meg shocked, as they all turned to me.

“I’m not a princess,” I repeated.

“Aren’t your brother a sort of King?” Ana said.

“Is he single?” asked Marigold instantaneously.

“No and yes.”

“Wait, is he King or not? I’m confused,” said Megan.

“There is no King,” I said a little loudly, blushing in embarrassment.

“Then why did you say that?” she asked Ana.

“Her brother is reigning over thirty-something Alphas and their packs. He might not have the title, but at the moment, that’s pretty much the closest thing to royalty that wolves have.”

“Oh, my! So you’re loaded?” asked Marigold.

“Well, let just say I could retire in style and never worry about my bills for the rest of my life, if I wanted to.”

“And you don’t want to?”

“I think I prefer to do something useful with my life. So I work for my brother.”

“As an emissary?” said Ana.

“Most of the time, I’m more of a secretary.”

“What did you study in?” asked Daniella.

“Nothing, I didn’t go to Uni. Not that I don’t want to,” I added quickly. “Simply that I didn’t know what to study. And it felt wasteful to go to class if I didn’t even care.”

“Do you want to keep doing that kind of work?” asked Marigold.

“I really like it. I mostly cater to envoys, give them accommodations, take care of them, do some office work, then travel all over the world and talk to all sorts of important people everywhere. That’s kinda how I met Darren.”

“Well, you could study in hotel management. It’s not exactly your career but it’s similar enough and could help you gain some professionalism. Or you could go in secretarial work. And not everything

is necessary uni either. Some, you could even study part-time, while you work. Or you could go with languages. If you travel that much, it could be practical to be able to communicate in their language."

"Danny is right, you should write a column. This is probably the best counselling I've ever had."

She beamed. "I think the first you would use would be languages."

"I think so too."

"What are the most used languages of those you work with, other than English?" she asked.

"French, Spanish, German and Russian would fight for top position. Then maybe Mandarin, Arabic, Hindi, Russian. A few more, but rarer."

"Then start with the main three. I'd say go with French. French and English have around 20% on common because of all the conquest between the two countries. But it has a different root. Once you have one Latin language down, Spanish won't be too hard to add. German is not the easiest language, but it shares roots with English, so it wouldn't be as hard for you as Mandarin. And you don't have to learn a new alphabet."

"You are brilliant," I told her.

We finished our Piña Coladas not long after, and before dinner, Darren came to pick me up, to go on a date for the evening.

* * * * *

On Friday, Michelle called me to join her for lunch.

I was a little nervous. We didn't talk much since I came here, and seeing how strained the relationship between Darren and his father had become, I dreaded the meeting a little.

We met at a small Italian cafe.

"I'm happy to have this time with you," she told me, a little after I joined her.

"Me too," I said.

"We didn't have many opportunities to get to know one another."

"No. We haven't."

We ordered and I went on.

"I just want to say, I'm sorry about how things have gone lately, and I've not asked anything of the kind of Darren."

“I know dear.” She took a sip of water before continuing. “I’m not holding anything against you.”

“I didn’t want things to go this way,” I said in a small voice.

“Neither did I. But you’ll learn that relationships are not always easy, and sometimes we have to learn to make concessions, strike a balance.”

I nodded. We received our food and began eating. It was really good.

“Can I ask you something?” she asked me.

“Sure,” I said.

“Why don’t you want to come and live here.”

I was careful about my answer. “It’s a really lovely place. But to me it isn’t home. My family is important to me. My work is important to me. My parents have taken care of me all my life, and so has my brother, I believe now it’s my turn to take care of them. I may not be Luna, but I don’t see my position as less of importance. And I won’t let another dictate what is right and wrong for me. I’m the only one to make that choice.

I told Darren at the beginning that I preferred to stay home, but if he wanted me to come here, I would take the time to consider it. Only I’ve considered since, and I wouldn’t be able to do it. It’s not me. In the end, I would be unhappy, and I believe Darren deserves better than someone unhappy because of his happiness. And so do I.

He told me he was okay with coming to live in Blakemore. That simplified everything for us. If he can be happy with me there, then I’ll do everything in my power to give him what he’ll need for that happiness as I expect him to do for me.”

“You could take more time to think about it?” she suggested.

“With all due respect, I will not stretch this unnecessarily. I know of someone who as had to deal with separation from a mate and I wouldn’t wish this on anyone, particularly Darren and I. Long distance is more gruesome than most think. And I promised myself I would not do it. We gave ourselves a few weeks to make our initial decision, and I stick by it.”

We ate some more in silence.

“You know—,” she said after a while. “James never wanted to cause you trouble.”

“I’m sure,” I said unemotionally.

“He’s not like that.”

"Of course," I said. "But he wanted to do what's best for his family and pack, and he thought I could help him. Which I'm not against." Michelle's head perked up. "But in doing so, he's using me. I won't let myself be used. Just like I wouldn't let anyone back home use Darren for their own gain. So I understand Darren's reaction. I would probably have done the same if my father had done anything like that." Well, I would probably not have screamed at my Dad, but I didn't need to get into the crux of it. Besides, our situations were a little different.

"I'm not holding this against him, or any of your family, for that matter," I continued. "I ask for no apologies. But I will not stand by as this is repeated," I said firmly. "This hurts Darren. A lot more than he lets on. And it puts a wedge between him and people he cares very deeply for. I want him happy. I'll do what has to be done for this."

Michelle continued to eat silently, before I saw a few tears fall down.

My insides began to twist upon themselves. Did I get too hard on her? Maybe I could have been a little more diplomatic about this. I should apologize. I'm making everything worst.

"I know it hurts Darren. And even if James doesn't show it, I know it hurts him to. It hurts him to see Darren go, and when he hurts he lashes out," she said softly. "He's becoming a grumpy old man. Being Alpha as taken a toll on him. It's time he retires. He's going to be far less stressed then. His father nearly destroyed Stonewillow you know, and he's always been afraid of repeating the same mistakes. So he has spent all his life focussing on this, neglecting everything else in the process. He's not a bad man, just an exhausted one," she told me still crying.

It was hard to watch her cry without crying myself, and water fill my eyes slowly.

"I understand," I said sombrely. "I think Michael will be an excellent Alpha," I said as my tears began to fall in earnest.

"I think so too," she told me still crying, but with a wry smile upon her lips. "Please take good care of my son," she said her voice breaking at the end.

"Of course," I said unable to contain it anymore and I went to hug her.

We cried like this for a little while.

After we managed dried our eyes, we both tried to smile a little, more apologetically than otherwise, and she made me promise to make Darren call her often.

We talked a little more casually after that.

She told me about Darren, about his childhood, and brothers, and some of his antics in high school with his little posse of friends. Around desert, she apologized about what had happened, and we hugged again.

We parted with a final hug a little after that.

She seemed like a good person, who really loves her family. I wished things got better before we left, but I've never really been a good psychotherapist.

* * * * *

As we lounged in the sunroom of Darren's home that Sunday, Michelle came into the room.

"Will you stay for lunch with us?" she asked Darren. I knew by this she included me. We hadn't eaten much with his family since Darren's altercation with his father—either eating at a different time, or outside, or simply in town. I've eaten with them a few times while Darren was at work, but it felt a little tense.

I was glad things seemed a little better.

Maybe they would get a good chance to talk, settle things.

I've always been a wishful thinker.

— Chapter Nineteen —

WE'LL PROBABLY SEE EACH OTHER

— Eveline —

Darren nodded at his Mother's invitation, which made her smile. I put my hand upon his and squeezed gently.

Fifteen minutes later, we were coming to the dining room as everyone else was joining us. When James came in and saw Darren he said, "Hope you're not going to embarrass us now." Under his breath.

Darren froze halfway down to his seat. Something switched in his eyes, like all life just left for a moment. He stretched back up. I saw his mother hyperventilate at the signs of what was about to happen. I took Darren's hand and tried to tell him to relax wordlessly. I know his eyes saw me, but there was no life behind them. And I knew at this moment he was coming to the realization than his father was not ready for peace, and he wasn't ready to compromise his well-being or mine for his father's stubbornness.

He gave me the smallest of nod to tell me he understood. He nodded more deeply to his mother. "Sorry," he said with a dead voice. "Something came up that we have to take care of now. We'll eat later." And he left with me in tow.

I think I might have heard his father scoff behind us. I did hear his mother tsk angrily at him though.

"I'm sorry, I—," he began when we got out of earshot.

"I know," I said. "I understand."

He gave me a wry smile, but at least I could see him again behind his eyes. I don't know where he left, but I got the strong feeling it's his safe place. He was protecting himself. I don't know how I knew, but I knew. He was hurting, and he needed to retreat where this would not attain him as strongly.

I felt sad for him. I knew he loved and cared for his family, like I do. But no family is perfect, and sometimes we clash. Only we all know each other so well, we all get really good at knowing which button to press to hurt the most.

I've been lucky that there as never been any major arguments like this in our household—or at least, not that I know of—, but I know just how devastated I'd be to fight like this with my father,

or mother. How little comments like this would hurt me. But at the same time, confrontations would mean hurting back someone—even if they'd hurt you—I wouldn't want to hurt. In a family, you can never really just hurt one person without affecting the others. And even if one thing is wrong, doesn't mean everything about that person is wrong. Which is why family fights are so hard, and hurts so much. Because despite the bad, we can't stop caring.

Actually, as a child, Kaden as been more on the receiving end of this type of hostility from me and my sisters than my parents. In some ways, he was more the parent than them, or at least when it came to discipline. He didn't have as much time as them to share the activities, the festivities, or the teachings, but he had to pick the slacks when it came to discipline. And it's only now that I realize how unfair this must have felt for him. He was still a child himself, but only with so much more responsibilities that one should ever have, especially this young. He was the head of the family, and the head of the pack, before he was mature enough to have a family himself. I love my brother, and care about him. And now knowing how fragile his health his and how long he's suffered from it, alone. It breaks my heart.

When we reached Darren's room, I tried to blink my tears away before they fell and he saw them, but he was so lost in his own mind that he didn't see.

I sat on his bed while he went to his closet and came out with a few suitcases. Then he began pulling his clothes out of the closet and folding them, storing them in the suitcase.

"Are you sure?" I asked him. Was he making a rash decision? It's not something to decide while upset.

"It's time. I'm ready."

He was calm. Posed. I guess he was ready.

"Then there are a few things that must be taken care of." He looked at me. "Call school to tell them you'll be transferring internship," I told him.

"Right," he said a little lost. "I should have called first to see if they'll take me at the other place to begin with."

"Do that, I'll take care of the rest."

He looked at me inquisitively. I just smiled and pulled out my phone.

For the next half hour, he was talking to Benedict, the CEO of Celia, one of my brother's companies. Kaden was playing this tough guy's facade, but there were times when he was just a big teddy bear. Giving Darren the CEO's personal cellphone number and all.

Darren then went to his laptop to send his resume, and school report, and filled a few forms. And then called his school to tell them of the transfer. And finally his father's company of the fact he was leaving the country and finishing is internship elsewhere.

I made a few calls of my own.

When he was done, he was sitting at his desk, and I went to sit on his lap.

"Everything worked out?" I asked.

"Surprisingly yes. It's all taken care of."

"Cool. You have an apartment."

He just looked at me.

"I know a couple who's leaving in a couple weeks for a few months. They have an apartment, furnished and everything, so you don't have to worry about that, and it's all yours. Free of charge."

He got a weird look on his face.

"Don't worry, I didn't pull rank or anything. Residential insurance are twice as expensive when you insure somewhere empty for long and they tend to refuse to insure against theft. They were looking for a house-sitter, well apartment-sitter, anyways. You just have to water the plants. Then after a few months, you'll know what you want and where, and you'll be able to get somewhere of your own. In the meantime, it's in Blakeden. It's the big town on our territory. Everything is close by, 25 minutes of walks from my place so even without a car it's doable for both of us. Your job is in the big city, and there's a shuttle going back and forth four times a day and it's free. So until you get a car, you're covered. By the time you'll have to leave the apartment, the internship will be done and you'll have more income to choose what you want. And for the couple of weeks before the apartment is available, we have extra room at home and you're welcome. Mom is getting a room ready for you.

Also, a plane will come and pick us up tomorrow morning. See," I said. "I told you I'd help set you up."

In answer, he smashed his lips against mine, and we got a little busy with mapping one another's buccal anatomy with our tongues.

When we resurfaced for air, we moved to packing his stuff together. As we weren't worried about maximum luggage size and weight—the advantage of having access to a private plane—we packed everything he wanted to bring. After a couple of hours, his room was pretty empty. All the furniture was there, but nothing was left in it. He had made a few boxes to give to his brothers, his

mother, his friends, and the rest to charity. Then we went to my room and packed everything, then brought it to his room.

We didn't say it, but I was pretty sure I was spending the night there anyway. We did spend most of our nights together since the day of Darren's fight with his father.

Once done, we were famished and went to the kitchen.

We sat on stools at the island counter and heated a few leftovers to munch on.

"Hey," said Kevin as he came in with Michael. They looked like they'd just come out of the gym, and they both grabbed sports drink from the fridge. "Took you a while."

"We were busy," said Darren with a mouth full.

"Uh huh!" said Michael unconvinced.

"Got some boxes for you guys. Stuff you might want," Darren said.

"Boxes?" Michael asked.

"Yeah, I'm taking the plane tomorrow morning, so I'm emptying everything."

They both froze.

"Tomorrow?" Kevin asked his voice small.

"Yeah. Do you have some time in the morning?" Darren asked Kevin. "We could take a lift. But if you're busy we can call a cab."

"Yeah, sure," he said a little numb.

"You told Mom yet?" Michael asked him.

"I will after lunch. Where is she?"

Michael shrugged. "Garden maybe."

Darren nodded. "I'll check."

"So," said Michael carefully. "Right now?"

"Seems as good as ever."

"Running away from Dad?" he asked a little upset.

"No. We'll have a talk, eventually. When he'll be ready," Darren said. "We'll probably see each other for Christmas. But you can visit if you want. Besides, we can still call right? Mom is probably gonna call every day for a little while. At least until she gets used to it."

— Darren —

I had some talks with my brothers. They all came to my room before the end of the evening and grabbed some stuff in my donation boxes.

For dinner, I went to see my friends, brought some things for them, and we pretty much celebrated all evening.

I didn't want to celebrate too hard, as we were leaving early, but it was hard with Ty and Mal to do, as they have very little restraint.

I got them to promise me to visit before the end of the year.

The hardest was Mom.

I went to see her before I left for Zayn's place and we had a long chat just the two of us. She had a lot of worries that I had to smooth out, but I took the time. Even though most of us are in our twenties, she never had a son leave home, and I think she was feeling some of the empty nest syndrome right now. I promised to call, and be there for Christmas, and her birthday next year—which made her feel better.

She took a wad of cash and put it in my hands.

"Mom…" I complained.

"Take it, use it if you need it. Store it in case of emergency, or invest it, or use it to start your own company, or to get married, but take it. I'm not going to miss it."

I wanted to complain again but decided against it.

I thought of sneaking it back in her stuff, but I realized the moment she would see I'd left without it, she would probably panic, and it would probably be easier to just pocket it. So I did.

In the morning I said my goodbyes. Dad was shining by his absence. Kevin and Kate gave us a ride to the airport and we chatted casually along the way.

Eva's head dropped on my shoulder at some point. We did have a short night. And I woke her only when we arrived at our destination.

There, Mads was ready to take our luggage, and we gave our last few hugs before take off.

The plane was nice. Comfortable. The crew amiable, but we mostly slept until lunch.

After that, Eva informed me her brother had a bed in his office and we moved there for more comfort. I never slept on a bed in an airplane before. We did fool around too so I suppose you could say we got our mile-high card.

It only occurred to me when we landed that I've just had sex in the bed of a terrifyingly powerful guy, with his sister—and his employees, I was sure, knew.

Which pretty much whipped the *pleased with myself* expression I had on.

Yeah. Go me!

We helped Mads with all our luggage, and some big burly guy next to a black sedan came to grab some of the rest to put it in the trunk of the car.

"Hi Sam," said Eva to whom I assumed was our chauffeur, and gave him kisses on each cheek.

"How was your trip?" he asked her.

"Nice," she replied. "This is Darren."

"Hi," I said and shook his hand. He had a really strong grip. Not like he was trying to crush my hand, but more like he had to hold back not to accidentally do it.

Mads sat at the front with Sam, they chatted quietly.

"Is Kaden at home?" asked Eva.

"Yes," said Sam.

The small private airport was on one of the Blakemore territories, nevertheless, it still took us 45 minutes to reach Eva's place.

The estate was immense. There was a large central building that must have been built a few centuries ago, at least, and which must have been the main pack house.

There were a number of other buildings, from rich cottages, to more modern additions. Many were linked through corridors, some old stone affairs, and others modern square glass rectangles. There were extensive gardens, and a large Victorian greenhouse. Old carriage shed, classier than many homes, has been turned into garages. One of the wings on the main house looked like it had once been a medieval fort. Eva informed me that this was the office building. Her parent's house was one of the detached cottages. It had five storeys if you counted the basement and attic, which was fairly big for a cottage, and some would more probably consider this a small mansion in its own right. But I supposed that compared to the main building, it was a cottage.

Everything was in excellent condition, despite the age.

There was a humongous pool, three artificial lakes, and manicured lawns and woods. There wasn't a single fallen branch under the trees.

Well, if I wondered about her family having money, I had my answer.

— Chapter Twenty —

KEEP YOUR EAR ON THE GROUND

— Mishka —

“So are you lot a sort of mini pack?” I asked Elijah.

“Sorta,” he said.

“Pretty small pack if you ask me.”

“Does it matter?”

“I guess not,” I answered. “How do you guys got together?”

Elijah shrugged.

We were sitting just the both of us on the couch, playing Mario Kart on an old 64. Most of the others were either away or sleeping.

The job had worked mostly well. They were definitely not secretly expert at this. I’m pretty sure most of then has had some experience with crimes of one kind or another, but other than Ethan, their expertise was limited. My guess his that Mason is ex-gang, John probably a con, I’m not too sure about the others, but most probably fell on the wrong side of the law at one point or another. Either human law, or wolf’s.

“My guess is that some of you were rogues,” I told him. Rogues are generally kicked out of packs. Mostly for breaking the laws, or getting on the wrong side of someone of power. They’re not necessarily all criminals, some just make the wrong mistake. And it depends on who banished them. Some wolves are pretty fond of their power, and don’t always use it properly.

I got hired once by a couple of women who had been raped by a Beta, and the Alpha did nothing, and when the victims tried to fight back, the guy got them kicked out. Made them rogues. So when they paid me to kill them both, I had no qualms against it. When they decided they wanted them taken alive and brought to them to be tortured first, I did it, and made sure they were drugged hard enough not to fight back too hard. Given their inherent strength, it would have been suicidal otherwise.

I generally don’t take contracts like these, especially against anyone too strong, but with enough preparation and motivation, I can. And for them, I did.

Rogues tend to have a bad rap, but they're all not inherently bad, like laws are not inherently good, and those in power not inherently benevolent.

I guess when you walk the roads that I do, you tend to see things a little differently.

But then again, I kill people, and steal for a living. What do I know of right and wrong. It seems like a lot of gold plated hypocrisy to me.

The kid said nothing about my comment. He was probably not trusting me.

"Look kid. I don't care either way. It's not like I'm in a pack myself or getting too hung up on laws either."There were a few seconds of silence as we continued racing in game.

"I was in the streets. I was adopted, things didn't go well when I began to show too many signs of being a werewolf. My family was taking it bad, humans you know," he explained. "They were getting me locked up. I escaped. But the streets … they're rough, wolf or not. John's a rogue. I don't know what he did to be one, but he took me on, taught me too. Amir was hanging around already back then. I'm not too sure how we all got together. Sometimes John got a job and would ask around for help. That's how Mase and Wes joined. We got more jobs, and we got more people. Some just did the work and left, others stayed," he told me. "You staying?"

"I don't know," I said truthfully. "The lone wolf gig is not as glitzy as people think. I'm starting to think having people around can make a lot of things easier, but I'm not sure your crew likes me."

"Well, you're kind of a douche."

"Nah. A wiseass, sure. Asshole, jerk, and annoying git, obviously. But I don't do douche."

He laughed. "Why though?"

"Want a little tip?"

"Sure."

"Acting professional is efficient, but it doesn't tell you much about human nature. Push people a bit and you'll see what they're made of. The important part, though, is to make sure you can handle the dragon once you've wakened it."

He looked at me. "So you think you can handle these dragons?"

"Sadly, I found no dragon here yet."

"Maybe you don't know," he said a little vexed.

"Maybe," I conceded. "I get you got it hard. A lot of people do. Maybe more so than you think. And you got help, which is nice. Anyone can respect someone who helps selflessly. What gets me

worried are those who pretend to act selflessly to hide other intent, and to get something out of you in the process."

"You think that's John?" he asked a little upset, perceiving my words as accusations.

"Not necessarily. I don't know this crew much. Actually, you do so a lot more than me. But I know something doesn't fit. Maybe someone in this crew is hiding their true intent, or scheming something, or serving two masters. Maybe the problem is not in this crew itself. Maybe it's the ones pulling the strings."

He frowned at that.

"I know those gigs didn't come from John. I think he's serving someone. Maybe it's just for the cash, maybe it's more. But I get real uncomfortable when I do work for someone I can't see, or talk to," I said. "You can't gage someone like that. And I know your crew don't make the kind of money needed to get a guy like me. So my guess is, the one who calls the shot wanted someone like me on board, and was ready to pay for it, but doesn't want to deal directly with me," I paused. "What worries me the most of all this is why? Is it someone who prefers to stay away from crowds because of social anxiety, or someone who has something to hide? And if it's the latter, is your crew, or some of it compliant or just unaware?"

The game had been over for a little while now and he was listening carefully. He was not an idiot. I suppose you don't survive with your mind intact on the street by being an idiot. Idiot ends up in drugs, or other massive crap.

"Food for thought," I told him, and put the controller on the table. "I like you kid. I think, if nurtured, you have potential to do well. You're a survivor. I respect that." I got up. "My spidey sense tells me something's up, I'm just trying to be careful. I think you should too."

He nodded slowly and I nodded approvingly.

"You should keep your ear on the ground. I'd appreciate a heads up if the crew is about to whack me. If you could be so kind." I smiled. "And if you're in trouble, call me. I'll help. Whatever I can."

— Darren —

"Nice to meet you sir," I told Eva's father, Sebastian, as I shook his hand. I could feel the strength of this man's wolf when our skin touched. I could feel a similar strength to the one I felt in Eva's brother the night we met. Those guys were not petty wolves, or lowly Alphas. I wouldn't want to fight either of them.

The man was tall. Taller than me but not as tall as his son. He had black hair with barely any grey in it. Beside him was a woman. She was beautiful, maybe not conventionally so, but beautiful

nonetheless. There was a strength in her posture, something that told me her role was not just of a trophy wife.

Behind them stood five girls. Aged from teen girls to young women. They were all relatively pretty. Well dressed. Most had the same dark hair as their father, but two had the dark auburn of their mother's.

"This is my mother, Shea." Eva pointed at her mother, continuing the presentations.

We shook hands and exchanged pleasantries.

"And these are my sisters. Nadine, Jasmine, Lisa, Gwen, and Amy."

"Hi!" I said.

"Hi!" said Jasmine stretching the 'i' a little too long, which got most of the girls giggling.

Eva clucked her tongue in scorn at them.

It was cute.

Shea gave the girls a look, and they barely looked abashed. Sebastian didn't even react.

"I'm gonna show you to your room," Eva told me. She took my arm and guided me upstairs.

"I'm sorry about my sisters," she said finally.

I shrugged.

After I saw the room I would stay in—which was a pretty nice room too, with dark-blue walls and long white curtains—she decided to show me the whole house, which eventually led to the gardens, then the packhouse.

Eva's mother called her as she saw we were close to the office building and did ask her if she could go to ask her brother if he would join them for dinner tonight.

So we moved to the office building.

It was getting late, and a lot of people had left.

Some sections of this building had the reinforced stone walls exposed on the inside, whereas other sections had original old finishing, while others had more modern finish. But the eclectic look was rendered with style.

"Well, hello there," said some guy at a desk.

"Hi Mike," said Eva. She looked a little nervous. "Hem. This is Darren."

“Hi,” I said shaking his hand.

“Well, now I get Eva’s infatuation,” he said looking me up and down.

“Aren’t you straight?” she asked a little bemused.

“Oh! No, woman. I’m bi.”

“Oh,” she just said.

“Sorry mate, but I’m kinda taken,” I told him nonplussed.

“Yeah, yeah, I already know,” he said faking a saddened expression.

“Is my brother in?”

“Yeah. There was a big war room meeting not long ago, but pretty much everyone’s out now.”

“War?” she asked a little concerned. “What’s going on this time?”

“I’m not sure of the details. I know Alpha Meadows called on Alpha Devon to help a bunch of small packs that are having issues with some other pack that’s causing problems, and I think Ylva was sent somewhere and found some shady stuff, and now everyone’s preparing to make a move. And I think it’s gonna be a violent one.” He said seriously.

Eva frowned at this.

“I’m gonna check on him,” she said. “I have a message to pass along from my Mom.”

“Sure,” said Mike.

She was worried, so I gesture for her to go along and talk to her brother, while I stayed here.

“So—,” began Mike with a mischievous smile, looking at me like a crocodile looks at a rabbit.

“So?” I asked carefully.

— Chapter Twenty-One —

DON'T SAY ANYTHING

— Eveline —

"Hey there," I said to my brother.

"Hi," he said, his eyes locked on his computer.

"I heard things might be getting heated?"

"Yeah."

"I heard Ylva found something bad?"

"You heard a lot of things," he said.

"The grapevines aren't thick enough to stop the rumour mill."

He gave me a small smile, looking briefly up from his computer.

"Anything I can do?" I asked concerned.

"Nah. I know Darren is here. You might want to spend more time with him."

"Appreciated," I said. "But I'm serious. If there's anything I can do—?"

He looked up again. This time with his eyebrows knitting. "Things might get rough for a little while. I might leave for a while too. I'm not sure how things will go." He paused. "There are a lot of packs we are coordinating with. Some are a little unwilling to cooperate. I could take some help from the team to smooth things out with them."

"Okay."

"I thought you would've stayed a little longer in Stonewillow," he said, rubbing at the bridge of his nose, before returning to his typing.

I went to sit in the chair in front of his desk.

"I thought so too," I thought out.

He stopped typing. "Did something bad happen?"

"I know Darren sent you a text about his father."

"Yeah," he answered carefully, his full attention on me now.

“Well, Darren was getting worried about his father trying to get something out of his relationship with me, but when he heard his father had contacted you directly, he blew a fuse. They got into an argument, and things stayed tense for a while there. They mostly stayed away from one another, but eventually his Dad said a comment that Darren didn’t digest well. So he decided to leave now. And here we are.”

“Is everything okay?”

“The relationship between Darren and his father is pretty tense at the moment. His mother said to me that he’s not handling his position as well as he used to. That the previous generation messed up, and he stayed afraid of doing the same thing, so he put title above everything else. And apparently, it gets rough on his sons.”

Kaden laid back a bit in his chair thinking.

“I suppose being Alpha has its rough sides,” I said.

“Sure,” he told me.

“Was there a time you’ve regretted being one?”

“I never really took the time to think about it. I was the only child for a long time, and by the time it changed, I was already it. I always knew what was to come, and I’ve kept myself busy enough not to dwell on it much.”

“I don’t think Darren’s father dwells on it that hard either. It’s those around him that does it the most.”

My brother gave me a wry smile. “I suppose that’s how it is,” he said, rubbing at his chest.

“If you ever have kids,” I said. “Don’t just put all your effort on an heir and neglect the other, please.” I didn’t want to see one more generation of this.

Kaden nodded distracted, and rubbed at his chest again.

“Are you okay?” I asked concerned.

He nodded. “You should go,” he said closing his laptop.

Something was off.

Was he dismissing me?

“Go Eva. You’re probably late for dinner,” he said quickly.

Dinner!

I'd forgotten to invite him over.

"Mom asked—," I began.

"Go, Eva!" he said a little roughly, he turned his chair aside, and bent a little, holding his chest.

Something was wrong.

My heartbeat tripled its speed in a few seconds.

I rushed to him.

"Eva," he complained, his voice rough.

"You're having an attack?"

He said nothing. Clearly frustrated with me.

"I'm not leaving. What do you need?" I asked. "Do I call the doctor?"

"No."

"What if you have a heart attack?"

He was breathing harder now.

"It's not the heart," he said breathlessly, half bent down.

"What do you need?" I asked again.

"The can," he finally admitted.

I turned to see his metal garbage can. I picked it up and brought it. He was retching. So I took the garbage bag out of the can and knotted it shut, then put the can in between his legs. He raised it and began vomiting violently.

There wasn't much that I could do, so I moved his hair out of his face a little. It was long enough to cover part of his face, but not long enough to be able to tie it back. I moved my hand softly on his shoulders and back.

The smell hit me.

He looked terrible. Sweat was now pearling on his forehead.

I got up and moved to his adjoining bathroom. I looked around for a little while until I found a washcloth. I soaked it in warm water, then returned to Kaden and began cleaning his face. I moved to his mouth in between vomiting fit, then went to rinse it thoroughly, then came back.

"Go," he said while heaving.

"No, it's fine."

He growled at me, but his heart was not into it.

At this point Darren got in.

"Is everything O—," he started to ask, but stopped.

Kaden growled.

"Door," he ordered. "Out."

"Close the door," I told Darren. "He already saw," I told Kaden

Darren closed the door. Kaden growled again. Darren stayed immobile by the door, looking at us.

"Don't tell anyone about this, okay?" I asked him.

Darren's eyes grew wider in realization. I think he understood a lot more than I told him.

"Mike is still at his desk," he said.

I nodded. "Tell him to go home."

Darren peaked his head out the door. "Boss says to go home. You can close shop."

"Cool," I heard Mike say, as Darren closed the door again.

— Darren —

I heard the distant buzzing of a cellphone notification. I figured who was trying to communicate with Eva, but she was concentrated on her brother. So I went to her, and picked up her phone from her jean's pocket.

I unlocked it and opened the text app.

Her mother was asking if Kaden was coming.

I texted back.

No, sorry Mom. Kaden is pretty busy at the moment and won't be able to make it.

Then I showed the screen to Eva.

She nodded and I sent it, before putting the phone back in her pocket.

The smell of vomit was strong, but regardless, I smelled the blood instantly.

I saw Eva stiffened a second or two after I noticed, to look into the bucket.

Her eyes got wide.

He was throwing up blood now.

That's not good.

She took her phone and gave it to me.

"Go to my contacts, the doctor—," she began.

"No," her brother interjected.

"Kade, you're puking blood," she chastised.

"It'll pass," he said.

She looked torn.

"You sure?" I asked him.

"Yeah," he said. Then picked a washcloth from his desk and wiped at his mouth. There was a red streak on it now, but his stomach seemed to have settled a little, as he didn't have his head deep in the can to begin with.

"You've had this before," I said, putting Eva's phone back inside her pocket again.

He didn't answer, but he got up slowly.

Eva tried to help, but he was moving on his own, and went to the bathroom.

His face was still ashen though.

"I'll help you clean up," Eva said, getting up.

"I'm fine," her brother said as he closed the door of the bathroom.

Eva looked like she wanted to argue.

I put my hand on her shoulder and gave her a look to drop it.

She bit her lip, but eventually let go.

"You call me every fifteen minutes for the next couple of hours or I'm gonna send in the doc," she told him through the door. While he was probably washing his mouth as I heard the water in the sink and him spit a few times.

He growled at her half-heartedly, in frustration.

"I mean it Kade," she said.

Eventually, he grunted in conciliation.

And we moved out of his office. No one was on the other side.

Eva stopped at a washroom to wash away the smell of barf off of her hands.

Then we walked out.

Eva was upset.

"I get this happened has before?" I asked her.

"Maybe, I don't know." She stopped and turned to me. "Don't tell anyone, please. Even at home. Don't say anything, okay?"

I frowned.

I get that weakness is not really advertised for someone in her brother's position, but keeping it from his own family was different. And the blood too. This was more than an indigestion. He was used to it. And he kept it secret. Eva was not exactly surprised of the turn of events, but doesn't know that much either. I analyzed.

"He's sick," I told her. "That's why you were crying before you left. You had just heard about his health." I wasn't sure how I worked out all the details, but when I said it, I knew I was right. "It's bad too. That's why you want him to call you every fifteen minutes. To make sure it doesn't get worse. You're thinking life dangerous worse," I said.

Her eyes widened. "How do you know?"

"It's not too hard to figure it out. Plus we're mate. I don't think we'd be good at keeping secrets from one another," I said. "Is it deadly?"

Eva's eyes filled with water. "I can't tell. I promised not to tell anyone," she said meekly.

I wrapped my arms around her, and the moment her face got into contact with my shoulder, she began crying in earnest.

I heard again the vibration of her cellphone. So I took it out of her pocket again and checked it. Her mother was asking her when she was coming in. So I wrote.

I'm sorry Mom. I think I'm a little queasy. Darren is taking me on a walk to see if it'll pass. I might eat later. Don't wait for me and eat. I'm sorry, I'll take a rain check.

I send it. Eva's head perked up and I showed her the texts.

She nodded.

“How did you unlock it?”

“I saw you put your code in. 0000 is not a good code, you know. You should put in one a little harder to decipher.”

She gave me a doleful smile, and put the phone back in her pocket.

“Can anything be done about it?” I asked about her brother. She understood.

“I don’t know. I can’t tell,” she said again, tears streaming once more.

“Okay. It’s okay,” I murmured.

We walked like that for a while.

It was past midnight when we came in. Everyone was in bed. We grabbed a small bite then went to bed.

I wasn’t sure what to think about what I’ve just witnessed.

My phone rang. I checked it. It was Kaden.

“Yeah,” I answered hesitantly.

“Is Eva sleeping?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but if she isn’t, she probably soon will.”

“You’re not with her?”

“No.”

“Huh!”

“I figured it might not be the best move to do so early after meeting the family.”

“I thought you’d sneak in, anyways.”

“I thought about it. But I didn’t.”

He grunted noncommittally.

Why did he call? Probably not that.

“What do you know?” he asked me.

“About what?” I asked.

“Tonight.”

"I mostly figured it all out, other than the cause."

He grunted again, this time in annoyance.

"Eva told me not to say anything, including to your family," I paused. "I won't. She wouldn't tell me anything. She takes her promises seriously. She was quite shaken, so I know it's serious. I'm not gonna judge, and involve myself where you don't want me to. It's none of my business, I guess."

I sat on my bed.

"I figured it's possibly deadly." I continued.

He didn't say anything. He didn't deny it either.

"After you, Eva is the oldest. I know you don't have a chosen heir. Which means if anything happens to you, everything falls on her shoulders."

"She mentioned that?" he asked.

"No. I think this is still too early, and she's thinking with her emotions right now, but soon enough, she's gonna come to the same realization. And I don't think she's ready for that. She's struggling with your situation, but soon she's gonna start to struggle with hers too. I don't know if you had a plan or something—."

"Not really. I figured if anything happens, my father is gonna step in."

"That's probably the most logical option. But it's only temporary."

"Sure. But what does it have to do with you exactly?"

"It has to do that I'm in Eva's life, and if she falls apart, I'm gonna be the one who's gonna have to pick up the pieces," I said. "Right now I don't even know what's going on, and I get that, it's none of my business, but it is Eva's. And she's struggling with information she can't communicate, and I don't know how to approach that. I get the gag order. You probably don't want to hurt your family, and any sign of weakness on an Alpha is an opening for a challenge. But she needs to talk to someone. If not me then someone else. So you're gonna have to loosen up a little with her.

And let her help. I know why you don't want to, but she feels helpless, and that's never a good feeling. Give her an outlet. Even when if you think it might not change anything, as long as she tries, there is hope in her mind. Let her have that. It can be just little things, but at least something.

She really cares about you. She talks a lot about you. She also told me how she feels that her and her sisters have treated you unfairly a lot. How you've been a parenting figure, but mostly dealing with the negative aspects of it, but not so much with the positive ones. That they gave you a hard time when you had a lot on your shoulders. She needs to pay you back. Let her."

“She said that?”

“Not in so many words, but she’s quite a transparent person, and the mate bond does give me a lot of insight. I don’t know all the details, but I know I’m on the right track.”

“You say you don’t want to put your nose in what’s not your business, but you do quite a lot of that actually.”

“You’re not my business, she is.”

“Ah,” he said. “You’re probably not wrong. About any of this. It’s just that it’s complicated.”

“Isn’t it always.”

“Urgh. And I’m kinda hoping I might take care of this before it gets too bad.”

“Can you?”

“Who knows,” he answered frankly.

“You wanted to tell her something?”

“Just to check on her. But I didn’t want to wake her up.”

“Right. So you keep me awake,” I grinned.

“I care about her, not so much about you.” Maybe I should’ve felt insulted but I didn’t. I just laughed.

“Look after her,” he said more seriously.

“I will. I am”, I said.

“Mmh,” he said, then shut the conversation off.

I put my phone back in my pocket and grabbed some clothes. I guess that if I’m expected to sneak into Eva’s room, then I don’t see why hold back from it.

— Chapter Twenty-Two —

IT COULDN'T LAST

— Darren —

It's been a few weeks now, and I've gotten the hang of the new job.

It's actually more demanding than my previous internship. Well, not at first. But they have this weird philosophy here that if you can take more, then you will. So my workload has been steadily increasing. I've been changed office a few times too.

I've seen the CEO, Benedict Gaines, only twice. The first time was the second day of work here. I suppose he was checking on how this was going and all that. It was formal, and short.

The second time was not that long ago. We crossed paths in the cafeteria and we ended up eating together, so we talked a bit more.

He said that the change in departments and workload was mostly until my supervisor found exactly what was right for me. That it wasn't too unusual, and depending on my performance and job availability, a work contract would be emitted after the end of my internship for a long-term position.

Even as an intern, I was getting a bigger salary than when I worked at my father's place, so that was nice. I'd moved into the apartment too. It belonged to friends of Sari, the Gamma's wife, which is how Eva learned about them and their need to have an apartment-sitter. The place was nice, clean, well decorated and fairly spacious.

It was situated in the town of Blakeden on of the Blakemore territories.

It was an old town, compact, with most streets being made of cobblestones. But it was vibrant and eclectic.

Not all residents were members of any of the packs. There were the guests. Which was people like me. My approval as guest came in last week. I believe that my connection to Eva did steamroll the process a bit. As a guest, I was considered a full citizen of Blakeden with all advantages and responsibilities that it enticed, but I was not a member of any of the packs. Then there were visitors. It was a more temporary status that required reviewing to keep it. As a guest of Blakeden, I could vote at townhall on local issues. Visitors couldn't. And then there are the outsiders. Those who goes through the city, as it's not completely close off, even humans could pass through.

Given that status, it became a haven of the supernatural. Most humans in town are clued in too. I've seen so far at least five different types of shifters, one troll, a mermaid, two vampires, and I've been told there's a lot more. Apparently, there are stories of a variety of haunted spots too.

I've never seen anything like this town.

Well, I wanted a change, and I got one. A big one.

Mr. Gaines told me a bit about the company too—the company, Celia, was apparently named after Eva's grandmother. He also told me about his wife who is Delta of Blakemore.

He seemed like a good guy. Competent. Well, dressed, well-mannered, and very respected.

By now I only had three weeks left to my internship and I'd be out of school for good, with a degree, a job, and a girlfriend. I still had over two months in the apartment for free, before I'd have to move. Eva and I were doing pretty well, and we spent most of our time outside of work together. Things were going fairly well for me.

Which is why it couldn't last.

Today was a day like any other.

I was at my computer, it was late in the morning, and my stomach had begun rumbling. Which is when everything began shaking. It's not the first time I'd experience an earthquake, but never one this massive.

Everything on my desk began clanking against one another, as they were on every other desks producing this massive dissonant drumming throughout the entire floor.

A few people yelped in surprise at first, but got quiet really quickly. Some went to hide under their desks, others froze in place.

It lasted a massive fifteen or twenty seconds.

Some things fell, mostly little things, a couple of panels from the ceiling, no real damage. Once the quake had subsided, I got up.

I heard someone yelp looking outside while others assessed the extent of the damage inside.

I checked by the window and screamed.

"Everyone away from the window, quick!" I put in all the authority and force an alpha wolf can. It's not as preternaturally powerful as an actual Alpha official could, but you'd be surprised how a simple tone of voice can be effective.

Not everyone moved in time, or quickly enough, and many just turned around to see what was going on.

I ran on the other side of the building, grabbing two people who weren't fast enough by their sleeve on my way, effectively dragging them.

Those who looked outside saw the next building, which was in construction, have a few of its incomplete floor crumble—mostly on the sidewalks and streets, some debris hitting the side of our building. But the massive crane that was installed for the construction of high-rises, tipped over and crashed straight on us.

When it hit, there was this massive thunder of matter against matter grinding in a howling twisting of metal and concrete. Within the same second, the jingle of broken glass proceeded to rain on us with knife-like shard that sprayed anyone near enough.

Then the metal infrastructure, slowly slid sideways, scraping the entire side of the building in a deafening roar, until it finally smashed against a lower section of the building, and we heard it partially fall to pieces.

And amongst the rubble falling, glass breaking, and the metal twisting in a wail, we also heard something bone chilling.

Screams.

Once some of us got our baring back under us, we began assessing the damage. I heard my supervisor directing people to the emergency stairs, and set about doing the same.

Thanks the heavens, no one was gravely hurt, and I left our floor along with the last of us.

I stopped at every floor, looking around in case someone was left behind before going down one more floor.

Some had gotten more injured than others, but they generally had someone to help them go down. I help set two splinters and wrap a few worrying cuts, before moving along.

Once outside, I could see the true extent of the damage.

Most buildings seemed relatively fine. Some signs had fallen, a few things that were not anchored fell. There was probably a massive mess in every building, but unless a building was in an infrastructural compromised state, I doubt anything crumbled—unless the epicentre was much further and this earthquake had been even more powerful than we felt.

Even the neighbouring under-construction building was still standing up, and the amount of damage was repairable, I speculated.

But the crane had done the worst damage by far on this street. The side facade of the Celia office had been mostly skinned off, pieces of the floor missing at places where it hit harder. The damage went probably as far as the twentieth or twenty-fifth floor. But the smaller section that was perpendicular to the building that only had seven floors, had the crane completely buried inside it, and the entire middle section was mostly collapsed.

There were tears all around me, moans of pain, complains, bafflement, anxious murmurs, but the worst came from the crushed section—screams, wailing, pleadings, and cries for help.

I didn't think about it. I didn't think about anything. I just walked straight to the fallen building, and slowly made my way amongst the rubble.

I tried to help anyone out of there.

It wasn't long before others joined in.

I oriented a few of them to start a chain getting rubble out, and rapidly, others in the street joined us, moving massive amount of material out of the way, and creating a second chain guiding the survivors out without having too many people constantly moving on unstable structures.

A few wolves helped with the bigger pieces. Given my ancestry, I could pull up more than any present without shifting, and I would lift sections slowly, then tell others to move in and grab whoever was stuck.

They were all covered in a thick layer of dust, making their skin and clothes concrete grey.

I had to be careful of what I was doing, because in the metropolis, there were human eyes everywhere, and cameras, and the emergency crew was on its way.

When we moved to more dangerous section deeper inside, I insisted on keeping the human Samaritans at bay. If me or any of the shifters would get injured, we had a better chance at healing than a plain human. It also meant that if they didn't see, I could let some of my wolf out to help me.

The few wolves helping out had rallied behind me and did what I asked.

I was used to doing this, ordering people around. Even though I had never technically been in charge at home, my relationship to my family did automatically give me gravitas. And though not much was asked of me, when things went sideways, people rapidly relied on me and let me take charge.

Though, here, those wolves probably knew nothing of my family background, they quickly realized the confidence I had and let me guide them.

I didn't feel like a leader though. I mostly felt shock. My movements automatic, my words instinctive, but my mind reeling still.

Twice, I asked for blankets, or coats, or something to help move out some who couldn't move themselves. And while I waited, I held their hands, tried to reassure them. One lost consciousness on the way. But the four other wolves with me, helped me take her out of the destruction.

The third one didn't move. When I got closer, I saw the skull partially caved in. There was so much blood. There were a few bubbles forming where the mouth and nose should be. I screamed for another blanket or anything to support him out of there, and moved everything out of the way. But by the time it came, I'd heard the rattling of death bubbling out of his throat.

There was nothing that could have saved him.

This thought didn't help me feel better regardless.

We slowly moved the body out, and I asked the guys to cover him as soon as possible not to expose him to the public and cameras.

I had a good nose. Better than most, and I tried to track any possible survivors out. It was so hard. There were so many smells—blood, piss, dust, the water from damaged pipes, metal, splintered wood. The air was thick with dust. It was everywhere and at times, I could barely blink it out of my eyes. I listened too. Any sounds, anything that could be a sign of life.

I heard a firefighter distantly tell me to get out.

I didn't.

I found signs of life in what was left of the lower levels. I had to crawl most of the way there. I moved excruciatingly slow, both because of lack of access and because I didn't want to move the wrong way and trigger a small avalanche of debris. I could hear the occasional tumble of matter around us. A few times I put pressure on something unstable, and I got tossed down, or sideways. I was sure I had a series of nasty bruises forming on my back and sides.

I reached three people, two women and a man. The man was unable to move, his path blocked. One of the women was pressed down by a massive piece of concrete that had probably been a floor at some point, and the third was trying her best, and failing, at retrieving the wailing woman on the ground. The man contorted in pain, probably more at the sound of agony from the woman, than from pain from injuries.

I made my way to him first.

"Help her first," he pleaded.

"I can't, I'm gonna need your help."

He nodded.

It took all I had to move the metal pieces away from him, and I felt my wolf surface at the extent of the effort required of me.

I distantly saw him gulp. My eyes had probably changed colours at this point, my nails lengthened. And the grunt I couldn't stop coming out, turned into a growl. I could barely stop before it became a roar.

Everyone froze. Even the crying woman stopped for a moment, and I got the man free.

He looked at me carefully, moving slowly and around me, at arm's length.

The woman kneeling by the other was a shifter, cat I believe. She recognized immediately what I was, but said nothing. The others were human.

I knew I should be more careful, but I didn't know how to save them otherwise.

I told the woman to be ready to drag her out of there the moment she could, and there was another piece that needed to be held up so I could reach the biggest piece. So I raised it and asked the man to hold it.

Then I went to the massive pieces of concrete to try and lift the heaviest thing I've ever lifted. And with every step I took towards her, I felt the floor shake slightly, unstable, and dangerous.

— Chapter Twenty-Three —

HELP IS NOT THAT FAR

—Kaden —

I'd spent most of the week at Monaweard. Organizing with the Alphas, putting things in motions, getting more information, and preparing for an imminent battle.

That part had been the hardest to convince the others of.

Most wanted things to be taking care of rapidly and as peacefully as possible. Which was understandable, I'm pretty sure it's the main option to small packs. Unless they are facing an equally small pack, and that it's not getting reinforcement, then violence is too dangerous an option.

But the facility we found. After another reconnaissance mission, we figured it was a trafficking outpost. We found signs of organ harvesting. And we suspect the healthy females and pups were sold on the black market.

For the love of me, I can't figure what type of profit could outweigh the massive amount of work and risk such an operation would garner.

I was sure that there was something else behind this. It's the only way it made sense, but I just didn't know what, and it bugged me to no end.

It took a little too long for my taste to convince them to make a move and as most of the information gathered from the scouting was not visible on cameras, it didn't help much. But we had some footage of prisoners. It looked mostly like a distorted version of a concentration camp. You could nearly smell the reek through the screen. But the moment they saw young children, whatever hang ups they had, dissolved. There is one thing about the mind. The moment you hurt a child, there is an inescapable outrage that comes over you, and it had nothing to do with thoughts and everything to do with instincts. It's not surprising that pedophiles are amongst the most despised criminals, even amongst some of the worst prisons in the world. The moment you touch a child, for most of us, a switch flips, and reasons fly out the windows, and all we want is to make them stop.

I don't like what was happening to them, but I did appreciate the fact that it got things rolling.

There was still preparations needed, and I went home for the following weeks, until ideally we knew more, and mostly, where the pack was, as they were notliving full time at the facility. We also needed to know if there were any other facilities too. It pained me not to move quickly, but if

we did, they could just move to set up shop elsewhere, where we wouldn't know and couldn't interfere. We had to wait.

The plane hit the ground before noon.

It was slowing down when everything began moving roughly.

We were on the ground, it couldn't be turbulence.

I rushed to the cockpit. Knocked twice, then got in.

"Is something wrong with the plane?" I asked the pilot and co-pilot.

They were looking at their instruments and repeating commands at one another, so I waited.

"I found nothing wrong sir," the pilot told me after a while.

The co-pilot pointed at people coming out of a building, shaken. "I think it's the ground, sir. I think it was an earthquake."

I looked at what he was pointing at. It made sense. So I moved out and called Brandon.

"Was this an earthquake?" I asked when he answered. He's used to me having little decorum when speaking on the phone.

"Yes, sir."

"Send a message to all rank members of all the packs to assess damages and prioritize any injuries or rescues if necessaries. Once you have the details about the damages, you'll contact the insurance company. But first, all first-responders and rank members."

"Yes, sir," he said and I hung up.

I rushed out and made my move towards the house.

I saw no major damage along the way which is nice.

I got a call fifteen minutes in.

"Yeah."

"There's been an accident at the Celia offices," Tahmina told me, my Delta. Her husband was CEO, so he probably called to tell her.

"What happened?"

"The crane from the construction next door fell and crashed into the building. Ben says it's bad."

“Change destination to Celia offices.” I told Sam and he swerved the car in the other direction. The airfield was a little closer to the city than home, so I might get there a little faster.

“Is he okay?” I asked her. She was pregnant and I preferred it if she didn’t have to deal with a seriously injured husband at the same time. She insisted on keeping up with work until the very end, but that would definitely go beyond her. And I’d need to replace him, at least temporarily. And besides, I just hate when my people are hurt. They’re my responsibility. I swore to protect them. I take this seriously.

“He said nothing bad,” she answered anxiously. “I’m on my way.”

“This is not a good idea,” I told her carefully.

“He’s my husband,” she said with a finality I couldn’t argue with.

“Be careful, you don’t need a premature pup along with all this,” I told her.

“Yes, Alpha,” she said. “Thank you.”

“I’m on my way,” I told her and hung up, at the same time my phone rang again.

For a second there, I thought I didn’t push the right button, but Eva’s name appeared on the screen.

“Kade, there just was an earthquake.”

“I know, I just landed, I felt it.”

“I heard things are bad at Celia.”

“I heard too, I’m on my way.”

“It’s everywhere on the chat room. Darren is there.” I could hear the pure terror in her voice.

“I’m on my way.”

“Me too,” she said.

“Be careful,” I told her. “Don’t drive like a maniac. Get someone to drive you if you need to.”

“Kade … there’s at least one body.”

Those words hit me in the chest like a wrecking ball.

There’s a body. How bad is this then?

“Let’s wait until we can verify information,” I told her. “And be careful,” I repeated.

“What if it’s him,” she asked, her voice small, fragile.

I wanted to say it wasn't, but I didn't know.

"We'll know soon enough."

When we arrived at the site, the street was completely blocked.

There were firetrucks, ambulances and police cruisers everywhere.

People walking around like zombies, dust-covered zombies.

The office was one square section that was thirty floors high, and at the back, adjacent to the main building was a long rectangle, going all the length of the main office and protruding on the right side, and it was seven storeys high.

The crane fell directly against the wall of the office building, then slid backward to crash into the seven-storeys section at the back, ending its fall in a wreckage pile.

The side of the main building had serious damages and I would have to close nearly all of it for repairs. I'd have to wait on expert assessments, but the structure didn't seem compromised.

The back building on the other hand, was a mess.

If people were in there when it hit…

It was at least two floors shorter, more where the crane was sprawled broken through it.

There was rubble on the land all around it. I'm going to have to level this section completely. There's nothing salvageable.

I moved towards it in a daze.

There was a body bag on the ground, that some EMT was zipping up shut. They were people everywhere, some being treated, wrapped in blankets, looking dazed at the damage, or just onlookers hanging around or crying.

There was a chain of people taking some rubble out, and a firefighter slipping inside the carcass of the back office.

I went to the concrete ruins and spotted a member of my pack named Randall, I believed. I went to him.

"What's the situation?" I asked him.

"There some people trapped down there," he said, then raised his head and turned around. When he saw me, he froze for a moment. "Alpha," he said inclining his head.

"What do you know?" I asked.

"A few of us went to help some of the people trapped here. One guy took charge, but as it got further below, he told us to stay clear and wait for his signal. He said it's too unstable for many of us to walk in. And now the firefighters are taking charge and they're not letting us back in. So we clear the way from the outside. So that they can move in and out."

"So, there are still people inside?"

"Yes, sir."

I looked at the firefighters and waited for them to look away, then put my finger on my lips in a shush signal to Randall. He nodded, and I slipped in.

I had to climb up on the debris, until I found an opening and slipped in.

I'm not a small man, and some sections were pretty hard for me to pass through.

Randall was also right, this was definitely not structurally safe.

I used my nose to guide me and the sounds of a moaning woman. As I approached I heard a man grunt in effort.

I slipped in further. There wasn't much light here. Daylight couldn't pass through except in small spots.

When I reached them I saw one man, pushing some smaller rubble away, a woman holding the hand of another, clearly in pain, pinned to the ground. She didn't look entirely crushed there, which was good because otherwise the release of pressure could get her into shock, make her faint, or simply bleed out and die. My guess was mostly a few broken bones. A big concrete piece was atop her, and was probably locking in place one of her legs, at least. A second man was trying to lift the piece. It was huge and probably ridiculously heavy, and it moved. Not enough to free the woman, but it moved regardless.

The woman on the floor and the man moving smaller pieces were both human, the one kneeling at the head of the woman was a shifter, feline, cat is my guess, but the dust in the air made it harder to know without getting closer. The other man was a wolf. Clearly a strong one to move that much mass. As I looked at him, I recognized him.

Darren.

I went to the other man, he was bleeding from a few cuts. I put my hand on his shoulder and he squeaked and turned around in a terrified little jump.

"You've done enough man. Let me take over here," I told him.

He nodded dazed.

“Leave, be careful on the way out, it’s not stable.” I gave him a simple run down of the direction I took. “When you get closer, call out, help his not that far.”

He moved slowly, but some parts were so dark, I didn’t think his human eyes could see enough.

I bent down to the wherecat woman.

“Go with him. Guide him,” I murmured to her. “But if you can, come back. We’ll need help to drag her out.” Her eyes were huge, looking at me, but she nodded and went.

Darren had lowered his charge and went to move a bloc that was putting pressure on the segment he tried to move.

I went to help clear as much as possible, then took my place on the other side.

When the werecat woman returned, I waited for her to take her place above the other woman’s shoulders, ready to drag her out.

“Ready?” I asked.

We positioned ourselves.

“Ready,” said Darren. And we pulled for all that we were worth.

That much effort couldn’t be done without letting our wolves reach the surface, but slowly the slab began to rise up.

I could feel my muscles on fire, but I only redoubled the effort.

Werecat-girl slowly moved the other woman whimpering painfully out of harm’s way. Once she was cleared, we lowered it slowly. I feared if we let it drop down too fast, the crash could lead to shifting in the rubble, maybe even causing a small avalanche of bits of building to fall atop us.

I could feel the skin of my fingers tear in the bend, scraping against something sharp.

When it was back in place, I had to hold myself against it not to fall down in exhaustion. Darren didn’t bother and landed on his ass with a grunt. He was sweating profusely.

Werecat-girl, dragged the woman out slowly, supporting her weight most of the way. Werecats are not as physically strong as werewolves, but they’re extremely flexible and agile. And she should be able to get her out. She’d get help soon enough anyways.

“Are there any others down here?” I asked him a little out of breath.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “It’s hard to smell anything here. I found them because of the noise. Do you smell anything?” he asked me.

“Hard to say. There’s a lot of smells here. Give me a minute.” I strengthened up and moved a little to sniff. It took me a few minutes. Darren waited in silence.

“I think there might be something there.”

“Okay,” said Darren in a grunt and began to move in the direction a was looking in.

I went first.

It was even harder to reach.

I smelled the difference first, a few seconds later, I heard Darren make a noise. He smelled it too. I reached out. There was a shoe, it had a foot in, but I saw no leg attached.

I emptied my jacket pockets in my pants pockets then laid it on the ground. Then I put the shoe on the jacket, and moved to see what else I could find. Darren turned his head aside. For an instant I thought he would be sick, but he shook himself up and came to help me.

— Chapter Twenty-Four —

I WANTED TO SAY SOMETHING

— Darren —

I've never truly seen death before.

It took us a little while to retrieve the whole body. I was glad when Kaden put him face down. I wasn't sure I could handle seeing his face right now. After that, we used the coat as support to carry out the broken body. We had to move excruciatingly slow. It took us a while.

"Hey, I'm coming to get you," said a firefighter who spotted us.

"We're okay," said Kaden. "We have a body."

The man reached us and when he saw what we were carrying, he called for backup, and eventually, took the body from us.

I doubt that Kaden will want to retrieve his jacket.

We walked, well mostly crawled, out in silence.

When we got out, the sun was blinding.

We climbed down the broken structure until we finally reached the ground.

I was exhausted. And not just physically.

I wanted to go and take a three-hour long shower, until I boiled myself up. I wanted to sleep for two days straight.

I was spent.

"Kaden!" I heard a familiar voice screech.

I saw vaguely the outline before I recognized Eva coming our way.

"Darren!" she cried when she finally recognized me under the thick layer of grime that covered me.

She rushed into my arms.

I was glad to see her, but at the same time, I wasn't sure I wanted to handle people right now. I didn't want to answer questions, or explain anything.

I moved a little from her.

I saw her frown at that, but said nothing.

I turned my head away from her.

“Are you okay?” she asked worried.

I nodded. “I’m fine,” I grumbled. “I just want to go home.”

She nodded.

She took her brother in her arms for a few seconds, then took my hand and dragged me to the car.

I move in a daze, my movements that of an automaton.

She drove me home. I didn’t register the landscape, or the songs softly playing on the radio.

It’s only when I heard the door open and close that I realized we had stopped. I got out.

I moved in silence up to the apartment. When I got in, I went straight for the bathroom.

I dropped my clothes on the floor and went straight into the shower.

I wasn’t sure exactly why I was so detached. Maybe it was shock, or maybe weariness, I don’t know. I sighed as I let the water slide over me.

It went down the drain in shades of black and grey. It took me a while to get all the dirt off my scalp. It was everywhere, inside my pores, in the corner of my eyes. I snorted out a massive amount of dust imbued mucus from my nose. I felt disgusting.

— Eveline —

I was worried about Darren.

He looked really out of it. I wanted to check for injuries, but when we reached the apartment he went straight for the bathroom without closing the front door. I closed it.

He went right in there and closed the door behind him.

I began walking in circles in the living room, unsure what to do to help.

I was so hungry. I looked at my phone. It was nearly dinner time. I hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast. Come to think of it, neither did Darren, I guessed. So I went to make a couple of sandwiches.

I wanted to wait for him to eat, but it was taking so long, that I ate mine completely.

Then I got concerned.

I could still hear the shower.

I went inside the bathroom.

The clothes were littered on the ground. I picked them up, they were disgusting, so I took everything he had in his pockets, and dropped everything in the bathtub. Then I went to grab a broom and cleaned the mess it had created on the floor.

During this time, Darren was still in the shower. I could see his silhouette with his head bent down and the water hitting his shoulders and upper neck.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

There was some sort of grunt, but I had no idea what it meant.

So I decided to take my clothes off and go and check myself.

I got in, his back was before me. I could see a series of bruises and some cuts. Many were mostly red lines, probably healing already.

“Are you okay?” I asked again, as I put my hand against his back.

He grunted again, shrugging his shoulders.

“I’m worried,” I told him.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Just tired.”

I moved my arms around his waist, pressing myself against him, resting my cheek against his back.

We stayed like that for a little while.

“Darren?” I said finally. “Talk to me.”

He turned around. I couldn’t read his expression.

“Darren?” I asked again.

He stopped me by pressing his lips on mines.

It wasn’t the kind of kiss I was used to, there was no passion behind it, it was just a movement, an action, and nothing more.

“Darren?” I said against his mouth.

He kissed me harder. His tongue slipping into my mouth. His apathetic movements slowly gained in intensity, and before long, he had me pressed against the shower wall. His hands lowered to my thigh, raising them on either side of him. He didn’t wait to press himself inside of me.

I whimpered, my arms on either side of his head.

He was not gentle. He thrust into me, pressing me harder against the wall. I wasn't used to rough sex with him. He'd always been gentle and soft. This took me a little by surprise. I was not completely ready for this. And just as I manage to find my rhythm I felt him falter and find his release.

I felt like complaining, but I stopped myself.

He kissed me one last time, rinsed himself rapidly, and got out.

When I finally got out of the bathroom, he was putting his plate in the sink, eating the second half of his sandwich in three bites.

I went to dress up. He went to brush his teeth, and then went straight to bed.

When I realized he was already out cold, I got pissed.

What the hell?

I took a few long breaths and tried to calm myself. It had been a difficult day. But he was also acting like a jerk. And I didn't like it.

I eventually decided to stay. I watched a bit of TV and went to bed early.

He didn't even move when I got in bed with him.

I woke about seven, I felt like I'd slept too long in bed. Darren was still out.

I decided to go make some breakfast.

A few hours later, I was in bed next to him, with my phone in hand.

I was starting to worry. It was an abnormally long sleep.

A few times I put my finger under his nose to make sure he was still breathing.

When he began to stir, I felt relieved. I closed my phone and put my head on the pillow next to him

"Good morning," I told him when his eyes opened.

"Hey!" he said back. Well, at least he was more verbose than yesterday.

"You slept for a really long time. I got worried."

"Sorry," he said.

"You want breakfast?"

He smiled. "Sure. It would be lovely." Well, at least he sounded a little more like himself.

I got up and heated his plate, then brought it in the bedroom.

Darren was sitting in bed, rubbing at his eyes hard.

I gave him his plate and watched him eat in silence.

“What?” he asked me as he finished his plate.

“You were really weird yesterday,” I said.

I saw his eyes darkened a bit and he looked away. He tried to make it appear normal, but I saw through it.

“You were a jerk,” I said frankly.

His eyes snapped back to me.

“Hem…” he hesitated, a little confused. So I explained.

“You wouldn’t talk to me, you looked out of it. Ate, and went to sleep, without saying anything like ‘Hey, Eva. Thanks for the sandwich’ Or ‘Sorry about the rough and ordinary sex we just had, I should do better next time’.”

He looked at me like this was news.

I crossed my arms.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked clearly worried.

I shrugged. “I’ve had better sex.”

He licked his lips, uncertain.

“Sorry,” he finally admitted.

I sighed. “I get that yesterday was a rough day,” I said. I saw him look away. “Apparently, when things go wrong, your mind kinda retreat somewhere and you don’t become the smoothest person around. It was a little like that when you fought with your Dad.” He looked at me, but said nothing.

“We all have our rough moments, I get that. But if we’re together, you gotta at least talk to me,” I told him.

“I get that,” he admitted. “But I needed time.”

“Okay. So next time you tell me, ‘I’m not fine, but give me time and then I’ll talk to you.’ Rather than just grunt like a caveman, and fuck me to shut me up.”

“That’s not what I did,” he said defensively.

"Maybe, maybe not. But that's what it felt like."

"I won't be rough again," he said, his voice a little quieter.

I sighed again.

"It's not as much the roughness that bothered me as much as the fact that you were not present."

"What does that mean?"

"That your body was there, but not your head. You felt cold. And not temperature cold. I didn't like that."

He looked away. "Sorry."

"I don't need to be a psychiatrist to know you were upset," I said more carefully, sitting next to him on the bed. "But don't treat me like this doesn't concern me." I put my hand on top of his. "We agreed to a serious relationship, not friends with benefits. That means that we share. Good and bad. No?"

"Sure," he said still looking down.

I kissed his temple.

"I was certain that something had happened to you. I saw on the chatroom that there had been a body, and when I arrived I couldn't see you anywhere. Do you know what got into my head?"

"I'm sorry," he said meekly.

"Someone died Darren."

"I know," he said. "I'm the one who retrieved both bodies," he finally confessed. "They were…" His voice broke.

Whatever anger I had had, vanished. I moved astride him and wrapped my arms around his head, pressing him against my chest. He wrapped his arms around my waist, hard.

"I…" he began. "I don't…" he mumbled a few other words, disjointed and devoid of meaning. I moved my fingers through his hair, slowly, the way my mother did to me when I was sick as a child.

I felt the wetness of tears on my chest.

I wanted to say something. I think I'd been a little too rough on him. I mean, he hadn't been that horrible to me, and I acted like he'd been close to monster-hood.

I don't know how I'd feel if it had been me finding bodies. Maybe even of people I knew.

I didn't dare question him further. I just continued to move my hands on his head and shoulders, in what I hoped was reassuring caresses.

After maybe twenty minutes, we were lying down. It was my turn to have my head on his chest and I listened to his retelling of the day to the rhythm of his heart.

I was glad to know he hadn't been in serious danger, but I couldn't stop myself from shedding a few tears.

We talked some more. About anything, really.

I gave him apologies of my own, and we spent the whole day in bed.

As the sun went down, our conversation turned physical, I guess he felt like he had to compensate for yesterday. I wanted to tell him not to worry too much about it, but he was doing far too good of a job to find the strength in me to tell him anything that could make him stop.

— Chapter Twenty-Five —

ARE YOU ASKING ME?

— Kaden —

I was in my office with my Beta Jayson, my Gammas Nathan and Henry, and my Delta Marcus. I had insisted on Tahmina to take a few days off with Benedict. He hadn't been seriously injured, but they were awaiting a child, and in the incoming days, there would be a lot for Benedict to take care of. In the meantime, I had a few people pick up the slack to let them recharge.

Brandon was in a corner taking notes about everything. I'd also told Eva to take a few days off with Darren. So the office was a couple of women short.

On the up side, there was officially no major damage on any of the buildings but Celia. And other than a few isolated incidents, it wasn't enough to require contact with the insurance company.

We sorted out details about the aftermath of the earthquake, and most specifically to the Celia office. When I dismissed the meeting, I asked for Henry to stay behind.

I waited for them to leave and Brandon closed the door behind him, leaving Henry and I alone together.

"Have you talked to Junior?" I asked him.

"Yes," he said. "I think Hank is gonna go with him, he just hasn't decided yet."

"So, he still doesn't want to be Gamma?"

"He's never shown interest, and it's not gonna change soon." He sighed. "I know I sprung my resignation on you and I can stretch things out to help, but I'm in my mid-sixties, and I'm not as sharp as I used to be. I'm ready for retirement."

"You might not have to stretch it too long. I think I might have found someone."

"Really?" he asked hopeful.

"I haven't talked to him yet, and there might be a training period. But we'll see."

We chatted a little, and ended the meeting soon after.

I send a text, then went to the massive pile of papers I had to sign.

I had been away a lot this month, and with what was happening around Monaweard, it seemed like I'm gonna be away some more.

Thank the night for delegation of tasks to a large team or this would be falling apart. Even more than they already are, I mean.

There were two deaths from the crane crash. I was paying for the funerals, of course, and all the injuries too. All those who went to Blakeden hospital, it was easy, I could just waver the cost. But for those that went elsewhere, I had to deal with the paperwork. And a shit ton of checks to write. And there was litigation against the building owners and construction company that caused this mess.

I would probably leave next week or the week after. I couldn't delay this paperwork much longer. I wanted this mess in Monaweard dealt with so I could move on. So I had to take care of this crisis before then. If all went right, next month, both issues would be dealt with and the repairs on my office building would be underway. So all would be done before winter came.

I was neck deep in legal papers when there was a knock at my door.

"Yes," I said not looking up.

"Hi, you wanted to talk to me?"

I looked up. Darren was in the doorway. I looked at my clock, it was past nine.

"I told you you could come later this week. There's no emergency."

"Yeah, well. I prefer taking care of things right away."

I nodded in approval.

"Okay," I said, putting my papers aside. "Sit," I told him, gesturing at the chair in front of my desk.

He sat.

"I have a few questions for you first, if you don't mind."

"Sure."

"You okay to get back to work soon?"

"Yeah. I'm good." He looked at me. "Better."

I nodded.

"Back in your pack, did you receive Alpha training, or was it just your eldest brother?"

He looked a little surprised at the question.

“Some. Michael received all of it. Fred and Kevin had a lot covered. Tim and Max and I, got the basics.” He scratched his chin, he hadn’t shaved in a day or two, stubble were starting to appear. “I was exposed to a lot of it, but formerly trained, not that much. Why?” he asked suspiciously.

“I saw how you operated during the incident,” I said leaning back on my chair. “You have a good head on your shoulders. I know you organized some of the rescue operations before the first responders came. You got some people out. You didn’t panic. I know it was rough,” I added, looking him in the eyes. “You looked pretty out of it. You think you can handle more difficult situations, or you think this is enough?”

He thought for a few seconds. “I never really had issues with stressful situations.” He hesitated. “I’m not sure I could deal with bodies on a day to day basis, though.”

I nodded, thinking.

“Why?” he asked again.

“I’m not sure what to do with you,” I said truthfully. “You seem competent enough. I talked to your supervisor, you do good work, and can handle big workload.”

“Is that why my workload kept increasing?” he asked. “You were testing me?”

“I had nothing to do with that. I don’t micromanage my businesses, and you’re always allowed to say you have enough, you never said it.”

He thought about it.

“Well, first,” I said. “If you want to become a full member of any of my packs, you can. You’ve earned it. Though, I would not recommend Redclaw, they like to keep it in between werecoyotes.”

“You have a werecoyotes pack?” he asked incredulous.

“Sure, I also have a Werejaguar pack.”

He blinked. “I didn’t though werejaguars had packs.”

“They generally don’t, and they don’t have territories like we do either. But there was enough of them to create a pack, it made it easier to be represented, but they don’t have land. There were problems with getting too close to one another. Especially the males. So they’re strewed all over my territories.”

“Wow,” he said. “I’ve barely wrapped my head about how diverse is Blakeden. I didn’t think other species could be more than guests.”

“Then can and they are. We have some Werebears, two families of werecats, a bunch of weredogs, a bunch of hybrids … not all of them have dedicated packs. But I don’t judge much.”

He nodded.

“Does that bother you?” I asked him.

“Not at all,” he said. “I think it’s pretty cool, actually.”

“You have a preference, for a pack?” I asked him.

“I don’t really. I mean, I only know of Blakemore and Blakewoods. I’d like to be in the same one as Eva, if possible, but she said it’s mostly for ranked members and such. So whatever you choose should be fine.”

“It could be possible in Blakemore,” I said pensively. “Actually, I have a situation, maybe you could do something about it. Help each other.”

“Sure,” he said right away.

“Henry is one of my Gammas. He’s 67, he has a bum knee, and is getting old. He wants to retire. His only son, as never shown any interest in taking his place. He found his mate last month, some guy from another pack. And his mate is not ready to relocate. So, not unlike you, he’s considering moving for his mate. Which would take him out of the equation permanently. And it leaves me with one less Gamma.”

He froze. Blinking at me. “Are you asking me to take the position?” he asked carefully.

“I’m saying you have shown potential since you’ve been here. My sister speaks highly of you, and not just in an infatuated way. Anyone who I’ve talked to so far had good things to say about you. I also spoke to your brother Michael.”

“You did?” he asked surprised.

“I had a few questions for him.”

“About me?”

“Among other things,” I said. “He says you’re one of the most reliable men he knows.”

He beamed at me.

“You’re still young though. You haven’t finished your degree either.”

“A few weeks is all that’s left,” he said.

I nodded.

I straightened up and put my hand in a steeple on my desk, looking him straight in the eyes.

“I’m ready to offer an opportunity. What you do with it is up to you.”

— Darren —

“I offer the possibility of becoming Gamma of Blakemore. It comes with a lot of responsibilities, and a membership,” Kaden said.

My eyes were a little wide.

“Henry, would be the one to train you. If he sees faults in you, you’re out. If I come to believe you’re not fit for this, you’re out. If any other ranked members have a problem, they get a vote,” he said seriously. “And there are conditions. First, you must finish your accounting degree. Then you have two years—it can be done part-time if you wish—to finish your business degree. I talked to your Uni, there is not that much left, and you can get it transferred here.

Second, there will be a three-month trial, where you will be trained every day, starting now. It will be a seven days a week job, until you’re done with accounting, then you will manage your schedule at your leisure while you finish the other degree. You will receive partial salary, until you make full Gamma. There is a three-year period where the contract can be broken if there is a problem. After that, it’s considered your career until retirement, or incapacitation. You will be entitled to lodging and other benefits only once you have full title. Any questions or objections so far?”

“None,” I just said, still in shock.

“You’re entitled to one last day off tomorrow, then it is expected of you to start right away with Henry. When operations restart at the office, you will be able to return there until completion. A position in Blakemore can be more demanding than that of a regular pack.”

“How does the hierarchy work?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, Blakemore is in charge of other packs, right?”

“Correct. Though, those packs are technically of Blakemore.”

“Okay. So I get I’m under you and your Beta. I know you have another Gamma so that mean equal power, unless seniority counts. But I’d be above your two Deltas. But what about the ranked member of the under-packs? Will those Alphas outrank me? I’m I the equivalent of their Gammas, or it’s different because I’m Gamma of Blakemore?”

“Right,” he said. “First, in most matters, you and Nathan, my other Gamma, will have the same authority, but in matters of conflict, or votes, his seniority will count until you’ve gone through your first three years. And for the under-packs, you have more, equal and less power. It depends on the situation. In an example, if I give an order, and one of the Alphas want to defy it, you have the authority to represent me in this matter and outrank them. When it comes to general voting in an

assembly, your vote will have the same value as one of my Alpha, more than one of their Betas or Gammas, no more, no less, than one of mines. In matters relating to internal politics of one of the packs, the Alpha has full authorities, and unless it goes against one of my orders, or any of our laws, their decisions are absolute, and they outrank you. In such matters, I'm the only one who can veto over them, and I rarely do it."

"Okay." I nodded.

"Are you okay with those terms?" he asked me.

"Yes," I said.

"Don't you want to talk about it with Eva first?"

Oh. I didn't even think about her.

This offer was probably the best offer I could ever get in my entire life. Possibly even better than Alpha itself. I mean, I get pretty much a similar amount of power and responsibilities, but I'm not the head, which can take actually some pressure off.

"I should probably talk to her," I said.

"For your own sake, I would recommend it. She doesn't deal well with people keeping her out of the loop, or making decision that affects her, for her."

I nodded. "I will. I supposed I have a day or two to give you an answer?"

"Sure. But the faster the better. I'd prefer if you gave your answer by the day after tomorrow. My schedule is pretty full this week."

"I bet it is," I said. "How are you coping? I mean, how is it going with everything that's happened."

"Complicated to say the least, but not unmanageable."

I nodded. "I haven't checked news much yesterday. Did others die." I lowered my eyes to his desk.

"No," he said. "Two dead. A few seriously injured, but they're out of danger now. Everyone else should be fine, in due time. I don't know about lasting effects yet."

I nodded again. "You don't seem fazed by much."

"I'm fazed. I'm seriously pissed," he said calmly. "This shouldn't have happened, and I'm gonna get heads for this. I don't tolerate much attacks on my people, through willing interventions or mere neglect, it doesn't matter."

"Well, you seem to manage it pretty well."

“I’m not made of stone, despite what some may say.” He sighed. “But I have enough experience to know how to manage this.”

I nodded.

“If you don’t mind now, I’d like to go through this pile before midnight.” He pointed at a ridiculously big pile of folders, and papers. I probably looked incredulously at him.

— Chapter Twenty-Six —

BE CAREFUL NOT TO KICK A HORNET'S NEST

— Mishka —

It turns out that when there is smoke, there is a fire. Who knew?

I feel like a complete idiot, for taking this gig in the first place. I knew from the get go, this was not going in the right direction. Not to say anything about the jobs themselves.

I don't generally have an issue with stealing, but that last job was wrong.

In truth, killing, pointlessly, when you can do better … first, it's bad business. Second, it brings unnecessary heat. Third, it's resources extensive. And fourth, you don't go about killing families, children. I'm all for fighting warriors, I'm uncomfortable with killing those who have nothing to do with what's going on. Sun Tzu discouraged senseless killing for a reason. Plus, if there's one thing that can unite opposing force against one common enemy, it's generally children. It shakes something fundamental inside all of us. You can do pretty horrible things, but none are as horrible as when you do then to children.

These last victims, those we attacked, they didn't even know about the artifact hidden nearby, the one we were hired to get. The previous tenants had hid it there. We could've retrieved it without bloodshed.

I was in the process of retrieving, when John said to leave no quarters.

I'm fine with not having witnesses, which was why I was being so careful and sneaky.

But to kill them all, for the sake of doing the job faster? They wouldn't have been witnesses regardless.

I don't know if this decision was purely that of John, or if it was the puppet master above, but I don't like it.

I refused to do it. When the man launched themselves into the carnage, Elijah began puking is heart out in a corner. I saw a few, like Ethan who were clearly not enjoying this order. But other than Elijah who was physically incapable of complying, and me who was just too stubborn, no one else protested, or even tried to hold back.

I don't know what those things are, or why they are worth these kinds of troubles, or methods, but they're getting me really uncomfortable. And one thing is for sure. The kind of measure one goes to protect those things, or to acquire them, does speaks volume.

And even worse. They cut my paycheck.

I was being paid later and later every time, and now they were finding excuses to cut my paycheck.

Now I was getting pissed.

This last gig was a twofer, so if I don't want to lose the full pay, I should just probably finish the job. Besides, I've never broken my word to a client before, and my reputation is probably the most valuable thing I own. But this is the last.

I'm getting out.

And quite frankly, I should probably get the kid out too. He's not cut out for this.

I was lying down on my shitty cot in my shitty room, looking at the dirty ceiling.

This whole thing was dirty.

And it goes beyond this job.

I've gotten a bunch of emails about jobs, and the vast majority is shady as fuck.

Something has shifted and I don't know what, and I hate not knowing what.

So I took my laptop out and began my research by connecting with my regular contacts.

— Ylva —

"Hello," answered Brandon on the phone.

"Is Kaden available?" I asked.

"Not at the moment. He's in a meeting with Henry."

"You up to date with the Monaweard situation?"

"Yes."

"Aren't you on bed rest?"

"Chair rest now, and it changes nothing, my head is still working."

"For now," I teased.

He sighed. He and I don't have the same sense of humour. Well, actually, I'm not sure he even has one of those. He's probably the most boring guy I know. But I suppose he doesn't have to be entertaining to be competent at his job.

"Okay," I said. "Just to be sure we're on the same page. I've been ordered to keep a lookout on the island facility we've found, to anywhere those people may come from."

"I know," he said impatiently.

"Well, we got a hit. Some pack named Nubinero. There are a lot of actions going on here. I think there is something else going on. I also heard mentions that something with the faes is may be happening which allows them to make a move. It's vague and my guys and I have difficulties getting something concrete here. Maybe you could do some research and see what's happening with faes so we can make sense of what they're talking about."

"Sure."

"We still don't know why this facility to begin with, but I think they're selling something from it."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. People, information, research… Your guess is as good as mine."

"Okay, I'll look into that too. See if I can find something for sale that would fit their pattern. Maybe on the black market."

"Yeah, and just a hint here. Be careful. Something in all this gets my senses on edge. I think there's something big coming."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. But there are strong reapers activities. They generally don't get involved unless some massive amount of death is coming," I said. "Maybe there's just gonna be some massive tsunami somewhere, I don't know." I sighed. "I think there's a war coming, but don't quote me on it yet. It's not clear enough at the moment. But I'm definitely getting the precursor of a war vibe. It's probably still too early to know. Something could happen to stop it from occurring, but it's heading in that direction."

"Does it have anything to do with Nubinero?"

"I don't know."

"Will we be involved in anyways?"

"I don't know," I said exasperated. "It stinks. Everything stinks. It makes my head hurt. Just be careful not to kick a hornet's nest while you go digging."

"I can be careful."

“Good. And warn the Alpha. I don’t know if it’ll change anything, but we need all to be careful. Just in case.”

“I will.”

“Good. We’ll keep digging. If you get anything to orient us, send it to me.”

“Will do.”

“Good,” I said and hung up.

— Eveline —

Darren and I have been relaxing in front of a movie. We had spent the whole day cuddling. After the chaos of yesterday, we had needed it.

It had been after dinner when Darren got a text from my brother. It said to come when he’d had a minute.

I wanted to ask Kaden what it was about, but Darren decided to go right away. It had been a couple of hours since. Well, on foot, it was nearly an hour back and forth so it was reasonable, but it didn’t get me any less worried.

I don’t know why.

Something got me nervous.

I was pacing back and forth in the living room, and I had no clue why. I was feeling very erratic. Yesterday too. Well, yesterday was understandable with the earthquake and all. The moment things began shaking, well no, maybe more accurately, I began feeling real dread right after it had stopped.

Come to think of it, around the time the crane must have fell. Maybe that’s not what I really feel. Don’t they say that you can gain insight in the feeling of your mate?

I thought this occurred mostly in marked mates, but we’ve mated. And situations like these do bring for intense emotions. They also tend to get people closer together. As evident by today.

The day started a bit rough, but everything was sorted out now, and we were probably closer than ever.

Which meant that what I was feeling right now could be coming from him.

It made sense. Other than the first day we’ve met, I think this is the first time Darren and my brother are alone together. Oh, and maybe yesterday when they went on a rescue mission.

I mean, Darren is still new here. He's just a guest of this pack. And I know a lot of people find Kaden intimidating.

Darren is probably anxious not knowing what this is about and all.

Both yesterday and today have been very tiring days, especially for him.

I decided to sit back in front of the TV and try to watch something, get my mind off things.

Darren will tell me when he returns.

It didn't take him that long after that to return.

It had been raining apparently, because he was drenched. We should've checked the weather forecast first, or I could have helped him get there.

"I'm sorry babe," I told him. "I should have lent you the car. I didn't think about it at all."

"It's fine. Just get me a towel please," he asked, and I rushed to the bathroom. "I needed the walk anyway."

"Why? Are you upset? Is everything okay?" I asked worried. He took the towel from me, and put in on his head to wipe out the dripping rain from his hair. I took a second towel and helped dry his shoulders and chest.

"Everything's fine," he told me. When I looked at his face, he had a massive grin.

"Oh. What was this about then?"

"Your brother offered me to become a full member of Blakemore."

I smiled.

"Well, it's sooner than I thought but that's great."

"And to become his Gamma," he added.

I froze with my hand wrapped in a towel on his chest. He had the other towel askew on his head, and he was looking at me like he'd just met the Easter Bunny.

"Really?" I asked incredulously.

"What?" his smile faltered. "You think he's wrong?"

"What? No," I rushed. "It's just that my brother normally doesn't do things like that to someone he doesn't really know, unless they've proven themselves."

"Well, he said I did just that yesterday," he told me.

I smiled.

“And he’s researched me,” he said.

I frowned at that.

“Nothing I wouldn’t have done in his position.”

“Okay,” I said.

“I should give him my answer soon.”

“Wait, you haven’t already?” I asked surprised.

“I wanted to talk to you about it first.”

That touched something inside me I didn’t think had been touched in this relationship yet. Building a future together. Planning, choosing, setting the foundation for what’s to come. Darren just told me, in his own words, that he wanted to include my opinion in his choice of a career.

I kissed him.

I guess this is my go to when I’m strapped for words. Granted, this could affect my career. Any rank members’ mate can be given responsibilities. I can refuse, of course, but most do. Being the Alpha’s sister, it’s probably expected of me even more.

I suppose we will have a lot more to talk about and soon.

For a starter, it means a house for him, or quarter in the pack house at least. Does it mean moving in together? Is it too fast?

I’ve been here nearly every evening since he’s moved into the apartment, and when at my parent’s, he was sneaking into my room nearly every night.

Would it be really much of a change at this point?

I had more than a few questions for him, but he seemed to have a different idea in how to spend the rest of the evening.

Our kiss had deepened and he was already pulling my shirt off above my head.

And his clothes were all wet, so there were no reasons for him to keep those on either, and I decided to help him with the task.

Of course I got a little lost along the way, as his shirt was the wettest, but I worked on his pants first.

It got a little awkward when his pants went down to his ankles and his shoes were still on, stopping the disrobing process and he could get his feet up to take the shoes up. He nearly dropped on his ass, and I went down on my knee giggling to help with the shoes.

When I looked up, I guess that my position gave him ideas because I saw his eyes darkened. And our light mood, suddenly revved up in lust filled haze. And I decided not to disappoint.

— Chapter Twenty-Seven —

ANNOYINGLY CRYPTIC

— Eveline —

That morning, I woke with a smile on my face.

I can't say that happened very often throughout my life.

I am not a morning person.

I love lounging in bed, having breakfast in bed. Basking in the afterglow of a good dream.

I like this period between sleeping and awake, when you're truly awake and yet still half-dreaming. It's generally when my brain chooses to give me my best dreams.

But this morning, I had a gloriously handsome naked man in my arms, who had given me incredible sex the night before. Good enough to wake in a diluted horny haze.

He was still sleeping, though—as I checked under the covers—not entirely.

So I decided to work my way there with kisses.

He blinked a few times went I reached his navel. When he looked down at me—I never really defined myself in ways, even close to a femme fatale, but the look he gave me, was all the confidence boost I woman could ask for.

We kept our early morning time busy, and as per my preferences, we stayed in bed.

After a long shower together, and much needed food to refuel ourselves, we decided for me to go to work.

This week had been a difficult one, and work would be pilling up. We were both fine and it was time to go.

When did I become so responsible?

Also, it was a perfect time for Darren to go and tell my brother about his decision.

I didn't have spare work clothes with me, so we had to go to my parents place first. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to get our closet closer together.

We walked into the office building hand-in-hand. Granted it might not be the most professional form, but everyone knows at this point, so I didn't much care. We got a few looks. I was feeling too good to be bothered.

I walked like I own the place.

I don't but I'm probably the closest one to do after my brother and father, so I decided it counted.

"Hey there princess," said Mike as I came to my office.

"Hi," Darren and I told him.

"I heard Prince Charming was all nobly lately."

Darren snorted. "Since when am I prince charming?"

"Since I decided so," Mike said. "And since your little rescue stunt at Celia."

"You know about that?"

"Man, everyone knows, it's all over the chats."

"Oh," he simply answered.

"So you're parading your boo here on your day offs now?" Mike asked me.

"Nah. I'm a little late, but I figured I should get back to work, and Darren is here to talk to my brother."

"Oh!" said Mike. "Well, he should be off soon."

"Cool," I said.

And the guys started chatting about the event of the week.

I wasn't sure if I should rescue Darren from people getting too nosy and asking too many questions, but he seemed fine now. Maybe everything got better with a little distance. I'm not sure I'd be able to bounce back emotionally so fast. But when I went to my desk I mouthed 'Are you okay?' to him and he nodded at me so I decided to trust him and looked at the pile of stuff on my desk.

After Brandon got out of my brother's office—he seeming relatively okay from his previous injuries—Darren went in.

Brandon was moving a little stiffly when he would sit down or get up, but other than that, he was relatively fine. It had been a little over a month now, so given the extensive damage he'd had, it was pretty good. It would have been a lot longer if he'd been human.

After twenty minutes in the office, I saw Henry come in.

“I’m expected,” he simply told Mike, and went straight in.

I guess all was going well.

Marie gave me a series of numbers to call, and documents to have checked for legal loopholes and any oversights, so I sent them to our lawyer’s first.

It took a few hours actually until Darren and Henry got out.

They shook hands. “Tomorrow, early. Before the office get back in motion. I want to use this opportunity to get as much done as possible then,” Henry told Darren.

“Sure, just tell me the time,” Darren told him.

“Is eight too early?”

“No. It’s fine. Will it be here?”

“My office is on the floor below.”

“Okay.”

“See you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow.” The guys concluded and Henry left.

Darren looked at his watch then at me. “Do you get off soon, or do you have to stay late?”

I looked at Marie inquisitively.

She shrugged, but then Mike’s speaker beeped. “Send Eva in,” said my brother’s voice.

I got up, looking surprised at Darren. He shrugged not knowing anymore than me what this was about.

“Sit,” Kaden told me.

“What is it?” I asked sitting down.

“I’d like to send you somewhere,” he said. “I know you have Darren now and you might not want to travel anymore—,” he began.

“I’ll go,” I cut him.

“You don’t know yet,” he said smiling in approval.

“I’m not stopping work. And Darren is Gamma now. I’m gonna gain responsibilities too.”

"Not necessarily," he interjected.

"I thought about it. And Darren needs help, I'm gonna give it to him. And if you want to give me tasks, I'm gonna do them," I told him. "I'd much prefer to do things I'm good at though," I thought aloud. "But I can learn. Also, I'm looking in language school. I'm gonna learn French, and when I master it, I'll move to the next language. If you have suggestions, I'll take them into account."

"What is bringing this forth?" he asked me.

"I had a meaningful talk with someone clever. I want to do my part in this pack. And I want to do it well. I know it took me a while to get a move on. But I'm sure now. I know I fooled around a lot, and I didn't go to school. I'm gonna start with languages. Then I'll see, when I'm sure of the direction I'm going in, I might go back to school."

He looked me up seriously, then nodded. "Good to know," he said. "I'm not sure yet on how Darren's position is gonna affect you and your workload. How about we let him go through the initial three months and see where this is organically headed? If anything clashes with your work, or classes, tell Brandon, Marie, or me, and we'll adjust on the go."

I nodded.

"We can make a more solid plans after that."

"Okay."

"This trip," he said getting back to business. "Will be a little different from the usual."

"Okay," I said.

"I'm sending you to Ghealach pack. We need information, and they've agreed to give it to us, but only in person. They were really fussy about this, but they finally agreed to an official emissary."

"So it's Brotherhood stuff?" I asked.

"Not quite. The brotherhood playing things really close to their chest lately, and I need more than their usual cryptic non-answers. Something is brewing in the supernatural world. The word is that it has to do with faes, and Ghaelach pack is probably the one with the most connections on this side of the supernatural."

"Couldn't you ask for official talks with one of their emissaries?"

"Sure, but the faes are generally annoyingly cryptic about everything. Plus, I don't even know to which faction I must pander to. It might come to that in this end. But I need to orient myself. Which is why I'm sending you."

"Isn't this pretty big? Don't you generally do those type of meetings yourself?"

“Generally, but there’s been escalations in hostilities, and the reason why I need this information is to make more sense of it. It’s hard to gather intelligence on multiple front and prepare for eventual confrontations without delegating some.”

“Okay,” I said. “How serious is it?”

“I’m not sure yet.” He said racking his fingers through his hair. I could see the tiredness in his eyes. “It looks like it could get very serious.” He continues.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll do what I can.” I looked at him a little. “How are you doing? That’s a lot of things all at once, with the earthquake and all. You should rest some.”

“I’ll rest when I’m dead,” he said casually, but I felt my stomach fall all the way to by heels.

“I’m fine,” he added quickly, noting the change in my mood.

I harrumphed.

“How about you leave early and go celebrate with Darren?” he told me to distract me from the matters at hand.

It worked, I cheered some and we said our goodbyes for the day.

— Chapter Twenty-Eight —

I PREFER NOT TO TAKE CHANCES

— Darren —

In the morning, Henry and I began our work.

He seemed like a jovial guy.

His twin brother had been and still is Gamma of Blakewoods and had been Gamma himself since the formation of Blakemore. His brown hair barely had any grey in it, which was the opposite of his long shaggy beard. He looked like a man that has spent most of his life living in a remote cabin in the woods, and his clothes reinforced the image further.

We spent the morning meeting with the other ranked members of Blakemore.

There was Jayson the beta who was maybe a year or two older than Kaden. He was five six, five seven at best, but he looked like he could handle himself pretty well in a fight. His knuckles had the faint scarring of someone who's seen some violence. He was also the most mobile of the ranked members. He would often travel with the Alpha.

Then I met Nathan, the other Gamma. Nathan had dirty blond hair long and shaved on each side of his face. He went to school with Kaden and, along with Sam his driver and bodyguard, they were probably the ones who knew the most about him. His father was Gamma at Blakewoods, but not Henry's brother. Apparently Blakewoods is so big, it was ruled by three Alphas backed by each a Beta and Gamma.

Packs with multiple Alphas are rare and generally ruled by siblings, so though not unheard of, it was more an exception to the rule, than the other way around.

Then we went to see the Deltas.

Marcus was in his fifties with dark skin and black short-cropped hair. He was the only one of the ranked members who didn't have a bloodline to back him up. He rose through the ranks the hard way. He had been a pretty notorious warrior under Sebastian Devon back in the days, and got promoted at the beginning of Blakemore.

Tahmina had a Middle Eastern complexion. Her father was Alpha of a far away pack, and she decided that her future would not be to be married off to a powerful man of pure lineage. She went on her own to find her own place, and landed here. Her husband was Benedict, the CEO of Celia and still my boss. She was also seven months pregnant, and had been told to lower her workload,

and so the others were picking up the slack, and would even more when she'd get her maternity leave. Given that the team was bigger than most, it did help cover more ground when there was a change in employment or leave of absences.

I also got to see a good overview of the whole of Blakemore and decided that I needed to learn more about other shifters. I was to represent more than werewolves, and I needed to do this right, so Henry suggested that I went to Blakeden's library which had a vast collection of work on werecreatures, along with a lot of other supernaturals.

Actually, Blakeden had one of the rare Unis with classes in magic, faerie history, vampire lore and anything that had to do with our world. Including even classes on interactions and dealings between humans and non-humans.

I got so intrigued by the school that I considered doing a few classes once both of my degrees are completed.

I got dinner with Eva. She was preparing to leave tomorrow.

We were both a little anxious, it would be the first time apart except for the week after we met. She really wanted to become a more active member of this pact, and given my recent promotion, I couldn't blame her whatsoever, so we spent most of our time trying to comfort one another, and tell each other it was okay, and it wouldn't be long anyways.

— Eveline —

Mads was driving me through long dirt roads slithering around hills and woodlands.

It took us three whole hours from the tarmac to the packland of Ghealach.

After we passed security at the borders, it took another hour to reach the packhouse. It was an old stone thing. One of the towers was definitively in disuse, with the top half down. Some sections of the building had been modernized, but most of it could not deny its medieval fort past.

A tall springy man with wild red hair was waiting for me near the entrance. He opened my door for me and gave me his hand.

I wouldn't dare insult someone so polite, so I took his hand to slip out of the car.

"You must be Eveline Devon, Aye?" he asked me with a thick Irish accent.

"I am."

"I'm Lorcan Murphy. I'm the Beta of Ghealach." He had absolutely stunning green eyes the colour of gem stones.

"Nice to meet you," I told him.

“Same,” he said smiling. “How about we go in to meet the Alpha?”

“Sure.”

The inside of the house was even more interesting. It was a sort of mishmash of farm house chic, and medieval stone ruins.

Lorcan knocked on a door. “She’s here,” he said then led me in.

“Hi. I’m Eveline Devon.”

“Alpha Killian Byrne,” said a broad-shouldered man in his forties. “This is my wife Aisling.” He pointed to a brown-eyed woman around the same age as him. She had curly brown hair going all the way to her waist. I shook hands with them both.

“How about we get dinner first? You must be famished, and then we can talk,” Aisling told me.

“Sure,” I said.

The three of them went to a low ceiling room all wood and stone with a huge carved limestone fireplace, where there was a thick wooded table that was probably as old as my bloodline in the middle. Mads and I followed.

We ate a hearty meal of steak. The ingredient local, but the cuisine excellent.

“Are ye the Hellhounds daughter?” Aisling asked me.

“No, I’m too old for that. I’m his sister,” I answered.

We were sipping wine, all but Mads of course. He would never dare drink on the job.

“Why exactly does the Hellhound wants to get into Fae business?” Killian finally asked me after we finished our plates.

“He doesn’t want to get involved in any Fae business. I believe his words were they will give no answers that you don’t know and ensnare you in bargains you can’t escape.”

“That’s quite accurate, alright,” Killian said.

“There have been abnormal pack activities near some of Blakemore’s allies. There is a pack named Nubinero which has had ideas of grandeur lately. It has far reaches and is trafficking werecreatures. And when trying to understand their machinations, information about the Faes had come to light. But it’s vague at most. We will not stand for trafficking of our kin. We will not let down our allies in need either. But we need to know what we are about to get ourselves into, before ramifications further than anticipated strangles us from behind.”

“Aye,” sighed Killian. “Well said. I don’t know about this Nubinero pack, but I’ve heard of some others. Go get Fergal,” he asked Lorcan.

Lorcan rose, inclined his head to me once, then left the room.

“There have been all sorts of activities among the Tylwyth Teg lately,” he explained.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not that well versed in Faeries,” I told him.

“The Fair Folks, missy,” he said.

“Ah, okay.”

“Fergus is our resident expert, and our emissary when we have to deal with the Fair Folks.”

I nodded.

“But I will ask something in return.”

“For information?” I asked.

“Aye,” he said.

“I’m not sure I have the authority for this,” I said.

“I asked to talk to someone who had authority,” he explained.

“If you don’t mind, I will make a call to my brother.”

“Of course,” he said.

I rose from my seat and left the room. Mads followed me.

“You knew about this?” I murmured to him.

He shook his head.

It was late back home, but I didn’t see a way out of this, so I called Kaden.

“Yeah,” he answered half-asleep.

“I’m sorry to wake you,” I said.

“S’fine,” he mumbled.

“Alpha Byrne is asking for payment for the information.”

“How much?”

“A favour.”

“He said what he wanted?”

“No.”

“Ask, and put him on speaker phone.”

“Okay,” I did and walked back in.

“Would it be possible for us to know what favour you want in exchange for this information?” I asked him. I put my phone on the table.

“What if I prefer to call my chip later on?” he answered.

“I don’t do blank checks,” said Kaden from my cellphone.

“It isn’t something that can be discussed on the phone,” said Killian.

“Why?” I asked.

“Security,” he said.

“This line and these devices are secure,” said Kaden.

“With all due respect Alpha, I prefer not to take chances.”

“Then tell me something you can tell,” Kaden said.

Killian thought about it.

“I need help to protect something,” he said.

“For how long?” asked Kaden.

“Until safety is assured.”

“If you have something of value, that is sensitive enough not to be able to talk about it on the phone, I’m fairly sure safety will never truly be assured. Don’t get all cryptic on me and try to lock me in a disadvantageous deal. I may not be well versed in the ways of the Sidhe, but I can spot a scam coming. Don’t try this on me Byrne, I don’t take it from Faes, I won’t from you either,” Kaden said. He didn’t sound angry, but there was an undeniable finality to his words. Killian would be an idiot to argue further.

He thought some more.

“How about one year?” he asked.

It was Kaden’s turn to think it through.

“There would be conditions. First, I need the details, all of them and as fast as possible. You can give them to Eva, she’ll relay them to me at her return. I need to know about what needs to be protected, from what and why. Second,” Kaden continued. “I’m given freedom in how I will perform such duty. I will not risk men and resources in a bad scheme that could be done more effectively otherwise. You will be consulted, of course, and you can refuse at any time, but that will bring this deal to a close.”

“It will be done here,” said Killian.

“It will be so if it can be done efficiently within reason.”

Killian didn’t seem to like this answer, but he said nothing, thinking. Kaden seemed to get what was going on, so he continued.

“That is my final option. I have other contacts to milk about the Faes. If we can’t do business, that is your choice.”

“Deal,” said Killian reluctantly.

“You will give anything Eva asks for. You have twenty-four hours. Once I get the details about your needs, I will dispatch effectives within seventy-two hours. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes,” Killian told him.

In answer, Kaden hung up.

Killian blinked at the phone, probably unused to someone so curt.

“My excuses,” I told him. “But it is very late for him.”

“Of course.”

“So,” I said. “Do you want to talk about the Fair Folk first or do you prefer to talk about this mysterious thing that needs protection?

— Chapter Twenty-Nine —

THE CRUX OF WHAT IS HAPPENING

— Eveline —

Lorcan came back with whom I assumed was Fergal. He was a lithe man of average features.

The men sat at the table with us.

“Well,” said Killian looking at them, then me. “It’s Fair Folks first, I suppose.”

“What do ye need to know?” asked Fergal.

“Something has been happening with the Faes that has influenced at least one werewolf pack to attempt a power overtake of multiple small packs, and has motivated them into getting in trafficking of werewolves by kidnapping from vulnerable packs or rogues,” I said.

He nodded, evidently knowing what I was talking about, or at least he understood.

“It’s been nearly a decade now, but hostilities coming from the Gwyllions—who are a faction of the Tylwyth Teg—have occurred. There have been a few peace treaties, and backstabbing and everything has been mostly kept within Fairyland, but two years ago they went a little too far against the Gwragedd Annws, which they have obviously never been known to be massive troublemakers,” he said as if this was obvious knowledge. “So…”

“I’m sorry,” I interrupted him. “I don’t want to be rude but I’m not sure I’m keeping up.” Unsure? Man, I was not keeping up at all.

“Okay,” he said. “Some nasty Faeries were mean to other Faeries that’s never been known to be relatively mean, after years of annoying their race as a whole. So a bunch of them banded together and decided to end this once and for all. The Gwyllions, at least as we knew them, are now no more.”

“What do you mean, no more?”

“Their faction is officially gone. They haven’t been completely eradicated—that is nigh impossible to do—but no one is worrying about them now.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, thinking out loud. “So there’s been a Faerie war, and one of them lost and are gone.”

“Correct,” Fergal told me.

"So… how exactly does that fit into this pack acting up now?" I asked confused.

"What happens when power falls?" he asked me.

"I don't know," I said frankly.

"Power doesn't poof into existence to return to dust whenever it's not needed. Nothing works like that. Not even magic."

"Okay?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Power vacuum," he said dramatically.

Killian took over seeing as I was still not clear on how all this fell in together.

"When there is a vacuum in the universe, matter tries to fill in naturally. This is what is happening. There is a power vacuum, and others are trying to fill in. Whenever an empire as fallen in the past, other nations and empires have taken the remnants to add to their own power."

"So you mean that some werewolf packs are using it to move into those Faes territory?"

"It's a lot more complex than this," Fergal said. "Nations are not made only of land. They have resources, people, trading routes, business deals, cultural exchanges, the list goes on, they have both internal things, like the land they live on, and external things, like allies, and trade."

"Plus," said Killian. "It's not just one pack that would want in the action. Plenty of things from plenty of different supernatural background would want a piece of the action, fighting among themselves. Some of them could lose those fights, leaving behind a smaller power vacuum or just a power shift. Any who wants in must make sure to gain in strength to be able to do this, which can be done in all sorts of ways. Not everyone wants the whole pie, some are looking for crumbs, other for whatever those who are eating the pie aren't eating anymore. It's a massive reshuffling of power. It will probably last years until the dust settles. It could take a few years if it's done through collaboration between nations, especially if some of them overpowers the others radically. Or it could lead to centuries of instability. It could only be the opening for some bigger conflict. Only time will tell us how this will play out."

I stood there with my eyes a little huge. This is way beyond my pay grade.

"You know, back in the days, people called World War I the war to end all wars, in the end it simply set the stage and future allies for World War II. But after World War II everyone wanted out, and splitting the pie didn't end in World War III. This situation, it will depend on how things will go. It could escalate into something ridiculously large in scale, or die within a year or two and be a minor blimp in history," Killian said.

"Do you realize ye've just depicted in yer analogy, World War I as a minor war?" said Aisling to her husband.

"Well, I could have used a scale appropriated example, but youth these days don't study those as much, and she might not have gotten the picture."

Him and Aisling had a light conversation about some clan squabbles of the past, but I didn't bother listening too much. I wouldn't know what they were talking about to begin with.

This was information I believe Kaden had to get quickly. And accurately. I wasn't sure if I could relay this properly.

"I'm sorry," I said turning to Fergal. "Do you think it would be possible for me to get the crux of what is happening in this power shift or vacuum on paper? I want to get the information to my brother as accurately as possible. And the details might matter later."

"Sure," he told me. "But tomorrow. It's a little late to do an essay on Fae politics and warfare at the moment."

"Of course," I told him. "Just not too late. I might not stay very long."

He agreed.

I looked at the time, and it was getting late, but I wanted to deal with all the important stuff as soon as possible. In an hour or two, Kaden would probably get up, so I could talk to him.

"Could you tell me about this thing you need protected?" I asked Alpha Killian.

He stopped abruptly his conversation with his wife, which had turned to if one of their nephews was turning into a useless bum or not.

Killian sighed at me, and refilled his wine glass, then his wife's and mine. The others took care of theirs.

"We are in possession of a powerful historical artifact. Given the present political climate, stealing powerful artifacts, as been one quick way for one to gain some power, and gaining power like this is perfect to prepare to face new foes. There have been others all over Europe who have been attacked because they were custodians of such things. I don't intend to wait until this happens. I want to take measures now. And I think helping each other out right now would be a good option. Fortifying alliances is always good in times of chaos."

"Sure," I said. "What type of artifact is it?"

"A shield."

"You will have to be more precise than this."

He squirmed a little. Kaden said all the details, so I will get all the details. I was about to tell him that, but he caved.

“It’s Dubán, the shield of Cú Chulainn.”

“Okay,” I said. “I suppose this is important.”

“It’s not the holy grail,” he admitted. “But Cú Chulainn is a significant Irish historical figure who has single-handedly saved Ireland against the armies of Queen Medb of Connacht. A powerful being in Irish mythology,” he added seeing I didn’t knew her. “They say Cú Chulainn was a demigod himself, and the reincarnation of his father god Lugh.”

“Okay,” I said. “Powerful demigod, with powerful mythical shield who defeated another powerful mythological being, and saved a lot of people.”

“Correct.”

“You don’t know who wants it, just that there’s been a pattern of stolen artifacts lately, and the present Fae politics could be the trigger, but no one is sure of anything.”

“Correct.”

“And you want to use this opportunity to strengthen the bond between our packs, in these dire times.”

“Also correct.”

“Okay. I got that right I think. Kaden will get into more details with you.”

“Thank you,” he told me.

“If you don’t mind. I’d like to prepare for the night. Tomorrow is gonna be a long day.”

“Of course.”

— Chapter Thirty —

IN COMPLETE SILENCE

— Kaden —

I was getting out of bed, when my phone rang. I was thinking of going for a run, but when I saw who was calling, I put it on hold in case this takes too long.

“How is it I’m not surprised you’re calling me?” I answered.

“Because you can read inside my head?” suggested Eva. I snorted.

“What’s going on?”

“I know I’m supposed to tell you in person and all, but I think you must know some stuff upfront.”

“Okay. Just give me a sec.” I went to my home office. Which to most people would seem redundant as my office is on the same property. But situations like these are not a first. I’m not going to wake up in the middle of the night to get to my office to go back to bed after. My home office is just fine. “Okay,” I told her once there.

“Okay, Faeries first,” she said. “I’m not gonna give you the details because there is a bunch of names I can’t even pronounce in there. I asked for a complete written account, or at least, all the important details that I should get tomorrow.”

“Good,” I said.

“Here is the dumbed-down version. Some Faerie group pissed a lot of other Faeries for a while and it was touch and go for nearly a decade, but they went against some nice Faeries and it rallied a bunch of them against the Douche-Faeries, there was a battle, or many, actually I don’t know, but they lost and are mostly gone, and now there is a power vacuum, or shift or something.”

“Fuck!” I interjected.

“I guess you understood this one better than me.”

I grunted.

“Anyways, a lot of factions are fighting for their own little bit of glory, and some are getting power-hungry. Some of them are also into power artifacts collecting lately, which is getting those with powerful artifact squeamish, if you get my meaning.”

“I do,” I said.

"So, they want to take precautions, and solidify alliances," she told me. "They say the effect of the fall of that little empire is affecting the supernatural world as a whole."

"Yeah, probably. But why haven't I heard about this one?"

"I'm not sure. I could ask. But they seem to say these were not a big faction, and everything was mostly kept within Faerieland."

"Right, but sometime little things can have wide-reaching ripples," I said thinking aloud. "It's probably not affecting all of Fairyland."

"I don't think so. They said only some of the Fair Folks got involved."

"Right, and the Fair Folks are just a fraction of all of Faerie."

"Right, he said the artifact snatching is happening mostly in parts of Europe."

"Okay," I noted a few things. "I'm gonna send you an email in a few hours, it will have things in there I want to know. Make sure it's included in this synopsis you're gonna get, or that you have the information at least, okay?"

"Sure."

"You shouldn't go to bed too late."

"I know Dad," she whined. I hung up.

Power grabs, huh? This could complicate things, and not just about Nubinero. Things could escalate in the upcoming months, or just die out. But either way, I need to be more prepared than this. I should have known about this, a long time ago.

I've probably been too werecreatures-centric. Nothing is an island. We're all interconnected.

I've tried not to make the stupid mistake of not to be up to scratch on my knowledge of human society and politics, but I need to up the ante. If the fall of a small faction of Faes can have effects like these … scratch that, everything has an effect, it's just a matter of scale. Our pack is not isolationist, we can't just hide in our own little hole and wait for things to pass, and not bother with anything other than us. Everything is affecting the entire world.

I have to correct this stupid oversight.

— Darren —

"Hey, babe!" I answered.

I was still in bed and my eyes were glued together. I tried to rub off the gunk, and mostly rolled on my side, raised the cover over my head to stifle the gargantuan amount of sunlight that was seeping through this tiny slit in the curtains, and listened to Eva's voice.

"Hey there. Are you lazing in bed?" she asked me.

"Nhgggn!" I mumbled incoherently, and readjusted my cellphone against my ear to stop it from falling. "I never lazy in bed. That's you. You're the one who could spend her whole life on a mattress."

"You sound like you're barely awake, or seriously drunk."

"I've put too much whisky in my coffee this morning," I declared half-unconscious.

"Sure, you'd do that on a work day," she said unconvinced. "Are you okay?" she asked a little more concerned. "Are you sick?"

"My bed is cold and I miss you," I whined.

"Oh, baby. That's the most perfect answer you could have ever given me," she cooed.

"And there's no one to help me with my morning wood," I added.

She laughed. It was beautiful.

"You can take care of that yourself," she said.

"But it's not the same," I complained.

"Oh, poor baby," she mocked. "What a tragedy."

"If I do that myself, my wrist is gonna get all stiff, and I have to work on the computer and shake hands all day. Whatever shall I do?"

"You never seemed to complain when you use those hands of yours on me," she said her voice a little deeper. Man, I love that voice.

"That is not the same, princess. Your moans are my fuel, I could go on and on, no problem, as long as you're there."

"Mmmmhh," she murmured. I instinctively reached between my legs.

"So," I said finally. "What are you wearing?"

"Mmh." she said, distracted this time. "Give me a sec, I hear something."

The silence stretched, I sat up, got out of the covers.

I looked at the time. I'm going to have to get ready for work soon, so I went to grab some clothes. I put the phone on speaker and put fresh underwear on.

"Is everything okay?" I asked putting my foot through my pants' leg.

"I don't know," she said softly. "I think something is wrong." I detected some insecurities in her voice. It's only then that the distance between us really struck me. Whatever was happening, I couldn't do anything. Not even look at her surroundings, check on her, nothing.

My shoulders tensed when I heard a crash on her side. I took the speaker off and put the phone to my ear, to hear more clearly.

Eva had let out a startled cry at the source of the sound, and my heartbeat sped up.

"Shh! We're under attack!" said Mads voice to her.

"What?" I said. "Eva, what's going on?"

She just shushed me, and spoke to Mads. I listened intently.

"What's happening?" she asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"Come," he just said, and I heard very low shuffling. Then it was mostly silence only for some distant noises. They were moving away from the noises. Probably doing their best not to be detected, so I froze, conscious that any noise from me could get them detected. Especially if whoever was attacking had supernatural hearing.

I heard a few faint murmurs, but the phone mic couldn't get it clear enough for me to hear.

"Darren?" said Mads voice from the other end of the phone. His voice was tense and low.

"Yeah," I muttered.

"Get to the Alpha, now."

"On my way." I pushed the mic off button on the phone, took my clothes off, grabbed a shirt and shoes and stuffed it in a bag. The second I got out of the apartment, I shoved the phone still on, in the bag and shifted.

I rushed out in a blur, hoping that nothing would happen. That there wasn't anything on the phone I should hear while I ran to the office. Kaden should be getting there around now.

I went faster than I've ever remembered going. Around street corners—luckily before morning traffic got underway—and right through the trees at the edge of town.

Of course, well-meaning sentries blocked my way as I came upon Blakemore packhouse land.

I shifted back at the swiftest speed I could.

“Emergency,” I said to them. “I need to speak to the Alpha now.”

“Now, you don’t get to—,” began one of them.

I was about to get in his face, when another who was a little further came to us in a rush. I knew him and came across him often when I visited Eva, his name was Steve.

“He’s Eva Devon’s mate and our now knew Gamma,” he said to them. “Let him pass.”

I nodded and shifted back as swiftly, grabbing my bag in between my teeth again, and sprinting to the office building. Behind me I heard the man shouting to the others. “Escort him!” And heard a couple of wolves shift behind me, then start running and trying miserably to catch up to me, to no avail.

When the building came into view, I noticed a window on the second floor that was open. So instead of navigating the entryway, I modified my running stance, and aimed my jump.

I crashed through the screen and moved upward to Kaden’s office. I knocked a bunch of things on my way, from pot plants to desks, as my wolf was not the lithest.

Stellan was at his post on the upper floor, his eyes widened as he saw me coming and before he decided to attack me, I stopped my progression, dropped down and shifted.

Three seconds later I was digging my pants out of my bag, not even bothering with the underwear.

“What the hell man?” he asked after he identified me, rushing to meet me.

“Please tell me the Alpha is in?” I said digging for the phone.

“Sure,” he said as I checked my phone screen, the mic was still off, the line still on.

I raised a finger to shut Stellan off before he said anything more. He complied. I believed the gravity of the situation was evident on my face.

I listened in.

It was silent for maybe seven more seconds, then there were crashing sounds, like a fight. I heard multiple shouts. And then I heard gun shots. Not just one or two. The bang, bang, bang, of calculated rapid fire from at least three or four different sources.

I’m pretty sure Stellan heard some of that, as his face paled, and he moved out of my way.

I sprinted to the Alpha’s office. I didn’t even knock.

For a second I saw Kaden's head get up from his laptop. The insulation from his office was good so no one would hear on his calls, but making him also a little oblivious to the rest of the building.

"Eva, Mads, attack!" is all I said.

I got to his desk, he got up, Stellan was right behind me.

They could hear some of what I was hearing, but I put the phone on the desk and on speaker for good measure.

We could all hear a fight going on. Screams, horrible screams. From the gurgling of one of those, I was pretty sure he was dying. And roars. Probably wolves.

The three of us were silent.

I raised a finger to the men to signal for silence, and pushed the button to reactivate the mic.

"Eva?" I said not too loudly. I wasn't sure if she was hiding still, or if she could even hear us over the ruckus. Maybe the phone had fallen and she didn't have it with her. Or she had shifted.

I waited for maybe four heartbeats before I heard her voice.

"Darren?" she asked softly.

"I'm with your brother and Stellan," I said. "Tell me what's going on."

"The packhouse is under attack," she said rapidly. "Mads' bleeding." Her voice broke on the last syllable. "Give me a sec so I can drag him out of this room."

There was some scraping. The sounds of the fights were softer now. Then we heard some ruffles, a yelp from Eva, and the phone connection broke.

The three of us stood there absolutely immobile, looking at my phone in complete silence.

— Chapter Thirty-One —

THE CRIES OF ABSOLUTE PAIN

— Eveline —

I had been shoved in a dark room with a bunch of other people. I could hear moans of injured folks around, a few whimpers, some heavy breathing.

We were in pitch darkness, so my wolf eyes could only see vague outlines around me. I had hung on for dear life on Mads. So when someone dragged me by my feet, I dragged him along with me. Whatever was to happen to us, we would go through this together.

There was massive damage to his abdomen, and other than when I was dragging him around, I'd kept my hands on his wounds.

I was shaking. Shaking in shock, fear, anxiety. They took my phone. I have never felt so alone. And all the bodies strewn around me, scared, changed nothing.

I was holding back my tears by sheer stubbornness.

I will not die as a whimpering little girl. If I die, I'll die on my feet, with my head held high.

God, I don't want to die.

Mads breathing was irregular. I knew he was in pain. But he never complained. He only betrayed his torment, when he got injured, and the only words he ever said were either to guide and help me, or to comfort me.

I could have fought back. But Mads didn't let me.

At first I thought he either believed he had to do this on is own, or didn't think I could help. It's only when they took me that I saw the look on his face, and understood why.

I'm a woman, I'm young. They were not seeing me as a threat yet. If I shifted, they would know I was strong. If I even let my wolfish nature brush the surface, one could feel it. But as of now, it was not the case.

And either they were not interested in me, or didn't know who I was. Or for that matter, what I could be worth to them.

If they came for something else, they might let me live if I was not perceived as a threat. If they moved on to killing witnesses, I could maybe sucker punch them while they looked away.

At the moment, my greatest weapon was my apparent weakness.

I could hear Aisling's voice not far away, murmuring words of comfort to a few others, including a couple of teens.

Things were getting more quiet out there.

There hasn't been a lot of people in the packhouse, but I'm sure, a lot of pack members tried to come to their rescue.

I couldn't see Mads, and it worried me more than anything else. I wanted to see his face. I felt like he could die at any moment, but if I could only see him, it could keep him with me. It was irrational, I know. But at this moment he was all that I had. He was the closest thing to home, my family, my friends, Darren.

God, Darren. How must he have felt? I don't know what he heard, but I knew he heard enough. Enough to be worried sufficiently so I could hear it in his voice. Worried enough to rush to my brother. We were having this nice conversation, it was going well, and then all fell apart.

Would we even see each other again?

We haven't been together for more than a full two months, but it had felt like so much more. We really got along. If there was any arguments, any problems, we worked it out. We haven't even marked each other. I'd thought about it, I know he did too. But we didn't. What were we afraid of?

I didn't even tell him that I loved him.

I did.

It was obvious now.

What if I could never tell him?

I've never been in a situation like this. No one would ever try anything like this with me. Not knowing of what my brother was capable of. But I was so far away now. I was out of his reach. The protection he always gave me meant nothing here.

Didn't it?

A lot of people knew the name. The Hellhound. It carried gravitas, often times, even more than a gun. But what of now?

No one knew of me, but a few members of Ghealach. Unless someone talked, then they didn't know.

But what if they were told? What if I told them? Would it change anything?

Would they decide on killing me and hiding the body, then leave quickly is the best way to deal with me? Easier than to deal with either me or my brother? Would they use me for ransom? Or would they decide I'm not worth the trouble and kick me out of here?

That's the hardest thing, isn't it? How can anyone plan anything when there are so many variables, so many unknowns?

How could Kaden get into bloody situations all the time and come on top every time? What was he doing, or knowing, that I didn't? How could he do that so often and not be driven to insanity? He talked very little of those things, but when he did, he always dismissed it as if it was a trifle at best.

If that was being an Alpha, then I'm glad I have an older brother, and I'm not Alpha myself. I don't think I could do this. But I guess most packs don't get involved into all the troubles Blakemore did. Kaden was born for this, literally and figuratively. I could never take his place.

But isn't he on a time limit? What then? He has no heir. The logical option would probably be me. None of my sisters even worked to begin with. I'm the only one with some knowledge of management. But I knew so little. My head would explode.

I had gotten excited at the prospect of what Darren and I could do for this pack, but as Gammas, not Alpha. Though, I guessed, Darren might have a little bit more knowledge than me in that regard. Or maybe not. Wasn't that one of the issues with his father? That he was pushed aside, and not given the same chances as his brother.

He was excited about being Gamma. But as I thought about it, I doubted he'd be as excited about being Alpha. I knew how conflicted he was about his father, about the role of Alpha. Gamma gave him responsibility, without all the weight on his shoulders. Plus, he was new to this pack, would the others accept him? Would anyone accept anyone? Blakemore is not a normal pack. Is there anyone out there who could do what Kaden does?

I guess I'm tormenting myself way too much, because as things looked right now, I may never return home. Tomorrow, I might not even be alive enough to worry about anything.

The night had become eerily quiet.

Maybe there was no fight anymore. Maybe everyone else was dead.

How many people were in here with me? Could we fight back? Or at least try?

I don't want to die without trying to kick their butt. Man, they needed the most epic ass-kicking in the whole world. I would love to see it. I could imagine it in my head, my brother, father, boyfriend, my pack, and all its warriors and might, coming here to bestow upon them the mightiest smiting the earth has ever witness. Screw God and its Angels (if they even truly existed),

or any other gods for that matter. Screw faeries, and demons, and vampires, and wizards and all the ghosts in the universe. None would destroy them like my pack would.

It got me smiling fiercely.

That would be my motivation. Whatever happens I know, there is not a single place in this world where they could hide forever. They will get their comeuppance.

We heard shuffling outside the door.

Someone opened it, and we got a few lights shoved in our face. There were five silhouettes barely visible. Their flashlights were messing with my night-vision.

Two of the lights looked like they were mounted on weapons. One of the silhouette was low, and held by the one in the middle. A prisoner maybe?

“You’re talking now?” one voice asked. The one in the middle maybe?

Someone spat on the floor. The prisoner.

“Which is the Luna?” said the same voice.

Everyone froze, I could barely hear any breathing.

That was when one of the weapon’s light landed on Aisling.

No one said anything. It rigned a silent deeper than death.

Aisling had two boys of maybe twelve and sixteen held in her arms.

The oldest moved himself in front of his mother, protectively. The other cowered on her side, holding hard to his mother.

“The oldest,” said the voice. And that was all that was needed for the one with his light on Aisling to aim at whom I believed to be her eldest son, and shoot him.

In the head.

Blood sprayed everywhere, and mostly on his mother.

Everyone was under shock. But Aisling released the most blood-curdling wail I’ve ever heard. One so filled with pain and anguish, no banshee could match it. I also heard another pained voice. A man’s. Killian. The prisoner.

The sounds were haunting. The other son whimpered, echoing his parent.

No one else dared a murmur.

At this very moment, I knew that may I live for a day or a millions days, these were sounds that were now imprinted in my memories forever. Those wails will haunt my nightmares. They reverberated in my head in a symphony or anguish and terror.

"Where is it?" said the man a little louder this time, so he could be heard over the cries of absolute pain.

As no one reacted the way he wanted, he slapped Killian. I was pretty sure he was restrained. I couldn't see the shape of his arms. Possibly held behind his back.

"Where is it?" he repeated. There was a coldness in that voice that I absolutely hated. It was colder than an Antarctic gale.

Again, he got no more than tears.

"The youngest," he said to the gunman.

I heard both parents plead, "NO!"

But before the words were said, the gun barked again, and brain matter splashed gruesomely once more. I felt warm droplets hit my face, as I watched in horror, a woman rock back and forth the corpses of her sons.

No shock was enough to stop my tears from falling anymore.

I focused all my attention on the shooter. He would be the first to go. Then the asshole in charge. Then the second gunman. If I could survive long enough, then the one at the back would be next. They were my kill list—one, two, three, four. I had to hit hard and hit fast. Harder and faster than anything I've ever attempted. This was no training. I had to go straight for kills.

I began shifting my weight ever so slightly. Getting myself slowly in position to pounce. If they couldn't see me coming, I might be able to take at least one or two down before they began fighting back.

"Where is it?" my kill Number Two said to Killian, holding him down.

I tried to ignore him, not to break my concentration.

The next one they'd shoot would probably be Aisling. The sound of the gun would distract them, and cover the sound I would make as I'd charged them. I tried to ignore the imminent murder about to happen and focus on my task at hand.

"Her," said Number Two. In an instant. Aisling face turned to rage and she pounced, but I didn't see it as I pounced at the same time.

The gunman didn't adjust his shot fast enough, and he shot her in the chest instead of the head. She continued to rush forwards, and he kept shooting. Her snarls the only other sounds, her claws and teeth sharp. He shot her as they tumbled down, until the gun sounded empty twice.

But at the same time this happened, Mads grabbed me for all that he was worth, holding me down. Stopping me from doing the same thing.

The second gunman, Number Three on my kill-list, shoved his light in the direction of Aisling and Number One. Killian was fighting back like crazy—trying to aid his wife, the last of his family—, and Number Two could barely hold on to him.

The light showed us that Aisling was down. Probably dead, and so was Number One. His throat ripped apart. They'd killed each other, their bodies one on top of the others.

Number Three, seeing this, moved his weapon's light in circles around the room a few times, nervously.

Number Two was still struggling with Killian. And the fighting got more intense.

"Hey!" he could barely scream at Number Four back in the corridor. Number Four did nothing but watch. I felt his gaze linger on me. Did he saw what I was about to do?

It's only after Number Three shot Killian a few times in the legs that the fight broke out of him. It's not the only thing that broke either. He collapsed on the floor, crying his agony, and not the physical kind.

Number Two returned to the room panting. I saw his silhouette in the doorway take a handgun out with a mounted light of his own, then moved it around the room.

Then it landed on me.

"You know something?" he asked me.

"No," I said with venom dripping in my voice.

"You were in the main house. He's protecting you." He pointed the light a little more toward Mads. "You're important. You know something," he said taking a shooting stance.

"No," croaked Mads. "She's not from this pack. Just a visitor."

"Then you're useless."

Bang!

— Chapter Thirty-Two —

YOU JUST DON'T KNOW IT YET

— Eveline —

My body got shoved hard and I hit the floor in bone-shattering strength, and got dragged sideways in the blink of an eye.

I was dazed. My head had hit the floor hard enough to see stars, my mind confused for a moment.

"NO!" said Mads more firmly in a half-scream. "You touch her and you're dead. You're all dead."

Mads got me out of the way?

I moved my hands confused over my body, looking for injuries.

I found blood, a lot of blood, but not the pain that should've been associated with it.

It was probably Mads' blood. He was too injured to move like that.

I tried to move a little confused, but he was holding me in vices on the ground. I could probably fight him, but I didn't want him to get more hurt. He could barely hold himself in a sitting position. His hands that were holding me down were probably also helping him to stabilize himself.

I saw Number Four move a little forward at Mads' statement.

"You're a dead man," told him Number Two. "You'll do nothing."

He was about to shoot Mads, I knew it.

"She's the Hellhound's sister," Mads said rapidly.

But not fast enough.

The gun barked again, but this time the mussel flash was shoved towards the floor.

Number Four moved in so fast, and pulled Number Two's gun down.

"WHAT THE HELL MAN?" Number Two cried, shoving at Number Four's chest, but it barely made him sway.

"You the Hellhound's sister?" Number Four asked me, ignoring Number Two.

"This is the last time you do shit like that," said Number Two to Number Four, his voice lower but still audible. "You want a pay, you're gonna have to find something of value here."

Number Four said nothing at that and kept his eyes on me, but I think I saw in the shape of his face something around his jawline. Clenching his teeth maybe. Is there discord in the ranks?

“Yes,” said Mads, is voice fainter, croakier. He could barely talk. His breathing was laboured.

I put a hand on one of his and squeeze. I knew. And he knew that I knew what would come next for him. We both kept our eyes on the men, but there was this wordless communication going between us.

He lowered himself slowly back on the ground next to me, and squeezed my hand back. I shifted my weight a bit to look at him.

He was at the end of the line. I could see a spiderweb of blood radiating from a point not far from his collarbone. He took the bullet for me.

I was covered in his blood. His face was paler than cold ash, his eyes sunken.

“It changes nothing,” Number two said to his men.

“It changes that the Hellhound is coming after us for revenge,” said Number Four.

“Not if he doesn’t know,” said number Two.

“He knows,” I said to them, my voice soft, my eyes on Mads. I kissed his temple. He nodded.

I understood.

This was the best strategy for me now. If I’d attack, I might have taken some down, but I’d be dead. But if I survive this, I could aim Kaden at where it’s gonna hurt. And at least one of us could possibly make it out alive.

“He’s on his way,” I told them. Knowing for a fact it was true. “All the hounds of Hell are coming. You’re all dead already, you just don’t know it yet,” I said with confidence. My voice calm.

I couldn’t stop my tears from falling, but I didn’t hear them in my voice.

I mouthed the words ‘thank you’ to my friend, my protector. Mads tried to raise his hand to my cheek, but he didn’t have the strength. So I grabbed that hand too, and brought it to my lips to kiss it.

I saw his eyes go out of focus. A few seconds later there was a soft rattle, and it was the last breath he ever released.

I heard the men argue about me in hushed voices.

“How do we know it’s not bullshit?” asked a new voice. As I heard no one new coming in, I guessed it was Number Three.

"She is," Killian croaked at them.

"Let me handle this," said Number Four. "I'll take care of this. You do … whatever."

"Fine, now fuck off," said Number two.

"Hellhound girl," said Number Four to me. "Come with me, we'll call your brother."

"Wait! Is that a good idea?" asked Number Three.

I closed Mads eyes and wiped at my tears, probably smearing blood all over my face.

There were still other people in here. Most probably Omegas. I was not comfortable in leaving them here, but I didn't know what else I could do.

"We're gonna have to deal with him anyways," said Number Four to Number Three. "Up!" he said to me.

I slowly got up.

I saw both guns move swiftly to me, locking on me with their light. Good, they're nervous. They should be. I didn't see a gun in Number Four's hands, but I could see the shape of weapons against both of his thighs.

I moved with my hands clearly visible on either side of me, so not to look menacing and give them excuses at being trigger-happy. I mean, more than they already are.

I walked to them, occasionally raising my leg over someone's legs, as everyone else was sitting down on the ground.

I tried not to look at the body of Aisling or her children. Two of the men moved out of my way on either side of the door. Number Four retracted in the corridor, giving me place to move, while staying out of arms reach.

The moon was bright tonight. There was enough of its light basking the walls in the corridor. At the door, I turned and looked at Mads body. If it wasn't for all the blood and injuries, he could have been sleeping. I wanted to hold him in my arms and bring him back home.

We will get back for him. I'll make sure of it.

Number Four made me walk ahead of him, giving me short orders as to where to go.

I wasn't sad to have left that room. The fear of everyone in there was so palpable that it had turned into a stench so thick I could taste it on my tongue.

We eventually landed in a room I'd never seen. There was a couch, two large chairs, and a coffee table in front of a large fireplace of ornate wood. It was a beautiful room, cozy, welcoming. But it

felt hollow, as I knew that those who most enjoyed it would never come here again. I knew Killian would not be kept alive long. The only reason he was still alive was probably to find the shield, which was all they wanted, I was sure. And after witnessing the annihilation of his family, I didn't think there was much fight left in him.

This room was probably warm when a fire would dance in there, shrouding the surfaces in shades of gold and orange, dancing, caressing all that it touched. But to me, this room had the coldness of death. It was an empty carcass left only for ghosts. There were probably many of them here. Generations upon generations of lives filling it with joy, sadness, love, and then death. Until the next generation came to light it up again.

Number Four closed the heavy wooden door behind us, shutting us away from the rest of them. We were so far, than even if he didn't, I don't think they could have heard us. I probably could scream and not be heard.

He switched the light on. My eyes recoiled at the aggression for a few seconds until my irises adapted to the change in lighting.

He was taking his phone out, and gave it to me, unlocked, ready to signal.

I put in Kaden's cellphone number.

I've never been good with phone numbers. I never remember any. That's why I rely on my contact directory, like most people nowadays, I suppose. But I always made sure I remembered one number.

Tonight, I was glad I did.

I heard the phone ring.

Number Four extended his hand to me, palm up. I put the phone in it as the line connected.

He put it on speaker and nodded upwards at me, signalling me to talk.

He was not bad looking, a little ragged. He had a long pale scar going from above his left eyebrow and on his cheek, barely missing his eye. I could see another scar like a small flower on the right side of his neck. They were old scars, faint, not angry red, but pale white. His eyes were brown like mine, his hair a pale brown with golden highlights, like a dark shade of brass. He was tall, maybe a few inches over six feet. He wore dark practical clothes, and had a number of weapons strapped to him, but he seemed in no hurry to get one in his hand. He had the posture of someone relaxed, careless, but his eyes were aware, seeing everything at once.

"Yes," said my brother."

"Kade," I said. My voice sounded smaller and more vulnerable than I wanted it to be.

“Eva?” he asked, his tone morphing into something hard for me to decipher.

“I’m here. I’m alive,” I said.

“What’s going on?”

Number Four didn’t stop or tried to make me say anything, so I didn’t restrain myself.

“Ghealach has been attacked. They came for the shield.”

“The shield?” my brother asked.

“An old shield of historical significance that was wielded by an Irish demigod and a mythical battle. Or so I heard,” I said looking at Number Four. He showed no reaction.

“Do they have it?” Kaden asked.

“I don’t think so. Last I saw, they were torturing Alpha Killian Byrne for it.”

There was a low growl coming from the phone.

“They killed his wife and children,” I said. “They killed Mads.” I choked on the last word. I took a few long breaths to push back the tears, but I began to shake. I’d seen it before. Was it the slow aftereffect of adrenaline rush? I don’t think I ever felt this. Not like that. not this strong.

I heard Kaden’s indistinct voice talking to others, ordering them.

“Are you safe?” he asked me.

I looked at Number Four. “No,” I said truthfully.

“Tell me what you see, so I can guide you to safety.”

“You can’t,” I said.

“Someone’s there?” he asked, then paused for a few seconds. “They made you call me.” Realization about my situation now clear to him.

“Yes.”

“Make sure they hear,” he told me.

“He already is.”

“What are your intentions?” my brother asked the man.

“Are you the Hellhound?” he asked him.

“Whether I say yes or no is not something you can verify.”

"True. But I'd like to hear it nonetheless."

"I am." There was darkness in Kaden's voice I believe I've never heard before. He made it sound like a threat. My captor either didn't hear or didn't care.

"You're on your way?"

"I am."

"Good."

I blinked. What?

Kaden's tone changed. "And why is that exactly?"

"Because they're a bunch of backstabbing psychopathic puppets, and I'm gonna enjoy seeing them fall."

"Why? Because they're not paying you anymore?" I asked him.

"I may be a merc," he told me. "But I have principles. They are not respecting them. I don't kill children. I don't massacre civilians. I may have low morals, but I have my word and I keep it. They are cheating me of my money now. My loyalty has a price, they are not paying it."

"So you want to betray them?" I asked.

"No. They betrayed me. I'm not falling with them."

"You think that makes a difference," asked Kaden.

"It does. I saved your sister's life, and I will keep doing it."

"For what price?" he asked.

"I'm not part of that group. I'm a hired gun. Don't come after me, and I will not let them come after her."

Kaden thought for a few moments. "Deal," he said. "But you get her out of there."

"No."

"Why?"

"With all due respect, I'm gonna be far by the time the two of you duke it out, I'll get her out of the way, but that's it. You go get her."

Kaden growled in annoyance.

Then, Number Four's face shifted, like he'd just realized something.

“Unless…” he began.

“Unless what?” asked my brother.

“Are you hiring?”

I blinked again. Wait, what?

There was silence for a few heartbeats.

Is this man a masochist?

“Are you asking me to hire you?” asked Kaden.

“I’m tired of the lone wolf gig. But I’m not exactly barista material. I can’t imagine myself work somewhere that requires a paper hat. I’m good. There are not many packs who’d be interested in someone of my talent. But you’re different. You have your own personal army. You send warriors all over the place. You fight battles at least every other month.

The idea of setting roots somewhere is enticing. That and a regular paycheque. No more bouncing checks, no more looking around to try and find a decent gig. You use me and I use you. Sounds fair. You can send me wherever, and I’ll do what you ask as long as the pay keep coming.

You do that, and I’ll get your sister to you. Even better, I’ll tell you everything you need to know about the jerks. How many there are, how they operate, and anything I know about the puppet master. I’ll even help you deal with any of them.”

“And how would I know you won’t back stab me?”

“The same way I know you won’t. It’s not your reputation. Look up Black Dogs. You know of them?”

“Order of mercenaries.”

“Bingo,” the man said. “Asked them about Vanargand.”

“I see.”

“You heard of the name?”

“It’s another name for Fenrir, monster-wolf of Norse mythology.”

“I thought using Fenrir could be copyright infringement, or just piss the guy off.”

“That would be unwise.”

“It would.”

Given the shift in Kaden's tone, I guessed he heard the name from outside of mythology too.

"Now, I do like a good party, but we have to keep it a surprise, so take another phone, one that can't be traced. I'm sure you have some of those around. Text this number as Vanessa, my scrumptious party-mate that can't wait for me to get off work so that we can meet and raise Hell together."

I heard Kaden ask Ylva to get him a clone phone then to text the number Vanargand asked.

"Oh," he said. "An actual woman texting me. You're making my day."

"I will not tell you against such comment because she's not fond of being patronized and it would rob her of the chance to have a proper excuse to cut your balls off, cook them, and make you eat them," said Kaden matter-of-factly. I never hung out with Ylva, but I knew it would be the least she would do.

Vanargand saw my expression and his smile widened. "I just knew you'd get me to meet the best folks."

I shook my head. He's suicidal, he's gotta be.

"Now," Vanargand said. "If I contact you on this phone again, it's gonna be to try to extort a massive ransom out of you."

"Sure," said Kaden. "But don't go on thinking it's gonna be paid."

"It will be," he said.

Oh, I know. His a masochistic suicidal. He's gotta be.

"I want a beer. A good one. Cold."

Kaden barked a humourless laugh. "Anything else will be paid in body parts. And she will be unarmed."

"She will be no worst that she is," he corrected my brother.

"Eva?" Kaden asked.

"I'm fine, just a lump on the head."

"Who?" he asked dangerously.

"Mads while getting me out of a bullet's trajectory."

He sighed. "We will land soon."

"We'll keep in touch Vanessa darling," said Vanargand and shut the line.

I looked incredulously at him.

“I don’t think you understand who you’re antagonizing here,” I told him.

“No one has a sense of humour. I’m completely unappreciated here.”

“What’s your real name?” I asked him.

“Mishka,” he said.

— Chapter Thirty-Three —

GRIEF-STRICKEN DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

— Kaden —

We were in my office Darren, Stellan and I.

It took me maybe three seconds for my brain to connect all the pieces.

“Stellan. Call all the warriors, have then ready. I want the plane ready in fifteen, and contact established with someone at Ghaelach. Now.”

Stellan nearly jumped at the order, suddenly ripped our of his trance. But he got his baring under him quickly. He was not in this position for nothing.

He rushed out, getting his phone out on the way.

“I’m coming,” said Darren. He had a pack in his arms, and was taking a shirt out and putting it on, then shoes, in rapid order.

“No,” I said.

He looked up sharply with murder in his eyes.

I cut him before he could complain.

“You’re not trained.”

“I’m trained,” he said angrily.

“Not for this. You don’t know how the team operates, you don’t know the tactics, formations, you don’t know who is in what team. I won’t bring an amateur in.”

He opened his mouth to argue some more. I stopped him.

“You’re emotionally invested.”

“And you’re not?” he accused me.

“My emotions are not controlling me,” I said.

He deflated, his emotions clearly in turmoil. “I get it, but I’m not staying behind.”

“Darren…” I began.

"I can understand. Don't bring me on the battlefield." These words seemed to cost him. "But once we get her back, I'll be with her until we're back here. Anyone comes after her then, I'll kill them."

He didn't have the eyes of a killer. I know killers. Intimately. He's not one. At least not yet. He obviously never killed before.

But once we get her, she's not going to need a killer. She'll need something better, kinder.

"You come if you do exactly as I ask. Defy me and I send you back, and strip you of your title."

He nodded, his back rigid, his eyes determined. I saw the defiance in them, but he was railing it in.

I suppose if I can trust him as a Gamma, I should be able to trust him with this.

Within the hour we were in the air.

The comfortable seats were off the plane and the long benches that replaced them were filled with men. Some of my bests.

I spent most of the flight organizing with my team leaders, looking at aerial maps of the area. Preparing. The cargo loaded with weapons.

This wasn't my first rodeo.

My people could get things moving quicker than any I've seen.

But never had there been stakes like these.

I put as much ice in my vein as I could. I can't lead them if I can't do exactly what I asked Darren to do. Not let my emotions control me.

I was waiting for contact with someone on Ghaelach land, so I didn't question an unknown number calling me.

It should have been on Brandon's phone though. But I realized this only when I heard Eva's voice in the receiver.

— Mishka —

This gig was going FUBAR. Make it Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition or Fucked Up By Assholes in the Rear, both would work just fine.

I'm used to SNAFU, but even I have my limits.

We were supposed to sneak in there, quietly, get the merchandise, and get out. This is a freaking packhouse. No one is stupid enough to start a fight right inside a packhouse.

Oh, how wrong was I.

Such stupidity exists, and it never comes alone.

Things were going relatively well, until John received a call. It's the third time things go south on a job, after a call. Either he's terrible at planning and leading, or the puppet master is pulling the strings all wrong.

I realized the change of plans only when I heard the first shots. I guess after what happened in Italy, they didn't want to risk my interference anymore.

I was with Elijah, just the two of us.

Three seconds after he told John on the phone the shield was not where he had expected it to be, the first sounds of a fight were heard.

"Kid. Eli!" I tried to stop him from joining them. "This isn't your fight. This is not the plan. Something is off."

"I can't back off," he told me.

"You can. This isn't your fight."

"It is. This is my family."

"They're gonna get you killed."

"You don't understand," he told me. "I have too. I can't run away." He opened the door to step out.

Before the door was completely open, I heard the shot and moved against the wall. I lowered myself on my shin, took a knife in a hand and a handgun in the other.

I saw Elijah fall bonelessly on the ground before I'd gotten my weapons out. There was a hole in his cheekbone.

He wasn't dead. His feet kept twitching. His hand spasmed a few times before he went into a full-body seizure. The brain was clearly damaged. Given how no one would give him medical attention, if he didn't die in the next couple of minutes, he's going to die anyway later, either by being finished off, or just left to rot.

While he seized, around a dozen shots went through the wall above my head at what would have been around chest level. They saw me. I hit a stuffed chair not far from me in an imitation of a falling body. With the fighting in the background and the kid seizing and gurgling on the floor, they'd probably not realized I faked it.

Someone walked in. The moment he was a few inches from the threshold I slam my left fist and the knife it held in the man's thigh. Then double tapped his face with my right.

There were movements on the other side behind me, so I shove the chair across the room, flying in front of the doorway. In the limited light and chaos. It could easily look like someone running in the opposite direction. Then I waited for the guy I just killed to fall on the ground to use the noise to hide my movements.

I didn't need to wait as shots went through the doorway and other side of the wall following the chair. And so I faded in the shadows and slipped silently out of the room through the window. By that time Elijah was not moving anymore and was silent. He was gone.

Kids.

Why did it have to be kids again?

If I thought it was the last one to go in this mess, then I was spectacularly wrong.

I watched Westley put bullets in the head of two boys less than fifteen minutes later. They were even younger than Elijah. I had just wanted to get the kid out of this stupid mess, finish the last job before skedaddling outta here and never have anything to do with them again. As things were going, I was getting more and more hibigibies about this place, and this crew, and everything that came with this.

We never went straight after an Alpha before.

I mean, it's not that it can't be done. With enough wolfsbane and Myrkalves crafted manacles, nearly any wolf could be subdued. But taking on an Alpha—even more so, an influential and respected one—has far more reaching implications that merely restraining or killing him.

It's the type of things that can start a war.

But never this thought had ever been as true as when a dying man's words about a young girl changed all the stakes of this mission.

The Hellhound's sister.

These idiots had no idea what they have started.

I never personally met the Hellhound, but I got it from good sources. You don't attack his allies lightly. But taking his sister. Trying to shoot his sister.

Man.

We're fucked.

Maybe you've heard some stories about Genghis Khan, like how a Sultan insulted him by humiliating three of his peaceful emissaries, and in response he obliterated his empire in less than two years, had every castle, town, and farms burnt down and diverted a river over the sultan's

birthplace to erase him from maps and history. Or how, when his favourite son-in-law was killed, his daughter demanded vengeance so he killed the whole nation, every men, women, children, babies, cats and dogs, then put their skull in gigantic pyramids. 1,7 million skulls for one man's life.

There are not many recent examples of such extreme vengeance in modern history.

But tonight, I felt like I was at the doorstep, about to cross into history and possibly trigger such an event.

Naturally, there were not 1,7 million of us, but it doesn't mean we can't be exterminated all the same. It's just that we won't leave as strong an impression into history.

And here I was standing with the side of the losers—that didn't respect me, didn't pay me properly, and were worth neither the effort, nor my life.

So when I stood in that room, with this pretty girl who just gave me probably the biggest opportunity of my life, and averted my future possible obliteration, I didn't restrain myself from grinning like a Cheshire cat at my good fortune.

"Raise your shirt," I told her.

"What?" she sputtered.

"Up to here," I said levelling my hand just above her breast.

"And here I thought you were trying to get out of trouble," she grumbled as I took out my best hidden gun, a Seecamp LSW 32.

"Your clothes are too tight. It's nice to look at, but terrible to hide a gun. Your boobs are perfect though."

"Euh, what?"

"Here." I pointed between her breast, and just a little lower—the lowest part of her sternum. "I'm gonna hide this there," I said showing her the small pocket pistol.

She blinked a little confused.

"If something happens you need to be able to defend yourself," I explained.

"I have claws," she said matter-of-factly.

"Of course, but those are close quarter weapons. This is long-range. You don't want to get up close and personal if you can avoid it."

"I trained," she explained.

“Sure. You killed anyone before?” I asked, she hesitated. Of course she never did. “How about three at once,” she frowned.

“You fight long range, so that if it gets close range, you have as little enemies left to fight as possible, and ideally, they’re already injured,” I explained. “This is when your training comes in. Shirt up.”

She complied a little begrudgingly.

I slide the leather tongue around her bra in between her cups, snapping the small holster in the middle just below her breast, fixed on the centre of her bra, where her shirt will bulge a little and hide the weapon.

“This,” I said, showing her the handgun. “Has six rounds.” I took the magazine out showing her how to do it. “Ever used a gun?”

“No,” she admitted.

“If they’re close, aim for the head. Wolves are tough to kill, otherwise, aim for the chest. It’s a bigger target, harder to miss. Even if you don’t kill them, you’ll slow them down. It’ll give you time to shift, and will make them easier to kill.”

She nodded.

“I have two spare magazines.” I gave them to her. She put them in her pockets. “Small bullets so limited damage, but hollow points so less chance of the bullet going through, and it should compensate some for the smaller caliber. Don’t go shooting through walls and furniture. It won’t be reliable enough. You need big caliber to use this tactic efficiently. The safety is here.” I showed her. Then I holstered the gun. And showed her how to unholster it efficiently.

“Reaching for it is not gonna be subtle,” she told me, practicing her draw.

“You’re a woman, just say you’re gonna bang them so they let you leave or something. Let them believe you’re undressing, then shoot them before they even realize you have a gun.”

She looked at me sceptically, but didn’t argue any further.

“I thought you told my brother you’d protect me?”

“I did, I will, and I’m good. But no one is invincible. The best way to protect someone is to make sure they can protect themselves.”

“So you’re not protecting me?”

“So I’m making sure that if I can’t, you can,” I said, more seriously now that I’ve ever been with her so far. She needed to understand. No security is ever assured on a battle field.

She nodded.

I took one of my knives—the smallest—from my ankle and put it on hers.

She nodded again and drew it a few times to get the hang of this. I didn't even have to ask. Good girl.

"You ready for this?" I asked her.

She nodded affirmatively.

"Now make sure you look miserable as if I tried to fondle your boobies and extort all the money I could from your brother," I told her with a twinkle.

She smiled.

I scowled at her some.

She readjusted her expression to a very passable grief-stricken damsel in distress, and we walked out.

— Chapter Thirty-Four —

IF SPIDERS COULD SMILE

— Mishka —

“So?” Ethan asked me.

Hellhound Girl and I entered the kitchen. Ethan, Amir, Karl and John were there. And so was what was left of the Alpha.

He was not walking out of there. There was only one eye left and a slew of broken bones, some giving odd shape to his limbs. His breathing was ragged. There was a bunch of syringes on the counter that would have contained wolfsbane serums. So I guess he kept fighting back. The white tiles had smears of blood, pale in places, darker where it’s thicker.

“He’s the Hellhound alright,” I confirmed.

“Fuck!” Ethan swore.

“Where are the others?” I asked.

“You think I’m gonna tell you while she’s here?” John said.

“She’s not leaving my side until we’re outta here. It’ll change nothing,” I said.

“Who’s this Hellhound and why is this a problem?” asked Karl.

“Someone you don’t want to have to face,” said Ethan.

At least one of them did their homework.

“And what are you gonna do with her?” asked me John.

“You said she was my problem, and to find my own payment method, so I’m ransoming her.”

Ethan looked at me like I’d just sprouted horns.

“And how does that work exactly?” John asked.

“I’ll dump her on our way out, and get my money, then I’ll go out and party with Vanessa because I’m not doing any more gigs with you.”

“Why?” asked Karl. “And why do you lot look scared of this Hellhound dude?”

“You don’t pay my wages anymore,” I said. “I work for money, not charity. And to answer your second question, have you ever heard of Genghis Khan?”

He blinked. “Eum, the Mongol Guy”

Ethan snorted.

“Yeah, the Mongol guy,” I conceded sarcastically. “The one who conquered half of the world. Well, right now, when it comes to werewolves, the closest thing we have to Genghis Khan is the Hellhound. Granted before the Mongols finished their conquering spree.”

“What?” That guy was definitely not the brightest bulb in the box.

“The hellhound has conquered a bunch of packs already, but not half of the world.” Ethan explained.

“Yet,” I interjected.

He eyed me but continued. “He’s also reputed to answer to challenges pretty brutally.”

“You don’t know how brutal he can get,” Hellhound Girl said to the guys. There was a fire in those eyes that I liked. She was probably imagining them burning at the stake and she enjoyed the idea.

“How much is that exactly?” asked John.

She just smiled, like a spider would to a fly. Well, if spiders could smile that is. But you get the image.

“Get her outta here,” said John to me.

“Get your hands off of him,” she ordered him regarding the Alpha lying on the floor.

“Out, now,” said John pointing at the door.

“You know, torture doesn’t work,” she told him. “You’ve watched too many American action movies.”

I dragged her out before John decided she was better off dead.

She growled at him, but didn’t fight me back. I half-dragged her out of the room. My arm around her waist, nearly lifting her completely off the floor.

Despite her little rant, she managed to look damsel-ish enough.

Now we’re going to have to work on that little mouth of hers if we want this to work.

— Ylva —

“Contact made,” I said in my ear-piece. “Spread,” I told my guys and they moved, disciplined, fawning behind me, then marching slowly forward. “Anders?” I called.

"Yeah," he told me, coming forward to meet me.

"Find out who's in charge."

He nodded and went forward.

I took a phone out.

Hey there baby.

I'm ready to party.

Where are you?

I'm getting bored. I wrote.

I got a message back nearly instantly

Vanessa darling. I thought you forgot about me.

I just got to get a few things sorted and I'm all yours.

We could watch a movie or ten.

Then warm things up a bit.

"Ten lookouts," I said in my earpiece. "Dodson, I want eyes on the building, check sniper positions."

I wrote two more texts.

Baby, are you alone?

You know I don't like it when you see other girls.

I waited a few seconds for the answer.

Babe, you know you're the only piece of ass I want. I'm with a few friends. They're guys, but they brought a few friends of their own and now I'm just waiting for the right moment to ditch them.

Do it fast. I'm wet already. I sent back.

Working on it. I received back.

Keep it up, I'll make it quick. Then we can get the firework going.

If you don't, I'll ask your friends. I wrote.

They're 7 idiots, none of them know their ways to a G-spot. Vanargand replied.

Then I'll ask their friends. I wrote.

They're a bunch of amateurs, they're not equipped for your kind of needs. He replied.

If there's enough of them, it doesn't matter so much. I wrote.

You're too much of a handful, the 26 of them won't be enough to do what I can do alone. He wrote back.

You have quite an opinion of yourself. I wrote.

It's not vain when it's true. I read that and scoffed.

Show-off git.

I took my other cellphone and called Kaden.

"Status?" he answered.

"We've reached the village, Anders is doing recognizance to find out who's in charge. I talked to Vanargand. Ten on the lookout. I send someone to spot them. Their main team as seven members but they have 26 in reinforcement, but those don't have weapons. Claws and fangs only."

"The code's working I see."

"He's enjoying this a little too much, if you ask me."

"If it works…"

"Give me a sec," I said as Anders came with someone to meet me.

"Lorcan Murphy," the man told me as he reached me. "Beta of Ghealach."

"You were not at the packhouse?"

"Not during the attack."

"What do you know?"

"A bunch of assholes got in there. This is a fort. It's equipped to handle assaults. They were prepared before we attacked. We can't get in."

"We have a contact in," I told him.

"Miss Devon?"

I nodded.

"What do you know?" he asked me.

"You're not gonna like it."

"Tell me."

Suits me. I've never been one for bedside manners, so he better not freak out on me.

"Luna and her kids are dead," he stiffened. "Alpha's injured bad. They're looking for the shield. Torturing him for it."

He swallowed. "Ab—about the others?" He had to give it a few tries before his voice got stable enough to talk, but he didn't crumble on me.

"Don't know, but our man is dead."

He nodded.

"You got that?" I asked on the phone to Kaden.

"Yeah."

"You want to talk to him?"

"Pass him through."

I gave the Beta my phone and took the other phone to fish for information on other survivors.

— Chapter Thirty-Five —

WE'RE ALMOST THERE

— Eveline —

"When are they—?" I started asking but Mishka raised his hand sharply, shutting me up, and swung around, putting himself at my back facing the other way.

I turned and heard footsteps coming our way.

Before I could see who it was, Mishka unsheathed a gun as long as my forearm and a little boxy—it looked like it could shoot a lot of bullets, really fast—and aimed it in front of him.

I couldn't see yet who it was.

"Why are you here?" he asked the darkness.

There was no answer.

"John changed his mind again?" he asked.

"I don't make the calls," a voice answered. It was one of the guys that was in the kitchen. The one that seemed to know a bit about my brother. The one dressed in military fatigues.

"He wants her dead?" Mishka asked.

Crap!

"That's his call," military man answered.

"No, it's not. She's not dying," Mishka said, unwavering from his shooting stance.

"Why?"

"I'm not losing twelve millions."

"What?" asked the other confused.

"It's the ransom I'm getting for her. I can cut you in if you want."

"You have proofs?"

Mishka took his left hand from his gun, palm up. "I'm gonna reach for my phone now," he said and moved slowly to his pocket to retrieve the cellphone. Then he raised it up so that when he'd move through the apps, he'd still have an eye on the other guy. I saw him open the text app, and select the conversation he created with my brother. Then he turned the phone to show it to the darkness.

I saw the other guy appear slowly toward us, his gun aimed at Mishka.

He got close, read the conversation but kept an eye on Mishka with his gun up. With his spare hand, traced his finger on the screen to see the rest of the conversation. Once done, he took a few steps back and out of reach. Mishka put the phone back inside his pocket.

“It’s a lot of money,” Military Guy said.

“I know,” answered Mishka.

“You think the guy will pay? I think he’s gonna kill you.”

“He’s not because he won’t get his sister otherwise, I’m gonna be far gone when he’s gonna get her and make his move on this place.”

Military Guy made a sound, pensive.

“No deals,” said a voice from behind us.

“Hello Amir,” said Mishka calmly, but I saw muscles in his shoulders tense up.

“She’s a liability. Drop your gun.”

“He got Westley and Elijah killed,” Mishka said. “You think he’s taking care of you. He’s following someone’s order, and every time they talk things go FUBAR. Why do you think we ended up with a bunch of additional amateurs. They don’t even have weapons, they’re here as cannon fodder.”

“Better them,” said Amir.

“You think you’re gonna leave this place quickly. The rest of this pack is waiting to take the first one to step out of here. This is a siege, and the moment the Hellhounds arrive things will only get worse. The only thing that will hold him back is having her alive. She dies, and he’s gonna level the building on us,” answered Mishka.

“He’s not gonna know,” said Amir.

“He will. He’s asked visual confirmations of her being alive every fifteen minutes,” said Military Man.

“We can fake those,” Amir said.

“No, he asks a question she must answer in a video. So no staged photo of proofs of life or pre-made videos.”

“What Ethan said,” said Mishka.

While they said this, Mishka slid his left foot a bit back until it touched the toes of my left shoe, then slid it to the left. Then put it back in its original position. Not moving the rest of his body in the process

I wasn't sure but it felt deliberate. He was trying to say something, but what? Move to the left? I couldn't think of anything else.

I grabbed the hem of my shirt as I would if I'd been nervous but kept my eyes on Mishka for a sign, any sign.

Two seconds after the men stopped talking I saw the slightest contraction of muscles in his neck. I took it as the sign and threw myself left and down, and slid my hand under my shirt to grab the gun there.

For a split second, I thought I might've spooked too quickly, but Mishka moved right and shot Ethan. Three bullets in the face. So I turned and aimed at Amir.

A bunch of wolves rushed in behind Ethan and before Ethan's body had the time to hit the ground Mishka was already shooting at them, so he couldn't take care of Amir.

Amir shot a few bullets where I had been a second before, as I shot at him until I emptied the clip. At least three bullets made it to his chest and as he adjusted his aim to where I was now, I jump instinctively, my claw lengthening, the gun falling on the ground, useless.

I went straight for his neck faster than he could aim. His gun pressed uselessly against my flank as I grabbed whatever I could and pulled.

I felt the cartilage of his oesophagus shatter under my grip, the blood pouring on my hand as my elongated claws dug all the way through, scrapping on the spine on the way. Whatever warm flesh and muscles were there, came out as I pulled my fist away. Blood sprayed on my face, I felt the warm wet trickle splash on my skin and drip down in a disturbingly soft caress. The metallic scent of blood thick in my mouth. The wolves in me elated at the scent, at the violence, begging for more. But my human mind in shock at what I just did.

His gun barked pointlessly behind me.

I could see in the faint light, the man's tongue pulled out through his neck like a grotesque short tie.

I heaved my feet uncertain, as the man that I just killed fell to the ground in a gory mess.

Someone grabbed my arm and I flipped. My heart going in full panic mode, I yelped.

"Shhhhhh," said Mishka as he blocked my free hand coming at him in an attack. "We're leaving now." He handed me back my gun. I don't know when he grabbed it, but I took it numbly.

“Reload,” he told me. I shook myself out of my dazed and reloaded the gun, letting the clank of the discarded magazine resonate on the floor behind us as we moved forward.

I barely noticed where we were going. One foot here, another there. I just did what he did.

When we landed with our two feet on the grass, he moved for me to lay low, then took out a small flashlight, not unlike those mounted on weapons, like those used to kill Aisling and her kids.

He clicked it on and off a few times in arrhythmic sequences. I didn’t see anything, but something made Mishka believe it was time to move. My eyes were out of focus. I was tired, exhausted, my mind couldn’t think anymore. My body followed automatically but I feared if we stopped again, I may fall on my ass and not be able to get up again. We moved mostly under the cover of the trees.

It took a while. Too long. Why couldn’t I be home yet?

I heard crunches in the forest and my mind instantly sharpened again, my gun raised ready to shoot whatever was coming our way.

Mishka put his hand softly above mines and the gun and pushed down until it was aimed at the forest floor.

“Are you okay Miss Devon?” asked a male voice from the darkness.

I just nodded, too shaken to talk.

Three men approached. I recognized two of them. They were Blakemore.

My legs gave out and I crumbled on the ground. “I wanna go home,” I whined like a lost child.

Mishka bent down and put his hands on my shoulders. Which got the other men to aim their weapons at him.

“Get up,” he told me, ignoring the men and their guns. “We’re almost there.”

— Chapter Thirty-Six —

I'M NOT DOING THIS ANYMORE

— Darren —

I was pacing for the thousandth time the length of the small room inside the cabin we set base in. Brandon was sitting in a corner trying to ignore me and focus on the comm system and occasional buzzing of voices.

"Target acquired." Was the only one that really got through to me.

I'd gone insane in the last hours, and never had any minutes felt this interminable. I've also never felt this useless, and I hated it.

I knew why I was told to stay behind, I knew the logic behind it and it was sound. I would have done the same if it had been me. But it was a harsh reality to contend with.

And I made myself this promise, never again. Never again will I be this useless. Whatever has to be done will be done. But never again.

How long was it to bring Eva back?

Was she too injured to move quickly? Did she need medical attention? How bad was it?

I was spiralling, with nothing better to do. It took a full century before someone came to the door, and I jumped out of my skin, my eyes madly fixed at the door.

One of the warriors opened the door to let another one in, and behind them stood a gore-splattered Eva.

Her eyes were sunken, her expression that of a lost woman, but when her eyes landed on me, I saw the ghost of emotions ready to burst.

I was already rushing to hold her in my arms. I think we mumbled a few things but none made sense.

I felt it when she broke. Her muscles that were hard with anxiety went rubbery, her hug lost the strength of elation at finding one another, to become softer and more desperate. Her body began to shake uncontrollably. Her face dug into my shirt as tear wet it all the way to my skin, and her voice came out in whimpers of sadnest.

I let her emotion settle in this heartbreaking display, and moved slowly, until I was carrying her in my arms.

I didn't try to shush her, or to tell her everything was okay. It would change nothing. Just empty words without any meaning.

I moved to the bedroom on the upper floor. There was an adjacent bathroom.

It was a cabin, small, three small bedrooms upstairs, kitchen and living room downstairs, open-concept. The walls were all wood. Inside and out. It was on the fringe of Ghealach Territory.

I took Eva to the bathtub, I turned the water on and took out the telephone shower head.

I went about, rinsing the blood and gore. Slowly, softly. Making sure to notice injuries. I stopped only to help her out of her clothes. She let me.

She was lying down at the bottom of the tub, and I washed her carefully, but thoroughly, lathing the soap on her skin, rinsing, then to the next zone, working the muscles. I saw the tension ease out as the tears flow slowed.

When it was finally done, and I'd cleaned the blood she smeared on me too. I dried her carefully, then wrapped her in a towel, and carried her to the bed.

I went to close the light, and she made a sound that would have been more appropriate for a wounded cat, as she probably feared I was leaving her.

Once the light were closed I went under the covers and pressed her body against mine, her figure, supple and smaller than I've ever remembered, to let go.

It didn't take too long for exhaustion to overtake her, and she fell in a coma-like slumber.

* * * * *

I felt it when she woke.

I opened my eyes feeling as if I'd slept only for an instant. There were dried tears on her cheeks and redness to her eyes. In movies, you see women crying all prettily, but that's not how sadness works, that not how pain works. There is nothing pretty about having your heart shattered. There is no scenario telling you how to act it, and what comes next. There is just the pain.

I rubbed my thumb in slow circles on her cheeks, as if erasing writings in the sand, erasing words of violence, of loneliness, of grief, of fear. I kissed her forehead. "I love you," I told her. Three simple words. Three short words. Like all the most significant things in the world, love is a little word with so much weight to it that it could shatter the crust of the earth. Like hope, pain, war, hate, faith, truth, love. But of course, love is the sweetest, the bitterest, the loneliest and the most joyful. Love is the sum of it all. We go to war for love. It is the source of most pains, and hopes. Love is so simple, yet it's the greatest endeavour someone may ever seek in one's lifetime.

“I love you,” she said, resting her hand on the side of my face. “I should have said it before, but I didn’t. I don’t know why. I don’t know what I’ve been afraid of. Why I hesitated. I love you,” she said again, pressing her lips against mine. It was a small kiss, a chaste kiss, but a good kiss. It ended so I could get lost in her eyes again, and her in mine.

“I’m sorry,” was the only thing I found to say.

She shook her head softly. “I never understood. I was a bitch to you after the earthquake. I’m sorry,” she told me.

“What for?”

“I saw things,” she said. There were no tears in her eyes, but if there had been, they would have shrouded the depth of her sadness. “I did things.”

I kissed one eyelid, then the other. “You’re alive. It’s all that I want. We will get through the rest together. If your brother would have let me, I would have gone on a murder spree.”

She petted the side of my face softly. “I’m glad you weren’t there,” she said.

“I’m not.” There was a hardness in my voice for the first time, a sharp edge.

“If you’d been, you might hav—,” she choked on the words, then shook her head slowly. “You would have protected me, you’d be dead. And it’s your blood that would have been on me.” She kissed my nose as delicately as the wings of a butterfly. “I love you. I need you.”

“I’m here,” I murmured.

“We should move in together.”

I smiled. “Maybe we should.”

“And we should mark each other.” My heart fell down a flight of stairs, before endorphins crept in.

I nodded.

“We’ve been stalling, afraid. I’m not doing this anymore.”

I kissed her, deeper this time. I took the time to savour her lips. Her arms wrapped around my neck, pulling me to her like gravity. I rolled atop her, savouring her mouth, pressing myself against her, crushing her to the mattress. There was still the towel, half-wrapped around her and it was easy to move it out of the way.

By the time we deepened the kiss further, our bodies were just naked heat, fusing with one another.

When I took her, I did so slowly, our movement in cadence. We made love. There is no better words to describe what we did. There was no acrobatic, no violent ecstasy, it was all softness. Our bodies never apart. The heat rising along with our heartbeats. Our mouths fused, breathing in the air the other exhaled. At the peak of our ecstasy, we marked each other. There were no signs, no words, but we did it at the same time. We just knew.

It took us hours to find the calmness of each other's arms again, resuming our conversation as if it had never been interrupted. Whispering little nothings in each other's ears.

"I want to train with the others," I told her after a while. "I want to know how they fight. How they operate."

"Why?" worried lines appeared between her eyebrows.

"Because I'll never be left behind again."

"Babe…" she began.

"I'm not saying I'll fight every battle. But if I have to fight one, I'll be able to."

She nodded understanding. "I want to train too," she said. "And also with firearms."

"Is that why there was a gun under your breasts?" it had been a surprise when I'd undressed her.

"It's a loaner," she said with a wicked little smile.

"You used it?"

Her smile broadened, but there was a faint sadness behind it.

"I was pretty badass out there."

— Chapter Thirty-Seven —

A WORLD OF HURT

— Kaden —

Once Eva has been secured. It took us around eight minutes to rush the fortress and take it. Vanargand was with us, and guided a team to where there could be survivors. He'd been good to his words.

Before we went in, Rayner—who was the man who secured Eva in the woods—told me how Eva pleaded with him to return Mads' body. I would have done it regardless, but still. It didn't help to ease the pang I felt in my chest when I saw his broken form discarded on the floor. So were others. It was a massacre. I don't know how much of this Eva witnessed, but I'm not letting her get back to her life without some serious counseling.

Mishka had given us information before we moved in. All that he had, or so I thought. Even pictures of the main crew and their personal information. He had done some digging of his own before he came here. He even had social security numbers and bank accounts.

Some of my men took Mads' body away, and that of the Luna and her children to bring them to their people. The rest of the bodies were subsequently taken out too. The attacker's bodies, put in a different place than their victim's.

A few of the perps had been taken alive, and except for those holding them, and those on body duties, all my men joined me after their assigned job done.

The broken body of the Alpha was found in the kitchen. No survivor had been found.

"I think John gave the order to wipe everyone. He did that on another job. That's probably when he sent men to take your sister too," Vanargand told me.

"What happened?" I asked, careful not to let my rage seep into my apparent detached tone.

"I killed them all but one."

"He escaped?"

"Your sister killed him," he said casually.

It took me a lot of efforts not to let my steps falter.

She killed someone.

I'm glad she's alive. I'm glad I insisted on her being trained, but still. There was something wrong in that statement. It was irrational really. I don't control my sister, but I feel like it shouldn't have been here to do it. I don't want to look down on her or her capabilities, I don't think I am. But it still feels wrong.

I could picture her face as she was this ditsy teenager, and barely more together as a young woman. This image clashed with that of a killer. It was dissonant. She should have been safe. I sent her here. It was my responsibility.

I'm not arrogant enough to believe I can control all possible outcomes, went given her position, her work, her relation to me, she should've had more than one body guard at least.

She'll probably never want to leave again. Darren will probably insist on it himself. I'd understand. I'm not going to impose anything on her, to stay or to go. It's her decision, it has to be. But it doesn't mean that it's not tearing at me right now.

There will come a time when she will probably have to make some decisions for her to overcome the trauma. But I doubt I can guide her much along that path.

I finally reached where the last men were held.

"This is him?" I asked Vanargand signalling the brown-haired man in the middle that I suspected was John Bishop, the leader of this group.

"Yep," said Vanargand.

That's when they noticed him, and they began spitting insults his way. Of course, my men knew the only one I wanted was Bishop, so they shut them all, but him.

The gun shots resonated in the room, and that pretty much shut Bishop up.

The bodies fell on the ground where they were kneeling, the blood pooling on the hardwood floor. Then my men walked forward and double tapped all the corpses in the face, for good measure.

I walked to Bishop, his eyes were a little wild and he jumped at every gunshot until the men returned to their position behind me as I walked to him.

He was kneeling too—like the others had been—, his hands locked behind him.

I would have towered over him had he been on his feet. Now he had to turn his head upward like a child to look at me, and I wasn't that close yet.

"I will say this only once," I told him in a calm voice. "You can give me any useful information about this hit and the one calling the shot or you can refuse. Once your decision is made, I don't care what you have to say. The only thing this will change is how you die. Quick or slow."

"You think I'm gonna just tell you?" he spat.

I turned around and walked to the door. "Make it last." I told my men, and saw them move in to deal with him. He'd killed one of ours. They will be creative enough to entertain Bishop for a while.

"You're not trying to get more out of him?" Vanargand asked me. He was the only one here who would ask me such a trivial question.

"Torture doesn't work," I told him.

"Your sister said that too."

"She's more clever than she looks," I told him.

"She looks fine enough."

"Thread carefully here." I didn't change my tone, but the message got across.

"Don't worry," he told me unaffected. "I'm more interested in Vanessa," he said the name in a sing-song way.

"Be careful what you wish for," I told him as we crossed the lawn.

We reached Lorcan Murphy as he was accounting for the bodies of his people.

"You found the Alpha?" he asked me as I came to him.

I nodded.

"Where is he?" he asked carefully. He knew the man had been severely hurt.

"They're bringing the body, he'll be here soon."

He looked down at the bodies before him. They were his family. No matter what people say, no matter the size of a pack, packs are family. He was on the verge of breaking. I'm sure if I hadn't been present, he'd already be crying.

"That makes you Alpha now. You will need time, but you can't take too much. They need you now," I said, nudging my head toward the other packs member present. They had kept everyone but the warriors indoors, away from the carnage where they would be safe. It was better this way.

"I know of the deal Killian made with you," he told me.

"I will hold my end of it."

"You'll take the shield with you. We need to rebuild. We might not be able to protect it here for a while."

“Are you sure?” I asked him.

He was still not looking at me. His eyes moved from the corpses on the ground to the last one that was brought in, their former Alpha.

“The deal was for a year. Before then, we will take it back.”

“Understood,” I told him. “I will leave in a few hours with my sister, if you can send it by then, it would be safest this way. I will leave a skeleton crew to help for the following week. My sister has asked information to be given to us. Details about the Faes’ matters.”

“I know of it,” he told me. Still looking at Byrne.

“I will get the information before the end of the week,” I said it as a fact. He nodded.

“If you have any needs or questions, feel free to contact me. My sister mentioned Alpha Byrne wanted alliances. I’m still open to the idea. As a sign of good will, along with the crew I leave you with, you will be allowed to deal with the invaders as you see fit. None survived, the last one will die soon enough. Any information we have about them can be forwarded to you if you want it.”

He nodded again. “Thank you.” He finally turned to me. His eyes wet. We shook hands and I left him.

“Is it him?” I heard Ylva say as I got to the cabin we used as HQ. She was speaking of Vanargand I was sure. He was among the men coming in with me.

I acquiesced.

“You’re Vanargand?” she asked him, looking him up and down, not exactly impressed.

“You can call me Mishka,” he said beaming at her.

“You have a cute name?” she said it as if it was the most disgusting thing in the word to have.

“Why, thank you, Vanessa,” he said still sing-songing the name.

She kicked him in the balls.

I saw him tense a bit just before the hit. I think he might have been able to stop it, but he didn’t. Interesting.

He bent in a sigh of pain and said in a choked voice, “I like her.”

This guy is in for a world of hurt.

— Chapter Thirty-Eight —

A MASSIVE SHADOW IN THE SHAPE OF A MAN

— Ylva —

We were flying back to Blakemore. The little twit in tow. Kaden had left his office to his sister and her mate and he was sitting calmly with his men, his head back, eyes closed. I knew he wasn't sleeping.

I received a text.

"You had one of them tortured," I told Kaden reading what Dodson sent me.

"No, I just let the guys loose," he said his eyes still closed.

"It's the same," I told him. He didn't argue. "Dodson said he mentioned three packs names, but he was pretty incoherent, so they're not sure what it means."

"Which?" he asked still unmoving.

"Greysky, Akayume, Nubinero," I said.

We knew the last one.

"Does it mean we move on Nubinero?" I asked.

"We were moving anyways, why wait."

That got me smiling.

"I'm not sure what's going on, but I'm in," said the twit.

"No," I just said.

"Come on, Vanessa." I'm gonna rip him a new one.

One of the guys next to him scooted away a bit.

Another turned to him. "You're gonna die if you keep that up. And her name is Ylva."

"Cool," Mishka said cheerfully.

I hate that face. I could punch it for years on end.

Once we landed, we geared everything ready to go, and ate a metric shit-ton of food, then crashed to catch some Zs before the next take off.

Within twenty-four hours, we were back in the sky.

— Kaden —

I was in the plane office as I called David.

“Yes,” he said half-asleep.

“You’re back home?” I asked him.

“Yeah,” he mumbled.

“In twelve hours I want you back at Monaweard with all the Alphas involved,” I told him.

“What’s happening?” he asked a little more awake now.

“I’m making my move.”

“Now?”

“A small group attacked a pack where I’d sent my sister for information. They may have been involved with Nubinero. I’m not waiting.”

“Is your sister okay?”

“As much as she can be considering. They massacred the Alpha and his household.”

That made him spit curses.

“What do you want from me?” he said after a sigh. It was not aimed at me but the situation. He was asking me how he could help.

“I will need that meeting. Things are gonna take a direction they might not like, but they should know first.”

— Mishka —

I was told the gist of the situation. I wasn’t even officially part of the team, and they had me playing superhero twice in the same week. The contrast with my previous employer could not have been starker.

I told the Hellhound I was doing this free of charge. Apparently it might have had a link with Jerk-Team 6 so I thought it could be a gesture of goodwill. Besides, I saw the guy’s eyes, he’s going to keep his word. I should be fine.

We landed on an island a few kilometres wide, which contain a facility and nothing else. We were to extract any possible living victims, and wipe everything else.

I volunteered for extraction.

I was told to keep back and watch how they operated, before engaging. It didn't take me long to get the jargon, what sign was what. Most was standard military communication. Their click communication via comm, was new, so I couldn't keep up with that and was curious to see how extensive it was. By not being standard Morse, meant that no one could listen in and follow along, but it also meant anyone not clued in couldn't keep up, ergo me. But I was all docile and everything, listening to my assigned boss like a good soldier.

It's not that I'm incapable of discipline or obedience, just that I don't give it easily.

They were a well-oiled machine, every cog moving perfectly in sync with the other with little need for communications. They were not just training together often, this is a long-lasting team that as trained, worked, slept, ate together. Giving that this was a pack, they might even have grown together.

I'm used to being one of the most graceful actors in any job, moving efficiently, as flawlessly as one can, but I've never been that much of a team-player. I could play with the team, but I never truly blended in perfectly. They did, and it was beautiful. For a moment, it made me long for what I'd never truly had, for something I could gain. I never really saw it as something missing. Even now, as I made my move to join mostly to add a few advantages to my situation, but I didn't take in the full scope of what it genuinely met to join.

Any other day, this thought would have made me uncomfortable. Tonight, I was reevaluating.

Our team found nine women all huddled together, dirty and naked in one of the buildings allocated to our team.

The extraction went smoothly. Another man and I stayed back where the women used to be to stop any who would see them missing from raising the alarm, while other teams did their job too.

We stayed quiet, hidden in the darkness, unmoving, listening.

We got the signal three minutes and seven seconds later to move to phase two. All that needed rescuing were out of the way. Now we cleaned house.

We slipped out of the building, moving slowly, not advancing too fast until the rest of our team would be back with us.

We were to engage silently for as long as possible without casualties on our teams. We would not have engaged anyone with just the two of us, unless the opponent was alone. Always outnumber the enemy if you can. So when we found one alone, in no one's line of sight, we engaged.

We got closer still in silence and made sure to stay downwind for our scent not to betray our presence.

My partner grabbed the man by the neck hard enough to shut his windpipe so he wouldn't scream and drag him down to cut his throat so the blood would splatter low and not attract attention too quickly. I moved things to make sure the body would stay out of view, I checked for signs of anything that would betray the attack early.

Thirty-nine seconds later, the rest of our team made contact and we moved to our next target.

Inside a building there was three MAM. We moved carefully to position ourselves correctly and silently. One of them was near a window, so two men got behind that window. One was near the door, so two stood next to it, on the other side. The last one was a little bit trickier. To get him without being seen, without giving him time to alert anyone with screams or comm systems, and without using noisy guns would be a doozy. He was at the other end of the room, right in front of the door. He'd see anyone come in right away.

We waited.

Ten seconds.

Fourteen seconds.

Nineteen seconds.

He turned his back to the door.

We made our move.

One man behind the window grabbed the MAM nearby, with his hand inside reinforced gloves over the man's mouth making sure he wouldn't scream or bite through, and while making sure he would stay out of his partner's way. The partner shoved an eight inches long knife in the man's neck at an upward angle, right below the jaw, stabbing all the way to the brain.

The two men on the side of the door slid in. One wrapped the his left arm around the closest MAM's neck and mouth, and stabbed him in the eyes with an equally long knife of his own. Probably scrapping the back of the skull in the process. The other, being me, I walked right behind him and kept myself out of the way, lowered my stance and got ready to shoot if anything went wrong.

Our fifth and last man, ran in at full speed, and pounced as he crossed the threshold, his progression barely audible. He had his knees hit the back of the last enemy before the man even realized what was going on, and sunk his elongated claws in the face of the man, reaching to it from the back.

We made sure the two bodies we could control would fall down with barely a whisper and had to accept than the third would hit loudly with one of us atop him.

We all slipped in, shut everything up—lights and doors—then left and took position to observe the building we just raided.

No one came to investigate and we couldn't see signs of our deed from the outside. When we were sure it wouldn't change, we changed location.

The other locations we hit was even easier, and quicker.

As we approached the centre, and their HQ, we knew it was just a matter of seconds before someone would be clued in on what as going on.

Maybe six seconds after I thought this I heard the first sign of struggles. It took five more seconds for the first gunshot to be heard.

In the next beat a massive shadow in the shape of a man, jumped maybe twenty feet in the air, only there were a few anatomically incorrect details to make this really a man. The claws were long enough to be visible from my vantage point, the head more massive, the face slightly elongated, the hair longer, the ankles articulated like that of a canine. It was a half-shifted werewolf.

Partial shifts are really hard to pull off. Generally, the claws are the first thing one learns to shift alone, when one can. But a shift that turned you into a bipedal wolf was extremely difficult. But it had allowed this man to jump, and this high, effortlessly.

I lost sight of him as he landed behind a building, but I saw a body being thrown all the way through a wall.

Flesh is not made to be used as wrecking balls and what was left was probably unidentifiable.

We rushed quietly to come to aid to the teams ahead.

It probably didn't take us more than forty seconds to reach them. By that time the fight was over.

I saw the wolf-man melt effortlessly back into a man. The shift had been controlled enough to keep the clothes intact, and only the footwear was missing.

Damn, I've never seen anything this impressive from a werewolf.

The sheer staggering amount of control is mind-boggling. I could only do claws and teeth before I had to complete the shift. The hellhound still had his claws out. No one shifts back partially. That I've never seen. You shift back fully and then get the claws back on. It's too hard otherwise. The human mind is more open to restraint than that of a wolf.

Man, I don't ever want to fight this man one on one. If there's no choice, I'll do it from three kilometres away with a sniper rifle, I'm not even going to confirm the kill, and just run for my life and disappear after that. That or poison. I don't see how it could even be feasible otherwise.

— Chapter Thirty-Nine —

THERE'S A LOT OF SCARY THINGS OUT THERE

— Kaden —

"What is the status?" I asked Jaxx.

"72% of location covered for information extraction, phase three nearly complete," Jaxx told me.

"Jayson?" I said a little louder.

"All civilians aboard the plane, no injured," my beta said a little louder from outside of the building where I was.

"Where is it in phase four?" I asked Anders.

"50% completed. It shouldn't be long after the completion of phase three," Anders answered me in my earpiece.

I nodded to myself. Good.

I went outside, I wasn't necessary in this room anymore. I went to see where things were with my orders regarding the bodies.

The last few were being assembled in between two of the main buildings. My guys took what I told them to take, then piled them up in a small pyramid.

I could hear the thunk, thunk, of falling machetes.

We should be out of here before sunrise.

It took a little under an hour for phase three to be done and all information paper or electronic that could have values was extracted. Within fifteen minutes, just like estimated, phase four was completed and everything was ready for ignition. The last of us left in the boat we came in, and when at the safe distance, set up the charges that had been strewed around the island. The explosion was deafening but not painfully so as we were far enough. But it was big enough to send a shockwave strong enough to rock the boats. The rest of the combustibles were set aflame nearly instantaneously. Within five minutes the island was one gigantic pyre, that would leave behind only the blackened skeleton of a once lush forest and buildings.

Once I was satisfied with the blaze and its level of destruction, we sailed off.

We weren't that far from Monaweard Territory, and the commute was reasonable by land, but there was an airstrip much closer, and giving the amount of personnel with me, it was easier to move by air.

An hour later, we were landing on a field within Monaweard Territory. I'm sure Mariqueen was not excited about me landing there rather than to the other strip right outside her land, but I was going for efficiency not friendliness. Besides, I was about to piss off the whole lot of them anyways.

I walked first out of the plane.

Twelves Alphas were present with their small delegations, plus David, of course. He nodded to me amicably, despite the blood-splatter they could all smell on me, but the other's nod was a little tighter.

It was four thirty-three in the morning. The sun was rising slowly to my right.

I nodded to them for only social formality.

"What gives us the pleasure?" asked Mariqueen a little more polite than the others.

"I've raided the facility at eleven-o-six yesterday," I told them.

This shook them a bit.

"It was our call to make," said Alpha Sanders.

"No. It was mine. Two days ago a small group attacked another pack killing the Alpha, his family and household and kidnapping my sister and killing one of my men. This group was believed to be linked to the pack behind this facility. Which puts me in the right to act as I see fit. To get proper retribution."

That got me a small round of murmurs.

"I have survivors," I said as my men brought them out of the plane. Those naked had been given spare clothes, mostly men's clothes. Werewolves tend to always have spare clothes at hand. "I would like for you to check if you can identify anyone. I will leave any of your pack members in your charge."

That changed the ambiance.

Mariqueen nodded to me gratefully. I saw in her eyes how significant that gesture was to her.

I gave them time. Time for the survivors to come out, and for the Alphas to check with them.

David joined me.

"Which sister?" he asked me.

"Eva," I said.

"How is she? Truly?"

"I don't know. I didn't see her since we got her back. She's with her mate."

"She found her mate?" David asked surprised.

"A few months back. He seemed like a little lost pup, but he got a good head on his shoulders. Enough for me to make him Gamma."

David choked a bit. "Gamma of what?"

"Blakemore."

He whistled.

"Just before this incident, Eva was changing too. Taking her job seriously, wanting to study, to take more responsibilities. She has really grown in the last few months. She's not the little girl I used to know."

"Kids tend to do that," he told me wisely. He was only two years older than me.

"I'm just scared this might set her back. Things were not pretty in there. She was close to Mads, I know she saw things, it was bad. I also know she killed one of them to survive."

"Things like these, they leave a mark."

"They do," I said in a sigh. "You never forget your first. Then you spend a long time wondering if it will ever go away, or just become normal, until one day you barely notice when you kill one, not until you look in the mirror to see the blood."

"I don't think you're talking about Eva anymore." We were looking at the sunrise. It was pretty, there were a few clouds defusing the colours. The kind of sight that made me wish I was an artist to immortalize the sight, or even describe it well. But it was just pretty.

"Maybe, maybe no," I told David.

"She's a woman, don't forget to treat her as such, not like a child."

"I know."

"She has her mate, they'll probably move in together soon, get married, have babies, and then you'll look at those babies thinking how much they look like their mother, and you're gonna get all nostalgic about the time she ran around the yard half-naked in pigtails."

"I'm not sure you're having this conversation with the right guy," I told him.

"Everyone knows you're a big teddy bear."

"Is your eyesight okay, I think you might need glasses."

"I stick to my words," he told me.

"Go tell them that," I said referring to the Alphas behind us.

"Some of them got it. Those that matter," he said. "For the rest, then… Oh, well…"

I snorted.

"It's not gonna stop there is it?" he asked me. I knew what he meant. Nubinero.

"Me stopping won't stop them."

He said nothing. He knew.

"A Fae faction as fallen, there's a power vacuum."

"Fuuuck," he muttered under his breath. "How bad is it?"

"Not sure yet, but if it's having ripple in werewolf communities…"

"… It's significant enough to worry," he finished my thought.

"We start with Nubinero, we see how the rest goes."

"It's gonna be one massive dance, each to their own rhythm, with some stepping on others' feet," said David.

"I've never been a great dancer. I'll probably pull the fire alarm and deal with anyone who hasn't evacuated if they decide to get annoyed with me."

"I know. That's what worries me."

"And why?" I asked.

"Because doing that would attract a lot of attention, only this time it won't be just from werewolves," he said gravely. "There are a lot of scary things out there."

"I know," I said. "I'm not trying to get involved with those."

"But by getting involved with one of the players, you set yourself as a player in the game, and a significant one enough to warrant involvement of those you might not have wanted to be involved with. This could be just a sign of things to come."

I frowned at that.

“I can’t just stand back,” I said helplessly.

“I know,” he said with worries on his face. “So listen to this very carefully. Get yourself prepared. Maybe the wave is gonna pass you by and you’re gonna be fine, but if it hits you, you must be ready to surf.”

“I think you’re getting a little too deep on the metaphors.”

I said with jest, trying to ease the tension.

“I’m serious,” David said. “Some wars are for peace, and others to build. What do you think they will see when they look at you. Someone settling matters, or someone laying the stones of a new Empire? They’re all running after a prettier, shinier throne to sit on. No one controls what tomorrow is made of. I know you don’t wan this, but you won’t back down either. Just don’t be an idiot and look at the big picture. Fate is a river, you can divert it, you can predict some of it, but in the end you can only control so much.”

“I know,” I said thinking. I put my hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “I know.” I told him more meaningfully. And I went to joint the Alphas as the remaining survivors returned to the plane.

“Gentlemen, I suggest you send them back with your people now before we continue this meeting,” I told them.

Some seemed to want to question me but they didn’t. They sent some of their entourage with them to return to their cars.

“What will happen to the others?” asked me Mariqueen.

“They will return with me, receive medical attention, and be returned to wherever they want to return when they’re ready,” I told her.

She nodded appreciatively.

“If some of them need a place, you can tell them I can give them one.”

I nodded.

I signed to my man to bring the next guesses, and gestured for the Alpha to gather around.

My men brought five large trunks and they opened them.

Decomposition had not seriously set in, so the stench was not unbearable, but the smell of dead flesh was unmistakable. They nearly all recoiled at the sight of dozens of heads.

“This is what I’m going to send to Nubinero,” I said. “For those who don’t understand the message, it’s a declaration of war.” They stared in shock. “It’s my war, not yours. I expect nothing from you,

and am simply giving you a heads up." I gave a small hand gesture, and my men packed the trunks back in the plane. "If you want to get yourself involved, you have all the rights for it, given the present situation, and I will give you military support. For the others, if I keep giving you men and supplies it will be seen as participation from you so you have forty-eight hours to prepare for the loss of effective, then I will ship those trunks. Any questions?"

There was a hesitation. No one could deny me my right of action, but they were uncomfortable. The mood was as black as the forest I burned this morning.

"I'm in," said Mariqueen.

"You sure?" I asked her.

"Yes," she said. "We'll have talks," she said gesturing at the others.

"Well, then…" I said and walked back to the plane.

There is work to do.

— Chapter Forty —

BABY STEPS

— Eveline —

Darren and I needed a little time to ourselves. We needed to re-energize ourselves. It hadn't been long since the earthquake, then the attack on Ghealach. It was too much.

We didn't go anywhere fancy. No glitzy resort. It wasn't the sun we needed but each other. Everyone let us have our space. Blakemore has a big territory, so we went to a waterfall one day, a lake the other, we would hike in the woods, or picnic under the sun. We let our wolfish selves run wild a few times together. We didn't think about work, about responsibilities, about the things we went through. We thought of all that we can face together. That we are indeed stronger together.

We indulged in a full week of shameless abandon.

But once that was done, we went back to work.

My brother was a little squeamish at the idea. He hid it well, but I know him, I saw it, he was worried. He made me promise to see a therapist. Alone or with Darren but I had to talk to a professional at least ten times. *Ten times.* This man is insane.

I went reluctantly, but ended up enjoying it. I talked more about where my life was going, that where it's been. This is what I needed, look toward the future. It may have taken me a long time to mature, but I was slowly getting there. Baby steps.

Darren and I had insisted for combat training. Hand-to-hand, weapons, tactics, everything. We made it our biweekly couple thing.

We couldn't afford to do it daily with everything that was going on, but we took it seriously.

When I went to return the gun and knife to Mishka he told me to keep them, and he could get me bullets whenever I wanted.

I kept them. I have them on me nearly every day. I also asked him to find something good for Darren, and he delivered. When the situation was dicey, he was a bit of a scary man, but I've never really been intimidated by that type of men. And when things were quiet he was a ridiculously juvenile goofball. Be he was reliable.

He kinda drove Ylva mad, but I think she doesn't dislike it, and he clearly doesn't dislike her. Given his own disregard for his safety, I suppose they could work out, whatever that would be.

I told Kaden I wanted to keep my job as his and would accept changes only is they went with more responsibilities, but I wanted to stay as a liaison. I think I surprised him, but I asked for two bodyguards, he agreed to three.

I started French classes and I discovered that I really enjoy languages. And private classes are so much more efficient than anything we had in high school. And you skip the drama altogether.

I spent a lot of my spare time with my family. And I had a few serious talks with my sisters. They can't keep cruising through life like that. I did it and it was a lot of wasted years. Nadine has excellent organization skills that she uses only for party-making, so I convinced Kaden to let me bring her in to organize things when we have people visiting. Who knows, she might discover a career she loves.

I know of the facility, and the war declaration Kaden has given to Nubinero. I sat with Darren and, as he was more versed in politics than I, asked him to teach me. He's doing a lot of catching up on Blakemore itself—which I've helped him with—and doing so, realized how incomplete my own knowledge of my pack was. We've been trying to compensate for this.

I'm not learning remotely as fast as I'd like, and most of Darren and I's political lessons tend to rapidly shift to anatomy lessons, but we'll get there. As I said. Baby steps.

Kaden has had another health issue. I know he tried to hide it, but I saw. I know what to look for now. It scares me. I can't lose him. The pack would fall apart. Our family would fall apart. No one is ready to take over, and with the present political climate, the gap between him and anyone else is only growing.

I know there's a lot he doesn't tell me. I nagged him plenty about it but he's immune to my nagging. I tried to listen in whenever I can but it doesn't really work. Getting my information through Darren is way more efficient.

Darren's birthday is coming up and I called his crew of friends from Stonewillow to come and visit us. And his family too, of course. I offered the private jet and everything. With everything that has happened in such a short succession, they don't even know about him being Gamma.

We decided that once his three-month probation period is passed, we'll move to a small cottage together, but until then, I moved most of my clothes to the apartment. We might get a home half-way through Blakemore packhouse land and Blakeden. Darren has really grown attached to the town. One day, he came home all excited about seeing a mermaid bar.

"What's a mermaid bar?" he asked me.

"A bar where there are tanks of water instead of stages where mermaid dances," I explained.

“Wait! It’s a mermaid strip club?” he asked abashed.

“No, it’s classier than this. And men can’t grope and grind against the dancers. It’s more like a burlesque show.”

“How do you know?” he asked suspiciously.

I raised an eyebrow at him unamused.

He grinned sheepishly. “Well, if it’s classy…” he mumbled.

“We can go for a date if you want.” Which really cheered him up.

Turned out, we had a blast, I could imagine Marigold, Daniella, Ana, Megan and Kate, go in there to watch the mermen. I should make sure to invite them too with the others from Stonewillow.

I caught my mother looking at me strangely a few times. I think at my belly and breast. I think she might have been evaluating if I may be pregnant yet.

I’m not sure about those baby steps. Eventually probably, but I don’t feel any rush. I want to make sure Darren and I have time to be where we want to be when it happens, but I’m not exactly thinking in if’s but in when’s, so I guess this means a lot in and of itself.

I suppose no one is ever truly ready until it’s there, but I’m not rushing things to please my mother.

Like Kaden, Darren and I eat all our Friday dinners at my parents. Everyone as grown very fond of Darren, even Kaden—though he tries not to show it too much—which really made me happy. He’s family and I want him to feel like it.

I know things were tense with his, but maybe this time it will be a little better. They will see he found his place and he’s happy.

I’ve always been a bit of the optimistic.

That is not changing.