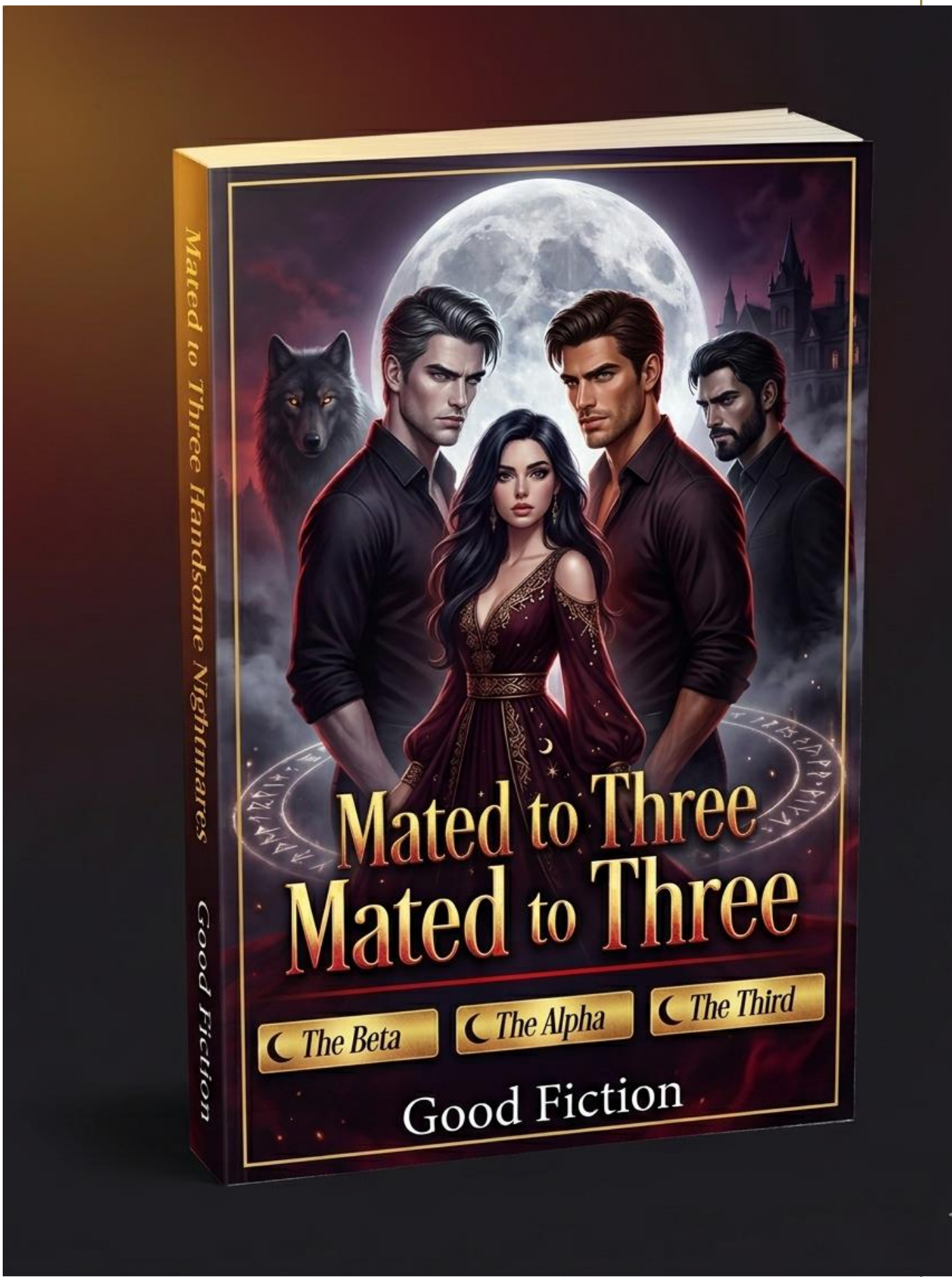
Mated to Three Handsome Nightmares
Good Fiction
Mated to Three
Mated to Three
The Beta
The Alpha
The Third
Good Fiction

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Chapter 1

Lyra's POV

My hands shook uncontrollably, tears streaming down my face as I stared at the messages on my phone. This wasn't how I imagined the day before my wedding would be. My heart pounded in my chest, and a bad feeling settled in my stomach. I struggled to process the reality I was experiencing at that moment.

"Why? Why me?" I whispered to myself, my voice cracking, but I couldn't find any answers. It all made no sense. I read the message again, hoping against hope that I had misunderstood, but the words remained the same, cutting like a knife: "*I do not want you anymore. I am breaking this bond between us. Elise is the one for me, and I am going to be with her. She is having my child soon. Goodbye.*"

I dropped the phone onto the bed, my hands going limp. My breath hitched as I clutched my chest, feeling as if the ground was slipping away beneath me. The room seemed to spin, and I sat down, burying my face in my hands, my shoulders shaking with sobs.

That was all the message said. He didn't even have the courage to do this in person; he decided to end it over text. My fiancé eloped with my best friend the night before our wedding. How long had they been having an affair behind my back, while I was blissfully unaware?

"Lyra!" I heard my father's voice faintly as he climbed the stairs. My heart raced, dread pooling in my stomach. He must have heard what Jacob had done. He was going to punish me. "Lyra!" he bellowed, kicking the door to my room open, his eyes blazing with fury.

"No, Father, please," I begged, sobbing as he stomped towards me. He grabbed a handful of my hair and slapped me hard across the face, sending me to the floor. But he wasn't finished with me.

He yanked me up by my hair again, my body trembling as I struggled against his grip, tears streaming down my cheeks. I pleaded for mercy, knowing it was futile; this wasn't the first time he had done this, and it wouldn't be the last. "You have finally succeeded in disgracing this family," he snarled, slapping me again. I didn't really know exactly why he was beating me this time, but I didn't want to find out.

He shoved me forcefully against the wall, the impact going through my body as I slid down, tears flowing from my eyes. I was too afraid to look up, my body wracked with pain almost too intense to bear. "What the hell is this?" he demanded, throwing an envelope at me. Shaking, I picked it up and opened it, my hands shaking as I sifted through the contents, praying he wouldn't hit me again—but that hope felt like a dream.

My mouth fell open in shock as I scanned the document. To my despair, I realized I was six weeks pregnant, and the father was none other than Jacob. I knew at that moment I was doomed; this was the end of my life as I knew it, and my father would never forgive me.

"How dare you spread your legs before marriage, knowing how important my name is?" he spat, his voice filled with hatred. "What if people find out you are pregnant without being married? What would they say about me?" His voice grew cold and steady as he continued, "That's right, tomorrow is your wedding. That good-for-nothing you are supposed to marry better take you away, or I swear, I could kill you tonight with the rage burning inside me."

"Father..." I choked out, tears catching in my throat. How could I possibly break this news to him and still hope to escape with my life? It seemed almost impossible, but he was going to find out sooner or later.

Jacob had told me he loved me, whispering sweet nothings that made me believe we could be together. Despite my father's objections—my father never wanted me to marry Jacob because he was just an ordinary warrior and I was the daughter of the pack's Beta. I loved him so much that instead of ending things with him like my father

had ordered me to, I decided to keep our relationship a secret. When I finally told my father I was still with him and I wanted to get married to him, my father didn't seem to care anymore as he only wanted me out of his life. He made it clear he wouldn't be attending the wedding.

“She’s not going to be getting married, apparently,” my stepmother said, her words making my heart leap in panic. I turned to see her entering the room with an evil grin, which quickly turned into a look of disgust. “This filth is useless; she couldn't even keep a man. I just got word that her fiancé ran away with her best friend,” she sneered. Pausing for effect, she added, “It seems she will have to raise a bastard child in the pack now. What an absolute disgrace.”

My father turned to me, his face contorted with anger as if he hadn't heard correctly. “What did she say?” he demanded. I shook my head, my eyes darting anxiously between my stepmother and father. Fear overtook me, and I curled into a ball, backing into the corner of the room, terrified of what they might do.

“I asked you a question!” my father shouted, making me let out a small scream as a full-blown panic attack set in. My breathing became labored, and my vision blurred. My father's silence took my silence as confirmation, and he spat, “You fucking whore.” He grabbed me by the hair and threw me against the dressing table. My head collided with the mirror in front of me shattering it, the glass tearing into my skin. “You are just like your whore mother, and you think I will let you bring shame to me? I will kill you just like I killed your mother before you can disgrace me,” he growled, continuing to hurt me.

I tried to shield my face and head, but my father's abuse was relentless. My stepmother just stood there, watching without intervening. I couldn't take it anymore; I knew there was no guarantee I would survive if this continued. “You wretch,” my father spat, raising his hand to slap me for what felt like the hundredth time. But this time, I caught him off guard as I pushed him with every bit of strength in me and bolted out of the house, running as fast as my legs could carry me.

“Somebody help me!” I screamed, even though I knew no one would come to my aid. But I couldn’t stay in that house any longer—my father would kill me, and I couldn't let that happen.

“Do not let her escape!” my father growled behind me as I ran down the stairs. Some guards blocked my path, but I quickly maneuvered around them, sprinting through the main exit without daring to look back.

I didn't know if it was the adrenaline coursing through me, but I ran faster than I ever had before. Whatever force was driving me forward, I was grateful for it. If I had known I was pregnant, I would have done everything in my power to prevent the family doctor from running tests on me after I fainted that day. But it was too late—the doctor had given my father the results, and now I was fleeing for my life and the life of my unborn child.

I heard the sound of wolves behind me but dared not look back as I ran barefoot on the road. The night was very silent, adding to the fear pounding in my chest. All this for a man who rejected me as his mate over the phone? A man who eloped with my best friend the night before our wedding because she was carrying his child? Just my luck.

I pushed through thick branches, desperate to reach the main road. I knew I was being chased, but I also knew that being caught meant certain death. I couldn't let that happen—not now, and not with a new life depending on me.

I ran onto the main road without looking, and a blinding light from the right caught my attention, accompanied by the loud sound of a car horn. In that split second, I realized a vehicle was barreling toward me at full speed, too close to avoid. All I could do was stare, frozen, as death approached.

The vehicle hit me with a painful force, sending me flying into the air before I crashed to the ground. My head hit the pavement, leaving me disoriented. I felt life slipping away, and through my blurry vision, I saw the car come to an abrupt stop. A figure, whose legs I only saw got down from the car and walked towards me frantically.

I struggled to keep my eyes open, my vision darkening as I began to surrender to the cold embrace of death. Soon, my sight faded into complete darkness, and the immense pain I had felt just moments ago disappeared. The last thing I heard was a voice saying, “You are not going to die, not yet.” But it was too late; death had already claimed me. And just like that, my life ended—all because I fell in love.

Chapter 2

Lyra's POV

I woke up with a groan, clutching my throbbing head. I struggled to open my eyes, but when I finally did, the blinding rays of sunlight streaming through the window made me wince and snap them shut again. The light felt like it was burning into my eyes.

I slowly opened my eyes once more, using my hands to shield them from the harsh light. As I sat up in bed, my movements were sluggish, and my head pounded with a strong ache. Confusion took over my thoughts. What's going on? I wondered, as my vision gradually cleared, revealing my surroundings. "Where am I?" I muttered, my voice as low as a whisper. The room was big and luxurious compared to my room at home.

"Where is this?" I whispered again, my eyes darting around the space. The memories started to come back: running from my father, the blaring horn, the sudden impact of the car. I placed a hand over my chest, feeling my heart race as panic set in. How was I alive and feeling okay? I clenched my fists, trying to calm down my breathing, desperately searching my memory for answers.

"Princess Raven," a voice called out, catching me off guard. I turned to see a maid standing there. "Oh, thank heavens you are fine," she said, smiling as she walked towards me, her eyes scanning me as if checking for injuries. I stared back, feeling confused. Who was Princess Raven, and why was she calling me that?

"Who are you?" I asked, curiosity taking over. "Where am I?" I looked around, trying to piece together my surroundings, when I noticed something odd. My long black hair was now a light brown with gray streaks. I racked my brain but couldn't recall ever dyeing my hair. What the hell is going on? I also glanced at my hands, realizing that my skin was looking unusually pale compared to my usual tan.

"What the heck?" I muttered, shifting uncomfortably in bed. Confused as the maid stared at me, her expression a blend of concern and confusion. "Is everything alright, Princess Raven?" she asked cautiously.

"Princess Raven? Who the heck is that?" I shot back, my voice rising. I swung my legs over the side of the bed, attempting to stand, but my legs felt weak, nearly giving out. I gripped the edge of the bed to steady myself. "Where am I? Why do I feel so different?" I asked, my voice shaking as I started panicking.

The maid's eyes widened in alarm. "I will get the doctor," she said hurriedly, backing away before turning and rushing out of the room, the door closing with a slam behind her. My breathing quickened, and I clenched my hands into fists, my knuckles whitening. My body doesn't feel like my own. Why was she calling me Princess Raven when that obviously isn't my name? I racked my brain, trying to make sense of it all.

Just then, my eyes caught a mirror mounted on the wall in the corner of the room. My heart was beating fast as I felt fear and curiosity pulling me towards it.

My mind raced as I walked closer to the mirror, my reflection startling me. I shook my head in disbelief. This can't be real; I must be dreaming because there's no way this is happening. The woman staring back at me was completely different from me, from her hair to her nails.

I tried to connect with the wolf inside me, but I felt nothing—it was dead silent. Is this really happening? I lifted my hand, and the reflection repeated the motion. My eyes widened in shock, and I stepped back. This was not me; the reflection was not me.

Unable to handle the situation, my head grew light, my vision blurred, and I collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

Later, I woke to the sound of low voices, my vision blurry as I opened my eyes. I saw a man and a woman talking. My groan of pain seemed to catch their attention, and the man walked over, examining me and asking various questions. I felt too weak to respond properly or even understand him fully.

The man sighed and spoke to the woman before leaving the room, leaving us alone. As my vision cleared and my senses sharpened, I mumbled, "Where am I?" I looked at the woman, who glared down at me, arms crossed over her chest.

"Just a little punishment, and suddenly you have lost your memory," she said. From her tone, I could tell she didn't like me. Her words confused me. What was she talking about? What punishment? She sighed, her expression turning hard. "How I wish you had died falling off those stairs," she added, which only confused me further. What stairs?

She took a deep breath, still glaring at me, and continued, "I don't care if you have amnesia or if you are struggling to remember who you are and all that nonsense, but just know one thing: the Alpha is coming for you tonight, and you will do as he says."

She didn't give me a chance to respond as she stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her. What a witch. She reminded me of my stepmother back home. But who is she to this woman whose body I seemed to be living in? And what was this "Princess Raven" business?

Princess Raven? The memories started flooding back. I have heard of her but could I really be in her body? Princess Raven was the princess of the Cremstone pack, and I had heard about her engagement to the Alpha of the Silverwolf pack, Alpha Orion, just before the incident that happened to me. Alpha Orion was known for his power and ruthlessness, a figure both feared and respected. The thought of meeting someone like him terrified me. How could Princess Raven be engaged to him? How was that even possible?

But then a chilling thought crossed my mind: how was I in Princess Raven's body? Or had I been Princess Raven all along, and my previous life was just a figment of my imagination or perhaps a dream when I passed out? The confusion was too much for me, and I couldn't make sense of anything.

Just then, a knock on the door broke my thoughts. A group of maids entered the room, their expressions pleased as they bowed slightly. "The lady of the house has asked us to help you get dressed," one of them said. "The Alpha will be arriving soon, so you need to be ready for his arrival."

I didn't know how to react or what to say. I simply watched as the maids went about their work, rifling through a collection of clothes I had never seen before. They dressed me in the finest, high-end designers, transforming me into something out of a fairy tale. When they finally finished, I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I had to admit, Princess Raven was stunning, but how was I trapped in her body? Why couldn't I connect with a wolf of hers?

"The woman of the house requests that you stay here until his arrival," the maids said, bowing respectfully before exiting the room and leaving me alone with my swirling thoughts.

Who was that woman? I tried to recall but then it hit me. She was the mistress of the Alpha before he died, and now, for some reason, she was in charge of the house instead of Princess Ravenna. What could she be plotting? I could tell she was in trouble.

As I sat in the room, contemplating my next move, a maid arrived to inform me that the Alpha had arrived. I took a deep breath, bracing myself for the encounter. The maid escorted me out of the room and down the stairs. My heart pounded in my chest, but I couldn't help but admire the house's beauty. The interior was nothing short of extravagant.

As I made my way down the stairs, the mistress of the house shot me a glare. "Wait and sit here. The Alpha will join you shortly. And remember what I said—you will do everything he asks of you." I nodded, settling into the couch and glancing around the lavish interior, still questioning whether this was all a dream or if it was real. My mind raced, struggling to understand the situation.

I clasped my nervous hands together, waiting for the Alpha's arrival. A maid walked towards with a smile, offering me a glass of water. "Do you want some water?" she

asked, extending the glass toward me. I was about to politely decline when I noticed her smile fade immediately. Her eyes locked on something behind me, and fear took over her. She stepped back quickly, abandoning the water without a word.

Curious, I turned toward the direction she had looked, my heart racing as I wondered who or what could have frightened her so much that she had to run away. My gaze met his cold, silver eyes, making my heart almost leap from my chest. He sat on a couch opposite me, relaxed and confident, studying me from head to toe. This had to be him. The aura around him was very cold, radiating nothing but danger despite him not saying a word. Was this what Alpha Orion looked like? I had never seen him before, as he rarely made public appearances. But one thing was certain: he was ruthless in the stories I have heard about him, and the way he looked at that moment confirmed the stories. Danger was all I could think of the more I stare at him.

Then something surprising happened: I felt my wolf stirring within me, a feeling that was very familiar. It was my same wolf I had grown up with “Nara”, not a different one. This definitely meant that the body I was in wasn't my own; it belonged to someone else. I wasn’t crazy—I had indeed had a life of my own before. If Nara was with me then this isn't my body and this isn't my life I am living.

At first, relief came over me as I felt the comforting feeling of having my wolf again. But then, as his stirrings grew more strong, I understood what it meant when she reacted like this. Suddenly, in a whisper as soft as a breath, she said, "Mate..."

The word hit me very hard. Could he really be my mate? Was it possible to have another mate besides the man who had abandoned me? Was he my second chance mate? I had heard that some people were lucky enough to find such a thing, but I never thought it would happen to me. Now, it seemed the moon goddess had decided to toy with my fate, and I was left battling with this new, shocking twist in my life.

“You’re my mate?” the man I assumed to be Alpha Orion asked, his shock written all of over his face. But if he had been with Princess Raven before, he must have known she was his mate—so why was he suddenly acting surprised? The next question he asked sent a shiver down my spine. “Why do you smell different? The last time we met,

there was no mate bond between us." He paused, a frown growing on his face before adding, "Why are you suddenly my mate? Who are you?"

Chapter 3

Lyra's POV

I stared at the man before me, utterly speechless. I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out as his eyes roamed up and down my frame. I had to admit, Alpha Orion was the most attractive man I had ever seen—with his chiseled jaw, impressive physique, and striking features. But I was too frightened to appreciate his looks in that moment; everything felt way too intense. I was scared.

"What the fuck will I use a mate for?" he snapped. His harsh tone made it clear he was not happy with the idea of a mate bond. But why would something so beautiful as a mate bond make him feel so disgusted? I couldn't make sense of it at all.

I gulped nervously, seeing his growing impatience, which frightened me even more. "He is definitely not going to like the idea of a mate between us," the man said, as I opened my mouth to ask a question, only to shut it again, lacking the courage to speak. What was going on? Who was this person he mentioned who wouldn't like the idea of a mate bond?

"Beta Keto, you are here," the rude woman said, appearing out of nowhere. Her face was filled with fear and respect as she walked towards the man, who remained relaxed, his eyes focused on me. Beta? This was his Beta. The rude woman who called herself the woman of the house, whose name I later discovered was Ruth, glanced around as if searching for something and asked, "Where is the Alpha now?"

"He couldn't make it today; he had some important matters to deal with," the man replied, rising to his feet and adjusting his suit. "The princess will be coming with me. The Alpha will meet her at home" With that, he stood up and walked out of the house, while Ruth turned to me and said, "What's going on here? How can you be the Beta's mate? You have met him before, and you weren't his mate. How did this happen?"

I had no answer for what was happening. I opened my mouth to say, “I really don’t remember anything,” but it was a lie. How could I explain that I was a lonely soul trapped in the princess’s body? It is not going to make any sense because it doesn't even make sense to me at that moment.

“Oh, shut up,” Ruth snapped, cutting me off. “One more word from you and I will push you from a balcony this time.” She glanced around frantically to ensure no one was listening. “Don’t forget our plan. Seduce the Alpha if you need to. We need him on our side and you have to break that stupid bond with the Beta. Our plans can’t fail.” I was at a loss for words as she pushed me forward, urging me to move.

I glanced back to meet her cold, icy stare before taking a deep breath and walking out of the house. A sleek black car waited for me just outside. I entered the car, where the Beta was already seated in the back seat. I took a seat close to him, trying to steady my nerves.

He didn’t say a word, preferring silence, and I couldn’t think of any meaningful words either. My entire world had taken a sudden turn. What business did I have with the Alpha, and why did it seem necessary to seduce him to achieve my goals? As for the Beta, how was I supposed to break the mate bond? It seemed strange, but I already felt so drawn to him that breaking the bond might be difficult.

“If you know what is best, don’t tell the Alpha about this. I will find a solution to this nonsense soon,” he said dismissively. I merely stared at him, unable to find the courage to respond.

We soon arrived at a grand mansion, with the Beta remaining silent throughout the drive and making no effort to address the mate bond any further, which was confusing. “This way, ma’am,” a maid said politely, her expression cold as she added, “Come with me.” By then, the Beta had already disappeared, but I didn’t think about it. I had more pressing matters at hand—namely, meeting Alpha Orion and understanding this situation with him.

“He is working out in the gym right now, but he wouldn’t mind talking to you,” the maid said as we arrived in front of a door.
Is working out the important matters he had to deal with that stopped him from coming.

It was a private gym in the Alpha's mansion as the maid slowly pushed the door open. The space wasn't large, but it was well-equipped, with various pieces of exercise equipment arranged neatly. From the corner of the room, I spotted a figure drinking water from a glass. He seemed to notice me as he finished his drink, setting the cup down and fixing his stare on me.

He walked toward me, his eyes locked on mine, and stopped right in front of me, his tall frame towering over mine. Standing at exactly 6'4", he was even more good looking than the Beta. His dark hair, damp with sweat from his workout, clung to his face, giving him a rugged, and very manly look. He wore a fitted sleeveless gym shirt that brought out his impressive biceps and a pair of athletic joggers that highlighted his powerful physique. I gulped, unable to tear my eyes away from him, he was so hot. At that moment, something occurred to me.

Just like before, I felt an attraction I couldn't explain, and it seemed he felt it too, as his expression shifted for a moment before quickly returning to normal. My wolf stirred again, adding to my confusion as the Alpha and I locked eyes. Suddenly, Nara, my wolf whispered, "Mate..."

"Mate?" I asked, shocked. How could this be possible? The Alpha and I were supposed to be mates? but the Beta was already my mate. What was happening? How could I have two mates at the same time? What cruel game was the universe playing with me? Was my wolf perhaps mistaken?

“A mate?” The Alpha seemed taken aback, his deep voice sending shivers through me as he continued to stare. I felt small under his intense look, unable to look away as he asked, “How exactly are you my mate all of a sudden?” It felt like déjà vu, as the Beta had said something very similar.

I felt his hand under my chin, lifting my face slowly so we locked eyes. My heart raced as I struggled to find the right words. “What a shame you are my mate,” he said, his eyes boring into mine. “It seems I will have to punish you ten times harder than I intended for daring to be my mate.” His words shocked me, and my heart pounded furiously. His tone was so psychopathic that it sent shivers down my spine. What was he planning to do to me? Why would he punish me for something I can't control?

Suddenly, I heard a very familiar voice say, “They are ready, sir?” It shocked me to the core. No, it couldn’t be him—perhaps I was imagining things. Alpha Orion glanced at the person behind me before nodding and then looking back at me. His hands remained on my chin as he gently caressed my face with his thumb. The small gesture stirred something within me that I couldn’t quite describe at the moment.

“I guess I will have to play with you later,” he said, removing his hand from my face and walking away. I stood there, dumbfounded, struggling to process everything that had just happened.

The familiar voice that had announced something to the Alpha spoke again, “What do you think you are doing, Raven?” no it can't be him. But the voice was too familiar. I turned to find Jacob standing there. My heart nearly leaped out of my chest as our eyes met. “Jacob?” I called out, stunned. This was my fiancé, the man who had left me just a day before our wedding. What on earth was he doing here?

“Shhh,” he said, placing a finger over his lips as he walked closer. “Here, my name is Kevin. Don’t use my real name.” He closed the distance between us while I stared at him, trying to make sense of the situation. What was he doing here? Why was he here now, especially after running away with my best friend a day before my wedding?

“We have a mission, Raven, and you need to stick to it,” he said, gently grabbing my hands. “You have to seduce the Alpha at all costs. Use your charms—you are pretty, so make the most of it.” He glanced around nervously, then leaned in to whisper, “Ruth told me about your mate's bond with the Beta. I don’t know how that’s possible since you are supposed to be mated to me,” he said. I didn’t feel any mate bond between us.

We had been mates before, but he had broken the bond. Does that mean the original owner of this body was mated to him too just like me? What is going on here?

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Just make sure you break that mate bond so the Alpha doesn’t suspect anything.” He paused, looking around nervously, before leaning in to give me a kiss on the lips. What the hell? Did he just kiss me or should I say Princess Ravenna? “Once this is all over and we have the money we need, we will pay Ruth off so she can leave you alone, go far away, and be together. Just do your part and seduce him more.” With that, he walked out of the gym room.

I stood there, dumbfounded, unable to process what was happening. The entire situation felt confusing. What connection does Princess Raven have with Jacob? What were they planning with Ruth, and what is the need to pay her off so I can be free? Why do they need me to seduce the Alpha? So many questions, but I had no answer to any of them. What the heck is going on?

Chapter 4

Lyra's POV

I stood in the middle of the gym, my head turning like a rollercoaster.

My lips still ached from where Jacob had kissed me just minutes ago.

Jacob, my fiancé, the guy who'd jilted me some days ago, leaving me heartbroken and shattered to pieces.

And yet, somehow, it feels like I'm stuck with him again.

He even has the mind to kiss me, like we were lovers.

I felt really annoyed and frustrated at the same time. I was confused as fuck.

While I was still trying to process the whole jargon flowing through my head, I heard the gym door opening.

I turned to look and saw Alpha Orion walk in.

My goodness, this dude looks like a smoking mountain, or a freaking giant.

Everything about him was intimidating as hell, down to the way he looks at me, the exact kind of look a lion would give to a puppy. It made me feel very uncomfortable.

Slowly, I placed my sweaty palms on my gown and tried to act like nothing was wrong.

Orion stopped a few distances away from me and crossed his arms over his chest.

“If you think the fact that we’re mated is going to make me treat you differently, then you’re setting yourself up for a shocking discovery.”

I froze, losing my breath for a second.

Why is he even getting married to Ravenna or whoever the fuck owns this body I'm trapped in if he doesn't care one bit about her.

The thoughts of what he might have in store for me terrified me, but my expression remained neutral.

I wouldn't let him see how much his words terrified me. I am used to the rejections anyway, so if he rejects me here and now, I wouldn't care less, I don't even know him enough to love him.

But then Orion’s eyes narrowed, and he took a step closer. “What do you have to do with Kevin?” he asked. “I heard you two talking when I left.”

My heart felt like a sinking ship. Did he see Jacob kissing me? I panicked, perhaps he heard us.

For fuck sake, why do I keep going from trouble to trouble.

I didn’t even know how to answer him, so I just kept my mouth shut.

He groaned, the kind of sound that means only one thing: anger. Especially with the way his jaw tightened.

He stepped even closer, towering over me, and pointed a finger right at my chest. “How do you know Kevin?” he demanded, “And if you lie, I don’t mind killing you tonight.”

The air left my lungs. Killing me? He’d really do that? My hands shook so bad, I had to roll them into fists to stop the shaking.

His eyes were like lasers, piercing through me for answers.

At that moment, I knew, one wrong word, and I might not walk out of this gym alive.

I opened my mouth again, but there were no words.

I was trapped, caught between Jacob's stupid game and Orion's deadly Attitude.

I had to say something, anything, but what? The truth? A lie?

My mind danced in different directions, searching for the right words, but it was all blank. All I could feel was the pounding of my pulse and the sweat on my skin.

I wanted to run, to bolt out the door and never look back, but my feet were glued to the spot.

Jacob's kiss kept replaying in my head. It had happened so fast, one second he was talking about some wicked plan, the next his lips were on mine.

My heart ached with the memory of how he'd betrayed my love for him.

I could still see his face from that day he sent. me that text message, like it was no big deal.

But Orion, he was the real problem now. My mate. The Alpha. The guy who could snap my neck without breaking a sweat. I had just met him, and he's already talking about killing me.

Orion's groan snapped me back to the moment. He was losing it, I could tell.

He stepped closer, so close I could perceive his strong masculine perfume.

"You're just thinking of the lies to come up with, aren't you?" he accused.

My jaw dropped. Lies? I hadn't even said anything yet!

"You're a whore," he spat. " You're already trying to seduce Kevin."

His words hit me hard, like a hot slap across the face.

Fear had been bubbling inside me, but now it boiled over into disgust.

A whore? Seduce Jacob? The idea made my skin crawl. Jacob or whatever the fuck his name is now, had kissed me, not the other way around, but Orion didn't care about the truth.

He'd already decided who I was. I wanted to snap back, to tell him he was wrong, but I bit my tongue.

I'd heard the rumors about him, how he crushed anyone who crossed him, how bodies disappeared after his anger flared.

If I slipped up now, who knew whose body I'd end up in next? Or maybe this time, my death would be permanent.

Orion's eyes narrowed, his voice rose with fury.

"Since you're nothing but a whore, I'll treat you like one!"

My heart slammed hard like a wave on the seashore.

I took a shaky step back, but there was no running away from him.

He turned toward the gym door and shouted, "Keto!"

The door creaked open, and Keto stepped inside.

His eyes darted between me and Orion, a quick glance that revealed nothing at all.

“Take her to the drilling pit,” Orion ordered, his tone cold. “My men are waiting.”

The drilling pit? My eyes widened in terror. What was that? The name alone sent a chill down my spine, conjuring images of dark, twisted places, holes in the ground, blood, and screams.

I didn’t know what it was or what awaited me there, but it sounded like a nightmare.

My breath caught in my throat, and my legs felt weak.

Before I could move, Keto crossed the room in four quick steps.

His hand clamped around my wrist. “No—wait!” I gasped, pulling against him, but it was like tugging on a steel door.

He didn’t even look at me, just yanked me toward the door.

Chapter 5

Lyra's POV

I couldn't stop my heart from beating very fast, it almost felt like it was going to come out of my chest.

Keto's grip on my hand was as firm as iron. He pulled me down to a dark, narrow hallway.

The air inside the hallway was cool compared to the hot air outside.

We got to a spot where I saw a set of metal stairs, and it led to what had to be an underground basement.

I became so scared, and the sheer terror of what awaited me once I got to the drilling pit hugged me tightly as we walked. What awaits me there? That question lingered in my mind like the pull of gravity.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, even though my voice was shaky.

It was quite obvious from my voice that I was really scared, but I couldn't help it.

Keto didn't answer. He just kept walking as though he was deaf and dumb.

His refusal to answer my question made my stomach hurt. I haven't heard any tales about Keto, unlike Orion, but I could tell he was loyal to Orion.

I was terrified of Orion, but Keto? I wasn't sure about him, I would try to get to him.

I swallowed hard and summoned every piece of courage I had left.

I stamped my feet and yanked my arm away from his hand. He stopped immediately. “I said, Where are you taking me?”

He turned to face me, and his silver eyes scanned the area as though he wanted to be sure no one was watching.

“You’d better come with me peacefully,” he started trying to make his voice a little calm, “Don’t make this harder than it already is.”

Harder? My lungs tightened, but I stood my ground, even though my knees were shaking. “Tell me where we’re going,” I insisted, louder than I intended.

Keto sighed and ran his hand through his hair, pushing it back.

He stared at me for a while, like he was considering his options.

Then he opened his mouth to answer me.
“I’m taking you to a place where your chances of coming out in one piece are fifteen percent.”

Fifteen percent of surviving? My eyes widened in fear, and it felt like his words went through me like a spear.

For a while, I couldn't feel my legs anymore, and feverish sweat broke out across my forehead.

The drilling pit sounded like a death sentence. I'd rather find a way to escape.

“Please,” I whispered as I stepped closer to him, my hands still shaking slightly.

“Keto, please help me escape. Don’t take me to the drilling pit. I’m begging you.”

He stared at me, his expression neutral.

And for a second, it seemed like I saw something in his eyes, like confusion or conflict.

I remembered when we just met, how he was my mate, just like Orion. Perhaps I can use that as leverage to make him help me.

His eyes went soft, just a little bit, and I held on to that tiny hope. Is he torn between his loyalty to his Alpha and the bond between us?

Finally, he nodded his head. “Fine,” he said. “I’ll help you. But you have to do exactly what I say.”

I felt relieved, so much that it almost pushed me to tears.

“Okay,” I said, and nodded quickly. “I will. I'll do anything you say.”

Without warning, he bent down and carried me on his shoulder without any struggle on his part.

I gasped, and my hands instinctively grabbed his shirt to steady myself. “What are you doing? How is this helping me escape?”

“You’d slow me down if I let you walk,” he grunted as he walked.

I squirmed, and somehow, my heart started racing again.

We moved past the basement walls, but something felt odd. “Wait,” I said as I lifted my head slightly. “Why are we going deeper into the basement? Shouldn’t we be going out instead?”

Keto stopped walking, he tilted his head a little bit, “You want me to take you through the route where we came in? Orion is probably right behind us by now.”

I zipped my mouth shut. Leaving through the same route obviously wasn't a good plan. The possibility of running into Orion was high, like he said.

When Keto noticed I had no more words to say, he took it as a cue to keep going.

At least he was helping me. I didn't know how, but if I had any chance of escaping, he was my only option.

We reached a staircase that was sort of narrow and steep, which led deeper underground.

Keto didn't hesitate, he descended through the steps and I held his shirt tightly.

At the bottom, we reached a worn-out metal door. He shifted me slightly and used one of his hands to push the door open.

He stepped inside and set me down on the floor.

I still couldn't feel my legs, but I tried to steady myself.

He'd agreed to help me escape, and the least I could do was to appreciate him for risking his life to help me. So I lifted my head up to face him head-on and thank him.

But I swallowed the thanksgiving speech that was already on my lips when my eyes sighted things that looked like I was in a nightmare.

Dozens of men were scattered across the room, their eyes turned to me like a camera detecting motion.

They were huge, really huge. Some smiled at me, others just kept staring, but they all looked like monsters devoid of feelings.

The relief I felt earlier was quickly replaced by a fear that was almost suffocating.

I returned my attention back to Keto, "What is going on?" I sounded like a child on the verge of sobbing.

He wouldn't meet my eyes. He looked elsewhere. "I'm sorry," he said, "I can't risk disobeying my Alpha for you."

The words hit me like a knife to the heart.

Betrayed. He'd lied to me. He'd never planned to help me escape.

He'd brought me straight to the drilling pit, or whatever this place was.

My knees gave in, and I held the wall to prevent myself from falling.

How could I have been so stupid to believe he was actually helping me?

One of the men, a fat guy with a handkerchief wrapped around his cheek, walked closer to me.

"Looks like Alpha Orion brought us a new toy to play with," he said, smiling.

Panic enveloped me right from my head down to my toes; any moment from now, these men would be all over me.

Chapter 6

Lyra's POV

Tears stung my eyes as I turned to Keto, “What are they going to do to me?”

The men in the hall started circling around me.

They looked really cruel, and their hungry stares made me feel disgusted.

Keto folded his arms, his face hard but not as cold as Orion’s.

He took a glance at the men, then returned his gaze to me. “If I were you, I wouldn’t worry about them,” he said, “They’re the mouth. Orion’s the teeth.”

My breath seized. Orion. Of course. He was the real danger, the one who could crush me with a single word.

My eyes went to the heavy metal door we had just entered.

Good to see it was still open, but Keto's words interrupted me.

“Don’t even think about it,” He said.

But I didn’t listen. His words meant no shit to me anymore.

Panic surged all over me as I ran towards the door.

I could hear the men laughing behind me like a pack of hyenas.

The fact that Keto didn’t try to stop me should have made me worried, but I was too preoccupied with my escape plans.

I ran as fast as I could, cared less about directions, just ran as far away as possible from the drilling pit, and Orion, but I couldn't get very far away. I bumped into a pair of red eyes and froze on the spot.

Orion didn't say a word, he just held his gaze on me like a red traffic light at night.

I became paralyzed at the spot, like a statue that lacked mobility. His massive height made me feel like an ant staring up at a giant.

That made him scarier, like he could easily squeeze me without any struggle.

He wore a white singlet that hugged his body, revealing all the strong muscles and dark tattoos he had on.

“Going somewhere?” he asked.

I nodded dumbly, my head moved before I could stop it.

He twitched his lips, “Go back,” he said, gesturing his head toward the hall.

I started to turn, ready to obey just to avoid his wrath.

But then something unexpected happened within me, and the words came out before I could stop them. “I’m not yours to order around like a slave.”

Orion’s eyebrows went up, his eyes widening for a second.

It was the kind of surprise that said no one had ever disobeyed his order before, especially not a woman.

My heart pounded fast, but I couldn’t take my words back now. Although I wished I could.

“What did you say?”

I swallowed my fear, even though my hands were still shaking.

I lifted my chin up. “I’m not yours to order around like a slave,” I said, louder this time around.

Orion’s face changed, he became red with anger, though that flicker of surprise was still visible.

His gaze went to someone who was obviously behind me, but, before I could turn, I felt strong arms wrapping me from behind.

“Let me go!” I yelled, trying to yank free, but it was like fighting a steel gate.

I knew it was Keto—his grip was unmistakable.

Orion didn’t say a word as Keto carried me back into the hall, my kicks and shouts doing nothing.

The men’s laughter grew louder, mocking me.

Keto set me down inside, and I stumbled, barely catching myself.

I was about to stand when the door creaked, and Orion walked in.

He had to bend his head to fit through the frame, his height made the door looked small.

The men quickly cleared their throats and straightened up like soldiers.

Orion’s presence sucked the air out of the room, and every eye was on him—except mine.

I couldn’t look away from the ground.

“I know you’re all wondering who I have brought in this time.” Orion said.

One of the men, a huge guy with golden teeth spoke up. “She’s too weak, boss. She’s not gonna last.”

Orion chuckled, and the men took it as a cue to laugh.

I didn’t understand what they meant, but the fear in my gut told me it was bad.

“My initial plan was to let two of you have her for the night as you please,” he said casually, “She was supposed to be for me, but she’s not the kind of woman I’d want to fuck around with.”

My stomach dropped. I felt like I might vomit.

His words echoed in my head, have her for the night.

He was going to give me to these men, like I was nothing. A whore, just like he’d called me.

The men were about ten, maybe twelve. I tried hard not to cry as I stared at them.

Then one of them stepped forward. “Just give the word, boss, and we’ll take turns,” he said.

I wanted to scream, to run, but my legs were rooted to the spot.

My mind raced, searching for how to come out of this troubles, but Orion’s next words stopped my thoughts cold.

“But,” he said, pausing for effect, “she showed me something earlier. The wit of a warrior.”

I looked up, my breath catching. He was talking about what I'd said in the hallway, my defiance.

Was that a good thing? Or had I just made things worse?

Orion turned to face me, "For daring to disobey a direct order," he said, "you're going to fight my strongest female werewolf tomorrow."

The room spun. Fight? Me? I could barely stand, not to talk of fighting.

"I've heard the rumors about how strong you are, Ravenna," Orion continued, his voice mocking. "You'll prove it tomorrow."

Ravenna. My heart skipped a beat. He thought I was Ravenna. But I wasn't. I was Lyra, stuck in Ravenna's body.

Ravenna might've been a fierce fighter, but me? I'd never thrown a punch in my life.

Back home, I was the weakling, the one everyone pitied. I was never trained to fight.

Now I was supposed to face Orion's strongest werewolf? I'd be torn apart for sure.

Orion's gaze never left me, his lips curling into a cruel smile.

Sweat dripped down my face, stinging my eyes.

I wanted to beg, to tell him I wasn't Ravenna, but what good would that do?

He'd probably laugh and throw me to the men anyway.

My defiance had bought me a fight instead of a night of horror, but it felt like trading one death sentence for another.

Chapter 7

Lyra's POV

I found myself in a small room, alone with Keto. He had dragged me down here at Orion's command.

This time around, the only thing on my mind was the way Keto had betrayed me after he had agreed to help me escape.

We were alone now, and I couldn't keep the anger anymore.

"You betrayed me!" I shouted, "You said you'd help me escape, and instead you led me straight to the drilling pit!"

Keto's face didn't look like he was feeling any atom of guilt.

He crossed his arms and leaned his back on the wall like he is enjoying the whole show. "Would you have had sex with the men instead, huh?" he asked.

I scoffed at him, "Stop acting like you did me a favor, you bloody coward!"

I moved closer to him and raised my finger at his chest. "You're just Orion's errand dog, too weak to even be called a man. But you know what? I'll tell him you're my mate. Let's see how he is going to react."

Keto's eyes widened, and I could see fear spreading across his face.

He looked around the room, like he was watching out for prying ears, then he leaned in.

"I don't know what you want, but you'll be making a terrible mistake if you think telling Orion something like that will save your life."

I cut him off. “At least I won't be dying alone.”

He scowled, his jaw tightened. “Die? Who says you’re going to die? Have you forgotten you’re Ravenna? You’re as strong as Nikki. I’m more worried about her death than yours.”

I blinked my eyes, “I can’t fight,” I protested, and my voice sounded cracked.

I wasn’t Ravenna—not really. I was Lyra, trapped in her body, with none of her strength or skills.

Keto laughed, a short, mocking sound that made my cheeks burn. “Stop pretending,” he said. “I know about your exploits, Ravenna. Defeating Nikki will be easy for you.”

The urge to just tell him the fucking truth was strong, but no words came out.

How could I make him understand? I wasn’t the warrior he thought I was.

Ravenna might’ve been a legend, but I was just Lyra, scared, weak, and completely out of my league.

If I told him the truth, would he believe me? Or would he drag me back to Orion?

I pushed the panic down and clung to my anger instead. “I’m still telling Orion about our bond,” I said, “Let’s see how you squirm then.”

Keto’s eyes flashed with anger, and he stepped closer, his voice rising. “You think you’re clever? I know about your affair with Kevin. If you tell Orion about me, I’ll make sure he knows about you and Kevin. Good luck surviving that.”

Kevin? My mind blanked for a second, confusion swirling.

Then it clicked, Kevin was Jacob. My Jacob, the one who'd jilted me, who'd kissed me in the gym and dragged me into all this mess.

But an affair? I didn't understand how it all connected. Was Ravenna involved with him, too?

A strange headache disturbed me as I tried to piece it together, but I didn't have time to think.

I heard Footsteps outside the door, and Keto heard it too; he swallowed his words immediately.

He turned to face the door as it opened.

Jacob—Kevin—walked inside, and his familiar face sent a jolt of rage through me.

Keto said something about resting for tomorrow to me, but I was too focused on Jacob to hear him.

He walked past Jacob and greeted him with a nod.

Through the open door, I saw two guards stationed outside, their eyes fixed on me like hawks.

My stomach twisted. No escape.

Jacob closed the door behind him, and I wanted to scream, to demand why he kept showing up to ruin my life.

But I stopped myself. I was in Ravenna's body, and as far as anyone knew, I was Ravenna.

If I acted like Lyra, I'd blow my cover and probably get myself killed.

So, I bit my tongue, my hands clenched into fists.

He stepped closer, his eyes softening like he was about to kiss me again.

My skin crawled at the thought, but he glanced at the door, wary of the guards, and kept his distance.

Instead, he leaned in and whispered, “Nikki might be strong, but you’re stronger, Ravenna. Stick to the plan.”

I nodded, forcing my face to stay neutral, but inside, I was burning.

The plan? What plan? My mind screamed with rage.

This was the man who’d betrayed me, who’d left me for another woman and shattered my heart.

If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t be trapped in this body, in this nightmare.

The urge to lash out, to jump on him and kill him, surged through me, but I held it back. Barely.

He kept whispering, “Once you’ve seduced Orion and you sleep with him, we’ll kill him, take his money,
and run away together as lovers.”

My eyes popped wide, shock hit me like a slap. Seduce Orion? Sleep with him? Kill him? And then run away with Jacob? The man I wanted to strangle to death?

My stomach churned, and I had to clench my jaw to keep from gasping. This was the plan? Ravenna and Jacob—no, Kevin—had been plotting to murder Orion and escape as lovers?

I couldn't wrap my head around it. Was this why Jacob had kissed me in the gym? Did he think I was still part of his twisted scheme?

I nodded again, my throat tight, but my mind was a chaotic storm.

I am not Ravenna. I didn't know her plans, her strength, or her love for Jacob. All I knew was that I hated him—hated him for breaking me, for dragging me into this, for thinking I'd ever want to run away with him.

And Orion? The idea of seducing him made my skin crawl.

He was a monster, a predator who'd called me a whore and thrown me to his men. Killing him might sound good, but I wasn't a murderer. I wasn't even a fighter.

Chapter 8

Lyra's POV

Today might be the day I die. Or maybe the Moon Goddess will toss me into another body, like some cruel game of chance. Who knows?

I sat on the small bed I found in the small room, staring at the window, deep in my despair.

My life lately has been on a roller coaster of disaster upon disaster, and now, the end of it, I guess.

My hands wouldn't stop shaking, and the only form of ease I could get was to speak out loud, like I was talking to someone else in the room, even though I was alone.

“I would prefer to die honestly, facing death would by far be better than living in this ugly world, I wouldn't call it a nightmare. Nightmare was an understatement."

Then I caught the sound of the door opening behind me.

I didn’t need to turn to know who it was. That heavy push, that ghostly aura—it was Keto.

When it came to me, Orion always sent him.

Maybe I was too disgusting for the Alpha to bother with himself. Maybe he just wanted to punish me—or Ravenna, really.

I still didn’t know why he hated her so much. Was it her defiance? Her reputation? Whatever it was, I was the one stuck in her body, about to pay the price for her sins.

“It’s time to do what you’re best at,” Keto said, his voice cutting through my thoughts.

I was right. It was him. I turned my head slightly, keeping my expression neutral. “And what would that be?” I asked, my tone was so calm it surprised even me.

I was about to face death, yet here I was, steady as a rock. Weird.

“Fighting, Princess Ravenna,” Keto replied, his voice cool, like he was trying to charm me. Like he thought a few sweet words would make me forget his betrayal.

I spun to face him, and my eyes narrowed. Princess? That was new. He’d never called me that before.

What was his game?

I caught a faint smile on his lips as he crossed his arms. That smile made me more suspicious.

“What’s funny?” I snapped.

His smile widened, but it wasn’t cruel like Orion’s. “Nothing, really," he said, "Just the way you look right now is the exact same way you look when you're about to fight. So calm and composed. He sniffed in air, then continued,

“You might be a woman, but you have the strength of ten strong men.”

I smiled back at him, although it was a faint one, but he probably thought I was blushing; in fact, I was laughing at myself.

Oh, Keto, only if you knew the truth. I wasn’t Ravenna. I wasn’t some badass female werewolf with a trail of victories.

I was Lyra, the girl who’d never thrown a punch, who’d been called weak her whole life.

But I had to admit, I admired Ravenna, whoever she was.

She'd carved out a name for herself, made men like Keto believe she was unstoppable. Too bad I was the one stuck in her shoes.

"It's funny," I said, "how someone who betrayed me yesterday is now hailing me like his champion."

Keto's smile vanished, and his eyes widened slightly.

He hadn't expected me to call him out. Good. Maybe he thought I'd let it slide, that I'd be too soft and just let it go.

"Ravenna, Orion is my Alpha," he started, but I cut him off.

"And I'm your mate," I said, "Isn't it the duty of a male to protect his mate?" I scoffed as I folded my arms. "Or did you forget that part?"

Keto's head bowed, and his shoulders went down.

For a second, I saw something in his eyes, like guilt, maybe even shame.

I could tell he wasn't like Orion. Orion was a beast, but Keto? He still had a good heart.

"I'm sorry for not helping you. But someone like you should understand there's nothing I can do."

I blinked my eyes, he caught me off guard. I wasn't expecting an apology? But I wasn't going to get carried away. There had to be a catch.

But it was a good one because I was going to take advantage of his guilt, use it to get what I wanted.

If I played this right, maybe I could manipulate him into helping me escape before I had to face Nikki or Orion's wrath.

"Must you ruin your apology by insisting on being a coward?" I snapped.

I needed to push him, to make him feel worse. If I could crack his loyalty, even a little, I might have a chance.

"Yes, Ravenna," he said, "I'd rather be a coward and live than die like a brave man just because we're mated. Especially when you've never given a fuck about me since we were little."

My eyes widened. Since we were kids? So Keto and Ravenna went way back.

Had he loved her once? Did he still? The idea sent a spark of curiosity through me, but I pushed it aside.

This wasn't the time to talk about this. I had to focus on getting out of here.

His words gave me the perfect opportunity, and I was going to twist it to my advantage.

"I know you're doing this to make me change my mind about telling Orion about us," I said, folding my arms tighter. "You're scared he'll kill you if he finds out we're mates."

Keto closed his eyes, letting out a frustrated sigh. Then he opened them.

"Alright, yes," he admitted. "I don't want you to tell Orion. I don't care about us being mates if it means my death."

Perfect. I had the perfect opportunity now.

I moved closer to him, softened my voice just enough to sound concerned. "Well, I don't care about you or Orion," I said, "but I care about who becomes my mate."

I forced a small, calculated smile, the kind that could pass for sweetness.

“Look, Keto, I might’ve ignored you before, but things are different now that we’re mates.”

His eyes held mine, and I could tell he was speechless.

But I wasn't done yet, I pushed further, gently taking his hand into mine.

I held his gaze, didn't say a word, just allowed him to feel my vulnerability.

He swallowed hard, “Fuck this,” he muttered, and before I could react, he placed a hand on my hip, and pulled me close.

He planted a kiss on my lips, as almost as though he couldn't hold himself anymore.

I wasn't him to kiss me, so I hesitated, didn't know if I should push him away or just let him wallow in his own feelings for a while.

Just then, the door flew open.

We quickly let go of each other, but it was too late. My eyes darted to the door to see a massive figure in the doorway; his eyes were burning with rage.

Chapter 9

Lyra's POV

Keto stepped back, his face went pale in an instant, but he didn’t say anything. I couldn't say anything either, my throat was too tight to speak.

The figure at the door walked in, and for a moment, I almost opened my mouth to sigh in relief.

It was Jacob, or Kevin, they called him Kevin around here.

Kevin's eyes flicked between me and Keto, and I could feel the heat of his anger.

He had seen the whole thing, but I am kind of happy he was the one, not Orion.

Infact, I was drunk in happiness that he saw it. The anger and jealousy in his eyes made me joyous, so joyous I almost forgot about the battle ahead.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Kevin growled.

He took a step forward, and I almost laughed.

My gaze went to Keto, and our eyes met. Somehow, I could tell he was relieved, but there's more; he probably was wondering if he was the one Kevin was talking to or if it was me.

I don't think Kevin knew that Keto was aware of his affair with Ravenna, but I knew he wouldn't be foolish enough to cause a scene here and make it known to Keto that he was in love with me, or is it Ravenna now?

I opened my mouth to speak, but Keto beat me to it.

"Are you referring to me or her?" he asked, his words came in sharp, as though he was daring Kevin to be bold.

But Kevin cleared his throat, lost for words, "I came to see Ravenna before she leaves for battle," he said, his tone softer now, like he was trying to cover his tracks.

Keto gave me a quick glance, then walked out without another word.

I watched him go, and Kevin's eyes followed him too as he walked out of the door.

Kevin waited until Keto closed the door before turning to face me.

“The assignment was to seduce the Alpha, not the Beta,” he said, gritting his teeth.

For a second, I couldn't help but wonder if Ravenna actually loved Kevin.

He claimed to love her, yet he was pushing her to sleep with Orion for some twisted idea of “freedom.”

I cleared my throat, still figuring out how to be in Ravenna's character, but it was hard. I wasn’t her. I was Lyra, and I didn’t know how to tolerate Jacob.

If he tried to kiss me again, I swore by the Moon Goddess, I’d kill him without looking back.

“Why are you here?” I asked, ignoring his accusation.

He stepped closer, his voice softened. “You’re my sweetheart, Ravenna. Should I have any reason to see you?”

Sweetheart? I wanted to vomit. In my head, I screamed, Your sweetheart is dead! But I kept my face neutral and clenched my hands at my sides.

“If you keep checking up on me, you’ll get me in trouble,” I said, “Orion already suspects there’s something between us. You’re giving him more reasons to believe it.”

All I wanted was for him to back off, forever, if possible.

I hated him more than I’d ever hated anyone.

He gritted his teeth. “Orion thinks he’s all-powerful, but if all goes well, I’ll be the one to kill him.”

I almost laughed at the thought. Although a fight between the both of them would be a pleasure to behold.

As much as I despised Orion, I’d pay to see him pluck out Kevin's teeth.

The image of Kevin’s disfigured face, painted with blood and broken, was almost enough to make me forget my fear. Almost.

Before I could say any other word, one of the guards from the door stepped inside.

“It’s time,” he said, not even glancing at Kevin. “You should come with us now.”

I looked at Kevin, “May the Moon Goddess favor your cause, like she always does.”

I didn’t answer. I just followed the guard out, with each step leading me to the slaughter.

The house was small, more like a brothel than an apartment, with faint lights and colorful drawings of unclad ladies on the walls.

Other doors lined the hallway, probably holding more prisoners or fighters like me.

I should’ve been panicking, screaming, begging to be let go.

But I wasn't. I was calm—too calm. It was like I'd already surrendered to death, like some part of me had accepted this was the end. Or maybe I was just numb, too tired to even feel nervous.

Outside, Keto was waiting by a white Lexus, his expression was unreadable.

My eyes darted to the gym across the street, the one that led to the drilling pit.

Was that where we were going? My chest tightened at the thought of facing Nikki in that hellhole.

"Don't worry," Keto said, opening the car door for me. "Orion's not around."

I slid into the backseat, and Keto got in beside me.

He nodded to the guards, who bowed and stepped back, their eyes fixed on me like I might try to run away.

The driver started the engine, and the car pulled away.

"I thought the fight was in the drilling pit," I said, keeping my eyes on the window as the streets moved past us. "Where Orion and his men could watch."

Keto grinned, and I saw it from the corner of my eye. "There's no way a battle this big would be behind closed doors," he said. "Different clans are coming from all over to watch. It's like a clash of Titans. Only a stadium can handle that kind of crowd."

My eyes widened in shock, and my heart sank.

A stadium? I was going to die in front of a crowd?

The thought of dying in front of crowds made my mouth go dry.

Honestly, I'd pictured the drilling pit, but a stadium? With thousands of eyes on me, cheering as Nikki rips me apart piece by piece.

My hands started to shake, and I clasped them together to hide it from Keto.

Chapter 10

Lyra's POV

“I want you to tell me about Nikki, what's she like?” I asked, I turned to face him this time. “I want to know about the strongest female werewolf Orion is so proud of.”

Keto turned to face me, “She’s a beast,” he said. “She is extremely fast and ruthless. But you’re Ravenna. You've taken down worse, I'm sure you can handle her."

His words didn’t help. It only made the unease in my chest stronger.

The more explanation he gave about how strong Ravenna was or Nikki's fighting exploits, the more it dawned on me that I was screwed.

I took my gaze away from him to the window, in a bid to look for something to distract me.

I could see the massive structure ahead of us, the stadium, just like Keto had said.

It had a gray concrete wall with colorful banners around it.

Crowds were already gathering outside. I rolled down the window, and their voices made my skin prickle.

This was the place, I'm sure of it. The place where I’d either fight like Ravenna or die as Lyra.

I pushed the door open, my legs were already shaking, but I steadied my breath and stepped out of the vehicle.

Keto gestured with his head that I follow him.

I took another deep breath, walked by his side.

People kept looking at me as I walked past them, whispering Ravenna's name with excitement in their eyes.

"They're here for you, Ravenna," Keto said.

I didn't answer. I just kept walking, my calm disposition did a good job, it concealed the storm within me.

I followed Keto as we navigated through corridors into the stadium.

He took me into the stadium's tunnel, I assumed we were headed to one of the dressing rooms.

The noise from the crowds was disturbing.

I'd never faced any kind of crowd before, let alone one of this magnitude.

"Why aren't you taking me to the stands?" I asked.

Keto raised his eyebrow. "You're not here to watch, Ravenna. You're here to fight. We'll wait here until it's time."

I remember seeing two fighters on the field as we walked in, but I was too lost in my own unease to pay attention.

"You need to change into something more... suitable," Keto's voice cut in, his eyes fixed on my red top and black jeans.

"I didn't bring any extra clothes," I said.

I had no idea what Ravenna would've worn, and I wasn't a fashionista in life-or-death situations.

Keto didn't say anything; he just walked to a locker in the room and unlocked it.

He pulled out a red Lycra suit and handed it to me.

I stared at it for a while. It looked like something those superheroes from Fantastic 4 would wear, not a terrified girl trapped in a warrior's body.

I cleared my throat, "You need to give me some space so I can change."

Keto's cheeks flushed slightly. "Right. Sorry." He turned to face the lockers, with his back to me.

I didn't dress up immediately, I watched him to make sure he wasn't going to look back, then I quickly changed.

The Lycra was tight; it hugged every curve of Ravenna's body, my body.

I glanced at Keto again; he was still facing the locker. "Okay, I'm done," I said...

He turned around, and his eyes popped wide open.

For a while, he just kept staring at me. I could tell he was struggling to take his eyes away.

I must have looked really good in the suit, judging by the way his face turned red.

I shifted uncomfortably, cleared my throat.

Before he could say anything, his phone buzzed.

He pulled it out, his expression changed as he read the screen. "It's Orion," he said, "It's time."

My heart dropped. The word 'Time' has never terrified me like it did today.

There is no running away from this anymore, fighting was inevitable, death too, probably.

Keto led me through the same tunnel, and the distant roar of the crowd resumed again.

We passed a few people, other fighters or crew, I couldn't tell.

Their eyes were hard, and some spat on the ground as I walked by.

I ignored them, my chin was high. I was used to humiliation. It wasn't new.

We stopped at the tunnel's entrance, where the field opened up before us.

My breath caught. The stadium was massive, packed with thousands of people, and their cheers shook the air.

I saw dead bodies being dragged by some people off the field.

I felt my stomach twist, and I placed my hand on the wall to steady myself.

The sight of those bodies really made me sick; I felt like throwing up. Was that going to be me soon? I wondered.

A loud voice rang through the speakers in the stadium, it almost got me startled.

I knew that voice, it was Orion's.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the hour we've been waiting for is finally here!" he announced, and the crowd erupted with their loud cheers.

I glanced at Keto, but his gaze was somewhere else.

Orion's voice continued, "For a long time, we've kept female werewolves in the shadows while the men took the spotlight of glory. But that changes tonight!"

It smelled like a political showoff. I knew Orion didn't care about female fighters, he was probably using this to win over the clans who'd traveled to watch.

It was a show, and I was the sacrificial lamb.

The crowd roared louder, "Today," Orion went on, "we have two strong female fighters in the building. Let's welcome the finest female werewolf in my clan: Nikky!"

The crowd exploded, chanting her name. "Nikky! Nikky! Nikky!"

My heart raced, and I felt disgusted.

Just then, I heard footsteps behind me.

But before I could turn, Keto's voice rang in my ears. "That's Nikky for sure."

I looked at him, but his eyes were fixed on the tunnel behind me.

Slowly, I turned, and my heart pounded so hard I thought it might leap off. Then I saw Nikky.

My jaw dropped immediately, and my eyes widened in terror. "No fucking way," I muttered under my breath

Chapter 11

Lyra's POV

Nikky was tall, like 7 feet high, taller than most men. She looked more like a man than a woman.

She had the tattoo of a serpent on her neck, and her face looked rough.

The way she walked scared the wits out of me.

Then she paused as soon as she reached where I was.

She fixed her gaze on me. “I’m going to avenge my sister’s death,” she said, “I know you killed her, Raven.”

I couldn’t speak. My throat locked up, and all I could do was stare as she turned and strode onto the field, her braid swinging like a horse's tail.

Killed her sister? The words kept playing in my head.

What kind of life had Ravenna lived? And why was I the one stuck paying for it?

Orion’s voice snapped me from my thoughts as he continued through the speakers.

“And now, I present to you, Princess Ravenna!”

My heart sank. Ravenna. Not Lyra. The name felt like a chain around my neck.

I froze, my feet glued to the tunnel floor.

The crowd started cheering me up, but it died down slowly when they didn't see me.

The silence was worse than the noise, it was like they were waiting to judge me.

Keto tugged my shoulder to move.

I took a deep breath and forced my legs to move.

Each step I took felt like walking through mud, but I kept walking until I was out in the open.

The crowds resumed again, their noises banging hard in my ears..

I was stunned, they weren't booing, they were cheering louder than they had for Nikky.

Shouts of “Ravenna!” and “Princess!” filled the stadium.

I hadn’t expected this. I thought they’d hate me, especially with Orion’s hatred hanging over my head. But it seemed Ravenna was a star here, loved by the people.

I stole a glance at Orion, he was standing on the stands.

He was smiling, but it was fake, a show for the crowd.

The cheers washed over me, and I felt a stirring inside me.

The crowd’s positive energy sparked a calmness I hadn’t felt since Keto came to my room.

I stood a few feet from Nikky, who was frowning at me, with her fists clenched.

We were waiting for the signal to fight, but the crowd wasn’t done.

They kept chanting, “Princess! Princess! Princess!”

I couldn't help it, I smiled. It was just a small one, but it felt good.

Nikky scoffed; she was clearly provoked.

If this was Ravenna's life, crowds cheering, people chanting her name, it was a damn good one. Better than mine had ever been.

Orion was her only problem, but aside from him, I was starting to think I could get used to being Ravenna.

Orion raised his hands, motioning for silence.

The crowd went quiet, eager to hear him.

"This is a battle between the Creamstone Pack and the Silverwolf Pack," he announced, "If Ravenna wins, she stands a chance of becoming Luna of my pack, a position vacant since I became Alpha."

The crowd went wild, and my jaw tightened, but Orion wasn't done.

"If she loses this fight, and Nikky wins," he said, "it'll give me sovereignty over the Creamstone Pack."

The crowd's reactions became divided; some cheered, others booed.

My eyes narrowed. So that was his plan all along. This fight wasn't just about punishing me or Ravenna.

Orion was aiming for power, using me as a means to expand his territory.

"The fight will be in two rounds," Orion continued. "The first round will be in human form. First to draw blood wins."

The crowd murmured, unimpressed. It seemed like drawing blood wasn't high-stakes enough for them.

I could tell Orion was holding back, toying with their expectations. He was too cunning to leave it at that.

"The winner of the first round," he said, "will be given a weapon for the second round, where they must shape shift to fight." He paused for a while, then continued. "This round will be a fight to the death."

The crowd cheered again, they obviously loved the higher stakes, higher stakes meant greater tension.

I felt sick, and my calm demeanor faltered again.

"Let the fight begin," Orion said, raising his hands to the sky before taking his seat.

Before I could process his words, Nikky moved.

She crossed the distance between us in a heartbeat, her fist aimed straight at my face, my mouth, maybe.

I didn't think. I just reacted, ducking to the side.

The crowd roared, and I blinked, shocked. I'd dodged her. Me. Lyra? How come?

I glanced at Orion, he looked displeased. He hadn't expected that.

Good. I raised my hand, rallying the crowd, and they took the cue, they raised their voices again.

"Ravenna! Ravenna!" they shouted.

As they shouted, a faint memory flashed in my mind, and a voice I didn't recognize spoke up.

"A good fighter believes in her strength and weapon, but a better fighter draws strength from everything around her, the sand, the crowd, the air, even her opponent."

Was it Ravenna's memory? It had to be. I'd never heard fighting advice before, but it lit a fire in me, a confidence I didn't know I had.

I darted towards Nikky, curving my fist toward her face, but it was a false blow, a trick to distract her.

She moved her head back to dodge, just as I'd anticipated.

In the same motion, I swept my leg toward hers, it took her by surprise.

Her knees wobbled, and she staggered to the ground.

The crowd went wild, chanting, "Raven! Raven! Raven!"

I stood over her, breathing hard, but I didn't attack.

Another memory flashed through me again, the same male voice.

"Let your opponent think they're winning. Use this time to study their moves." Ravenna's training class was definitely playing in my head.

I didn't know why it was happening, but I held on to it.

Orion rose to his feet, his eyes widened with disbelief.

I smirked, took in his shock like a delicious meal.

Nikky got up, and her face twisted with anger.

She hesitated, careful now, and I used the moment to study her.

Her legs were her weakness, I knew instinctively she was going to prevent me from hitting her legs again.

I dashed forward, and the crowd's cheers fueled me.

Instead, Nikky surprised me, she used her bigger frame to her advantage, and she caught me in an embrace.

Her grip around me tightened; she was squeezing the air from my lungs.

I winced, and the crowd booed her.

Panic washed over me, but instinct immediately took over.

I bit hard on her breast, my teeth sank deep into her skin through her Lycra.

Nikky screamed in pain and immediately released me.

I broke free, and in a split second, I threw an uppercut.

My fist went straight to her jaw, and a tooth flew out.

Nikky staggered backward, then fell to the ground.

The crowd exploded with their cheers.

I stood there, breathing hard, and my hands trembled with adrenaline. I'd won the first round.

I couldn't help it, I looked at Orion. He was clapping, but it was forced.

I'd beaten Nikky, at least for now, and I'd done it in front of him.

But the fight wasn't over. Round two was coming, a fight to the death in wolf form. Could I shift? Is winning possible?

Chapter 12

Lyra's POV

Nikky quickly rose up on her feet, her eyes flashing with rage as she spat some blob of blood on the ground.

Then she smiled at me, her teeth stained with blood, and somehow a chill went through me. It wasn’t the smile of someone who’s losing or who had lost.

It was as if the blow I had given her only added more firepower.

"You do know how to fight, Ravenna. I'm impressed." She said, and then wiped off the blood on her lips with her hand.

Honestly, the whole experience seemed to freak me out. I don't know how I would have reacted if I were the one who lost a tooth.

For sure, I would be crying like a baby, and yet, a woman like me is smiling for losing a tooth.

I didn't answer her, I didn't even know what to say, part of me wanted to even apologize for maiming her like that, but the other part of me, the strange part, didn't want me to act like a coward.

So I took a quick glance at Orion, I could see him rubbing his temples from the corner of my eye.

Something was really off, I could tell. Nikky and Orion knew something I didn’t, and that scared me more than the fight itself.

“Time for round two,” Orion announced through the speakers.

Then he turned to me, “Princess Ravenna, pick your weapon.”

The way he pronounced the word “Princess” felt cringed. It was obviously all for show, a mockery in front of the crowd.

I scanned through the weapons laid out beside him on the stand: swords, axes, spears, daggers, chains, tridents, javelins, shields, etc. All ancient weapons used in battles.

My mind went blank. I didn't know what to pick, or better still, what Ravenna would have chosen.

I also didn't know how to use any of them.

Then another memory flashed into my mind, “Werewolves are fast and sensitive to weapons. Always pick one that’s less obvious to the sight.”

I took a deep breath and stepped toward Orion. “I choose the dagger,” I said, my voice louder than I expected.

Orion’s lips curled into a smile, but it wasn’t genuine.

“Typical Ravenna, renowned for her daggers.”

He tossed two small, silver daggers toward me.

I picked them up in my hands, then the memories surfaced again.

“Most werewolves in their full form don’t know how to fight with weapons. They fight like beasts. To be exceptional, you must master the discipline to fight with weapons, even as a werewolf.”

I turned to face Nikky, she was already transforming.

One by one, her bones snapped as she grew taller and broader.

Her gray fur shot out like grass, and her fangs were thick and pointed like knives.

She was bigger in her werewolf form, more terrifying.

The crowd cheered, and I saw some exchanging coins, betting on who'd win.

My stomach twisted. To them, this was entertainment. To me, it was life or death.

My eyes darted to the tunnel entrance, searching for Keto. He was still there, his face blank, unreadable. Not impressed, not worried, just neutral.

My chest tightened. If he'd helped me escape, I wouldn't be here, bleeding and terrified. But he'd chosen Orion over me.

I glanced at the daggers in my hands, then made a quick decision.

I threw them to the ground a few feet away, their blades sunk into the dirt with a soft thud.

The crowd roared, they found the stunt entertaining.

I didn't know where that move came from, Ravenna's instincts, maybe, but it felt right.

The cheers fueled me, pushing back the fear for a moment.

Nikky let out a loud growl and charged towards me.

I ran toward her and tried shifting, too.

I'd never done it before, but Ravenna's body should know how, right?

I groaned, willing my bones to crack, my fur to shoot. But nothing happened.

My heart sank in utter fear. I couldn't shift. I was stuck in human form,

The slip off cost me. Nikky reached me before I could get to the daggers; her claws went deep into my stomach.

Pain coursed through me, and I screamed as she threw me like a toy.

I hit the ground hard, and the impact knocked the air from my lungs.

The crowd gasped, and their cheers turned to murmurs of shock.

I tried to move, to stand, but my body was too weak to obey.

The crowd started booing Nikky, waving their hands in anger.

They could see the fight wasn't fair anymore. I was human, bleeding, and she was a werewolf.

I looked at Orion, hoping, praying that he'd stop this. He wanted me gone; that was obvious.

But he hesitated, which made me realize he was weighing his options, his eyes kept flickering between me and the crowd.

I searched for Keto, but he was gone. My heart sank further. Even he'd abandoned me.

The booing grew louder, and objects, cups, were thrown down at Nikky.

Finally, Orion stood up from his seat, he raised a hand for silence. "The fight is no longer fair," he said, "Ravenna is unable to shift. Nikky, I order you to stand down."

The crowd cheered him up for his fair judgment.

I let out a hot breath, even as my vision blurred with pain.

Maybe I'd survive this after all. But Nikky didn't move.

Her yellow eyes locked onto me, and she exchanged a quick glance with Orion.

Something passed between them, something I couldn't read.

"No," Nikky snarled, pointing a bloodstained claw at me. "She dies."

Before I could react, she leapt into the air, her massive form soaring toward me, claws outstretched.

Time slowed. My body screamed at me to move, but I was too weak, too broken.

The crowd's gasps faded into a dull roar, and all I could see was Nikky's fangs, her eyes burning with hate. This was it. I was going to die.

Chapter 13

Lyra's POV

I snapped my eyes closed like a door slammed shut, bracing for death.

I had expected it sooner, but it lingered, stalking me like a wild cat before closing the distance to take me beyond.

How does death feel like? Some say it's a quick sleep, painless. Others said death is faster than time, hits you within the twinkling of an eye, but I had waited for seconds now, no transition, just silence.

I had expected Nikki's claws to be on my throat by now, slicing it open like a blade on paper.

Perhaps the moon goddess had, in her benevolence, teleported me into another body again.

I opened my eyes, willing to see why the beast didn't make good on her death promise.

Just then, a pool of blood was splashed across my face, the smell of iron filled my senses, but the blood wasn't mine.

My mouth opened widely in utter shock, my breath came in hard, although my vision remained blurred, but I could see an object rolling like a ball towards me.

As soon as my sight cleared, my eyes widened in surprise. You'd have called it an owl's eyes if you were there.

The ball was no ball, it was the head of Nikki on the ground, her eyes wide open but devoid of life, and her tongue protruded out of her mouth, like a slaughtered ram.

Standing beside her severed, lifeless body was the man who had wagered my death at the hand of Nikki.

It was Orion, he had killed Nikki, to save my life? The very life he wanted off the grid.

No, monsters don't save lives, he probably did it because Nikki defiled his order, or he did it to gain the support of the crowds.

I had always avoided his red eyes, but this time around, I didn't. We kept the stare for a while, then he smiled, not at me, at the crowds.

They were cheering him up like a footballer who had just scored a penalty at the last minute in a final cup match.

He had somehow become the champion of a battle he didn't fight, and he savored the glory as the crowds kept chanting his name.

"Orion! Orion! Orion!" They chanted in unison.

Part of me felt grateful that he had rescued me, but another part of me felt like he shouldn't; I was already tired of living.

"It has been a wonderful time," Orion announced, turning like the Earth on its own axis to address the crowds in the stadium.

"Lots of you have traveled far and near to watch this battle, but I assure you, this is only the beginning." He yelled, raising his hand to rally them up.

They clapped for him; their claps echoed like thunder off the stadium.

Then one by one, they began to leave, and the well-organized stadium became a market of werewolves going in different directions.

Orion turned to me, his white shirt still stained with Nikki's blood.

"I see you weren't entirely useless today; I had expected your death in the first round." He said, while he extended his hand towards me as support to get up on my feet.

I scoffed, ignored his hand, and tried to get up by myself. "It's a shame, your best female fighter couldn't take out a weakling like me."

It seemed like the battle had done something within me, like instill a new level of confidence I didn't have before.

Orion's smile evaporated. "If I hadn't intervened, you wouldn't have the balls to talk anymore."

"And what good have you made with your own balls, huh?" I shot back, "All you do is play around like a sick politician campaigning for election."

My eyes trailed his face, down to his hand as he clenched his fists. "Are you challenging me? Do you know what happens to those who challenge me?" He said, pointing at Nikki's lifeless body.

I should be scared, terrified, if he could kill Nikki without blinking, then killing me would be an easy thing, but I squared my shoulders.

"That's all you do," I replied, "Take glory in fighting women. You think killing Nikki makes you a champion?" I scoffed, although the pain in my stomach called for my attention.

"How about you fight a man like you, let's see if you're really as powerful as you think you're or just a giant that a small stone can bring to the ground."

He hissed, like a serpent ready to strike, but I knew he couldn't touch me, at least not here, while the crowds were still around.

Then a voice interrupted, "You fought well today, made the right moves."

My gaze quickly turned to the speaker, he was a man who appeared to be in his early forties, an alpha, I supposed, he had other men behind him like an entourage.

"Thank you very much," Orion answered, extending his hand to the man for a handshake.

The man stared at his hand for a while, before connecting his own hand for a shake. "I wasn't talking about you, Alpha Orion," he said, "I was referring to Princess Ravenna."

Orion's smile faltered, and his handshake slowed, my cheeks inflated with air like a balloon as I tried to hold back laughter.

I bowed my head slightly, "Thank you, sir," I answered.

Orion cleared his throat; he didn't say a word; he just folded his hands behind his back.

The man walked closer to me, "Tell me, Princess, are you married?" He asked.

"No, I'm not sir," I replied sharply.

"Yes, she's, she's mine." The words burst out of Orion's mouth.

The man's gaze darted between Orion and I. I could tell he was confused, wondering why our answers were different.

"You stated earlier that she stands the chance of becoming your Luna, which means she's not your Luna yet. Am I correct?" He asked, his gaze fixed on Orion.

I didn't say anything, nor give any reaction that would reveal my support for this man but yet inside of me, I was nodding off emphatically.

Orion didn't answer him; he just turned to me. "Come with me, we need to get your wounds treated."

He held my hand, but I pushed it away. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

He winced. I could tell his patience was thinning.

The man stepped in between us, his back to me, while he addressed Orion. They were almost the same height, but Orion was taller.

"Any problem?" The man asked, "Princess said she's not going with you."

"Fuck off," Orion cut in.

"No, I won't, you should be the one to fuck off," he replied.

Oh no, I hoped the drama unfolding before me wouldn't lead to bloodshed.

The man obviously had his pack close by, and Orion, as far as I could tell, was alone.

Before I knew it, the whole place went blurry again, and I couldn't hear the conversations between Orion and the man in front of me.

I fell to the ground, and that was the last thing I remembered.

Chapter 14

Lyra's POV

"Ravenna! Ravenna! You need to wake up." These were the faint words that played in my head as I regained my consciousness.

I was on a bed, facing the wall, when I opened my eyes.

My hand instinctively went to my stomach; the exact spot Nikki had maimed me. It was patched up with a bandage by only God knows who.

Am I in the hospital? was the next question that puzzled me as I turned to take in the wonderful apartment.

It wasn't a hospital; hospitals don't go heavy on interior decoration.

"Good to see you're awake." Keto's voice cut in, and I looked towards his direction. He was seated across from me in a black suit and red tie.

"I'm not dead yet, and you guys are already preparing for my burial," I said, obviously surprised by his pale face.

"Yeah, you're right. We're preparing for a burial today, but it's not yours, it's Nikki's." He replied firmly.

"Oooh." Nikki's death seemed to have slipped off my mind. She was indeed part of Orion's pack.

"I'm sorry, I was being insensitive." I felt sorry for Nikki, she died trying to avenge her sister's death.

"Don't be sorry, Ravenna. It was either you or her, and she wouldn't have felt sorry if you had died in the arena." Keto stated, he got up from the couch, approached me with hands dipped in his pockets.

"I would like to attend her burial; she was a great fighter."

I placed my hand on the bed as support and tried lifting my body up to a sitting position.

Keto noticed this and placed his hand behind my back to help me sit down.

I was still feeling pains around my stomach, but I didn't want Keto to notice. I had a feeling he wouldn't let me attend the burial if he thinks I'm not up for it.

"I think you need to rest, you don't look strong enough to go anywhere." He said, just as I had anticipated he would.

I nodded my head dismissively, "I'm fine, it's just a light wound."

"It's not a light wound, her claws went deep into your stomach, a normal human would die from internal injuries." His eyes observed my stomach, like he was tempted to check the wounds.

"Well, I'm a werewolf, I'd heal." I smiled, though my gaze went to the door as a maid entered with a tray of food in her hand.

"A werewolf that cannot shift doesn't look like a werewolf that can heal, Ravenna."

"Your lunch, Princess." The maid's voice cut in.

"Lunch?" My eyes snapped wide, "How long have I been out?" It felt like I had been unconscious for four hours.

"Almost 24 hours," He pointed his hand to the bed, and the maid took it as a cue to drop the food.

"Wow, 24 hours' sleep is better than being buried six feet deep." I took the cup of coffee on the tray and sipped it, although my eyes were still on Keto.

With the way he looked at me, I knew he wasn't going to let me go to the burial.

"If you're not going to take me to the burial, then I'd probably ask Orion directly."

He smiled, a small one, it felt sarcastic. "I don't think Orion would want to see you right now after the stunts you threw yesterday.

That was when it dawned on me, I had forgotten about it.

The man who asked if I was married was about to get into a fight when I refused to follow Orion.

"How did it go? Did they fight each other?" I asked. It was very obvious from the tone of my voice that I was curious to know how it ended.

Keto didn't reply, he uncovered the plate of food on the tray and gestured with his head that I eat.

The scent of the food filled my nose, plus my stomach yawned with hunger.

The meal was grilled steak, with sushi rolls and fresh vegetables like cucumber, avocado, and carrots.

Without wasting time, I went straight for the sushi rolls.

"Your fainting spell stopped them from fighting, at least for now," Keto said as he sat down on the bed beside me.

I was too busy with my food to pay attention to his words, but I managed to speak even as the meat filled my mouth.

"I didn't think Orion was the kind of man who let things off easily, and the man didn't look like someone who was afraid of a fight with Orion."

Oh God, the meal was delicious, this was the first delicious food I had eaten since I took over Ravenna's body.

"He isn't, and I never said they won't fight, I said they didn't fight yesterday."

I paused, my hand mid-air with sushi. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Keto took a roll of sushi from my plate, "It means the fight was postponed, next month, just as you and Nikki had fought."

"Two Alphas will be fighting because of you; whoever wins claims you," Keto added.

I didn't know how to react, so I just went mute. I hadn't expected it to get to this, but I was still confused.

Orion claimed I was useless, yet he agreed to a challenge because of me.

"Why would Orion fight to keep someone he hates?" I asked.

"I think it has to do with his ego as an alpha rather than his hatred for you." Keto glanced at his wristwatch.

"The burial is in two hours, that should be enough time for you to freshen up and get dressed."

He turned his face to mine, but his eyes weren't looking at mine; they were fixed on my lips.

I cleared my throat, "Well, you should leave now so I can start preparing. I don't want to be the reason you arrive late for the burial."

He licked his lower lip, as though he was trying to lubricate it. "You're right, I should probably get going."

But he wasn't making any attempt to leave, so I got up from the bed and headed towards the restroom.

His firm hand held my hand, I turned, wondering why he was holding me.

But before I said anything further, his hand grabbed my waist, and his soft lips found mine in a light kiss.

Chapter 15

Lyra's POV

If a witch or a priest had told me about my future, perhaps prophesied like the church folks used to say, that I would somehow survive the battle against Nikki.

I wouldn't believe it, but afterwards, I might definitely believe in miracles.

But one thing is for sure: one supreme being doesn't want me dead, at least not yet.

First, I was reincarnated in another body, next I narrowly escaped death again, only God knows what lies ahead.

The time was 1 pm, but the sun was perhaps grieving a great fighter like Nikki to show up; it almost felt like the Earth was mourning Nikki's death.

It cried thunder, and sobbed rain as we got to the venue for the burial. It was a big field where, according to Keto, dead werewolves from Orion's pack were buried.

"Are you sure the burial will hold?" I asked, turning to face Keto in the car as the driver slowly parked in the field. "The rain is heavy."

Keto chuckled, more like a light scoff. "You weren't afraid to face death in the arena, and here you're, terrified of rain and thunder like a salt."

I bit my lower lip, feeling the edge of his sarcasm. "Well, at least I don't piss my pants when Orion is pissed, unlike you." I shot back.

"It's not uncommon for a dog to be arrogant in front of a lion, but a leopard knows better." He winked at me before reaching for the car lock.

"And what happens when the lion finds out that the leopard was kissing his dog?" I asked, "What will be the fate of the leopard? shit himself this time around?"

Keto's gaze shifted to the driver, but the driver didn't act like he was paying any attention to our conversation.

"I didn't think you were going to agree that you're a dog." He taunted, then pushed the door open and entered the rain.

"Fuck!" I sighed. I never knew Keto was good with banters. I guess there are a lot of things he's good at that I don't know about.

I thought he was a man of honor, dignity, who would hang onto loyalty until his last breath.

But his kiss on my lips earlier today made me wonder what kind of person he is, really.

"Are you coming out, or still afraid of the rain?" Keto's voice cut in from the car window on my side, he was holding up a black umbrella.

I nodded my head dismissively, "I'll be in the car for now."

"Alright, suit yourself." He said and then whistled at the driver, who took it as a cue to follow him.

The driver got out of the car and slammed the door shut.

I saw others pulling in cars, dressed in black for the burial.

I'd wanted to attend the burial, honour Nikki's death, but now that I'm here, the only thing on my mind is to be alone with my thoughts.

Although I might have escaped death, it doesn't change the bitter truth.

I'm trapped in a body that's not mine, trapped in a life I didn't bargain for. Instead of mourning Nikki's death, I was mourning my life of imprisonment.

While the rain was falling, my eyes were dry, but as soon as the rain stopped falling, my eyes became wet with tears.

I sniffed, wiped the tears off my cheeks with my hand.

I was just about to get down from the car when I heard voices.

Three men stood close to the SUV next to mine, the car windows were tinted, so they didn't know I could see them as they whispered.

It was so obvious they were plotting to do something, and from the way they looked at one another, it doesn't feel like a good plot.

I needed to eavesdrop into their conversations, perhaps they're not happy about Nikki's death.

I managed to roll down the window a little bit, and their muffled voices became clear almost immediately.

My heartbeat started racing, like I was in a marathon. It was as if it knew I was about to get into trouble, but my ears were itching to hear, I couldn't care less about trouble.

One of them, a chubby man with bald hair, spat on the ground. "We're going to kill Orion tonight. For killing Nikki."

My eyes widened in surprise, a plot to kill their own alpha. That's unheard of, an Alpha's death weakens a pack.

"I called you guys here to join me, let's rid our pack of him." He added.

"But he's our alpha, killing him won't be easy." Another voice cut in.

I couldn't see his face, unlike the chubby one; his back was the only thing I could see.

"He lost his respect as my alpha the minute he killed Nikki over that bloody Raven." The third man added, "We'll kill her too."

My hand instinctively covered my mouth. I knew it was only a matter of time before death came knocking again, but I didn't think it would be this fast.

"When do we kill him?" The second man asked.

"Him? Are you even listening?" The chubby one kicked against the tyre of the car he was leaning on.

"We're killing Orion and the bloody Raven," he said, "We have to finish what Nikki started, and we are killing them tonight."

I swallowed hard, my palms were all sweaty, a testament to the anxiety raging within me.

"Tonight? Isn't that too soon? I think we're making a grave mistake here, and I'm not sure I want to be part of it."

Just then, the chubby man's hand moved with lightning speed, he sliced the second man's throat with a dagger.

I gasped, terror washing over me as I saw blood gushing out of his neck.

He tried using his hand to stop the bleeding, but the blood had its own plan.

Then he slumped to the ground like a piece of wood.

"Do you also have reservations about the mission?" The chubby man asked the other man.

"No, boss," he said, "I'm with you."

"Good, now help me carry his body into the car, before other werewolves begin to pick his blood smell."

I didn't know what came over me; I just couldn't sit still, so I opened the car door, but it made a creaking sound.

My heart sank, did they notice? I wondered as I took a glance at their direction.

They also paused, dead body in hand as they stared at one another.

Ofcourse, they heard, they're fucking werewolves.

They dropped the dead body on the ground, but I didn't wait. I knew they were going to trace where the sound came from, so I ran out of the car.

But the pain in my stomach wouldn't let me run fast, and soon I was on the ground.

"Take care of the dead body, I'll handle the witch." The chubby one said to his comrade.

I tried getting up, but the pain was so sharp, I fell to the ground again.

"Ooh, bloody Raven. So, it's you." He said as he approached me, "We were talking about your death."

Chapter 16

Lyra's POV

What if I make a deal with him? Tell him I support the plan to kill Orion and also volunteer to help make it possible.

It still won't stop him from killing me, to honour Nikki's death.

"You know you don't have to kill me?" I pleaded as he brought out the dagger he had used to kill the other man. "If you kill me now, they would know something is wrong, Orion would know."

Part of me wanted him to see sense, I didn't want to die.

I'd wanted it in the stadium, but now, for some unknown reason, I wanted to live, even though I didn't like the kind of life I was living.

He smiled, "Don't misunderstand me, princess, the plan is to kill you while Orion watches, not behind him."

"He's going to watch you die at my hands just as you watched Nikki's death at his."

He gestured with the dagger, "Now get up on your feet, and slowly; I'd advise you not to get any ideas."

I winced, but somehow managed to push myself up.

"Good girl," he taunted, "You know, for a minute, I thought of letting you live, I thought of just cutting off your tongue so you won't be able to talk or tell Orion we were planning to kill him."

He tilted his head, his fingers played around the dagger's edge. "Would you have loved that idea?" He asked.

"You don't have to cut off my tongue," I pleaded, "I promise, I won't say a word to Orion."

He placed his finger over his lips, a gesture that meant silence. "Keep moving."

I placed my hand over my stomach, turned, and started walking.

I hadn't walked ten feet when I felt the knife's edge at my throat. "You're walking too fast, princess."

He wrapped his other hand around my stomach, "One step at a time." He stated firmly, sniffing my hair like he was taking in my scent.

I obeyed and walked as slowly as he asked. "Now I see why Orion is crazy about you; you smell different."

I didn't say a word, I just walked, but I was praying within; whatever helped me escape death twice, should be able to help me for the third time.

Our steps were slow, but soon we arrived at the spot of the burial.

It looked like they were wrapping up the ceremony when we arrived, but there was no sign of Orion or Keto, just strange faces I couldn't recognize.

The air around the burial became cold, and within seconds of our arrival, it began to rain again.

One by one, the men and women at the burial site noticed the knife at my throat.

They didn't say a word, they just started turning to face me.

It felt almost as if some of them were happy to see someone doing exactly what they had in mind, but lacked the courage to do it themselves.

Finally, one of them spoke, "What's going on?"

"Nikki is dead, because of her." He shouted,

"The only way to honour Nikki's death is by killing her."

I wasn't really paying attention to his words, my eyes were busy searching for Orion.

It's funny how Keto manages to disappear anytime I was in trouble, but I knew that monster called Orion, his presence would go a long way in transferring some of the fear I felt to the man holding a dagger at my throat.

"We decide her death, Orion has no choice, but to honour our decision." The chubby man added.

"Who's with me? The bloody Raven dies, and we bury her beside Nikki's grave."

At this point, I started panting, not for air, but out of fear.

The people began to murmur among themselves, they were talking to each other but the heavy rain made it look like they were murmuring.

"Olaf, If you kill her now, Orion will kill you." One of them said, raising his voice so the others could hear.

"Not if we kill him first." He stated coldly.

It was obvious that some of them entertained the idea of killing their alpha, perhaps Nikki was their fan favorite and Orion just killed her like a chicken.

"Do what you will, Olaf." They said, almost in unison. "We won't stop you."

Olaf chuckled, "Too bad, Orion is not here to see your death, princess."

I shot my eyes, bracing for death. It's easier to embrace death with your eyes closed than with your eyes open.

But, in that last moment, I heard a voice, his voice, Orion's voice.

It was loud and terrible, but in my own head, it was the sweetest thing I have ever heard; it made my heart leap with thrills I couldn't fathom.

"Let her go." He shouted, and as if on cue, the thunder clapped to make sure his words sank in.

I snapped my eyes open, and the air around the field shifted.

I could feel Orion's rage even though I couldn't see him.

The way the people cowered in fear at his voice had me having goosebumps.

They had to; he was their alpha, and not just any alpha, he was one of the strongest alphas that has ever walked the Earth.

Olaf turned, and I had to turn with him to face Orion. Who was behind us.

Olaf still had the knife positioned at my throat, but there was a difference this time; his hand, the one that held the knife, started shaking.

It shook so bad, it felt almost as though he was being shocked by electricity from within.

My eyes found Orion's eyes, he wasn't alone, Keto stood by his left, and another woman I didn't recognize stood by his right.

But he was the only one I was seeing at that moment.

It had to do with the fact that he had saved my life before, and also with the possibility that only he could save my life again.

"I said, let her go." He repeated, with his hands behind his back.

"No, Orion, she dies," Olaf shouted back, but it sounded more like cries than words.

Orion nodded his head, but his eyes darted somewhere else, and I followed his gaze until they landed on Keto.

Keto nodded, as though he understood the message.

"Alright then," Orion placed his hands on his waist. "Kill her." He smiled, but it was a sarcastic gesture.

Olaf hesitated, and in his hesitation, Keto did the unthinkable.

He brought out a gun and, in the twinkling of an eye, shot at me.

The gunshot rang loud, my ears kept ringing.

I froze. Did he just shoot me? My own death at the hands of someone who had kissed me and confessed his love to me.

It wasn't until Olaf's body hit the ground that I realized I wasn't the one who was shot.

But something strange happened, I had this strange sensation to cough, and when I did, I was coughing out blood.

Orion saw it, Keto saw it, but it was Orion who ran towards me. "Ravenna!" He called as he drew closer.

The world around me went blur, and the last thing I remembered was hitting the ground with a thud.

Chapter 17

Lyra's POV

The first thing that popped up in my head as I eased back into consciousness was the sound of heavy rainfall.

I opened my eyes, looked around. Where's everyone? I muttered under my breath.

I was still in the field where Nikki was buried, at the exact same spot where I had passed out.

My clothes were completely soaked by the rain, and I couldn't stop myself from shaking so much that my teeth vibrated.

Why did they leave me here alone in the field, under the rain and without help?

Did they leave me here to die? I thought within, or perhaps they thought I had died.

I tried getting up from the ground, my eyes scanned for any covering that could shield me from the rain, but I was too weak to stand up.

Then I tried crawling, and that was when it dawned on me that I was paralyzed: I could move my head, but not my body.

Fear gripped me. If nobody comes out here to help, I'd probably die out of cold.

My gaze turned to the direction where Nikki had been buried, but the coffin was no longer six feet under the ground.

It was out in the open, a black coffin.

Just then, a strong wind blew and the coffin opened.

My eyes popped wide in fear. What's going on?

Then I saw her hand, her fingers held onto the edge of the coffin, then she sat upright, and turned her head towards me.

I blinked. How is this even possible? The last time I checked, her head was severed from her body.

Orion cut her head off right in front of me. How is she even alive?

Then she brought out a gun, aimed it at me.

I froze, for a second, all the cold I felt left my body, replaced by a strange heat.

I moved my body again, tried to move, but it was futile; my body wouldn't obey my command.

Then she cocked the gun, her eyes flashing with anger, "I won't rest, until I avenge my sister's death."

I was about to say something, plead with her, but it was too late; she pressed the trigger.

My eyes fluttered open again. This time around, I was on the bed in a hospital.

My breath came in hard, and before I could process the environment, the sudden urge to throw up hit me.

I raised my body this time around, and I was no longer paralyzed, shifted to the edge of the bed, and threw up all the fluids that wanted out like a waterfall.

"Take it easy, Ravenna." It was a female voice, but I didn't look up.

I felt her hand behind my back as I threw up, she tapped it gently. "It's alright, you're fine." she said, her voice sounded cool.

I steadied my breathing; the whole stuff with Nikki was a dream.

I felt relieved, but I couldn't tell if it was because I had just vomited or if it was because Nikki's resurrection was a dream.

"Take, drink this," she said, "It will help you relax."

I didn't collect the glass of water in her hand, I took a quick look at her first.

The last thing I wanted was someone from Orion's pack giving me something to drink.

She looked young, just like me, with black hair and silver eyes.

"Who are you?" I asked, my eyes darting between the glass she was holding and her face.

She didn't look much like a fighter to me, she was too soft and pretty to be a fighter.

"I'm Kira," she said with a smile, "You don't remember me?"

I nodded, "I don't think I have seen you before, I'm sorry."

Ravenna might have known her, but her memories are faint in my head.

Apart from the fighting lessons that seeped in during the fight with Nikki, I don't have any other memories..

She squinted her eyes, and I could tell she was suspicious of something.

"Drink that before it gets cold," she reminded.

I hesitated, "Are you a doctor?"

"I'm a healer, and this isn't the first time I have treated you, so drink up." She said, as if she knew I was skeptical about drinking it.

I took the glass from her hand, but slowly.

It wasn't water, it was a black liquid, like a tomato paste, except for the colour.

"What's this?" I asked as I held the glass mid-air.

She chuckled lightly, "If I wanted you dead, you would have been dead by now, Ravenna." She pushed the glass from the bottom, a light push.

I took the glass in my mouth and started drinking, slowly.

The taste was really bitter in my mouth, and I don't think I have ever drank anything as bitter as this drink.

"Don't stop, drink it all," she pressed, and I obliged.

I gulped the drink like a bitter pill until the glass was empty.

I handed the glass back to her, and she collected it.

A loud bloat escaped my throat, but I felt better afterwards.

"That herb is meant to help you heal from your internal injuries." She said as she got up from the bed.

She was dressed in a loose-fitted blue silk gown decked with colorful crescent moon patterns that stopped just beyond her knees.

"Are you part of Orion's pack?" I asked, and my hand went straight to the pillow.

She took hold of the cup of coffee on the small table in the hospital ward.

"Yes, I'm the pack's healer," she answered, then sipped the hot coffee.

"I don't think I saw you at Nikki's burial. Were you there?"

I shifted from the edge of the bed to the wall where I had placed the pillow so I could rest my head on it.

"Well, as the pack's healer," she said, "I'm not allowed to attend burial sites."

"Oooh, I didn't know," I answered, my voice softening.

"Ravenna would know this." She dropped the coffee back on the table.

I raised an eyebrow, "What is that supposed to mean?" I asked.

She folded her arms. "It means you're not Ravenna, you're just in Ravenna's body, and Orion doesn't know this."

I froze, my eyes widening in surprise.

Just when I thought I was beginning to settle in as Ravenna, this strange healer had just blown it off.

"So tell me," she added, "Who are you?”

Chapter 18

Lyra's POV

I faked a smile, but inside I was shaking.

How could she tell I wasn't Ravenna in just a five-minute conversation?

"I'm lost, I don't get you," I said, even though my voice sounded weak.

"Are you trying to say, I'm impersonating Ravenna?" I added.

She didn't say a word for some seconds.

She twirled her lips, and I could tell she was still wrapping her head around the possibility of transmigration.

"Alright then, if you insist you're Ravenna, tell me, what happened to your memories?"

"How am I supposed to know? You're the healer, you're the one to tell me what's wrong with me."

"No, this is not amnesia." She said, "This is transmigration, and before you try and deny it." She cut me off before I could say anything.

"Ravenna is left-handed, but as far as I can tell, you're right-handed."

Was I right-handed?

Yes, as far as Lyra is concerned, I'm right-handed, but I never knew that part of me was obvious in Ravenna's body.

"Secondly," she continued, "Before you woke up from your sleep, I heard you yelling; I'm not Ravenna, please don't kill me."

I swallowed hard, and my heartbeat began to race.

I didn't know what to say anymore, I must have been sleep-talking while Nikki was about to shoot me in the dream.

I opened my mouth to speak, but words failed me. I wanted to deny it, but my mind went blank.

She noticed the way I was struggling to speak up and stepped closer.

"I want the truth," She sighed, "I want to help you, and I can only do that if you tell me the truth."

I took a deep breath. "You're right, I'm not Ravenna."

I couldn't even summon the courage to look at her directly in the eyes, my face went down.

I kept staring at the tiled ground as though I wanted it to open and swallow me.

I raised my head slowly to meet her calculative gaze.

She nodded, "Who are you? Tell me."

I swallowed, my gaze faltering away from hers to the door. "I'm Lyra," I said, "Lyra Blackwood."

Her eyes popped wide open, shining bright like Neon signs, "Lyra?"

Did she know who I was? I wondered.

Oh my God, this is even going to be more difficult than it already is.

I panicked, my fingers fidgeting, "Yes, I'm Lyra. Do you know me?" I stuttered, "As Lyra?"

"No, not me." She drew closer to me, placed her hand on my neck, "Ravenna mentioned your name once."

"Ravenna knew me?" I asked, my jaw dropping.

"Ravenna knew many people, and I was her therapist."

She removed her hand from my neck. "Your body is no longer hot, that's good; It means you're healing."

"What can I do, Kira? I didn't bargain for this." My eyes searched hers to see if there was any compassion in them.

"Ravenna- sorry, Lyra, I think you'd do just fine." She assured, "I'm more concerned with what Orion will do when he finds out you're not Ravenna."

"He mustn't find out," I stated, my voice higher than I intended.

"He's the alpha of my pack, Ravenna." She nodded, "Lyra! I'm still getting used to your name."

"It's my duty to report everything to him." She added.

"Orion is a monster, I beg you." I pleaded. "He'll kill me, please don't tell him."

"I'm sorry, but I can't make any promises." She took the empty glass from the desk beside my bed, then carried another keg to the other corner of the room.

"If I were you, I'd be more worried about who wants Ravenna dead than what Orion's reaction would be if he finds out about your real identity."

"I don't understand. What do you mean?" I asked, confused by her statement.

She shook the keg, then poured the liquid inside the keg into the glass cup.

"You had mistletoe in your system." She stated as she handed the glass, now with the black liquid, to me.

"Someone probably mixed it up with your meal to stop you from healing or shape-shifting into your wolf."

My mind immediately flashed to the meal the maid brought to me while I was with Keto.

"Before the battle or after the battle?" I asked to be sure it was the maid.

"Well, before the battle, I was told you couldn't shift during the fight with Nikki, so it has to be before the battle."

I still didn't understand, "Are you saying someone predicted I was going to be in the fight with Nikki, and sneaked mistletoe into my meal so I could die during the fight?"

"Yes, exactly, and until you find out who did that, I'm afraid your life might be in danger."

She gestured with her hand, and I took it as a cue to drink up.

I hurried the drink inside my mouth this time around, it wasn't as bitter as the first time.

"What did you eat before the battle?" she asked as she took the glass from my hand and dropped it on the table.

"Uhm, I don't remember eating anything-"

"Then it means it's not someone from Orion's pack," she uttered, "It's definitely someone from your pack, Ravenna's pack."

My grip on the sheets tightened.

I was going to mention Orion, but she ruled him out.

Just then, it dawned on me, the only person capable of something like this was the witch that handed me over to Orion.

But how did she know I was going to fight with Nikki?

I was about to say something to Kira when she placed her index finger on her lips.

"Someone has been listening to our conversations," she whispered as she walked towards the door, her footsteps silent.

My heart skipped a beat, and my breath hitched.

Just when I thought Kira was the only one for now who knew my secret identity, it turned out that there was another secret listener.

She swung the door open, and my heart melted like ice before fire.

She was right, someone was at the door listening to our conversations.

Chapter 19

Lyra's POV

"Why are you both looking at me like you've got something to hide?" Keto asked, his eyeballs rolling to the left at me, and to the right at Kira.

"Don't fucking play that card on me," Kira replied. "You're the one hiding behind the door like a spying criminal." Kira shot back as she eyed him from head to toe.

From the way Keto was looking, I knew he heard some of our conversations, and my heart wouldn't stop the fast beats.

I kept my gaze fixed on him for any hint he knew the truth about Ravenna and I, but so far his face looked neutral, like he didn't hear that part, or he was simply good at hiding it.

Keto raised his hand up in mock surrender, "Yeah," he admitted, "You're right, I was at the door for a while."

"Why?" My voice in tandem with Kira's voice as we asked him.

He didn't say a word, he just strolled into the ward like he owns the fucking hospital.

"I needed to be sure it was the right ward before knocking." He said, his tone playful.

It was a lie, I knew it, Kira knew it, but we couldn't press.

"So, Kira, tell me, what was wrong with Ravenna?" He asked as he settled on the bed beside me.

Kira shot him a defiant look. "Well, you heard it all, so there's no need to say anything."

I didn't know why, but it sort of seemed like Kira was trying to watch out for me.

Keto turned to face me, his hand brushing my arm, until it settled on my back.

"How are you feeling?" His voice was unusually calm.

But before I could answer him, Kira interrupted.

"Hey, get your slutty hands off her back," she yelled. "Don't you dare touch Orion's mate like that."

Mate? Orion's mate? I almost laughed.

Kira had no idea what Orion was doing with me, how he treated me, I'm more like his fated enemy than fated mate.

Keto took his hand off my back. "Kira, is this your way of expressing jealousy? You could have just asked me to touch you." He smirked.

"What do you want? Keto, why are you here?" Kira asked, but her eyes were focused elsewhere, outside the window.

"I'm here to pick Ravenna, Orion would like to see her." He answered.

My heart skipped a beat the minute I heard the name Orion. What does he want to see me for? I muttered.

"The weather is very gloomy, like it's about to rain, the kind of rain that won't stop for a long time." Kira stated, "Now is the best to leave."

I could feel the air in the room drop, and before long, the winds started blowing outside.

Keto turned to me, "Can you walk?"

"Yes, she can walk," Kira cut him off, "Before you offer to carry her."

I got up from the bed I was sitting on, and Keto followed behind me as I made my way to the door.

"Hold on," Kira called, "I'd like to have a few words with my patient." Her gaze darted towards Keto, "Privately."

"Hmm," Keto murmured. "I'll wait outside then, don't keep me waiting."

He walked out of the room, and Kira's gaze followed him.

She waited for some seconds after he left before clearing her throat.

"I'd be coming over to Orion's place to see you." She said, "By then, I would have decided if I should tell Orion about your case or not."

"When are you coming over to Orion's place?" I asked.

"Soon, I need to do some research about transmigration and also look into the mistletoe issue you had."

"Thank you very much, Kira-" I said, but she waved her hand to cut me off.

"Don't get your hopes high yet, I can still very much decide to tell Orion everything, that's if Keto doesn't beat me to it yet."

I nodded, saying nothing.

"Now, take care of yourself, and try not to get into any fight until I say you're fit to fight again."

She opened the door for me and then peeped outside to see if anybody was eavesdropping.

"Alright, Kira," I said, bowing in respect as I headed toward the door.

The door led to a hallway with several other rooms around.

It made me wonder if this is a werewolf hospital or just a normal hospital with werewolf patients and healers mixed with human patients.

I walked straight to the stairs and walked down the stairs.

It was relatively quiet, hardly any doctors or staff around.

When I got to the end of the stairs, Keto was there waiting for me, and as if he could read my mind.

"It's a private building for werewolves that needs medical attention, in case you're wondering," Keto said as he held my hand to support me.

I still felt pain in my stomach, but not like before. I guess the wound hasn't healed completely yet.

"Kira is the only staff around?" I asked.

"No, she's not, but she's the head healer of our pack, and this building belongs to Orion." He stated firmly.

"But I don't see any other healer or patient around."

"Werewolves don't fall sick the way humans do. Some of them prefer home treatments, but in cases whereby a werewolf needs to get x-rayed or surgery, we bring them here." He explained.

We walked towards the lobby and saw some staff there.

They didn't say much, they just bowed to Keto as we walked outside the building.

Outside, the rain was drizzling, but the air was very cold.

Keto gestured towards the car, and we crossed the road, watching each side to avoid vehicles in motion.

As soon as we got to the car, I opened the door but Keto closed it back.

"We need to talk." He said, his eyes narrowing.

"We can talk in the car, Keto," I replied, although my voice sounded weak.

It was as if I knew what he wanted to talk about, but I wasn't prepared to face it.

"Just a simple question," he said, "Who's Lyra?”

Chapter 20

Lyra's POV

I swallowed the saliva in my mouth, and my legs started shaking.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"Who's Lyra?" He inquired again, "I heard you and Kira talking about Lyra.

"I don't know what you think you heard, Keto, but now's not the time to ask me questions, after everything I've been through. What I need right now is rest, not interrogations."

His eyes narrowed, "It's a simple question, Who is Lyra?" He pressed.

"Keto, I have no idea who Lyra is; you must have misheard." I denied blatantly.

"Then tell me what you and the healer were talking about?"

I didn't answer him, I just pushed the door open and entered.

There was no driver this time around, so it was safe to assume he was going to drive.

He opened the door to the driver's seat, entered, and shut the car door closed.

He kept looking at me through the rearview mirror, "Tell me what Kira told you."

"If she won't tell you, then why do you think I should?" I snapped.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means mind your fucking business and drive the fucking car," I replied, my voice louder than I wanted it to be.

He didn't press, he just started the car and drove off.

The journey was a quiet one; neither of us said anything, but within me was a raging storm.

He definitely heard the name Lyra correctly, but I didn't think he heard enough to connect the dots.

If he heard all the conversations, he wouldn't be asking about Lyra, or perhaps he heard it all but was trying to play like he didn't.

It's safe to say Keto sometimes can be cunning like a snake; it's easy to know what Orion is thinking about, but Keto is quite unpredictable.

I cleared my throat, "What happened to the guy that wanted to kill me at Nikki's burial?" I asked.

He didn't answer, he just kept his hands on the wheel as he drove.

"I'm talking to you, Keto, answer me." I pressed.

He took a look at me, through the rearview mirror, "You're alive, right? Shouldn't that be enough explanation that he's dead?"

"You shot at me, Keto, what if the bullet had hit me instead?"

"It wasn't a silver bullet, so Kira would've handled it." He said, his hand shifting the gear from 2 to 3.

"There were two of them," I said, leaning back on the seat.

"Two? What do you mean?"

"I heard them conspiring about killing Orion and I, because of Nikki." I stated, "Three of them, but one of them got killed because he disagreed."

Without warning, Keto pressed the brakes, and the vehicle screeched to a halt.

I lost balance due to the sudden brake he applied, but quickly steadied myself.

"Did you just say they were conspiring to kill Orion?" He asked, this time around, he was staring at me directly in the eyes.

I nodded my head, "As I was saying, they're two, you killed one, but the other one left with the dead body." I added.

Keto kept his gaze on me for a while, but it was the kind of gaze that clearly revealed he was deep in thought.

"This means you're not safe, neither is Orion." He squinted his eyes, checked around the area where he parked, possibly to see if we were being followed.

"He's just one person, Keto. I'm sure we can flush him out. I recognized him."

"You don't understand, Orion has many enemies, and that one person can sell out information about our pack to an enemy." He sighed in relief as his eyes darted back to mine.

"So what do we do?" I asked, my voice wavering.

He turned on the car's engine. "We prepare for war."

I swallowed a lump, lost for words.

Prepare for war sounded like he was exaggerating, but I didn't ask any more questions.

The more I knew what was at stake, the more terrified I might become, so I'd rather stick to the little information I had, for now.

Within minutes, we got to Orion's mansion, it was well decorated and plush, with a golden statue of two wolves at the gate.

I had been here before, but I didn't notice the statue; it was too big to miss.

The gate opened on its own accord, and Keto drove in.

He slowed down as he drove close to the car park and then turned off the ignition.

"Listen to me," he said. His voice was more like a whisper. "If you tell Orion what you saw and heard now, he's not going to believe you."

"I don't give a fuck what he believes, it's his life at stake, not mine." I snapped.

"Calm down, Raven," He whispered, "Just listen to me."

"Orion's life is not the only one at stake; your own life is also at stake here." He continued, "If Orion dies, the next alpha would definitely be in favour of killing you."

"Well, if Orion dies, you're the next in command, you'd become the next alpha." I cut in.

Keto chuckled, "If Orion's own pack kills him, do you think it's going to be about who the next in command is? Or who the pack believes will carry out their desires, which is killing you."

"So you're saying the pack wants me dead?" I asked, my eyes narrowing.

"Exactly, so we have to proceed with care, for your own safety, and for Orion's own safety."

I nodded my head in agreement. "So what do you suggest I do?"

"Keep your mouth shut, at least until we have the evidence needed to convince Orion about the conspiracy." He replied. "Can you do that?"

"Yes, I can," I said sharply.

I pushed the door open and stepped out of the car.

The mansion was quiet today, but the serenity did nothing to subdue the unease gnawing within me.

I waited until Keto was done with the car, "After you," I said as he walked past me.

As soon as he pushed the main glass door open, I saw the exact same man I had seen on the field; the man who had conspired to kill Orion.

He sat down beside Orion, and they were both having a hearty conversation.

I raised my hand, and I couldn't stop my fingers from pointing at him.

Chapter 21

Lyra's POV

The minute he saw me, his eyes widened in fear as panic washed over him.

Orion's eyes rolled between me and him, he was obviously confused about why I was pointing at the man.

Keto drew closer to me, he pinched me lightly, a gesture that reminded me of our agreement earlier.

I swallowed a lump, but my fingers were still pointed at him.

How do I explain it now without making a fool of myself?

An idea popped up, "Sir, there's dirt on your shirt." I said, pointing to the left side of his shoulder.

"Oooh, thank you." He replied with a smile.

His gaze darted to his left shoulder to remove the speck of dust on his white shirt.

"That's Orion's brother," Keto whispered in my ear.

I couldn't stop my jaw from dropping as a wave of shock swept over me.

Orion's own blood is among the conspirators who want him dead? That's unbelievable, who would have thought?

I can see clearly now why Keto said I should keep quiet until there's evidence.

There's no way I would believe my own blood sister, from the same father and mother, wants me dead if there's no evidence to prove it.

Especially if the accusations were coming from someone I consider an enemy, or someone that I hate.

Telling Orion the truth about his brother planning his own death would make him hate me more.

He would think I want to drive a wedge between his family.

"You fought well during the battle. I must confess, I was impressed." Orion's brother's voice cut in.

I cleared my throat, "My performance would have counted for nothing if Orion wasn't there to help me."

Orion raised an eyebrow, he wasn't expecting me to give him the credit like that.

"Orion really loves you." He said, and I almost laughed.

Orion? Love who? Me? That was the most stupid statement I have ever heard in my entire life.

"I even heard he accepted a challenge to fight another Alpha," He continued, "All because of you- again."

Orion's brother got up from the bar chair, his confidence soaring now.

"I don't think my brother has ever been this committed to a woman like this before." He added.

"Ben, that's enough." Orion snapped. "I'd like to have a word with her, alone."

There's something about Orion's voice; anytime I hear it, it always makes my heart skip, and little goosebumps.

"Yes, boss," Ben answered, "You're the alpha after all, brother, your wish is my command."

With a smile on his face, he walked towards the exit, but not without stopping beside me.

He leaned in close to my ears, "You always have a way of escaping death, Ravenna." He whispered, "I'm going to find your secret, and I'm going to end it."

Keto was beside me, but he didn't hear him, not unless he used his werewolf senses.

I didn't say anything in return, I just clenched my fists beside my thighs as Ben spoke and walked away, using the door.

Orion was still seated, holding a cigarette, dressed in his iconic white singlet and black jeans.

"I didn't know you had a brother," I said, my gaze fixed on Orion.

I knew something that Orion didn't know, and somehow it gave me the confidence to look him in the eye.

He kept his gaze on me for a while, as though he was thinking of the best way to reply me, then he shifted his attention to Keto.

"What was Kira's report about her health?" He asked, "How soon will she be able to shift?"

Keto cleared his throat, "Kira didn't say much, it seems she would rather talk to you than talk to me."

"But I overheard her saying something about someone poisoning Ravenna with mistletoe." He added. "Apart from that, nothing else."

Orion's eyes narrowed. "Mistletoe?" Then he turned his attention to me again, "Can you shift?"

"No, I can't," I replied sharply.

Then he stood up from his seat, his height towering, "Then you're useless to me, if you can't shift."

"I'm supposed to be your mate, not your shifting slave." I snapped.

I could see Keto raising an eyebrow as he turned his face toward me.

He looked surprised, but he's not alone; I'm also surprised by my new confidence.

Orion chuckled, the kind that was obviously sarcastic.

He walked towards me, and my legs started shaking.

I must confess, Orion has a powerful aura for an alpha.

I could see why Keto is afraid of him, you couldn't stand a chance against him unless you're an alpha like him.

"Just because I saved your life twice doesn't make you indispensable to me." He grabbed my neck with his huge hand, and I almost gasped.

He raised my chin slightly with his thumb finger, "You don't get to die until I'm done with you."

Keto cleared his throat, and Orion flashed him a curious look, "Boss, forgive her rude manners." He pleaded, "Kira stated it's important she rest well and eat properly for her wound to heal completely."

Orion didn't answer him, he turned his gaze back to me.

His strong grip on my neck was beginning to choke me, but I didn't want to give him the satisfaction that I was scared of him.

He released his grip on my neck, "Take her away from my sight, she disgusts me."

"Yes, boss,". Keto said, then gestured with his head that I followed him.

I placed my hand over my neck, which I could tell was red by now.

Keto walked towards the exit, and I followed him.

"Keto," Orion called, and we both turned.

"She stays in the mansion this time, where I can keep my eyes on her," Orion stated.

Keto bowed, "Follow me." He said to me, and I followed him towards where Orion was standing.

Orion kept his eyes on me as we walked past him, taking the. stairs by his left.

I followed Keto as we climbed through the stairs to a room that was apparently bigger than the one he had placed me in before the battle.

"You should freshen up, I'd get the maids to bring in your meal." He said, before closing the door..

I was alone now, I shut my eyes closed, took a deep breath, and sighed in relief.

I quickly pulled off my clothes until I was stark naked and headed for the bathroom in the far end corner of the big room.

But the door to the bathroom wouldn't open. I tried pushing it open, but it was stuck.

I decided to walk back to the bedroom. Just then, I saw Keto holding a tray.

His sharp eyes swept over my naked body, and I immediately covered my sensitive parts with my hands.

"What are you doing here?" I yelled.

But he didn't reply, didn't take his eyes off me, he just dropped the tray of food on the table close to the bed.

Then within seconds, he closed the distance between us.

Chapter 22

Lyra's POV

Before I could blink my eyes twice, I felt his hands on my waist, and the touch sent a jolt of electricity through my body.

I leaned into him, and his hands went from my waist down to my bare ass.

He grabbed them tightly, and I let out a soft moan.

He didn't look like the calm Keto I used to know, his eyes flashed with intensity like a lion ready to devour.

He swept me off the ground and hauled me onto the bed.

I let out a soft gasp, I clasped my thighs together, my legs raised slightly as I felt myself grow wet down there.

Within minutes, he loosened his sleeves and belt, pulled his clothes, and threw them in a different direction.

He climbed on the bed, his eyes fixed on mine, but his hands held my left leg.

A soft touch that made me yearn for all of him in me.

"We shouldn't be doing this," I said, but he quickly placed his fingers over my lips.

His fingers played around my lips before coming down to my neck, and then my chest, it went further down until his hands settled on my hard, pointed breasts.

"Orion has made it obvious that he doesn't want you." He said as his other hand made its way to my thighs, gently massaging them.

"I want you Ravenna, and unless you don't want this, then fuck what Orion thinks."

I was about to say something, to tell him to stop, I knew the door wasn't locked, and if Orion comes in, there's no doubt he's going to kill Keto.

"Keto-" I whispered, but then his fingers made their way to my coochie, a light touch on my clitoris.

"Fuck." I exhaled, and the thought of not locking the door flew away from my head.

I grabbed his already hard dick and drew him closer to me.

He groaned as my grip on the cap of his dick tightened.

He touched my hand, "Patience, Raven." He whispered, "I need to eat you first."

My eyes widened in surprise. I have never been eaten before. Jacob hardly even made love to me once before our wedding that never happened, but before him, there was no one else.

But I wasn't in my body, I was in Ravenna's body. She might have had sex several times before I took over her body.

Not that it matters, I'm now in charge, and as far as I'm concerned, I'm getting laid.

I watched as Keto stretched his body on the queen-size bed, his hands wrapped around my waist as he drew my thighs closer to his mouth.

I didn't know what to expect, my heart started racing out of anticipation and excitement.

Then he buried his face between my thighs, and I moaned.

My grip tightened on the bedsheet as his tongue continued to suck my clitoris with intensity.

Pleasure shot through my body until it came out of my moans in soft, rhythmic moans.

I clasped my thighs around his neck, and my hand made its way to his head, pushing him deeper into me like I wanted more of his tongue licking skills.

"Please Keto, I want to feel you inside me as I cum." I pleaded.

He raised his head up and gave me a sly wink.
"I don't have protection, Ravenna, you could get pregnant."

"Fuck pregnancy, get inside me now," I demanded, my eyes already aching for his 6inches dick.

He held his dick with one hand, and teased my coochie with it by tapping it on my clitoris.

He was about to slide in it when a knock on the door jolted me back to my senses.

Before I could say a word, Keto rolled off the bed and hid under the bed.

I quickly covered my body with the bedsheet. "Who's there?"

There was no response, just silence.

Keto stretched his hand from under the bed and grabbed some of his clothes on the ground beside the bed.

I got up from the bed, put on my clothes hastily.

Then I heard the knock again, but this time, instead of asking who was there, I opened the door myself.

I hissed, disgust washing over my face. It was Jacob or Kevin.

"Are you crazy?" I asked, wondering why he would come to Orion's mansion.

"What?" He said, looking confused.

"You know Orion suspects us already, and then you still have the nerve to come and see me at his mansion."

I came out of the room, instead of letting him in, and closed the door after me.

I did that to give Keto closure to get dressed; the last thing I wanted was Kevin discovering my secret affair with Keto.

"Come on, Ravenna, I have business with Orion." He stated, "As far as he's concerned, I came to the mansion to see him, not you."

I was still trying to steady my breath, and my gaze darted to the left and right as restlessness crept in within me.

"Aren't you going to let me in?" He asked, his eyes searching for mine.

"No, Kevin." I stated firmly, "We're better here. What do you have to say to me?" I asked.

Then it occurred to me that Keto was still in the room, which means he could hear our conversations and think I'm working with Kevin to kill Orion.

"Can we go somewhere quiet?" I said as I walked away from the room towards the stairs.

He didn't argue, he just followed me to the stairs.

I folded my hands. "Why do you want to see me?"

"Ravenna," He teased, "I've missed you, are you sure you don't want us to stay in your room? I could do with some quickie, you know."

I chuckled, and he probably thought I was blushing, but I wasn't.

I was disgusted at the thought of sleeping with him.

"I don't have time for this, Kevin." I cut in, "Say what you have to say already and be on your way."

"Okay! Okay!" He pleaded.

"Ruth is impatient, and time is not on our side. You need to seduce Orion." He uttered.

Was I even listening to him? I had to ask myself that question to be sure I knew what I was doing.

Well, I have to keep acting like Ravenna for now, and pushing him away might blow that cover.

"I'm sorry, but that's not possible," I said, "Orion doesn't want to have anything to do with me."

He smiled, "Don't worry, Ravenna. I'll handle that, just be ready when I tell you it's time."

I nodded, and he took that as a cue that I agreed.

He kissed my cheek, and I boiled with rage.

"See you soon." He said and went down the stairs.

As soon as he was out of sight, I sighed in relief.

I walked back to my room, opened the door, and entered.

Keto was still there, but he was dressed now, and he sat on the couch facing the bed.

I closed the door and locked it this time around.

My heart started racing again, and I felt that tingling sensation.

But it all vanished the minute my eyes sighted an object close to the fan hanging in the ceiling.

It was a camera, we were being watched all this time.

Precipitation covered my forehead immediately, and I swallowed a lump.

Chapter 23

Lyra's POV

"What is it?" Keto asked, he noticed the change in my countenance.

"Is there a fucking camera in my bedroom?" I shot, "Did you know about this?" My voice was louder than I intended.

Keto's eyes widened in disbelief, "Huh? What do you mean?" He asked.

The next thing I saw was his feet hitting the ground, even before I could process his question.

"We're fucked, Keto, Orion was probably watching the whole thing."

For a moment, the air in the room became hot, I placed my hand over my chest to steady my breath.

I wasn't as afraid for me as much as I was afraid for Keto.

Keto's face went pale, like his blood was drained from him the minute he heard we were being watched.

He stood motionless for a while, lost for words.

I pointed in the direction where I had seen the camera.

"We should run Keto, as far away as possible, before Orion kills us both." I pleaded.

He didn't answer me, he just went straight to the spot where the camera was placed and removed it.

"Keto, are you even listening to me?" I asked.

"Huh? What did you say?" He said, but his gaze was still on the camera.

"We need to run, Keto, right now."

He took a deep breath, sighed to calm his agitated nerves.

"We're not running away, Ravenna." He said, "We don't know for sure if he has seen it."

I didn't know when I let out a laugh, it was dry though, "So you want us to remain here until he finds out? Is that your crazy plan?"

"I'm saying we should remain calm until we understand the situation." He stated calmly.

"There's a fucking camera in my room, what other situation do you need to understand Keto?" I replied, my voice was getting louder now.

"Is everything alright?" A voice cut in from the door.

My gaze swiftly darted towards the door, but it was Keto who answered.

"We're all good, what is it?" He asked.

"Boss wants to see you now." The person at the door responded.

My heart skipped a beat, but Keto, on the other hand, was strangely calm, and that made me angry.

Why would he be calm? His life is on the stake, my life is on the stake, but he's acting like he can handle it.

"I'll be right behind you." He answered.

Then he turned to me, "Just calm down, Ravenna, I need time to think." He assured.

"Time to think? He just sent for you, and here you are still asking for time to think?" I asked.

He gave me a dismissive nod, "I have to go now, Raven, and try not to do anything funny, okay?"

I didn't answer him, though his eyes searched mine for any hint of agreement.

I took my gaze away from him, went straight to the door, and unlocked it.

He tried looking at me again, but I took my eyes away.

Then he walked out, and somehow seeing him leave made me emotional; tears stung my eyes.

This might probably be the last time I'd be seeing him, or maybe if I do see him, it'll be when Orion cuts his head off.

I was beginning to get fond of Keto, and the bond I share with him made the connection between us even more powerful.

I closed the door, but my grip on the door handle lingered as I weighed my options.

Do I wait here? and see if Keto will be able to handle it, or do I look for a way to escape while there's still time.

These were the thoughts that flowed through my head.

I wasn't really afraid of death, not anymore, actually.

I just couldn't bear the shame of being humiliated by Orion.

He hates me so much, and I knew the video would be the perfect leverage for him to humiliate me as he sees fit.

There's no telling what he would do, and even if someone else from the pack gets hold of it, that's worse; they already want me dead.

I couldn't imagine, I just couldn't sit still and wait for what happens.

But where would I go? I wondered.

'Anywhere but here,' A voice within me answered.

I opened the door gently and then peeked outside the room to see if it was empty.

Luckily for me, the hallway was empty.

So I came out of the room and quietly closed the door.

I didn't know my way around Orion's mansion, but a thought flashed in my mind.

If Orion installed a camera in your room, don't you think he'd likely install the camera at every corner of the mansion?

The thought weakened me, I shut my eyes closed and leaned back on the wall.

"Ooh, God, I'm fucked." I muttered under my breath.

"Are you alright?" A familiar voice cut in.

I snapped my eyes open in shock, I didn't hear any footsteps.

I swallowed hard, almost choking on my own saliva. It was Orion's brother Ben.

Has he been watching me?

"I've been watching you," He said as though he knew what I was thinking. "You don't look fine."

He had been here the whole time, and I didn't know, didn't catch a scent.

Perhaps he masked his scent, I knew werewolves could mask their scent.

"How long have you been watching?" I asked, although my voice was weak.

"Ever since you came out of your room." He answered.

For a while, I wondered how he could be related to Orion, they didn't look alike.

Orion was tall, but he wasn't; just average height, skinny, and less appealing.

"Why were you watching me?" My voice was still weak, so I cleared my throat.

"Because I figured we needed to talk alone."

Then he leaned in, "I know about your affair with Jacob, and I know you both have plans for my brother, too." He whispered, "So if I were you, I would come to the rooftop to discuss terms."

Chapter 24

Keto's POV

People often say loyalty doesn't exist.

I have overheard drunk men, women, and even werewolves speaking along the lines of loyalty.

"Loyalty doesn't exist, no one can ever be loyal."

But they were wrong, because all my life had been about loyalty.

I had always been loyal to Orion even before he became the leader of the pack.

But as the saying goes, 'Love makes even the bravest of men do stupid things.'

I had allowed my love or secret desire for Ravenna to consume me, thinking I wouldn't be caught.

And now, I can only hope that the fate that awaits me when I get to Orion's office isn't death.

"Do you have any idea what Orion wants to talk to me about?" I asked the dude in front of me.

He had called me earlier, when I was in Ravenna's room, that Orion wanted to see me.

I remember telling Ravenna not to do anything stupid, and I hope she listened.

"I don't know, you're his second in command." He replied, "But he looked pissed, like really pissed."

I was looking for a response that would give me a form of relief, but this added to the unease gnawing in my chest.

We reached Orion's office, which was a secluded room in the mansion, downstairs.

I knocked on the door, but there was no response. I knocked again, but still no answer.

I took a deep breath and pressed the handle. The door wasn't locked; it opened with a creaking sound.

From the scent that hit my nose, I could tell Orion was inside.

Alphas usually have strong scents, other werewolves can pick their scent faster than they can pick Betas or Omegas.

I entered his office, made sure my heartbeat was steady because I knew he could hear it.

Orion always made it a priority to listen to people's heartbeats when he talks to them.

This allowed him to know certain things, like when someone is lying, afraid of him, or planning to kill him.

His attention was buried in his laptop, so he didn't notice me, or he just acted like he hadn't seen me yet.

His expression looked serious and I could tell he was pissed.

Has he seen the video yet? I wondered, or is that what he's currently watching on his laptop?

I placed my trembling hands behind my back to hide them from his sight.

I cleared my throat. "You called for me."

"Someone has betrayed my trust." He said, without even looking in my direction.

My heart skipped a beat as I froze, my breath hitching.

"What?" I asked, as though I didn't hear him.

He raised his head this time, his red piercing eyes fixed on me like an eagle watching out for a prey.

"Come closer." He ordered, and I took five steps towards him.

Then he adjusted the laptop to face me, "Watch, and tell me what you see."

I hesitated, unwilling to watch the laptop; I just kept staring at him.

"Come on," He urged, "Watch it, and tell me what you think."

I swallowed hard, took a look at the laptop, then looked back at Orion. He gestured with his hand that I pay attention to the content on the laptop.

Then I pressed play, and was immediately stunned by what I saw.

Is he playing with me? What's all this? I wondered.

I was expecting to see the sex scene of Ravenna and I, instead, I'm seeing an account of money.

"All I see here is 30,000 dollars," I stated, unsure how the figure connected to betrayal.

He drew the laptop closer to him. "That's the total revenue that came in from Ravenna's fight with Nikki."

"I still don't understand, boss," I said.

"Someone has stolen from me, Keto, that's what I'm saying." He replied, "The whole money is supposed to be 90,000 dollars, but counting it again, all I'm seeing is 30,000."

I sighed in relief, it became obvious he doesn't know about the video, at least not yet.

"How did 60k disappear from the bag?" I asked, even though I knew he doesn't have the answer to that question.

"That's the same question on my lips, Keto. Someone has stolen from me."

I nodded, "What do you want to do?"

"I want to find whoever took my money and rip his/her head off for stealing from me." He stated coldly.

Typical Orion, renowned for ripping heads off.

I remember when Orion single-handedly killed a pack of werewolves, along with their alpha.

He severed all their heads from their body. Ever since then, his nickname has become 'The Ripper.'

"It's going to take time to find out the thief behind this," I stated.

Orion had so many accountants working for him, and any of them could be responsible.

He opened a drawer and brought out a key, and handed it over to me.

"Start with the CCTVs," he said, "You'll see them in my room."

I collected the key from him, relief washing over me like cold water.

He stood up from his seat, "Take your time and watch them, then get back to me."

"Yes, boss," I answered and turned immediately to leave.

"One more thing, Keto." He called, and I turned to face him.

"Do you think I'm being unfair?" He asked as he walked close to me.

"Unfair about what?" I asked, my eyebrows raised in curiosity.

"I'm talking about Nikki, do you think I shouldn't have killed her?"

I didn't know what to say, I wasn't expecting him to ask me that question.

Orion has never asked for my opinions before.

I wondered if he's feeling guilty for killing Nikki.

"She crossed the line, boss." I answered, "It was in front of the crowds; you had no choice."

He nodded, his hands brushing off his beard as he processed my answer.

"I could have stopped her, without killing her."

"And that would have made you look weak in front of your enemies, who were watching." I cut in.

"Hmm," That was all he said as he walked past me.

I waited until he was out of his office and finally exhaled.

The only thing on my mind was to get to Orion's room and erase the footage.

I made my way to Orion's room like a mouse chasing a cat.

But something felt off, Orion's room was opened, as though someone had broken the lock and entered his room.

My breath caught in my throat.

I peeked through the door and saw two men standing before the TVs.

They were smirking, their eyes were glued on the Screens as they watched a video of me.

On my stomach, giving Ravenna oral sex.

"I never knew Keto could wash a plate this clean. Orion is going to love this when he sees it." One of them said to the rest.

Chapter 25

Lyra's POV

As soon as we got to the rooftop, I folded my hands. "Since you know about my affair with Jacob, why haven't you told Orion?"

Ben didn't reply immediately. He kept rubbing his temples. "I was expecting you to ask how I knew."

"Answer my question," I said, hissing.

"Why didn't you tell Orion I was planning to kill him?" He ignored my question and asked instead.

I didn't respond, I just kept my gaze on him.

"Exactly, just as I thought." He walked close to me, but I took steps backward.

"I'm a politician, Ravenna." He said, "And as a politician, information is power."

"You disgust me, and the more you talk, the more irritated I get." I confessed, "So plotting to kill your own brother is politics to you?"

"Who's your mother, for goodness' sake?" I asked.

I was hoping to get on his nerves, but he was more thick-skinned than I thought, unlike Orion, who was easy to offend with words.

"I killed my own mother," he confessed, "But Orion doesn't know this."

My eyes widened in utter shock, I was so shocked, I couldn't stop my jaw from dropping.

"You killed your mother?" I asked, expecting him to tell me otherwise.

"Yes, I did." He said, "She didn't want me to become the next alpha; she preferred Orion, so I killed her to stop Orion from being the next leader."

I was speechless, I didn't think he was making the whole story up.

"She was the only one backing Orion up. I had won the favour of the council, so I thought killing her would make it possible for me to be the next alpha." He continued.

"But I was wrong, it was Orion I ought to have killed, not her; her death was meaningless."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked.

"Because I want you to understand that I would do whatever it takes to be the leader of this pack, even if it means killing you." He stated coldly.

I didn't know how to react, I just kept staring at him.

But my mind raced with different thoughts.

I had always seen Orion as the monster, the beast who saw killing as a form of hobby, but I was wrong.

Ben was worse, a psychopath, a manipulative bastard.

Sending my growing unease, he grinned, "You know as well as I do that 70% of the pack wants you dead. But I can change that."

I chuckled in disbelief. He wants to make a deal.

"You don't care about Orion, so why should you be concerned if he dies?" He asked.

Yes, he was right, I didn't care about Orion, I wanted to be free from him.

Keto, on the other hand, I was beginning to get fond of him.

But that doesn't mean I would kill Orion if given the chance.

I clearly don't want to be part of any coup; that's not who I am, nor will I ever be that kind of person.

"If I remember correctly, you wanted me dead some days ago, your fat friend almost succeeded in killing me," I uttered as I folded my hands again. "Tell me, what's changed?"

He tilted his head to the right, as if weighing his next words.

"You heard what you shouldn't have heard, and at that time, the fastest way to deal with it was killing you."

"But like I said, I'm a politician, and as far as my political plans are concerned, you're far more useful to me alive than dead." He added.

I couldn't push away the gnawing feeling in my gut.

I could tell I was being cornered.

Just then, the thought of Keto came into my head, and I blinked.

What if Orion has watched the video and has asked his men to fetch me?

The idea of killing Orion was beginning to sound logical.

Killing Orion would save my life, and Keto's life too.

All I had to do was work with Ben, I knew that was his endgame: My cooperation in exchange for my life.

"So what do you want me to do?" I asked, although my voice was weak.

Ben raised his hands to the air, "Nothing, Ravenna. I want you to do nothing until Orion is dead."

"And then what?" I asked, my voice came out sharp this time.

He dropped his hands down, dipped them into his pocket.

"And then you become mine, my mate," he said, "And I promise to treat you well, better than Orion is treating you."

I started out by smiling, and then the smile turned into an outrageous laughter.

I caught a glimpse of him smiling too, as I covered my mouth to stop myself from laughing hard.

"You're funny," I said sarcastically.

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear enough." His voice cut in.

"Whether you choose to marry me or not wouldn't stop Orion from dying." He stated, "But if you decide not to marry me, then you'll die."

"Shut the fuck up," I yelled.

He stopped talking, his eyes narrowing.

"I don't like Orion," I started, "But I'd rather spend the rest of my life with him than spend a single night with you, bloody psychopath."

He wrapped his hand around my neck, his movements were so fast I didn't see it coming.

I fought hard with my hands, but he was too strong for me.

My face reddened immediately due to the choking feeling I felt.

"Like I said, Ravenna." He lifted me off the ground, and my legs wobbled as I fought against his grip. "To refuse me is to accept death."

"You're killing me," I yelled.

"I will only ask this one more time." He said, his voice cold like ice, "Do you accept to be my mate?"

"Fuck you," I yelled, my voice sharp.

His grip around my neck tightened, and I knew it was only a matter of time before I lose consciousness.

Just then, pains went through my body like an electric current.

My skin became hot, and my bones began to crack.

I wasn't choking anymore, I was changing.

Then, a strength I didn't know I had exploded within me.

I pulled at his hand on my neck, and I noticed fur coming out of my body as I felt his grip begin to falter.

His eyes flashed with shock, and I could see his jaw dropping.

*An alpha?" He said, "No way."

Before he could run, my fangs found his shoulders.

Chapter 26

Keto's POV

Two things lingered in my mind as these two men watched the sex tape.

First, why would they break into Orion's private room?

Secondly, now that they have seen the video, what would they do with it?

From the way they were watching it, I could tell for sure, they would inform Orion about it.

That would put Ravenna and I in danger.

Orion is already provoked by the missing funds, hearing a matter like this would make him think I was only responsible for his missing money.

I quietly entered the room and jammed the door behind me.

They were engrossed in the video and did not notice my presence.

"Tell me, what urgent need drove you to break into Orion's room?" I asked, my tone deep.

They turned simultaneously to face me.

"Orion wouldn't mind us breaking in," one of them said. "You, on the other hand," he smirked, "You have some answering to do about this."

He pointed at the screen.

"I bet you discovered the camera in her room and came here to get rid of it," the other man added.

They were right, it wouldn't matter to Orion if they broke in, the video will be the only thing that occupies his mind.

At this point, I knew the only thing I could do was stop them from getting to Orion.

"We know what you're thinking, but you can't take out the two of us at once."

"Answer the question, why did you break into Orion's room?"

"We're looking for a weapon, a weapon that can help us kill an alpha like Orion," he said, his grin widening.

"Any idea where we can find it?"

"Yes, I do," I lied.

I didn't know the weapon they were talking about, nor the place where Orion hid it, but I had to play along.

"So, how about a bargain, huh?" The first one said,

He was taller than me, almost as tall as Orion, while the other one was about my height.

"I'm listening," I replied, my voice low.

"You tell us where we can find the weapon, and we'll pretend we didn't see the video," he stated, "Do we have a deal or not?"

"Delete the video first, and we'll talk," I said, "That's the deal."

The taller one waves his fingers at me, "No, Keto, you tell us where the weapon is first, and then we'll talk."

"I can't tell you where it is, I can only take you there," I lied with confidence.

They stared at each other for a while, weighing their options.

"Instead of following you anywhere, we could beat the crap out of you until you give us the information."

I chuckled, "I like this option, let's find out why Orion chose me as his second in command."

They shot each other a look again, but this time, it was different; I could see the dread on their faces.

"I have an idea, the smaller one said, he was wearing a red shirt and black jeans.

While the taller one had a black singlet on black jeans too.

"How about we keep the video in a flash, as insurance," he said, "That way he would not be tempted to try anything funny."

"Good idea," the other one responded, "Get it done."

He proceeded to the desktop connected to the screens.

I couldn't see what he was doing, but within minutes, he smiled as he waved a pink flash at me.

"We can go, I've deleted the video," he announced.

I swallowed a lump. "Not so fast," I cut in, "I'd have to confirm the video has been deleted first."

"Go on," he said as he crossed his arms.

I shot them a suspicious glance before walking over to the desktop to confirm if they had deleted the video.

They gave me space, and I checked the video to see that it has been deleted.

I tried using the opportunity to also check for any other suspicious content that could reveal those responsible for stealing Orion's money.

I knew if I lingered on the system, they would suspect.

"Have you confirmed it yet?" one of them asked as he eyed me suspiciously.

"Give me a sec," I responded and quickly shut down the system.

"After you," he tugged me lightly as I walked past them.

"I need to check up with someone first," I said as we came out of the room. "I'll meet you guys downstairs."

"Try anything funny and we'll send the flash over to Orion."

Then they took the stairs down, I waited until they were completely out of sight before taking the opposite direction.

I needed to come up with a way to deal with them, but first, I had to see Ravenna first.

To tell her that I had everything in control.

I went to her room, opened it, but it was empty.

I checked her bathroom, but she wasn't there.

Came out of the room, I saw some of the maids and asked them if they knew about Ravenna's whereabouts.

But they all denied, saying they didn't see her.

I didn't have the time to look for her, I had to take care of those guys.

I hurried my way up the stairs and came out of the mansion.

I saw them waiting by a car outside the gate.

I greeted the security guards stationed at the gate and headed out to meet them.

"Show me the flash," I asked.

I needed to be sure the flash was still with them.

"A deal is a deal, bro," he said as he dipped his hand into his pocket and brought it out to show me.

"I'm driving," I stated, and took the key from the top of the car.

But I waited for them to enter the car first.

I opened the door and was about to go in when I saw something strange that caught my attention.

On the roof of the mansion, I saw Ben, Orion's brother, holding his neck as blood dropped from it.

In front of him was a werewolf I couldn't recognize.

But the strangest thing was that the werewolf was an alpha.

Is that Orion? I muttered under my breath, but Orion's werewolf form was way bigger than that.

What if Ravenna is there too?

The thought suddenly dawned on me, and it made my heart skip a beat.

I was torn between handling these guys and going over to make sure Ravenna was okay.

But then the werewolf started changing back into human form, its glowing red eyes locking with mine.

And in that moment, I could tell for sure.

It wasn’t Orion.

It was her.

Ravenna.

But how?

Chapter 27

Lyra's POV

All my life, as Lyra, I have never seen someone so terrified of me.

It has always been the opposite: me, terrified, weak, and undermined.

I could see terror written all over Ben's face when I shifted into my wolf form.

He held his neck with his hand as he retraced his steps backward.

I followed him with each step he took backward.

"This shouldn't be happening," he said, "How does an omega become an alpha?"

I felt angry inside, and the only thing I wanted to do was kill him.

I snarled at him, and he flinched.

"This changes nothing, Ravenna," he said, and then jumped from the rooftop.

I didn't follow him, I was smart enough to know that wouldn't be a good idea.

First, I'll likely be seen as the enemy, and Ben will still get away.

I shifted back into my human form.

My heart still pounded fast and hard, but the fear I had initially felt when he held my neck was gone.

An alpha? How is that possible? That thought stood out among the many other thoughts that ran through my mind.

I was a beta as Lyra, and Ravenna was an omega.

There must be an explanation for this new alpha status.

But more importantly, I don't think I want Orion or Keto to know, especially Orion.

I left the rooftop and headed straight to my room.

When I got to my room, the door was open.

I remember closing it, who would have opened it?

I entered the room, but it was empty.

I stood in front of the mirror, my body reflecting back to me.

My mouth was covered in blood, Ben's blood.

I knew I had to freshen up, so I pulled off my clothes and headed to the shower to bathe.

While I was under the shower, I could see my eyes through the mirror glowing red.

Kira should have an answer for this, I thought.

I needed to see her.

As soon as I got out of the shower, I went to the wardrobe, took new clothes.

A black Manchester United jersey, along with a pair of joggers matching the same colour.

Somehow, shifting into a wolf had affected me.

I could no longer ignore the growing hunger pangs gnawing in my stomach.

I walked towards the door with the intention of finding one of the maids to bring me food.

It's surprising how I was no longer worried about the video.

I just knew Keto would handle it.

I caught his scent earlier, when I was on the rooftop, but I didn't see him..

As soon as I opened the door, I saw Kira standing, about to knock.

"Kira?" I called, "You're the person I was hoping to see."

She didn't respond, she just kept her gaze fixed on me.

She wore that surprised look that meant she had noticed something.

"Ravenna, your eyes," she said, "It's glowing red."

"Yeah, about that, "I stated, "I need answers."

"Come in," I said as I opened the door fully so that she could enter.

She entered the room, dropped her bag on the couch opposite the bed, and sat down on the bed.

"Where were you headed?" she asked.

"To get food," I replied.

"You can't go like that, not until we understand what's going on with you," she stated firmly.

"I figured, but I'm hungry."

"Alright, stay here, and don't open the door for anyone unless it's me. I'll get the food for you."

She got up from the bed. "What would you like?" she asked.

"Meat, lots of meat."

She raised a brow, "Do you love meat that much, or is this a new craving?"

"It's a new craving," I answered.

"Alright, I'll be back."

She left the room, closing the door after her.

As soon as she left, I sank onto the bed.

My eyes were facing the ceiling, but my mind was elsewhere.

Why didn't I kill Ben when I had the chance to kill him?

I could have ended him once and for all, but instead, I let him go.

Knowing fully well that he was going to come up with another plan.

A knock on the door jolted me out of my thoughts.

"Open up, Ravenna. It's me, Kira."

I got up from the bed and went straight to the door, opened it, and she came in with a tray containing mostly grilled chicken and vegetables.

"The maids wanted to bring it up here. for you, but I insisted on bringing it in myself," she said as she dropped the tray on the small table nearby.

"Thank you, Kira," I responded as my hand grabbed some chunks of the chicken and started eating.

Kira nodded, "Now that your wolf is back, have you shifted yet?" she asked.

"Yes, I have."

"Tell me about it, when?" she asked.

"It's a long story, but it happened today."

"What about your stomach, still hurt?"

She picked up her bag which shehad left on the couch.

"It still hurts, but just a little bit," I answered.

She nodded, "If you're still feeling pain, then it means your shift wasn't convenient, you shifted out of duress or under pressure."

I didn't know if I could trust Kira with the truth about Ben and how he tried to kill me because I refused to comply with his intentions for me.

I nodded, "Yes."

I hoped she wouldn't press, she wouldn't ask me what really happened.

"Take this," she handed me a bottle containing some herbs.

I collected it from her and placed it on the table.

"Drink it now, and drink everything," she ordered.

I didn't argue, I just opened the bottle and gulped it until the bottle was empty.

"It will make you sleep for 36-48 hours, and when you wake up, you'd be completely fine," she stated firmly as she zipped her bag.

"You haven't answered any of my questions," I cut in, "I don't think sleeping would be possible with these questions lingering in my head."

"Look, Ravenna," she called, "I choose to call you Ravenna because I've decided not to tell Orion about your transmigration yet."

I smiled, relief washing over me.

"Thank you, Kira, but I'm curious to know why you decided not to tell him," I inquired.

"Because I don't think Orion is Orion too," she said, her voice low.

"I don't understand."

"Just as you're Lyra in Ravenna's body, I think there's someone else in Orion's body."

My eyes widened in surprise, and for some seconds, I just went mute.

"If Orion isn't the one in his body, then who is in Orion's body?"

The sedative in the herb I drank kicked in, I began to see double.

I blinked rapidly, but the more I blinked, the more heavier my eyelids became.

I couldn't even hear Kira anymore, just a disoriented vision of her mouth moving.

Before I knew it, my back hit the bed as I dozed off.

Chapter 28

Keto's POV

"Dude, what's wrong with you? You coming or what?"

"Give me a second," I replied, my eyes were still on Ravenna.

I watched as she shift back into her human form. Ben had jumped off.

I was very sure he tried to attack her, kill her, maybe.

How is she an alpha? Ravenna is known as the powerful omega, and it'll definitely send a shock wave across different packs when they hear about it.

I waited until she was out of my sight before I entered the vehicle and drove off.

"You kept us waiting," Mark said, the muscular one.

"I needed time to think," I said, "Betraying Orion is not very easy for me."

"But you didn't take time to think before giving Ravenna a head, did you?" Mark asked.

I didn't answer, I just kept driving.

"Of course, he didn't," Dan's voice cut in, "You don't think when you see a pussy like that, especially if the pussy is Ravenna's," he chuckled mockingly.

"That's different," I protested, "Orion hates her."

Mark leaned in, "How about we let Orion watch the video, let's see what he calls it."

I swallowed a lump.

I knew I was being defensive, I kept telling myself that I was still loyal to Orion.

Mark leaned back, "I thought as much," he said, "You betrayed Orion the moment you put your hand on Ravenna's naked body."

"You better work with us, we're the same, you know," he continued, "You want what you want, and we want what we want."

"All I want is Ravenna, but you want Orion dead," I shot.

"The only way you can get Ravenna is if Orion dies," Mark responded, "Work with us, Keto."

I was tempted to yield to their proposal, to work with them.

I love Ravenna, but I don't think I could betray Orion just to be with her.

I can't watch Orion die, I can't be part of those planning to kill him.

But things just got complicated with that video, I don't know what I might do anymore.

"Alright, I'll work with you," I said, "But I need to know who your boss is, who's the head of this Operation."

I took a glance at them through the rearview mirror.

"We'll take you to him after you give us the weapon we seek," Mark replied.

I must say this, Mark is really smart and calculative.

Even from his looks, I knew I couldn't manipulate him.

"So, tell us where you're taking us," Dan asked, "We have no clue where we're going, if we have to work together like you said, start by telling us where you're taking us."

"We're almost there," I said, " just right after that bridge ahead."

I had two ideas, the first was to get time to a quiet place like the field where Nikki was buried and kill them, but I don't think I can fight off two betas, especially Mark.

Plus, I noticed a car has been following us closely behind for a while now.

So I might not be able to get rid of them with plan A.

Then there's Plan B. Plan B is crazy.

I switched the gear from 3 to 5, my leg pressing on the accelerator.

I was going to drive them over the bridge into the water below.

"What the fuck man," Mark said as he noticed the increase in speed.

I ignored him and within seconds, the car hit the Guardrails at the bridge, and it stumbled over.

We hit the water as gravity pulled us deeper into the river.

I held my breath, the windows were broken due to the impact on the guardrails.

The only thing on my mind was the flash.

Ben and Dan were already trying to come out of the car.

But I succeeded first, but instead of swimming up, I waited until they were out of the car, too.

They started swimming up, but I grabbed Dan's leg.

He was the one with the flash.

He tried kicking me off with his legs, but I held still as my other hands reached for the jackknife in my shoes.

Knives can't kill a werewolf, but this one was different; it was a silver knife.

He stopped kicking and reached for my neck instead, but his hands barely touched my neck.

I plunged the knife deep into his chest, aiming for his heart.

He gasped, bubbles coming out of his mouth.

I kept twitching the knife inside him as blood streamed out.

Then his body went limp, his eyes closed.

Instant death.

I dipped my hands into his pocket, reaching for the flash, but it wasn't there.

Due to the lack of oxygen, I couldn't stay long underwater, so I pulled him up with me.

As soon as my head went above the water, I took in air.

I searched his shirt, his shoes, and his socks, but still couldn't find the flash.

Perhaps it fell off during the accident, and it is still in the car.

Just as I was contemplating swimming back to the car deep in the river, another thought crossed my mind.

What if Mark was the one with the flash?

Panic set in, and I turned around to check for his location.

He didn't even wait to rescue Dan, because he saw me when I held Dan back.

For some weird reason, I decided to look up.

I sighted him, climbing the bridge in a semi-werewolf form.

Luckily for me, there was a boat coming towards my direction, I waved at it and it stopped.

He was a young boy, "Accident?" He asked.

I nodded as I held his hand for support into the boat.

I pointed at Mark on the bridge, "I need to catch him," I said, "He stole my money."

I didn't think he heard me, because when I turned to him, his eyes were widened, and his jaw opened.

He wasn't a werewolf and hadn't seen one before.

I removed my gold necklace, handed it over to him.

He swallowed hard when he saw the necklace.

"I know a shortcut," he said, "But we have to wait until he gets to the top of the mountain to see what direction he takes."

"He's going to take left," I interrupted.

He didn't ask how I knew, he just turned on the boat's engine and drove off.

Chapter 29

Orion's POV

I have killed many people, wasted many souls, and went on with my life like nothing happened.

I don't know what it means to be haunted by conscience, but lately, my heart has been bleeding.

Restless nights, no appetite, depression, etc.

These mundane emotions continue to torment me.

It started the day I killed Nikki, my fiercest female warrior.

She was trustworthy, she was like my sister.

I trusted her just as much as I trusted Keto.

But I killed her without hesitation, like a criminal, all because she had defied the order not to kill Ravenna.

She was blinded by revenge, overwhelmed by rage.

I could have just stopped her, locked her up, and punished her for some days, instead of killing her.

Now, my own pack is gradually turning against me.

They want me dead, but I don't blame them.

I'm responsible; it all started the moment I decided to bring Ravenna in as my mate.

Sometimes I wonder if Ravenna is just a werewolf or a witch, because of the misfortunes that are unfolding around me because of her.

I was so deep in these thoughts until my nose picked up a scent that snapped me back to my reality.

A wild beast had spotted me. From the smell, I knew it was a huge tiger.

I came to this forest to be alone and to think.

But this stupid tiger thinks he can eat an alpha for lunch.

I acted like I didn't know he was stalking me; he crouched behind one of the trees a few feet from where I sat.

On a normal day, I would have broken one of his legs and let it live.

But he distracted my quiet time, and no one, not even a tiger, should dare cross an Alpha's lane.

I'd kill it and have my men roast it for my birthday.

Celebration starts 12AM tonight.

The tiger was closer now, his scent was getting stronger.

Due to my training as a kid, I knew how tigers attack.

I knew it was going to attack from behind, and it was going to aim for my neck, or should I say Jugular.

I shut my eyes closed, with my hands pressed firmly on the earth.

It was necessary that I focus, to rely on my werewolf senses.

Especially my ears.

I waited until my ear picked up the tiger's jump in the air.

Then I turned to face it before it could bite my neck.

I snapped his mouth wide open with brute force, he died instantly.

"Quiet time is over," I said out loud, "Time to head back home."

I lifted the tiger, carried him on my shoulders, and headed to my car.

It was parked outside the forest, by the road.

As soon as I got to the road, some of my men were waiting for me.

They approached me and took the dead tiger from me.

"Take me home," I ordered as they dropped the tiger in the trunk.

I entered the car and within 40 minutes we were at my mansion.

As soon as I came down from the car, my nose picked up a scent: werewolf blood.

It was coming strongly from the rooftop of my apartment.

"That's strange," I muttered.

Was there a fight while I was gone? I wondered.

I decided I had to check the roof, but first, I needed to check on Keto, to know if he had found the culprits that stole my money.

Money that I had generated during the fight between Nikki and Ravenna.

The thing is, I had gambled that the match would be a draw, no winner.

I knew Ravenna wouldn't be able to shift.

Her stepmother, Ruth, had poisoned her with Mistletoe while she was unconscious.

Her plan was to kill Ravenna, but she decided to offer her as a peace offering to me when I demanded that I wanted Ravenna if she didn't want to go to war with me.

I used that leverage to win a gamble of millions of dollars, and then someone had the audacity to steal some of it from me.

My jaw clenched in anger as I got to my room.

Someone had broken my lock, but I gave Keto the key. Why would he break in?

"Keto?" I called out as I entered my room, but there was no response.

I went straight to the CCTVs and checked the recordings.

Maybe Keto is with Ravenna, I wanted to be sure, so I checked the camera in her room.

I saw her sleeping through her room's camera.

I checked the previous records to see what she had been up to since I left.

I saw something in the records that made me sit down and replay it again to be sure I knew what I was seeing.

I saw Keto leaving Ravenna's room, with no record of when he entered.

Something doesn't add up, so I played again.

Still the same missing link, like a part of the records has been deleted.

Why will they delete a part of the records unless they have something to hide?

I nodded the thought off my head.

I trust Keto, there's no way he would do something vile behind my back.

"But I'll still ask him to be sure," I mused.

Then, I saw another part of the recordings that caught my attention.

I saw Ravenna walk into her room, her mouth stained with blood.

I connected that video to the smell of blood I perceived earlier when I came out of the car.

Why would Ravenna's mouth be filled with a werewolf blood? Who did she fight with, Keto?

Something is fishy, I could sense it.

First, my stolen money, then my lock broken, CCTV tampered with, the smell of blood on my roof, and Ravenna's mouth covered in blood.

My mind began to piece everything together.

First, Keto has to answer for my broken lock and missing records on the CCTV.

Then, Ravenna has to answer for the blood I saw in her mouth.

As a leader, it's important that I analyze before asking questions. It helps me in figuring out the right questions to ask.

I made my way to Ravenna's room, her room was close to the rooftop.

On the door to her room, I saw a note.

'Do not disturb, she needs to sleep,' written by Kira.

"Fine," I sighed, I'll wait till she wakes.

I took the stairs that led to the rooftop.

As soon as I got to the rooftop, I saw a spot stained with red.

I crouched to try and see if I could tell whose blood it was.

My heart skipped a beat.

"I know this scent," I said, "But how? why?"

My eyes narrowed. "Why was Ravenna's mouth covered with my brother's blood?”

Chapter 30

Keto's POV

Mark was way smarter than I gave him credit for; he managed to slip away from me.

I stood at the bridge, watching every corner for him, but I couldn't see him.

The ambulance came, and I waited as they extracted Dan's dead body from the river.

I was sure the police would trace the car back to Orion, so I knew I had a lot of explaining to do.

That's if the video doesn't get to Orion.

With that video, Orion's enemies can paint me as the perfect villain in his eyes.

But I'd better get to him before they do.

"Can you lend me your phone?" I asked one of the police officers at the bridge.

A female police officer with blonde hair.

She gave me a once-over, "You look miserable," she said, "Were you involved in the accident on this bridge?"

"Yes, I was," I replied, "I was the driver."

She raised an eyebrow, "Then you should be in the hospital for a checkup," she said in a polite tone.

"I'm fine, trust me." I said, "Just lend me your phone."

"A minute please," she gestured with her hand that I hold on, and went over to one of her colleagues.

She whispered in his ear, but due to my werewolf abilities, I could hear them.

"The man standing over there claims to be the driver of the car involved in the accident."

"Is he fine?" he asked.

She nodded, "As far as I can tell, no sign of injury."

"Then bring him in for questioning," he ordered.

She turned and then headed back in my direction.

"Any problem, officer?" I asked.

"You have to come with us."

"I'm all yours, officer," I replied.

I followed her to one of their police cars, she opened the door, and I went in.

She sat close to me, and another police officer drove, a male with a bald head.

We got to the station and I was asked to sit down.

I have never been to the station before, and if she had allowed me to call Orion, I wouldn't have been brought in.

My phone's screen broke due to the accident, and Orion's number is the only thing I knew offhand.

The female officer tapped my shoulder. "Do you have a lawyer?"

"I don't need a lawyer," I scoffed, "Just let me call my boss, and he'll handle the rest."

She crossed her arms, "It doesn't work like that," she stated, "You have to call your lawyer."

"Am I a suspect?" I asked.

"Unless you can tell us how you managed to survive a car crash without any wounds, and how one of the person in your car died, not from the accident, but from a precise stab to the heart? Then you're a suspect."

I didn't say a word.

I didn't have to, because if I wanted to leave, their guns won't stop me, but it'll bring an unhealthy attention to werewolves and to Orion, because he owns the car, and they would trace it.

She handed her phone to me, "Just one call, and put it on speaker."

I dialed Orion's number, he picked up immediately.

"Hello?"

"Boss, it's Keto."

"Where are you?" he asked.

"At the station, not very far from the city center."

"I'll send my driver to pick you," he said, and cut the call.

But something felt off in the way he sounded on the phone.

My heart raced.

What if the truth has gotten to me, and he's just waiting for me?

I thought of running away, but the thought of Ravenna wouldn't let me.

I can't run, at least not without her.

"You didn't take my advice," the officer's voice cut in

"Will you arrest me for not taking your advice?" I taunted.

"Well, I will be out in the next two minutes, so I don't need a lawyer."

She just stared at me in disbelief.

"It seems you want to sleep in the station today," she uttered, turning on her heel.

I waited until it was exactly five minutes, then I saw her talking to another officer.

A senior officer, I supposed, and she didn't look pleased with what he was telling her.

Her gaze shifted towards my direction and I smiled.

Here she comes again.

"You're free to go," she said, "I don't know the strings you pulled, but don't be relieved yet, my eyes are on you, and if you're involved in the death of that man, I'll find you and bring you back here."

"I can give you my house address if you want," I teased, "To make it easier for you to find me."

"Goodbye," she said, turning, and walked away.

I stared at her for a while.

Sometimes I wish I were human, life is so complicated being a werewolf.

As soon as I was out of the station, "Keto."

It was a familiar voice that I recognized.

I approached him, and without wasting any time, I entered, and he drove.

"Orion's birthday is tomorrow, remember?" he asked.

He was one of Orion's personal guard or driver, depending on what Orion intended to do.

"I know, but Orion is not into parties," I answered.

"You're wrong," he said as the car drove past other cars.

"Orion said he is going to throw a big party tomorrow, and according to him, it's going to be a sex orgy."

He chuckled, "I think he's doing it to win the favor of the pack."

"Maybe, we don't know for sure," I said, "Orion is unpredictable, it might as well be a trap."

"Who cares, as long as it's going to get me some chicks to play with," he said, smirking.

Soon we arrived at the mansion, and my heartbeat started racing again.

I made my way to Orion's office, he was already waiting for me.

I lingered at the door.

"I can smell you, Keto," he announced, "Come in."

Then I opened the door and entered.

"There's someone on the line who would like to talk to you," he said as he stretched his phone towards me. "She claims she has information for you."

My gaze lingered on Orion for a while.

Is this a trap? I wondered.

My legs started shaking as I collected the phone from him.

"Hello, who's on the line?" I asked.

"Told you I wasn't going to let you off the hook easily," she stated, and I could immediately tell it was the female police officer I met earlier.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I denied.

She cleared her throat, "We pulled the car out of the river, and among the many things we saw was a pink flash drive."

My heart sank, the flash was in the car, not with Mark..

"We also traced the car, and like you said, it belonged to your boss, Orion," she continued, "Right now, we're currently on our way to your place, we'd play the video and ask you and your boss some questions."

My breath caught in my throat, and my life flashed before me.

"See you soon, Keto," she said, "You might want to get a lawyer this time."

She hung up, but my hand was too stiff to take the phone away from my ear.

I'm fucked and might as well die today.

I turned slowly to look at Orion.

He was robbing his temples.

He heard it.

"Seems like I am not the only one with questions, Keto." He said, his eyes narrowing.

Chapter 31

Keto's POV

"Tell me, Keto, why do I get this feeling that you have betrayed me?" Orion asked, his tone laced with anger.

I knew he heard my conversations with the police officer, and the fact that they're headed here is only going to complicate matters.

"I didn't betray you, Orion," I said, "I would never do that."

"I swear, I can explain, it's not what it looks like," I added.

Orion raised his chin, "Alright, make me understand."

I didn't know what he knows, but from the way he was staring at me, I knew he had found out about some things, maybe not everything.

"When I got to your room, I saw it opened, and the lock was broken." I started, "They were two of them, Dan and Ben, and according to them, they were looking for a weapon that is supposed to kill an alpha."

Orion crossed his arms, "Go on."

"I couldn't take on the both of them and I didn't know who else was involved in the conspiracy, so I told them I knew where you kept the weapon even though I had no idea what they were talking about."

"Hmm," he exhaled, "So what was your plan?"

"To kill one of them, and bring the other one back to you for questioning," I lied.

"So where is he? The one you were supposed to bring back."

I swallowed a lump, "I lost him while I was dealing with the other one."

Orion seemed to be buying my story, even though I didn't tell him the whole truth.

I still needed to come up with a plan to deal with the police officers coming here, and unless Orion let me go, I won't be able to stop them from getting to him.

"Did you get to know who they were working for? " he asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Not exactly, but I have a speculation, you might not like it." I stated.

I had to tell him, even though there was no evidence to prove it.

It would at least take his mind away from suspecting me.

"You think my brother, Ben is part of them?" he asked.

How the fuck did he know?

I nodded, "I don't think he's part of them, I think he's the leader."

He leaned back into his seat, "So I'm just supposed to believe you without any evidence?"

"There's evidence," I uttered, "You just might not believe her witness."

He sniffed, a faint smile spreading across his lips, "Let me guess, Ravenna? She's the witness."

"Yes, believe me, she's telling the truth," I protested.

"Why I should I believe a word Ravenna says?" Orion asked, he sounded like he was disgusted at me for believing Ravenna.

"She's not her father, Orion," I confessed, "Her father might have been a liar, but Ravenna is different."

"Hmmm, you sound almost as if you love her," he stated, "Perhaps you have allowed her to bewitched you."

My breath caught in my throat, I didn't know what to say.

I couldn't bring myself to denying the fact that I loved Ravenna, so I kept quiet.

"You killed Nikki because of her, Orion," I said, even as my heart raced with fear, "That sounds more like bewitchment to me."

"You killed your best warrior over a woman you claim to hate," I added, "Who does that?"

He held my gaze for a while, then he chuckled in disbelief.

"Are you saying I've been bewitched by Ravenna?" he asked.

"No," I sighed, "What I'm trying to say is maybe you don't hate her just as much as you claim to hate her."

"I could kill her tonight you know," he stated coldly, "Just to prove to you that I hate her."

My stomach twisted, "Killing Ravenna wouldn't get rid of the guilt you feel for killing Nikki."

I knew he has been dealing with guilty conscience ever since Nikki died.

He had avoided women totally since she was buried.

I noticed he also stopped drinking, so it didn't take me long to put the pieces together that Nikki's death affected him.

"When Ravenna wakes up, send her to me," he ordered, "I'll see if her story checks up, and decide whether or not I'm going to kill her."

"As for you, I want you to know that if I find out that you somehow betrayed me," he said, "I'd kill you."

I froze, my breath hitched.

He meant it.

Orion doesn't speak empty words.

Since I started serving him, this is the first time he would threatened to kill me if I went behind my back.

"I understand," I said, bowing.

"You're already a suspect in my eyes, and unless you bring me evidence that rules you out, you might not live long enough."

"How about the police officers?" I asked.

I had to find a way to deal with the police, they're the only one that can give Orion a reason to believe I was his enemy.

"You deal with the officers," he ordered, "You know I hate it when police comes to my mansion."

"Do you want me to kill them?" I asked.

Every fiber of my being wanted him to say yes.

I didn't want to kill innocent humans, but I had to, my life depended on it.

"Kill the officers," he uttered, and I almost sighed in relief, "But bring the one you spoke to earlier to me, alive and unhurt."

My heart pounded hard in my chest.

Bringing one alive is still going to get me killed, unless she didn't watch the video.

But knowing how curious and determined she was to tie me to the crimes, she wouldn't hesitate to watch the videos.

"Yes boss," I acknowledged, "I would do as you've said.

He waved his hand at me to leave, and I turned on my heels.

I left the mansion with a confused state of mind.

I couldn't even check on Ravenna, she must be worried about me.

I weighed my options as I shape shifted into my werewolf form.

It was late already, and the plan was to attack the police before they got to Orion's mansion.

Shifting into a werewolf gives me an incredible advantage of speed.

I stormed into the forest nearby, ran deep into the woods.

With brute force, I broke a tree, and carried it on my shoulders.

I had marked the female officers scent so I could smell it a mile off.

I waited till they were closed to where I was before blocking the road with the tree I had broken.

I shifted back into my human form and stood in the middle of the road as their car approached.

Sighting the tree in the road, they parked.

I could tell how many of them were in the vehicle by the number of hearts that were beating.

Four of them.

They came out of the vehicle, all four of them.

"We meet again," I said with a grin.

The female officer with the blonde hair eyed me suspiciously.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"To confess," I teased, "You want to know the truth."

The remaining officers, about three of them were busy pushing the tree away from the road.

She smiled, "I know you are responsible for the tree on the road but I just don't know how you did it."

"The dead man you found in the river," I started, "That was me, I killed him."

Her smile faded into a frown, and before I could say further, she brought out her gun.

"But your hands right where I can see them," she ordered, "You're under arrest for murder."

The other officers were stunned.

"What's going on?" one of them asked.

"Leave the tree," she ordered, "Let's take this one back to the station, he just made a confession."

"I'm sorry," I cut in, "But I won't be going to the station."

The other police officers brought out their guns.

"Go on your knees young man," one yelled.

But I didn't listen, instead, I let out a loud growl.

The kind of growl a predator gives before pouncing on the prey.

Chapter 32

Lyra's POV

When I woke up, the back of my head was pounding, but that soreness disappeared after I yawned and stretched my arms.

Kira mentioned that I was going to sleep for an extended period of time, which is why I had no idea how long I had been asleep.

My brain was too foggy to recall anything, but I tried to think of her last words.

I reached for my phone to check the time, but it was switched off.

I sat up from the bed, my attention was drawn to the camera.

"Keto?" I muttered.

I hope he's alive and fine.

I must know what is going on with him.

I hurled myself out of bed and went straight to the bathroom to shower.

I was refreshed in the water, and my conversation with Kira began coming back to me.

"Just as you're Lyra in Ravenna's body, I think there's someone else in Orion's body."

These were her last words.

I didn't know what to think of it, but I didn't give it much thought.

I don't care if he's Orion or Marion, all I care about is seeing Keto.

As soon as I was done with the shower, I browsed through my wardrobe for the perfect outfit.

That was when it occurred to me to check if it was day or night.

I went back to the bathroom and checked through the window. It was evening, the sun was beginning to set.

I went back to the wardrobe, and for some strange reason, I had a tug to put on a red bodycon split gown.

Without giving it much thought, I wore it.

But before I could get to the door, someone opened it from outside.

It was Kira, who was dressed in a black evening dress, and had on heels as if going to a party.

"I thought you'd be up by now," she said, "You look really hot wearing this dress."

"Thank you," I replied, "You look really pretty too, but what's the occasion?" I asked, "Are you going to a party?"

"Yeah, you guessed right, but I'm not going anymore, I'm already at the party," she said.

I raised an eyebrow, "I don't understand."

"Today is Orion's birthday, and the celebration is underway."

"Wow, I didn't know."

"Well, I thought you did since you were already wearing clothes for the occasion," she said.

"Just a hunch," I responded. "By the way, have you seen Keto?"

"No, I haven't seen him, but I know he will be busy bringing the girls in for the orgy."

My eyes widened in surprise, "Orgy?"

Kira sat down on the couch, her hands pulling off her heels.

"Every werewolf pack has their unique tradition, but in our pack, once the Alpha has a birthday, he must mark it with a sex orgy; different werewolves will choose who to fuck and have fun."

"That's gross," I said with a frown.

"So who are you fucking tonight?" I asked as I sat down beside her.

She scoffed, "I'm a healer; certain rules don't apply to me."

"What about me?" I asked.

I didn't want to have anything to do with orgy, I couldn't imagine having a one night stand with someone I have no emotional connection with.

"You're untouchable, Ravenna," she said, "Only Orion decides if any other werewolf can get to have sex with you."

"But Orion doesn't want me, he hates me."

"Orion is complicated," she replied, "You can't really know for sure what he has in mind for you."

"That reminds me, you talked about Orion not being Orion," I uttered.

I had hoped she would throw more light on the subject.

"Not today, Ravenna," she responded with a shrug, "Today is Orion's birthday, we celebrate."

"I think I need to get drunk and sleep through the night, haven't had a peaceful sleep for days now," Kira chimed in.

I cleared my throat, "There's something I want to tell you, Kira, maybe you can help out."

"Go on, love, I'm all ears," she answered.

"I uhm, uhm almost had sex with Keto," I blurted out.

"Well, almost had sex doesn't sound like something to be worried about," she replied.

"You don't understand," I cut in, "We were both naked and he was down on Oral sex."

Kira smiled, "Sounds like you both were having fun," she teased.

"There was a camera recording the whole thing while we were making out," I whispered.

Her eyes widened as the realization of what we'd done dawned on her.

She cleared her throat, "In my mind, I was imagining Orion, but then it dawned on me, you said keto."

I nodded, "What do we do?"

"Pray that Orion doesn't watch the video, which I think is impossible."

"What happens if he watches it?" I asked.

"He'll cut off Keto's tongue if he's merciful, but if he thinks there's more to it than the oral sex, death would be the penalty."

I swallowed hard.

"You know what, Ravenna," she cut in, "You worry too much, Orion doesn't have time to watch any videos tonight, so relax."

"How do I know he hasn't watched it already?"

"Ooh, come on, you bore me," Kira said, "How about you find Keto and ask him directly?"

She got up from the couch, "I need to sleep," she uttered, and then collapsed onto the bed.

I don't want to have anything to do with the party, I don't even want to leave the room, but I had to see Keto.

First to know if he's fine, and then to tell me to run as far away as possible from Orion.

I'd miss him, though, but that'll be better than death.

"Alright, I'm going out," I said out loud.

I got up from the couch, headed to my shoe rack, and slipped into a pair of shoes.

I adjusted my hair, then headed out of my room, leaving Kira behind on the bed.

I could hear the clinking of glasses and chatter from downstairs, but I decided to go upstairs instead, to the rooftop.

I met some people on the stairs, making out.

I ignored them and made my way to the rooftop.

Surprisingly, I saw several people there.

Scattered in small groups, most of the people on the rooftop were chuckling and drinking under the moonlight.

I started looking for Keto in the crowd, but could not find him.

Then, I noticed a keto-shaped figure.

His position was somewhat detached from the crowd.

He was standing all the way at the top, staring out into the sky.

That's when my heart skipped a beat.

I made a quiet call for him, “Keto,” along with taking cautious steps in his direction.

“Keto” was the only thing I managed to whisper before he started making slow turns towards where I was standing.

"I've been searching for you, Keto."

I didn't have the chance to get more words out to him before he uttered the words that shattered my heart into pieces,

“He watched it, Ravenna. Orion has seen the video.”

Chapter 33

Lyra's POV

I blinked, too stunned to speak, It felt as though I had been stabbed by a knife.

"What are we going to do?" I stuttered, my voice weak.

Keto sipped the glass of champagne in his hand, "We do nothing, Ravenna."

"huh?" Is he crazy?

"Let's run, Keto," I murmured, my eyes darting around to make sure we were not being watched, "Nothing means death."

Keto brushed my cheek lightly with his hand, " I'm sorry it had to be this way, Ravenna, but it was great knowing you," he said, his eyes wet with tears.

He sounded like someone who is aware of an impending death waiting for him.

Like a farewell speech between two lovers.

I felt a knot in my stomach.

I still couldn't believe Keto was going to die, just like that.

There had to be something we could do to save his life.

"How did you know Orion had watched the video?" I asked while my mind raced with different possibilities.

What if Orion is giving Keto the time to run so he can hunt after him for sport? Or perhaps he's still finding it difficult to just kill his most trusted beta; maybe Orion isn't an irredeemable monster after all.

"Because he knows about the flash and has the woman with the flash in his custody," he stated, his voice laced with emotions, like he was on edge.

"Then why hasn't he killed you yet?" I asked.

"It's his birthday, Ravenna," he answered, "Or maybe he's watching me to see what I'm going to do."

"Then you run, running increases your chances of survival, Keto," I pressed.

He nodded his head dismissively, "I can't run, Ravenna."

"Then you're going to die," I shouted, pushing him off.

I could feel the gazes of werewolves who came for the party on me, but I didn't care.

Luckily, they were too busy celebrating to pay much attention to a wailing girl.

"I'm not afraid of death, Ravenna," he boasted.

"Then be afraid of death for me, I want you to live," I pressed.

"You're suggesting I run," he said, "I can't run, I have served Orion all my life, and if it leads to dying at his hands, then so be it," he stated firmly.

There was genuinely nothing I could say. His mind was made up, and I was perfectly aware that nothing would stand as an argument against it.

Holding my hands, he said, "I want you to know that Orion is not so bad. Maybe he's a brute, but sadly never a monster."

I gave him a sarcastic chuckle and said, "Somebody's going to kill you because of his insecurity, and you think I would consider him not a monster?"

A smile appeared on his face, "You don't see it now, but one day you will. You will know why I stand by him."

Before I could even catch my breath, he pulled me toward him, planted one on me.

I was a little stunned: he kissed me publicly as if it were nothing!

My lips parted as warmth consumed me.

Then he pulled back, his eyes darting passed me as though he saw something, or someone.

"It's time," a deep male voice cut in, "Orion told us to find you."

My heart sank, I turned around to look, and my eyes met these three huge men I don't think I have ever seen before.

Keto sighed. I could feel his breath on my hair.

"Goodbye, Ravenna," he said, and followed the men.

I stood still for a moment, and the world blurred around me.

"Hi, Ravenna," a voice called from the stairs, "So nice to meet you again."

I cleared my throat, but my voice still revealed the grief in my heart.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know you." he looked familiar, but my mind was too foggy to remember where I had met him.

He was tall, just like Orion, brown hair and bearded, dressed in a black suit.

"Your battle with Nikki, the man you met before you passed out," he said, smiling like he knew there was no way I would forget him.

I raised an eyebrow as the memory of that day played back.

He was the alpha that almost got in a fight in Orion because of me.

But what is he doing here? Is he supposed to attend the birthday party of his rival?

"Ooh, I remember you now," I said, although my voice still held that grief, "I didn't get to say thank you for standing up for me that day."

"Ooh, it's nothing," he brushed, "Are you okay? You don't sound okay."

I swallowed a lump, struggling for words.

"Is it Orion?" he asked, his tone suspicious.

My gaze met his, and I nodded to confirm his suspicion.

"Don't worry, I have a fighting contest with Orion soon, I'll make sure I kill him for you, so you can be free from his tyranny," he assured.

I nodded, "No, not that," I cut in, "He's about to kill someone I love, and I don't know what to do."

"You do nothing, Ravenna," he said, almost sounding like Keto, "Just forget about the person in question, he's dead already, Orion is ruthless."

I clenched my jaw, "I can't just sit back, I have to do something," I insisted.

"I admire your strength, Ravenna," he said, "but you can't beat Orion."

"Only an alpha can go head to head with another alpha, and I can't do that in his territory; the contest is the only solution," he added.

I sniffed, but my head was spinning for ways I could intervene to save Keto's life.

"Don't do something stupid, Ravenna," he said, and I laughed.

"Sounds funny, right?" he asked, his tone playful.

"No, you sound like someone I know, someone close," I replied.

"Maybe the gods want you to forget that person and replace him with me," he teased.

I gave him a defiant look, "I didn't say it was a he."

"Only a he can talk like that, am I wrong?" he smirked.

I wasn't in the mood for jokes and subtle flirts, and I knew it was only a matter of time before I let out my frustration and anger at him.

But he's innocent, Orion is the enemy here, not-

"What's your name?" I asked, "I don't know your name."

"I'm Lucas," he answered.

"Alright, Mr Lucas," I said, "I must leave now."

He bowed slightly, "Remember, only an alpha can go head to head with another alpha."

I faked a smile and turned on my heel, but a realization stopped me dead in my tracks.

Only an alpha can challenge an alpha, and the last I checked, I had somehow become an alpha.

What if I challenge Orion in a fight for Keto's life?

My heart raced at the thought, but I couldn't come up with another way.

I had to save Keto, even if it meant killing Orion.

I quickened my pace through the stairs and saw a guard stationed at the corner of my room.

"Where's Orion?" I charged.

He looked at me like he had seen a ghost, but there was an authority in my voice that he couldn't ignore.

I felt it, it was the alpha's authority.

It compels other werewolves to comply.

"He should be in his room, or the basement," he stuttered, and I stormed off to Orion's room.

It was locked, "Orion?" I called like my life depended on it.

But there was no answer.

In anger, I kicked the door and it flung open.

But the room was empty, no Orion.

Without taking a moment to breathe, I strode down to the main parlour.

The sex orgy had already started, I saw naked bodies, ladies moaning in pleasure as men penetrated them.

Something about it called to me; it felt more like a ritual than an after-party fun.

But my rage overwhelmed it.

I moved past them and saw some waiters carrying glasses of what I believed was champagne.

I took a glass from the tray and gulped the champagne down my throat.

I got to the basement, and the door was open.

Without thinking, I slammed it behind me.

It was an Iron door, so I locked it to make sure none of Orion's men would interfere.

I sniffed in air, he was in the basement.

I could smell him, and I knew he could smell me.

Chapter 34

Lyra's POV

Orion doesn't know I'm an alpha yet; he still thinks I'm unable to shift, and intends to use that as leverage.

Strike him when he least expects.

I strode down the stairs, slowly, and my nose caught the scent of different things I didn't understand.

As soon as I got to the base of the stairs, I saw blood on the ground.

My eyes widened. What's going on?

Better not be Keto's blood, I mused as I walked forward.

The basement was not very big, but it was spacious.

It had a striking resemblance to the drilling pit, except for the intricate designs this basement has.

My attention was drawn to someone who was blindfolded, with hands tied behind.

My heart leaped, "Keto," I called as I ran towards him.

I removed the veil used to cover his face, only to realize it wasn't Keto.

It was a woman with blonde hair with striking blue eyes.

I was disappointed. Who is this stranger?

"Is Orion keeping you hostage here?" I asked.

I wanted to set her free, but I needed to be sure I was doing the right thing.

Maybe she knows where Keto was taken to.

She ignored my question, "I know you," she snapped.

A cruel smile spread across her features.

I nodded my head dismissively, "I don't think we've ever met."

"I saw you in the video," she insisted, "With a man called Keto."

My eyes widened in shock, She was the one Keto had told me about that Orion was keeping hostage.

"Did you tell Orion about the video?" I asked, hoping with every fiber of my being that she hadn't.

"No, I haven't," she answered, "I haven't seen Orion yet."

With haste, I loosed the ropes her hands were tied with.

My heart soared as I freed her. I felt a rush of excitement and relief

"Are you sure?" I asked, still astonished by her words.

She nodded, her eyes scanning the basement as though she were studying her new environment.

"I need to find him," I said.

Her eyes suddenly flashed with anger and a mixture of pain.

"Me too," she furrowed her eyebrows, "He's wanted for murder."

"Orion is wanted for murder?" I asked, "That serves him right. I'll help you bring him down."

"Not Orion," she interrupted, "Keto killed a man in cold blood and also kill-," she went quiet, her hands trembling in fear.

"No," I denied her accusation, "Keto is not a killer."

"We need to leave," she cut in. "Do you have a gun?"

"Gun? What do you need that for?" I asked, "Aren't you a werewolf?"

“She's not a werewolf," Orion's voice echoed from a corner in the basement, "At least not yet."

I felt a chill run down my spine.

He was crouched upside down on a metal bar, while his head was suspended mid-air.

"Where's Keto?" I asked, though my voice was weak.

He flipped, his legs hitting the ground with a thud.

He was there the whole time, watching, listening.

"Why are you here, Ravenna?" He said, and all those mile-long legs ate the space between us.

He had his shirt off, revealing tight six packs and broad chest.

With the way his skin was glittering, it seemed he had just come out of oil.

I took a deep breath and replied, "I am looking for Keto."

He met my eyes for a moment before turning his attention to the blonde woman beside me.

"I have gone over your file, Kate," he stated, "It's impressive, I would like to recruit you."

Kate chuckled in disbelief, and my mind buzzed with confusion and disorientation, which I suspected was caused by the champagne I drank earlier.

"What are you? FBI or something?" Kate asked.

"You're human, and he wants to make you a werewolf," I explained.

"Bingo," he exclaimed.

"I'd rather die than shift to some monsters," she blurted out, her tone cold.

I moved in between them, shielding her from Orion.

"I won't let you ruin an innocent person's life," I snapped, "And I won't let you kill Keto."

He smiled, as if he found our defiance entertaining.

"Interesting," he said, "By the way, Ravenna, be rest assured, I have no intention of killing Keto because he licked your ass, at least not yet."

I swallowed hard, my gaze shifting to Kate.

"Oh, no," he said, "Blondie didn't tell me, I saw everything as it happened."

"I chose to go along with it," he went on, his eyes fixed on mine, "To uncover his true intentions."

"If you don't plan to end his life, what do you have in mind for him?" I asked.

He twitched his lips, "Remove his tongue, perhaps castrate him, but you decide what punishment he gets."

"Don't punish him at all," I sighed, "He's not to blame, the fault is mine."

"Alright," he nodded, "In that case, there's something I want you to do."

"Do it, and I'll let Keto go free; refuse, and I'll kill Keto," he stated, his tone sarcastic.

It felt like he was playing a game, but whatever the case may be, I don't want him to harm Keto in any way.

"I'll do it," I said.

"You know, the people are saying I killed Nikki because of you," he admitted.

"You killed Nikki because of your ego; it had nothing to do with me," I asserted.

"It doesn't matter anymore, I have found Nikki's replacement," he started, "And I want you to bite her, just the same way you bit my brother."

"Your brother was going to kill me, I had no choice," I spat.

He sneered, "Time is running out, bite her," he said, pointing at Kate, who was already retracing her steps backward.

I didn't believe Orion; to me, this whole thing still felt like a game he's playing.

But I was afraid of taking chances.

"I'm sorry," I pleaded, as I turned to Kate.

"Please don't," she pleaded.

"It's not going to kill you," I assured, but she wasn't having it.

She turned on her heel and ran towards the stairs.

But I was faster, I yanked her back, and buried my fangs deep into her neck.

Chapter 35

Lyra's POV

She screamed in pain, her hands pushing against me to break free, but I held her tight.

I could still taste her blood in my mouth as I released my hold on her.

She held her neck, but the blood wouldn't stop as she kept writhing in pain.

I just stood there, looking at her helplessly.

"She's dying," I uttered, my tone laced with frustration.

Orion crossed the space between us in two strides.

He held her in his hands and brushed his fingers around her cheek, as though she were a baby that needed a wet nurse.

"She's not dying," he said coolly, "She's too strong for that."

I swallowed hard as guilt ate me up from within.

Then she passed out on Orion's arm.

He carried her to a far corner in the basement, where I saw compartments.

He went into one of them, I watched him as he placed her on the bed gently.

"If she dies," I yelled, "I'd kill you, Orion."

He chuckled as he walked towards me with a bottle of champagne and two glasses in his hands.

"If she dies," he said, "You're responsible, you bit her," he teased.

But instead of taking it as humor, it fueled my anger towards him.

"Take, drink this," he said as he handed one of the glass cups to me.

I eyed him suspiciously before taking the glass hesitantly.

I came here to fight him, the plan was simple, challenge him for Keto.

But seeing his unclad body, his firm six-pack, and broad chest has just been giving me strange feelings I couldn't understand.

He poured some champagne into the glass I held and into the one with him.

I waited until he drank his first, then I lifted the glass to my lips and took a quick gulp.

Until today, I had never tasted alcohol before, so I don't really know what it was like, except for the fact that too much of it would get you drunk.

But then again, werewolves never get drunk.

Then where is this weird feeling in my body ever since I took the first shot on my way here, coming from?

"What's in the drink, Orion?" I asked, my tone suspicious.

He gave me a sly smile, "Alcohol," he answered, "with a little mix of herbs."

I remembered this whole thing started as soon as I perceived his smell at the entrance.

My whole body started burning as though I was on fire.

It was burning with one single desire: The desire to be laid by an alpha.

"What kind of herbs?" I asked, my body tensed.

"The kind that makes you desire your mate without reserve," he teased, taking slow steps towards me.

I took steps backward, but it was hard; it was like trying to fight a magnetic pull.

"Where's Keto?" I asked.

He didn't answer, he just kept taking steps forward, closing the space I was giving him.

"I want him," I admitted, "Not you."

"Really? A good-looking alpha like me doesn't turn you on?" he asked, unbuckling his belt with a smirk.

"I hate you," I retorted, my voice echoing through the basement.

"Good," he said, his red eyes filled with pleasure, "All the more reason I'm going to enjoy doing this."

Then I hit my back against the wall, with no more steps to take backward.

The champagne glass trembled in my hand and fell to the floor, shattering on impact.

The strange herbs that were added to the drink were driving me crazy.

My body screamed for something I refused to name, something I'd sworn I'd never want from him.

"Orion, I said stop," I growled as my voice began fighting against itself.

His smirk widened ever so slightly, the red eyes flashing with an insatiable, dull predatory hunger that weakly reached down to my knees.

He was closer now, so much that the heat seemed to radiate out of his bare chest, the muscles gliding with each deliberate step.

He had unbuckled his belt, which now hung loose at his narrow waist, drawing my eyes into the sharp V of his waist before I forced them upwards and to his face again.

"Stop?" He murmured, "Your body is saying something else, Ravenna." His fingers brushed against the strand of hair that clung to my cheek.

I shoved against his chest to push him away, but my hands lingered, fingers brushing against the hard planes of muscle.

His skin was so hot against my palms that they sent a jolt through me, and my breath lodged abruptly in my throat.

His hand came down to my waist, his fingers digging in just enough to anchor me, to make me feel the strength he was barely reigning in.

And I flinched, but I did not pull away.

"I don't want this," I whispered, but the words were a hollow echo even to me.

I hated him, hated his arrogance, hated the control he had over the situation, and above all else, I hated how he could turn me inside out with that one look ... and yet my body was that traitor willing to lean in and drink that touch as if it had starved for it.

"Liar," he whispered, lips curling into a smile as he leaned close, his breath warm against my ear.

"You fight it, but you feel the cravings." That voice, that husky tone of his, tightened my core. "I'm going to fuck you, Ravenna, but first, I want you to know," he said as he leaned in, "Alphas fuck differently."

His words, like cold liquid, went through my body and settled on my coochie.

Then his full lips brushed mine.

It was soft at first, but then the hesitation vanished.

He pulled me closer, and our mouths met in a kiss that sucked the breath away from my lungs.

It was the sweetest kiss, and the way he tilted his head, like he had all the time in the world to explore me.

His hand cupped the side of my face, fingers digging into my hair, and then I melted into him.

Next, his two huge hands seized the neckline of the red gown I wore, and with one ruthless pull, he tore the fabric apart, and I gasped.

My breasts spilled free, and my hard nipples were pointed at him.

His eyes devoured every visible part of my body until his eyes settled on my smooth, shaved clean coochie that was already wet with anticipation.

Chapter 36

Lyra's POV

Orion’s breath was warm against my skin as he slowly lifted my thighs.

Then he kept lifting me up, and I arched my back instinctively until my wet coochie was at the same level with his face.

I gasped and held onto the iron bar above me for balance.

Without hesitation, he buried his mouth in-between my thighs, his tongue swirling on my swollen clitoris like an expert.

A soft moan escaped from my lips, and my thighs shook around his head.

His lips didn't take any break.

He was even more passionate than Keto with his mouth.

I groaned in pleasure, unable to keep quiet.

“Orion,” I gasped, my voice laced with desire.

My hips jerked against his mouth as the pleasure heightened. “Don’t stop… please, fuck."

There was no gentleness in his approach, and my breathing became irregular as I felt orgasm building rapidly inside me.

I was about to have the craziest orgasm of my life.

Then, I couldn't help it as it came, my screams shook the basement.

“FUCK ME,” I begged, my breath rapid, and my body shaking, “Now, Orion… please…”

I thought he was going to carry out my plea, but he had other plans.

He brought me down slowly, and a wicked smile danced on his lips.

“Not yet,” he whispered as his hands pulled his trousers down, “Go on your knees," he ordered, but I hesitated.

And before I could respond, he pulled me down until I was squatting before him, face to face with his thick, long dick.

My breath caught in my throat at how big his dick was, but my coochie couldn't wait to take it in.

I touched it with my trembling hands, and then wrapped my fingers around the base of his dick.

I shot him a glance before leaning forward to take his dick into my mouth.

My tongue swirled around the cap, slowly, for a while.

Truth be told, I have never done this before, but my instincts ran wild.

Slowly, I took his dick deeper into my mouth.

I couldn't tell why but sucking his huge dick gave me some sort of pleasure.

Orion gave out a low groan, his head fell backward as he placed both of his hands behind his head, to allow me do my thing.

“Just like that,” he groaned. “Fuck, you're doing a great job Ravenna.”

Then, I started sucking him hard, my rhythm became fast.

I loved the way he smelled, his alpha smell was driving me crazy.

My hands trailed his thighs while I sucked.

I felt his hand grip my arm, and with a growl, he pulled me up hastily.

Then he raised my thighs again, and I gasped.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, and my arms went around his neck for support.

My bare breasts clung tightly to his chest, and I could feel my chest tightening.

Then our eyes met, and for some seconds, I allowed myself to wallow in the thought that he wasn't my enemy, that he was my lover.

Then he slid his big dick inside me slowly.

It was tight at first, and wouldn't enter, but he kept testing the boundaries until it went in fully.

My mouth opened wide as soft moans escaped, his dick was a wonder inside me.

I was moved to tears, my fingernails digged into his shoulders, as he started thrusting in and out of my coochie.

I could feel my walls stretching to accommodate his dick.

Pleasure shot through me like an electric current..

“Oh... god...” I whimpered, my voice trembling. “You’re... so big...”

Orion didn’t stop, he kept thrusting into me again and again, each stroke striking a nerve that drove me over the edge.

My moans became gasps, then I started crying, then quickly turned into screams that echoed through the basement.

He kept hitting me deep, hard, and fast, my eyes rolled with each thrust.

He was fucking me like he owned me, or even worse, he was fucking me senseless.

If I wasn't a werewolf, I would have probably passed out.

In that moment, all I could think about was Orion; I forgot about the name Keto and what it meant to me.

Perhaps this was why he fucked me so hard, to erase Keto from my head, and put his own name in it.

My head fell over his neck as he pounded into me.

My entire body quaked, and I was no longer conscious of my environment.

“I… can’t take it anymore,” I sobbed as tears of pleasure flowed down my eyes, “I’m going to cum.”

He sealed my mouth up as his lips descended on mine with an intense kiss.

I gave in fully, without holding back.

He bit my lower lip, then sucked it gently as though it was candy.

Then my orgasm came, and it wasn't gentle; it exploded through my body.

I screamed into his mouth, my body shook violently around him, and my fingernails dug into his back.

My walls tightened around his dick like a snake.

I drew him closer, as though I wanted more of his body.

He kept his rhythms, and I could feel his dick growing bigger inside me.

Still, he slammed inside me, I could tell he was about to cum.

Then he hissed through his teeth, but his pace didn't stop, in fact, it increased, "When I'm done with you," he said, his voice tensed, "They're going to wonder who's making you scream so loud."

My head spun, and my vision blurred.

I have never felt any pleasure this great before, even as Lyra.

My sex with Jacob wasn't as intense as this one.

"I'm cumming," he muttered, and slammed into me with one last hard stroke.

Then he came, his groans louder now, and his body shook as he released inside me.

We stood there, interlocked, panting, and trembling.

My legs were weak, and I went numb with pleasure.

His forehead rested on my breast.

"I hate you," I whispered, my voice low.

"I know," he murmured, brushing his hair from my face. "But not anymore."

My heart skipped a beat.

It wasn't out of fear, but from the realization that he might be right.

Chapter 37

Lyra's POV

I woke up the next day with a slight headache in my head.

My body was still weak from the wild sex I had with Orion last night.

I turned to face the other side of the bed, when I noticed Kira was still sound asleep beside me.

How did I get to my room? I wondered.

The basement was the place I was, according to my memory from last night.

Just when I was closing my eyes to drift back to slumber, Kira let out a loud yawn.

Then she turned to face me.

"Why do you smell like an alpha?" she asked, her eyes heavy with sleep.

I didn't answer.

She leaned in, then sniffed in my scent.

"That's weird," she uttered, "If my eyes were closed, I would have said Orion was the one beside me."

"So what exactly are you saying?" I teased, "Because smelling like an alpha is kinda different from smelling like Orion, so which one is it?"

She blinked, "both," she taunted, "You're guilty of both crimes."

"I went to the basement to see Orion last night," I explained, "Maybe that's why you think I smell like him."

She sat up, her back was facing me, "No, going to see Orion cannot be the reason why you smell like him."

Then she turned to face me, her eyes widening, "Unless you didn't just see him, you-" she paused as though weighing her words.

"Oh my goodness, you had sex with him?" she asked, her voice louder than she intended.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I lied, hoping she would let it go.

"Don't you dare lie to me," she said, her tone playful, "You fucked him, but I'm confused, I thought you said you hated Orion, and preferred Keto."

I rolled my eyes. "Would it be fine if I say I don't want to talk about it?"

I honestly didn't want to think about or talk about my sex with Orion last night.

I just wanted to move on like it didn't happen, and then make sure it doesn't repeat itself.

Last night I was drunk on some sexual herbs, but I won't drink again.

Kira raised her hand in mock surrender, "Anything you say, princess," then she leaned in, "How was it like?" she whispered.

"I said I don't want to talk about it," I repeated.

"Okay," she cleared her throat, "I uhm, will be on my way soon."

"Orion knows about the clip," I blurted out.

"You mean the sex tape you had with Keto?" she asked as she sat down on the couch.

I nodded my head, "Yes."

"From the look on your face, I can tell he's not going to kill Keto."

"I don't know if I can trust Orion to keep to his words," I murmured.

"You know what, Ravenna," she said, "Go and shower, then come with me. I'd tell Orion I need to take you in for a check-up."

"Good idea," I uttered, and scurried to the bathroom to shower.

I didn't waste time, I was done bathing within 15 minutes.

I got dressed in a blue flowy gown, and we headed out of my room.

Suddenly, it dawned on me that I had bitten someone last night.

"Kira," I said, "I think we should head to the basement first."

"Why? You forgot your undies there or something?" she taunted.

"I did something awful last night, I bit a human."

Kira stopped walking, we were already at the stairs going downstairs.

"What was a human doing in a werewolf party?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Long story, just come with me."

I took her by the arm and led her with me.

We got to the basement, but there were guards by the way.

Two huge men with rough-looking faces.

I recognized them.

They were the same men who came to get Keto the other day.

I wonder where they had taken him to.

"Orion said no one is allowed to enter," one of the guards said.

"I'm the healer of this pack," Kira snapped, "Do you want Orion to know you didn't let me pass?"

They exchanged uneasy glances, their eyes darting back and forth nervously.

"Alright, we'll let you in," he stated, "but not with her."

I wanted to tell Kira to go in without me and check if Kate is alright, but she wouldn't back down.

"I'm not going in without her," she started, "And if anything happens to the patient in there, it'll be your fault."

They swallowed hard, but one of them looked at me suspiciously.

"Alright," he surrendered, "We'll let you two in, but if we see any signs that one of you is trying to work against Orion's plan, then you won't like what comes next."

"Understood," Kira replied coolly.

He opened the big iron door, and we entered.

"If two guards are here," Kira spoke up, "Then it means the patient is alone."

I nodded as though I understood what she was saying.

We went down the stairs, and I pointed to the small room where Orion had kept her the night before.

"She's not there, Ravenna," she dismissed.

"But you haven't checked yet to be sure," I said, raising an eyebrow.

"You're a werewolf, Ravenna," she cut in, "Follow the scent, not what you saw."

"Oooh, I uhm, still haven't gotten used to that yet," I admitted.

"Now take a deep breath and tell me what you smell and the direction from which it's coming from," she ordered.

Without hesitation or questioning, I took a deep breath.

"Can you perceive her scent?" Kira asked.

"Yes, I can," I said, sniffing.

"Where is it coming from?" she asked.

"I think it's coming from behind," I said, turning to face the opposite direction.

"Good," she tapped on my shoulder, "Now listen for her heartbeat, let's know if she's alive."

The minute she said that, it was as though my ears popped open and I could hear every sound in the basement.

"I don't think she's alive," I said, my voice low, "I can't get any heartbeat."

Chapter 38

Lyra's POV

"She's not entirely dead, she's having a cardiac arrest," Kira stated, her tone urgent.

We ran towards Kate and found her on the floor, lifeless.

Panic took hold of me. If she dies, it'll be my fault.

"How long do you think she has been out?" I asked as Kira crouched beside Kate.

She touched Kate's body, "Not very long," she said, "Her body is still warm."

I stood still, unable to move for fear she might not make it.

"Come here, Ravenna," Kira called, "I need your help."

I swallowed and crouched opposite her.

"Good news is," she started, "Her body didn't reject the werewolf venom."

"Bad News is, she has asthma," she stated coolly, "CPR won't work on her."

"So what do we do?" I asked, my eyes wet with tears, "She's dying."

"Only an Alpha's howl can help," she said, "It would make the venom work faster, and that will heal her asthma."

An Alpha's howl? I have never howled before, and I don't even know how it works.

Just then, I picked up a powerful scent, Orion's scent.

I turned to look at him, only to be met by Orion in his gigantic werewolf form.

He was like three times Nikki's werewolf form.

A cold shiver went through my spine.

He let out a deafening howl that lasted for a minute.

I had to cover my ears, but even with the effort, I had this urge within me to howl back at him.

To me, his howl felt more like communication than a random shout.

My eyes darted back to Kate, and her body responded to the howl immediately.

I watched in awe as her body started shaking violently.

Then she took a deep breath, her eyes flashing bright blue.

"It's working," I gasped, smiling wildly.

I turned again to see Orion, but he was gone.

I wondered how he does it.

He moved with stealth, like a shadow in the night.

"Are you alright?" Kira's voice cut in.

She was talking to Kate.

"Who are you?" Kate asked, her eyes darting between Kira and me.

"I'm Kira, your doctor," she answered, "Can you walk?"

"I think so," she said and tried to stand up. Kira held her hand to support her.

Kate's hand went to her neck, the exact spot where I had bitten her.

It was healed, with no single sign of injury.

Her eyes widened in disbelief, "I can't find the spot where you bit me," she said, facing me.

"How about we find a spot where you can lay your head and rest," Kira's voice cut in.

Part of me felt happy that she was alive, but another part felt bad for biting her and bringing her into a world she wasn't ready for.

As we made our way through the stairs, I could tell Orion was still in the basement; his smell was so strong.

But why is he hiding? Perhaps he's avoiding me?

I wondered, but I loved the idea that he was avoiding me.

It would make it easier for me to deal with the whole sex thing I'm still trying to avoid confronting.

We took Kate to my room so we would be able to watch her closely.

"Let's get you cleaned up," Kira said, guiding Kate toward the bathroom.

"What's happening to me?" Kate asked, still looking dazed.

"You've been through a lot," Kira replied softly. "A cold shower will help you relax."

Kate hesitated, but Kira reassured her, "I'll be right here when you're done, sweetie."

After Kate showered, Kira helped her into comfortable clothes.

"Time to rest, baby girl, you're going to need it," Kira said gently. "You can lie down on the bed."

Kate nodded her head.

She settled onto the bed, and Kira pulled up the covers over her.

"Sleep," Kira whispered. "You're fine now."

"Are you a werewolf like the rest of them, too?" Kate asked, her eyes heavy with sleep.

"We'll talk about werewolves when you wake up. Right now, you need to sleep," Kira answered.

Kate closed her eyes, and we watched as she drifted into sleep.

"Will she really be alright?" I asked, my voice low to avoid disturbing Kate.

"Not really," she admitted, "She's not really a werewolf yet, until the full moon."

"You say that like there's a tendency she might not survive."

"Ooh, she should survive the full moon, it's not the full moon, I'm worried about," she said, "It's what she has to contend with during the full moon."

"I don't understand," I said, "what is she up against? Maybe I can help her."

She folded her hands. "You can't help her, she has to fight on her own."

"You mean fight another werewolf?" I asked, "Is that what you're saying?"

She settled on the couch and then let out a soft yawn.

"It's called the Dance of the Beast, Ravenna," she stated, "She has to fight a bear, a big bear."

My eyes widened.

"And I think, this is only a speculation, but I think that was what Orion sent Keto to get," she added.

"When is the next full moon?" I asked as I leaned back into the couch.

"The full moon is tonight," she announced.

A knock on the door interrupted our conversations.

"Come in," Kira answered.

A young Maid walked in.

The minute I saw her, it occurred to me to ask.

"Is everyone in this mansion a werewolf, including the maids?"

I had never included the maids, the drivers, and other workers as part of Orion's pack.

Kira chuckled, "We are all one big happy werewolf family."

"Miss Ravenna," the maid's voice cut in, "Sorry to bother your rest, but there's a man waiting for you downstairs."

"Why don't you let him come upstairs to see her?" Kira asked.

"Orion's orders; no male is allowed to enter Mrs Ravenna's room without his permission," she explained.

I raised an eyebrow, "Excuse me?"

Kira held my hand, "It's better than killing Keto," she said.

"You may leave. She'll be on her way soon," Kira instructed.

The maid left, closing the door behind her.

"I need to see Orion and talk some sense into him," I blurted out.

Kira smiled, "Are you sure seeing Orion is about talking sense into him? Is it about round 2?"

Chapter 39

Lyra's POV

“I never wanted it,” I said firmly as I turned to address the naughty remark, “It was a terrible mistake.”

She didn’t say a word, she just gave me a playful smile.

“I’m saying the truth, Kira,” I insisted, “Orion deceived me into doing it, he drugged me, and it affected my senses. There's no way I would do something like that with him if I were in my senses."

Kira just blinked her eyes. She didn't say more.

“But I know better now,” I added, “it won’t happen again.”

A beat passed before she spoke. “If you say so.”

Her voice was so calm, so non-judgmental, that it made the shame of what happened rise hotter in my chest.

“I’m not lying, Kira.”

“I didn’t say you were,” she replied casually, then turned toward the door. “I need to head home, clean up, and grab my med kit. Full moon’s tonight. Kate might need attention.”

She got up from her seat, and together we went down the stairs.

My thoughts were pretty messed up.

The memory of the sex I had with Orion haunted my mind like a ghost.

The way it started, everything, even to the words he said, they kept playing in my head again and again.

I heard faint sounds of footsteps in the living room as we came down through the stairs.

I froze as I reached the last step.

Kevin.

He sat down like he owned the mansion, his legs were crossed, and he kept tapping his fingers.

He was dressed in a black suit like we had any appointments to begin with.

His very presence irks me.

Kira paused beside me, glanced at him, then looked back at me.

She leaned in. “Good luck surviving this specimen,” she muttered with a smirk.

Then she walked past Kevin without even acknowledging him and disappeared through the front door.

I stood still for a while, my eyes fixed on the man I nearly married and loved.

“Ravenna,” he called, and stood on his feet like he was happy to see me, “You’re looking good.”

I said nothing.

He cleared his throat and stretched his hands wide for a hug.

He looked kinda impatient, it was obvious from the way he looked.

I approached him, but I ignored his gesture for a hug.

“Why are you here, Kevin?” I asked, my tone sharp.

“I came to see you, Ravenna,” He smiled. “Wanted to see how you were coping with everything.”

“I’m fine,” I answered.

Kevin narrowed his eyes, then looked around the living room.

“Are we alone?” he asked.

I nodded once, "Yes."

“Good,” he said, dropping the fake smile. “We need to talk, it's urgent.”

He gestured that I follow him outside the living room, where it would be quiet and free from ears and eyes.

I hesitated at first, then I followed.

Once we were alone, his demeanor changed.

“Well?” he asked, “Did you do it? Did you seduce Orion?”

“Yes," I answered.

He smiled wildly, like he had won a jackpot, “I knew you could do it. Damn."

I squeezed my fists behind my back.

He dipped his hand into his suit pocket and brought out a small vial.

He handed it over to me, and I collected it slowly.

“What is this?” I asked as I examined it between my fingers.

He smiled. “This is an Elixir," he said, "You'll need it with what comes next."

I stared at it. “What does it do?”

Kevin leaned in, voice low. “Alpha’s Poison.”

The words didn’t sink in at first. I thought I didn't hear him clearly.

“What?”

“Alpha’s Poison,” he repeated. “Designed specifically to take down alphas. No antidote for it. Once it enters the bloodstream, it attacks their inner wolf, severs the bond between man and beast. They die a painful death.”

My breath caught in my throat.

Everything around me slowed. The walls pressed in.

The vial shook in my hand.

“You want me to kill him?” I asked, my eyes widening.

Kevin shrugged. “You have already seduced him. So do it again. This time, get him to drink this. One sip, and it’s over.”

My heart pounded hard.

“You told me you were going to kill him, you didn't say I would be the one to do it.”

Kevin scoffed. “Raven, please. Don’t be naïve, Orion’s not going to just make it easy for me to kill him. He's a predator, this is the only way we can get rid of him for good."

I stared at the vial again, horrified. The liquid sloshed inside it.

“I don't think I can do this," I protested.

“Come on,” Kevin insisted. “Don’t let one night in his bed confuse you. This was the plan all along, remember?”

I flinched.

“Right now,” he continued, “he wants you. That’s your chance, use it before it’s too late.”

I didn’t respond.

I couldn’t do it, I muttered within.

I might have entertained the death of Orion, but not by my hands.

I'm not a killer.

And if there's anybody I wanted dead even more than Orion, was the person giving him the assignment to kill Orion.

But I didn't want to blow my cover, not yet.

Kevin watched me closely.

“Unless,” he said, “you’re beginning to like him.”

“I’m not,” I said quickly.

He smiled knowingly. “Then prove it.”

I didn’t move. I didn’t speak.

He took a step back. “I’ll be waiting for your signal. Once it’s done, call me. We leave that same night.”

He turned towards the gate and said as he walked away, “I love you, Ravenna, this is our chance to finally get what we want, don't ruin it.”

I didn't respond, I just watched as he walked away.

I looked down at the vial in my hand, the color of it was yellow, like the sun.

My breath hitched as I stared down at the shimmering liquid, caught between the past I was running from… and the monster I might become.

Chapter 40

Lyra's POV

Something doesn't sit right with me about Kevin. I can't explain it, but the way he looked at me... it wasn't curiosity, It was calculation.

I thought I was the one playing him, riding along with his plan, but now it seems to me that I'm the one being played.

Perhaps he was playing Ravenna just the same way he had played me when I was in my body.

But I can guarantee he will be shocked this time around because I won't let him have his way with anything.

And Ruth, why would she care so much about Orion's death when she was the one who handed me over to him? That woman doesn't do anything unless it benefits her.

I want to know if anything connects them. There must be something. I just can't feel any association.

The vial was shoved into my pocket, and I went upstairs.

My heartbeat was hitting these incredible beats in my ears.

I went into my room, locked the door from behind, and took out the vial again.

The liquid glowed faintly in the dim light of the room.

I knelt beside my backpack, unzipped the side pocket, and buried the vial beneath layers of folded clothes. No one's going to find it.

And even if they do find it, they wouldn't know what it's for.

I zipped my bag back and kept it under the bed.

I sat at the edge of the bed for a few seconds, staring at absolutely nothing, thinking of Ruth. Of Orion, of Keto, of Kate, and then Kelvin.

Ruth probably wants Orion dead, but still gave me to him?

What does that say about me? That I'm disposable? A pawn in whatever twisted power game she's playing?

A soft rustle behind me broke my thoughts.

My stomach clenched

I turn around slowly, and there she is. Kate. Stirring awake.

Her eyelids fluttered like she's in a deep dream, but then her eyes opened, slow and unfocused.

She blinked at the ceiling, and then at me.

Shit.

I forced a calm smile onto my face. "Hey… you're awake."

She blinked again. "What's your name?"

My throat tightened

Did she hear anything while she was out?

"Ravenna," I lied easily, slipping into the role. "I didn't realize you were conscious."

She narrowed her eyes a little. And I wasn't sure if it was suspicion or confusion. Probably both.

“I’m hungry,” she mumbled, “and thirsty. Not water. I want juice.”

I nodded. “Alright. I’ll get it for you.”

I slipped out of the room, pretending like my heart wasn’t racing.

As I reached the hallway, I saw one of Orion’s workers coming down the stairs. Perfect.

“You,” I called. He stopped and looked up at me expectantly. “Tell the maids downstairs in the kitchen that I need food sent to my room. Something with meat. And orange juice. Cold.”

He nodded his head and disappeared without a word.

When I got back into the room, Kate was still lying there, staring at the ceiling like she’s trying to piece something together.

“Food’s coming,” I said to her as I walked over to the couch and sat down.

She didn't say anything.

She just kept her gaze on the ceiling.

Then, out of nowhere, she turned her head toward me. “How long have you been a werewolf?”

I blinked. That’s not what I was expecting her to say.

I had expected her to accuse me, curse me, or anything to express her expression.

“All my life,” I said cautiously. “I was born into a werewolf family. Unlike you.”

“Yeah,” she muttered, “I was human until some beasts felt like they could turn me into an animal.”

She said it like being a werewolf is a curse.

She paused again. Then: “Why did Orion choose to turn me into a werewolf?”

I hesitated. I didn't have a real answer for her, yet I felt compelled to give her answers.

“He lost someone close to him,” I said finally. “His best female warrior. Nikki. He definitely sees you as her replacement, perhaps he sees something in you that reminds him of her.”

“Was he sleeping with her too?” she asked.

That particular question startled me.

I didn't know why she was concerned about that, I had never thought of Orion together with Nikki.

“To be honest, I don’t know,” I said, hoping it would discourage her from pressing, but her stare showed that she wasn't going to back down from asking questions.

I cleared my throat, “She wasn’t beautiful… she didn’t have the kind of face that drew attention. She was more like a man than a woman.”

Kate stared at me. “Then what do I have in common with her?”

I shrug. “Well, I don't see any similarities. I guess only Orion can answer that question.”

A knock at the door saved me from having to dig deeper for answers.

I got up and went to the door to open it.

A maid stood there with a tray. Bread, roasted meat, a small bowl of fruit, and a tall glass of orange juice. Cold, just like I asked.

“Thank you," I said as I collected the tray and closed the door behind me.

Kate’s eyes lit up when she saw the juice.

She grabbed it with both hands and drank it like she had been walking through the desert.

Then she turned her attention to the meat like a starving animal.

She didn't even thank me for helping her get the meal. Not that I expected her to.

But then she paused, cleaned her mouth with a napkin, and looked at me.

“So,” she said, voice cool, “Which of the guys are you into?”

I blinked, unsure of what she meant, “Excuse me?”

Her gaze didn’t waver. “I saw the clip. You had sex with Keto. And last night… I saw you having sex with Orion before I passed out. So which one of them are you into and why are you fucking both of them?”

My breath caught in my throat.

I opened my mouth, but words failed me.

I had no idea how to explain it to her.

Chapter 41

Lyra's POV

"I never had sex with Keto," I said as I put up a defense mechanism, "We were about to, but we stopped."

I wasn't lying, I never had sex with Keto, but I might have done that if the camera wasn't there.

Kate tilted her head, unimpressed by my defense, "It's still the same thing, Ravenna. You would have done it if you guys didn’t see the camera recording the whole thing."

I frowned and folded my hands.

Her words stung me like a scorpion, and it wasn't because they were entirely wrong, but because they exposed a truth I hadn’t come to terms with myself.

"And what about Orion?" she asked, her tone suspicious, as though she wanted to catch me in a lie, "Will you call that 'almost had sex' too?"

My heart clenched.

The name alone sent a wave of resentment through my body.

"Orion drugged me," I said in my defense, my tone laced with anger, "And I hate him for that."

Kate studied me, her expression was unreadable.

"So that means Keto is the one you prefer, I see," she said, "But why do you hate Orion? Is it just because he drugged you, or does the hatred go beyond just the sex thing you guys had?"

I bit my lip as her words refreshed my memories.

The whole thing came into my head again, how it all started down to how it ended.

How he manipulated his way to my head, "Orion is a monster," I said out loud with confidence, "With him, there's no affection or care."

A faint smirk curved around Kate's lips. "From the way I see it, Keto is the real monster."

I shook my head. "You don't understand, Kate," I protested, "Keto only does what Orion commands. That doesn't make him a monster, does it?"

Kate arched a brow. "Tell me, Ravenna," she asked, "Did Orion command him to have sex with you?"

My throat went dry. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

I was speechless.

"I thought as much," she said, her voice sharp, "I know a monster when I see one. And trust me, Keto isn't innocent."

I clenched my fists.

I didn’t want to believe her at all, but part of me, the logical part of me, wondered if she was right.

Still, I wasn’t going to accept it.

"So you're defending the man who ordered your capture?" I asked, my tone sharp, "The same man who made me bite you?"

Kate looked at me, her eyes flashed with something like bitterness or resentment.

"Last I checked, he didn't force you. You compromised a human to save Keto. That was your own choice."

"I had no choice," I snapped. "I had to! Orion was going to kill him."

"No, Ravenna," she insisted, "You had a choice, yet you chose him over your morals, over an innocent human being."

I stared at her, with no energy to keep up with her words.

The more I argued, the more exhausted I became.

"Well, you're a werewolf now, so you'll understand with time. So I'd advise you to adapt to your new life."

"My life?" she repeated bitterly. "Right, the one your bite brought me into."

I turned away, biting my lip in frustration.

"I'm going to get some air," I blurted out, "I don't have the strength for this."

She shrugged me off, "Enjoy yourself. I'm getting some sleep too."

I closed the door behind me and headed to the rooftop for some air.

The rooftop is usually quiet and offers a conducive atmosphere to clear my head and think clearly.

The air was cool on the roof as soon as I arrived, and I immediately sighed.

Then I leaned against the metal railing as I thought about the recent happenings around my life: Keto. Orion. Kate. Ravenna.

Ravenna.

I had adapted to her life faster than I thought I could.

I had fought my way through the pain, fear, betrayal and come out stronger.

But it seemed to come at a cost, losing my sanity.

Kate's words haunted me. Was Keto really a monster? Had I been blind all along by his gentle approach towards me?

My heart said no.

But my mind, my mind replayed every moment from the very first day I met him.

The way he talked to me.

The hesitation in his eyes, the loyalty to Orion, the way he looked over me like I was his.

The fear of betraying Orion.

His guilt, his doubt.

He didn't seem like a monster to me.

He seemed like a man with good standards.

I exhaled slowly.

Maybe Kate was lying to get under my skin.

I wrapped my arms around myself as I stared at the faint stars in the sky.

I had to figure out what to do next.

Time was running out, and I couldn't afford to remain a pawn in someone else's game.

I turned back inside and headed back to my room to sort out issues with Kate.

As I approached my room, something felt different.

The hallway smelled different, and it sent an uneasy chill into my body.

I reached my room door, and I froze.

The lock was broken.

The handle was loose, like it had been bent by unnatural force.

Panic surged through me as I pushed the door open.

The bed was empty, and no sign of Kate in the room.

I scanned the room. No signs of any form of struggle.

It looked like she left of her own accord.

She had planned the escape.

"Damn it, Kate," I muttered as I rushed to the window.

It was closed, with no broken glass.

She didn't escape through here.

Did she plan this all along? Or had our argument pushed her over the edge?

My hands trembled. It's almost full moon, she won't be safe out there.

I remembered what it felt like when I was in her place. I was helpless, depressed, unsure of who to trust.

Chapter 42

Lyra's POV

I decided to check the bathroom, even though I already knew what I would find.

Nothing.

I was met with the gentle dripping of water from the tap.

I turned around, my heart skipping a beat.

“Kate?” I called her name when I heard footsteps outside the room in the hallway.

I quickly dashed out of the room to the hallway, but I was wrong; it wasn't Kate, it was one of the maids.

"Did you see Kate, a young woman with blue eyes, in the hallway?" I asked.

And she nodded her head dismissively, "No, I haven't."

Then I descended through the stairs, hoping to see her somewhere below.

Maybe she'd gone to the kitchen to get food, or the parlor, or wandered into one of the guest rooms.

But she was not in the living room.

I called out again, louder this time.

“Kate!”

No reply.

I turned to one of the maids coming into the living room from outside.

"Have you seen the girl who came with me?”

The maid gave me a blank look and shook her head. “No, miss. I haven’t seen anyone like that. Are you sure she came downstairs?"

I asked another person, and then checked the kitchen.

No one had seen her. Not even the security guards at the main gate entrance.

That’s when my gut clenched. She was gone. Somehow, she’d managed to escape, but how?

The mansion was a fortress, yet Kate had vanished like a bird with wings.

I pushed the heavy door open and went out into the garden.

My feet carried me to a particular place in the compound I hadn't been to before.

It was an enclosed swimming pool.

And then I saw him, Orion.

He was floating effortlessly in the center of the pool, completely naked.

His eyes were closed, arms stretched out, as though he were meditating or resting.

I stood by the blurry glass wall surrounding the pool and knocked on it lightly, “Orion,” I called, my voice wasn't loud, but it was loud enough for him to hear.

He didn’t respond.

He heard me. I knew he did. There was no way he didn't.

His senses were too sharp, but he didn't even twitch.

I frowned, not wanting to go in. Not while he was like that. Naked.

"Orion," I called again, louder.

No response, he just acted like he wasn't hearing anything.

I clenched my teeth.

He was doing this on purpose.

That bastard.

I spotted a brick lying near the garden path.

Without thinking twice, I grabbed it and hurled it toward the glass wall. It passed through the open doorway and went directly toward Orion's head.

But before it could strike him, his hand shot up and caught it midair.

Eyes still closed.

I froze.

He opened them then, slowly, like someone disturbed from a good sleep.

His eyes locked on mine.

"Kate is gone," I said, stepping closer to the glass, "I can't find her anywhere. She must have escaped."

Orion blinked once, then smiled.

“I know,” he said, his voice deep and relaxed, as if we were talking about something casual.

My jaw dropped. “You—what? You knew?"

He let the brick fall back into the water with a splash and swam closer to the edge, "Of course.”

“You let her escape?” I nearly screamed. “Why the hell would you let her escape? Your security was supposed to stop her.”

"Why are you so concerned about her escape?" he said, "I assumed you would want her to escape."

"As a human, yes," I answered, "but not as a werewolf."

“Where’s the fun in that?” he replied, tilting his head as he rested his arms on the pool’s edge, “Allowing her to escape is far more interesting than keeping her locked.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “Are you out of your damn mind? She could kill someone tonight, or get killed!”

He didn’t answer.

That silence provoked me more than his words.

I clenched my fists and took a step closer to the glass.

“I’m going after her,” I snapped. “If you won’t do anything, I will.”

That got him to move.

He stood up from the water.

The water dripped down his skin as he came out of the swimming pool.

He didn't bother to reach for a towel or make any effort to cover himself.

And I immediately turned around.

"Put something on, Orion," I muttered as eyes settled on the flower vase beside me. "For fuck sake."

"Why are you pretending to be shy now?" He said, his tone amused, "You've already tasted it."

I spat on the ground. "If you hadn't drugged me that night, I'd have nothing to do with you."

He laughed softly, a deep chuckle that sent a shiver down my spine.

Before I could react, I felt his arms wrap around me.

Then he lifted me off the ground.

"What the hell?" I screamed as he lifted me over his shoulder, still naked, with water dripping from his body.

"Kate won't get far," he said, walking back toward the mansion with me slung over him like a bag. "She'll be taken care of."

"And you," he added with a smirk, "you will be punished for interrupting my rest."

"Put me down," I kicked my legs, punched his back, and squirmed with everything I had. "You arrogant, narcissistic, naked psycho."

He didn’t shake.

His grip tightened slightly as he kept walking like I weighed nothing.

We passed by some workers in the hallway who immediately looked the other direction when they saw him.

One dropped a tray. Another gasped audibly.

But none of them uttered a word to him.

“Let me alone, Orion!” I yelled and hit his back with my fists.

He didn’t answer, he just kept on like my hands were foam.

Then he climbed the stairs and turned to the opposite direction of the hallway leading to my room.

The opposite direction led to his room.

As soon as he reached his doorstep, he pushed the door open with his other hand and went inside.

“You said I drugged you the first time,” he said as he edged toward the bed.

“Well,” he said, "Let's see what you'll say this time around."

Before I could react, he flung me onto the bed and locked the door behind us.

Chapter 43

Lyra's POV

The sound of the lock made my stomach twist.

I had tried running away, but as soon as he turned to face me with his big dick hardening slightly already, I sat back on the bed.

The effect he had on me this time around was even worse than that night.

I took my sight elsewhere, anywhere but him.

I turned my gaze to the window in his room.

"I don't know what you're trying to do, Orion, but if you won't put on some clothes, you can as well let me out of your room," I said, my tone serious.

He pointed at the door behind him, "I'm not stopping you from trying to leave," he taunted.

"There's no way I'm coming close to that door with your naked body on the way," I shot.

He tilted his head slightly, "You didn’t complain about my body when I was inside you the other night."

"I didn’t have a choice. You drugged me," I protested.

He stepped forward. One step. Two. And then he was in front of me.

I still didn't look at him, "Unless you drug me again, there's no way in hell I'm going to let you touch me."

But even as I said it, my body betrayed me as it pulsed with a mixture of adrenaline and something I didn't want to name.

The worst part was that he could sense it.

Like he was able to read heat signatures from my body.

"You're trembling, Ravenna. And I know it's not out of fear."

Next, he held my knee. I pushed him away, but it was like pushing against a wall.

He yanked me toward the middle of the bed, and I gasped.

My back met the mattress, with his huge body leaning over mine.

"Let go of me!"

"No."

His voice was deep and intense but not cruel. His eyes bored into mine, like I was being hypnotized by those piercing gaze.

"I hate you," I yelled.

"That makes it more fun," he smirked, pressing his lips to my ears. "But don't lie to yourself. You still craved the pleasure I put on you last night. Even when you saw me naked in the pool, you stayed."

His mouth trailed heat along my collarbone. I gasped, my hands pushing against his chest, but my fingers betrayed me and curled into his skin instead of shoving him away.

"Stop," I whispered.

"Say that like you mean it."

His tongue flicked over my nipple through the thin fabric of my shirt, and I arched into him, a moan escaping before I could stop it. He pulled back and looked at me with a devilish gleam in his eyes.

"See? No drugs this time. Just us."

He pulled the shirt up and over my head, exposing my chest.

I hissed through my teeth at the rate my nipples grew hard in his gaze.

One entered his mouth while his hand teased the other, and I felt my hips bucking on their own accord.

My fingers trailed around his hair, I pulled it hard, but not hard enough to stop him.

He groaned against my skin, and the vibration went straight between my legs.

"Orion..."

"Still want me to stop?"

"I..." I couldn't get the words out of my mouth.

His mouth came down to my stomach, kissing and biting spots until he reached the band of my shorts.

His dark eyes quickly glanced up to meet mine in a quiet defiance.

Without even waiting for me to respond, he began to gradually unzip my shorts, almost taking my panties down along with them.

I instinctively tried to shut my thighs. He clicked his tongue and forced them apart again with his hands.

"Beautiful," he murmured almost under his breath.

His mouth descended once more, and I gasped as his tongue entered me; my back arched, a cry at the tip of my lips.

Now a plea, he was merciless: licking and sucking the whole way down at such a pace that my thighs trembled.

"Please," I whimpered, not quite sure of what I was begging for.

He slid two fingers inside, curling them just right. My fingers squeezed the sheets, while my body writhed beneath him as pleasure took charge a little too fast for me.

"Cum for me, Ravenna, I want to taste your juice."

And I did, with a cry that tore through the room, I shattered.

My walls clenched around his fingers, and he didn't stop until I was trembling and breathless.

He pulled back, licking his lips like he'd just feasted. "No drugs. Just desire."

I tried to glare, but I was too far gone.

Then he was lifting my leg over his shoulder, positioning himself at my entrance.

"You're soaked," he growled. "Tell me to stop now, or I won't."

I stared into his eyes, still clouded with defiance but mixed with something I didn't want to name.

My silence was his permission.

He thrust into me in one smooth, hard stroke. I cried out, half in shock, half in pleasure.

He filled me completely, and for a second, I forgot how to breathe.

"Fuck, you're tight, just like last night."

He began to move, slow at first, then faster.

Each thrust drove the air away from my lungs, each moan of his tangled with mine.

His grip on my thighs bruised, but I didn't care. I wanted him deeper, harder.

"Look at me," he demanded.

I did. And the way he looked at me, like I was something he owned, made my walls clench tighter around him.

"You feel this?" he grunted, slamming into me. "This is real. No alcohol. No herbs."

I nodded, tears prickling at the corners of my eyes from the intensity.

He shifted, pulling my hips higher, hitting a new angle that had me gasping with every stroke.

My nails scratched down his back, leaving red marks in their wake.

"Say my name."

"Orion," I murmured

"Again."

"Orion!"

My orgasm hit me like an explosive dynamite.

I cried out as my body shook underneath him.

He groaned and slammed inside me with a blasting force that made the bed shake.

He fell on my body, his bare chest on my hard breast.

We both panted, covered in our own sweat.

He went quiet for a while.

Then he whispered, "Still think you don’t want me?"

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t.

Because I wasn’t sure anymore.

Chapter 44

Kate's POV

The air outside felt cold as I ran through the trees with incredible speed, I didn't know I had.

But my legs weren't the only ones running, my heart was also running with a mixture of fear and anxiety.

Somehow, the werewolf bite had healed my asthma, and I can feel my lungs strong.

It was twilight already, and according to the folklore I heard about werewolves, but didn't believe it until recently.

Transformation begins at night for a werewolf.

I could feel it under my skin, the heat, the pressure on my bones.

My pulse grew louder with every breath I took.

Something inside me was stirring, it felt like I was about to explode from within.

But I didn't stop running, I needed to get as far away as possible from those monsters in human bodies.

I stumbled upon two men, camping, it seems.

Were they humans or werewolves? I couldn't tell, but the thirst in my throat wouldn't let me avoid them.

"Hi, guys," I greeted as I leaned over a tree, my voice weak.

They looked at me like I had lost my way.

"I'm a police officer," I said, forcing a smile.

They exchange uneasy glances.

Then one of them spoke up, dressed in a red shirt, "Here to arrest us or something?" he asked as he got up from the mat they were on.

"No, I need water," I murmured, "I was abducted by some people, but I managed to escape."

"Huh?" the other one said, dressed in blue, "Police officer abducted?"

His friend, or possibly his lover, took a bottle of water close to him.

"Look we don't want any trouble, okay?" he said as he approached me slowly, "We don't want to be part of any shit going on with you."

I nodded..

"I'm going to give you the water, and then you will be on your way."

I nodded again.

He handed the water to me, though his eyes were cautious.

I took the bottle from him, opened the seal, and gulped the water into my mouth.

He waited, "You don't look good," he said, "On second thoughts, how about I drop you off somewhere close to your home or station?"

"Thank you," I said, "I'd very much appreciate that."

"Oh no, Raul, don't do that," he protested, "She's none of our business."

"She's an officer, Ken, we can't leave her like this," Raul pressed.

"Are you sure it's about that?" Ken asked, "Or is it because she's a babe and she's pretty?"

I felt my lungs burning, even after I drank the water, and my legs ached, but not out of exhaustion.

"Fuck off, Ken," Raul shrugged, "Turning to face, me, "Come with me."

"I'm sorry, but I don't think I can walk,". I whispered as I felt my legs getting heavier and heavier.

Without blinking, he swept me off my feet, and. started walking towards another direction.

"You can stay back if you want," Raul said, addressing Ken.

"No way, I'm leaving you alone with her," he replied as he followed behind us closely.

Then I heard a ringing sound in my ears, it felt like my ears popped open to a new way of hearing.

I could hear every sound, even the heartbeat of the guy carrying me, and that of his friend.

My senses became sharper, and my blurry vision cleared to see in the dark.

I was changing. Faster now.

And I was scared.

Raul noticed the way I was groaning, and he stopped, "You okay, Miss?"

"Please drop me," I groaned.

He dropped me, and my hands immediately held on to the tree close to me for support.

"I told you this girl is no good," Ken's voice cut in from behind.

Pain twisted through me, and my bones started shifting under my skin.

My hands trembled, and my fingernails were getting bigger.

No, no, not yet. I pressed my face to the tree, trying to steady myself.

I couldn’t shift now. Not yet. Not in front of them.

"Are you sure you're good?" Raul asked again as he drew close.

"Stay back," I snapped, my voice thicker.

"Come on, Raul," Ken called, "Let's go back, she looks like shit."

"Please don't go back," I urged, my voice urgent.

"You need to run as far away as possible," I blurted out, "Get to your car and flee."

“I don’t want to hurt you guys,” I added.

But even as I said that, my voice started cracking.

My fingers were hurting, I could feel the claws pushing through.

Raul held his gaze for a while, but Ken looked like I just gave me a slap on the face.

"Who the heck do you think you're to fucking tell us what to do?" he scoffed.

Raul swallowed hard, he could see my face changing.

"Do as I say if you don't want to die," I urged.

"I think we should listen to her," Raul said.

"Fuck you man, and fuck you too," he cussed, "I'm going back to enjoy my cool night."

"You coming or what?" he asked.

Raul didn't answer, he turned and headed in the direction of his car.

"Alright bro, go fuck yourself," Ken added as Raul walked away.

I dug my fingers into the ground, my claws were all out now, and I was barely holding my shit together.

But I could hear Ken walking back to the spot where I had met them.

It was at that point that I snapped, and everything happened so fast I couldn't even remember.

I heard a gunshot and then someone shouting, begging.

And when I came back to myself, my hands were covered in blood.

Ken was on the ground, in the pool of his own blood.

My breath hitched. "What have I done?" I whispered.

But he wasn’t moving, I pushed him to try and see his face.

That was when I saw that I had slashed his throat with my claws.

I staggered back, wiping the blood from my face.

Tears stung my eyes.

I had just killed someone in cold blood.

I had to get out of here.

"Now, you know what it means to be a werewolf, killing is our nature," he said, "While saving is a discipline we have to learn to do."

I turned to see the voice that was speaking.

It was the same man that had ruined everything for me.

It was Keto.

My heart pounded hard, this time not out of werewolf pressure, but out of pure human rage.

Chapter 45

Keto's POV

I hadn't seen Ravenna for 3 days, and the only thing on my mind was her beautiful face.

Orion had sent me on an errand to the Arctic region to get a polar bear.

I had expected him to kill me when he found out about the video, but instead, he asked me to get a polar bear for him.

I don't know which one scares me more, the fact that he had seen the video, or the fact that he had chosen to say nothing about it.

My walkie-talkie jarred to life, disrupting my thoughts.

"We've found one, but not very big, about 9 feet tall," one of the bear hunters said.

"Orion was specific, keep searching, until you find one, don't call," I answered.

I honestly don't know what interests Orion in Kate. According to him, he wants a replacement for Nikki.

But I don't see any similarities between Kate and Nikki.

Kate is calculative, Nikki was impulsive.

Nikki hated anything affair, she'd rather hump a woman than let any man touch her, while Kate has that lover girl aura.

It's such a pity that I had to bring her into my world, but it was her curiosity that got her into trouble.

My eyes widened in surprise, I had been looking at it the wrong way.

She doesn't have any similarities to Nikki, but she does have similarities to Ravenna.

Both of them are calculative, with those affectionate eyes.

They have a way of taking people by surprise, especially when underestimated.

But I don't understand? Why would Orion pick someone with similarities to Ravenna and then claim she is Nikki's replacement?

What's his endgame?

If he hates Ravenna, why would he want to have someone just like her around?

These questions lingered in my head, but answers weren't coming, and as far as I was concerned, Orion is a mystery.

You think you know what he wants, and who he is, but then he surprises you by doing something you don't expect.

The walkie-talkie rang again, and I picked it up.

"Any good news?" I asked.

"We've found a big one, a polar bear," he said, "About 11 feet tall, and a male."

"Good, get the chopper ready and bring it in," I said, my tone merry, "And, just give it the right dose to sleep off, we need it awake and ready for tonight."

"Copy, sir," they said.

"Can Kate really defeat this bear? She has no battle experience," I said out loud to myself.

"Don't you feel cold out here?" a voice cut in from behind.

I was standing in front of the hotel I had lodged in, the temperature in the area was -20°F, with the whole place covered in ice.

"No, I'm alright," I replied as I turned to see the young woman wearing multiple sweaters.

"It's really cold out here," she added as she walked past me, "You better put on something thick before you freeze to death."

I chuckled lightly, werewolves don't feel cold, but in order to avoid drawing any unnecessary attention to myself, I decided to go inside back inside my hotel room.

I had barely locked the door when my phone started ringing in my pocket..

I dipped my hand into my pocket and brought it out.

Surprisingly, it was Orion that was calling.

"Yes, boss?" I said as I picked it.

"Any luck?" he asked over the phone.

"We just saw a big one," I said, "We are bringing it in as you speak."

"Good, when are you coming back?" he asked, his tone firm.

"I'll be on my way in the next 3 hours," I answered.

"No," he disagreed, "Be on your way now."

"And don't come straight to me," he ordered.

My pulse quickened. I didn't know where he was headed with this conversation, but I couldn't wait. So I decided to ask.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked as I sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I just saw Kate trying to escape from the mansion," he started, "but I wasn't in the mood to stop her, you'd do that for me, yes?" he asked.

I swallowed, "Yes, boss, I'd do anything for you, but she's going to be madly aggressive, your bite would make her that aggressive."

I wanted to ask for reinforcement just in case handling her alone might be too difficult for me when she shifts fully under the full moon.

"I didn't bite her," he disagreed, "Ravenna did, her wolf is back."

My heart skipped a beat. If he knows about Ravenna's shape-shifting comeback, I suppose he already knows she is now an alpha like him.

But the fact that he hadn't mentioned it means he wasn't aware of that part of her yet.

Even Ravenna doesn't know that I was aware, and I planned on talking to her about it as soon as I went back to the mansion.

"Alright, boss," I answered, "I'll track her down."

Then he hung up, and I tossed the phone on the bed.

I sighed in relief, he's still talking to me as though nothing's changed, but I know he must be up to something.

I quickly got dressed and signed out of the hotel.

I started by taking a cab straight to the airport, where a private airplane was waiting to take me back.

I boarded the plane, and soon it was in the sky.

Within 20 minutes, the plane was showering over the forest where I believe Kate would have tried to hide or use as a path to escape.

The pilot told me they can't land in the forest unless they take me to their hangar, but I knew that would give Kate more time to escape and make it harder for me to track her.

So I asked for a parachute instead, and soon I was jumping out of a plane that was 30,000 feet high.

I stretched my arms in the air as the wind blew through my landing.

As I edged towards the forest, I pressed the parachute button, and it opened smoothly.

And it slowed down my descent.

As soon as I reached the ground, I pulled it off, and I could immediately pick up her scent.

Since she was bitten by an alpha, I believed she would be very strong and hard to tame.

I followed her scent until it led me to some guys, about two of them, one was fleeing away from her, while the other was ignorantly walking away.

I knew she was going to kill him. I wanted to stop her from doing it, but I changed my mind.

I wanted her to see what it means to be a werewolf, and wanted to see why I had to kill her colleagues.

If she kills on her first day, then it would be easier for her to deal with the guilt that comes afterwards.

As soon as I noticed she was done killing, I approached her.

“Now, you know what it means to be a werewolf, killing is our nature," I said, "While saving is a discipline we have to learn to do."

She turned to face me, and as soon as she saw me, her eyebrows narrowed in anger.

"You?" she snapped, "You're the monster who caused all this," her voice was deep.

The full moon is almost at its peak, and I'm sure it will last 2 hours.

"I'm sorry, but there's nothing I could have done," I said, fearing she might attack me. "You sealed your fate the moment you refused to stop sniffing around me."

"Now, I'm going to seal yours," she answered sharply as she shifted again into her wolf.

Chapter 46

Lyra's POV

I stood under the shower, my head leaning over the wall.

I had done it again, the very thing I said I wouldn't do, and this time, there was no drugs, no alcohol.

I did it with my senses intact.

Ooh no, this shouldn't be happening, I hate myself for finding him so irresistibly.

The truth had always been there, but I failed to say it, to admit it, that the sexual tension between Orion and me is very strong, stronger than the pull I have with Keto.

But Keto is so sweet to me, I shouldn't be doing this to him.

Maybe I'm not being honest with myself, or maybe my strong will is not strong enough.

How could I say it won't happen again, and it happened the very next day after the first incident.

I had told Orion how I felt concerning Keto, thinking he was going to kick me out, let me be, but instead, he chose to fuck with my brains.

Now I don't even know if my feelings for Keto are real anymore, or if I was just fooling myself about loving him.

"Ravenna," Kira's voice cut in from the room.

I didn't answer, I just wanted to be left alone.

I wanted to be in this bathroom as long as possible, to wash away every imprint Orion might have left in my body.

Anything that made the bond between us so strong.

If I can't resist him, then maybe I'd run away instead, try to escape like Kate.

Now that I think of her, I should put my guilt aside and go look for her.

I bit her, so she has to be my responsibility now, even though I don't know anything about helping a new human turned werewolf.

"Ravenna," Kira called again, "I know you're in there, we don't have time on our side," she said, "So whatever it is that you're doing in there, do it quickly."

I swallowed hard, I wonder what she would say this time around when I come out.

The last time, she said I smelled like Orion, now maybe she would say she sees Orion in me.

I washed myself again and again, maybe it'll help me feel clean, or maybe it'll stop my conscience from bleeding.

"If you don't come out in the next five minutes," she started, "I'm going to come drag you out."

"I'm coming," I finally said, though my voice was weak.

I needed to answer her, to at least stop her from coming to the bathroom.

I turned off the shower and tied the white towel around my waist.

Then I came out of the bathroom.

"Hi, Kira," I said, "I didn't know you were back."

"What's wrong with you?" she asked, her tone soft, "You look pale."

"I'm fine, just tired, I guess," I replied, "Kate tried to escape."

Her eyes widened in surprise, "And? Was she caught?"

I nodded my head dismissively, "No, she wasn't, at least not yet," I uttered, "Orion saw her escaping, but he didn't stop her, he said it would be more fun to have her try and run away."

"That's very dangerous," Kira answered, "She could kill someone or worse, get killed."

"Give me two minutes to get dressed," I said as I browsed through my wardrobe.

I quickly got dressed in a simple blue jeans and a blue top.

"Alright," I said, "Let's go."

"Your hair, you should tie it back," she suggested.

"Oooh, thank you."

I took my hair back, but she gestured that I let her help me instead.

As soon as she was done, we came out of the room.

She cleared her throat, "We'd have to see Orion first before leaving."

My heart skipped a beat. "Why do we have to see him?" I asked, not impressed by the idea.

"I need to ask him some questions about Kate," she said as she walked in front of me.

"Alright then, you go alone, I'd wait for you outside."

"No, you don't get to do that to me, I don't want to see him alone," she said as she dragged my hand to his room.

I swallowed hard and followed.

As soon as we got to his room, she knocked on his door.

"He's not in his room," I said.

"How do you know?" she asked as she pushed his door open, only to meet an empty room.

"You taught me how to smell, remember?" I reminded her, "I can smell him."

"Hmm," she closed the door back.

"I'm impressed, but tell me where your nose thinks he is," she asked, smiling.

"He's downstairs, at the bar," I replied, unimpressed by her acute sense of smell.

We sauntered downstairs, and just as I had said, he was at the bar, dressed in his white singlet and black jeans.

There was something different about his hair, like he had styled it.

He held a glass of wine in his hand.

"Orion," Kira called.

He turned to look at us, but his gaze settled on me first, but I looked away.

Although from the corner of my eye, I could see him smiling a little bit.

"Kira," he started, "You do know it's your duty to report health challenges or developments of everybody in my pack to me, right?"

"Yes," she answered, "That's why I came to see you.".

He folded his hands, "Alright, say on," he urged, "What do you have to say?"

"Ravenna told me you drugged her last night. May I ask why?" she inquired.

My heart skipped a beat.

I didn't like the direction of this conversation.

Orion chuckled in amusement, and I think this is the first time I have seen him laugh.

I had never seen him laugh before.

Maybe he isn't as monstrous as I thought he was after all, or maybe this is part of another game he is playing.

"Ravenna told you that?" he asked.

I knew he was going to ask that question, I saw it coming.

Bloody hell, Kira had just started something she doesn't have the resources to finish.

Kira turned to face me, "He drugged you last night, yes?"

I swallowed hard, and for a moment, I wanted the ground to open and swallow me whole.

"Yes-" I stuttered.

"We had sex last night, Kira," he said, "She wanted it too."

"Plus, we also had sex this evening," he added with a smirk.

My heart sank. Kira turned to face me, her eyes widening.

Chapter 47

Lyra's POV

"Did he drug you again today?" Kira asked, her eyes flashing with disappointment.

I swallowed hard, I didn't know what to say to her.

"It was a mistake, it won't happen again," I said, staring at her forehead instead of her eyes.

She folded her arms, shook her head in disbelief, and turned to face Orion, who was still sipping his wine.

"So what's it going to be tonight?" she asked, her gaze serious.

Orion got up from his bar chair, his glass still in hand, he sipped it again, then dropped it on the bar.

"Keto is around," he said, his tone playful.

His gaze shifted to me for a while, then back to Kira.

My heart felt like a weight was taken from it.

I finally get to see Keto.

Kira turned to face me, "I told you Orion isn't going to kill Keto," she winked, and then it disappeared as soon as she smiled.

Orion dipped his hand into his pocket, his gaze piercing, "Kira, from henceforth, you'll stay permanently in this mansion with me, I don't want you going to and fro anymore," he ordered.

Kira's smile faltered. "As much as I love your mansion, I still prefer my place. Why are you doing this to me?" she asked.

I raised my hand up, "I'm sorry, but can I step outside?"

I didn't want to be part of the discussion; I had a feeling Kira wouldn't like what Orion was about to say, and I didn't think I could bear seeing her sad.

I had never seen her sad before.

"No, you stay," they spoke up simultaneously.

"We don't actually have time for this," I protested, "We still need to find Kate, it's the full moon."

"This won't take time," Orion blurted out, his tone serious, "Kate will be fine."

He took three steps close to Kira, and she dropped her gaze to the ground.

"Ever since you took charge of Ravenna's health, Kira," he started, "You have refused to report to me."

"You knew she had her wolf back, but you didn't tell me, you kept it to yourself, and I had to find out myself," he added.

I flinched. How did he know I had my wolf back? Was it when I bit Kate, or when he figured I had bitten his brother?

"It's not her fault," I said, trying to defend Kira.

He shot his finger at me, "I'm not talking to you."

I swallowed a lump, I couldn't help it.

I didn't know if it had to do with the fact that I had sex with him, but part of me just couldn't be defiant to him anymore.

It's almost as if my wolf accepts him as the alpha, but I was an alpha too.

"What else are you hiding from me, Kira?" he asked, "I know there are certain things about Ravenna that you are withholding, but it would be better if you tell me those things before I find out myself."

"I'm very sorry, Orion," Kira pleaded, "It won't happen again, I promise."

"Maybe, maybe not," he whispered, "But you stay in my mansion from henceforth."

"Yes, boss," she bowed.

I took my eyes away from her to the big wall clock in front of me.

The time was 10 pm, and all we have is Orion's word that Kate would be fine.

"Now," he said finally, "Let's go."

Kira was the first to move, I waited till she was out of the living room before I followed after her.

Orion didn't follow, he stood back.

And I didn't bother to ask him if he was coming along or not.

I just knew that as the alpha, he had to be there.

Kira's face didn't look good, it was obvious she was not pleased.

And it had to do with me, if she wasn't keeping my secrets as Lyra and an alpha, she wouldn't be in this situation with Orion.

She opened the car door, the driver was already waiting for us.

A young man dressed in a black suit and dark shade of glasses.

I wondered why anyone would be putting on a dark shade of glass at night.

Kira entered the car, and I followed her.

Then the driver got in and started the engine.

"Is Orion not coming with us?" I asked, my hand resting on the cream leather seat.

"Orion always likes to make a dramatic entrance," she said, her tone sober, "He would come in his own time."

"I'm sorry about earlier," I started, "I know-"

She placed her finger on my lips to stop me from finishing my statement.

Then she nodded her head to the driver.

I took that as a cue not to speak in front of the driver about anything.

Perhaps he might tell Orion everything he hears.

I sat quietly beside Kira as the car rolled out of the compound.

The drive was quiet at first, apart from the soft hum of the engine; there was no noise.

Kira's gaze was fixed on the tinted window, distant and unreadable.

But something about the driver unsettled me.

The fact that he wore a dark shade under the dim street lights felt really off.

He didn't say anything.

He didn't greet either.

No glance back to acknowledge us.

He just looked straight ahead, focused, almost too focused.

“Kira,” I whispered, barely turning my head.

She sighed, "What's it, Ravenna?" she purred, "I'm almost enjoying the quiet ride."

"I don't think he's taking the right direction," I whispered.

Kira’s hand slowly reached for my hand. “Calm down, Ravenna. Maybe he's taking a detour,” she said, but her voice was a little bit cracked, like she wasn't sure of what she had just said.

I kept quiet for a while, watching, but my wolf kept stirring me within that something wasn't right with the journey.

"Kira," I called softly, "I still think we're headed in the wrong direction."

She didn’t respond at first, then she leaned forward, staring at the road. “You’re right,” she finally said. “He’s taking the back route, I guess.”

The tone of her voice sent a chill down my spine.

It sounded like she was suspicious, too, but didn't want to be led by her emotions.

“Where is he taking us?” I asked.

“It looks like a hunting path, one Orion uses when he goes camping, but he never tells the driver to bring us here.”

“Where are you taking us?” I asked the driver, my voice louder than I intended.

The driver made no attempt to respond or explain.

His hands gripped the steering wheel tightly, while he kept driving like he didn't hear a single word I said.

“Kira,” I said again, more firmly now. “This isn’t right.”

She nodded subtly, as though agreeing but not wanting to confirm it out loud.

“Kira, something’s wrong," I repeated.

She nodded, slowly pulling her phone from her purse and tapping the screen. No signal

The car turned sharply to the right, swerving off the paved road and onto a rough, dirt-filled path.

“Hey!” I yelled, grabbing the seat. “Stop the car!”

He didn't answer, he just kept driving.

My heart beat raced, “Who the hell is he?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I don't think he's really one of Orion’s men. That I’m sure of now.”

Before I could respond to her, the car came to an abrupt halt, and dust clouded around the windows.

The driver opened his door and stepped out, slamming the door behind him while the engine was still running.

For a brief second, I thought of running, but the doors were locked automatically.

Just then, I saw shadows emerging from the forest.

Black furs, huge, and glowing eyes.

They were werewolves.

Three at first, then more started coming out from the trees.

They were trying to surround the vehicle.

I swallowed hard, my breath hitching.

These werewolves didn't look like they belonged to Orion's pack.

“They’re not his,” Kira said under her breath, “They’re not Orion’s pack.”

My heart slammed in my chest. “Then whose?”

One of them approached the driver’s side.

And the driver stood beside him, whispering in his ears.

“They’re working together,” I whispered. “The driver—he’s one of them.”

"We have been kidnapped, Ravenna, we have to leave now," she said, her tone urgent.

She reached inside her bag and pulled out a silver dagger. “Stay close to me,” she hissed.

I nodded.

The wolves closed in.

Suddenly, one of them stood upright, partially shifting, his nose elongating while his limbs cracked into place.

His voice was very deep but human enough to understand.

“Ben wants her alive,” he growled. “The healer can die if she resists.”

Orion’s brother, he was behind this attack.

The words hit me like ice.

Kira kicked open our side door, grabbing my wrist.

“Run!” she shouted.

We bolted into the trees as claws tore into the car behind us. I didn’t look back. I couldn’t.

Chapter 48

Lyra's POV

The deeper into the forest we went, branches would claw onto my arms, roots threatening to wrap themselves around my ankles with each desperate step.

The howls behind us were growing louder and closer.

The full moon, seated in the sky, resembled a gigantic silvery eye, staring down and waiting.

"Kira, wait!" I gasped, finally tripping on a rock. "We cannot keep on running like this!"

"A little farther!" she shouted, blood shining on her sleeve where she had been scratched. "There is a place up ahead, we can hide!"

As we disappeared through a wall of trees, we stopped at a rocky ledge.

Moonlight flickered across the wide pool beneath, watered by a waterfall; rushing waters dampened our auditory senses, mute against the distant howls.

She seized my arm and dragged me toward the waterfall. "Come! Behind here!"

We slipped beneath the waterfall and onto the narrow ledge veiled behind it. The cold spray kissed my face; for a very brief moment, I relaxed, thinking we were safe.

I slid down the slippery stone, "Why didn't we stay and fight? We could've taken them—"

"No," Kira brushed me aside. She crouched in the dim shimmer of the waterfall, looking out into the forest. "You don't understand... That was a full pack—betas and omegas—on a full moon."

I frowned. “So?”

Kira glanced at me. “So, betas and omegas are at their strongest during the full moon. Their power peaks, and they become more aggressive, more coordinated. If we’d stayed to fight, we wouldn’t have lasted more than a minute. Especially not with you still transitioning.”

I bit my lip, frustration simmering beneath my skin. “But I'm an Alpha.”

She gave a tired smile. “Yes, you are, but Alphas, their powers don’t peak during the full moon. Their true strength comes during the lunar eclipse.”

I blinked. “Wait… so Alphas are strongest when there’s no moon at all?”

She nodded. “During the eclipse, when the moon is in full shadow. That’s when an Alpha's instincts are sharpened. But,” she leaned closer, voice low, “—there are exceptions.”

“What kind of exceptions?”

“There are some Alphas who’ve gone beyond the cycle. They don’t rely on the moon at all. They’re stronger than the rest, no matter the phase.”

I swallowed. “Like Orion?”

“Exactly. He’s killed so many Alphas… absorbed their strength. The moon no longer governs him. That’s why Ben fears him."

I wrapped my arms around my knees and felt the chill of the stone penetrate into my bones.

The sound of the waterfall behind us was very loud.

Although it was reassuring to know that it covered our scent, maybe even our voices, or, on the other hand, we wouldn't be able to hear anyone sneaking up on us.

"How long are we going to stay here?" I asked, "We can't hide forever."

Kira leaned against the wall, her eyes drifting out over the row of trees at the back of the veil of water.

"For now, the most practical thing to do is wait. Until we are sure they gave up looking or went on," she said, "Coming out too soon would be suicidal."

I paused and cleared my throat. "There's something I need to say."

She turned towards me, her face unreadable.

"This has to do with Kevin," I said, very softly.

Kira's eyes clamped shut. “What about him?”

I hesitated only a second. “He’s trying to use me… to kill Orion. And I think Ruth is behind it.”

Kira’s head jerked toward me. “What?”

“I’m serious,” I said, “He gave me something. An elixir. Said I should use it on Orion while we… while we were together. He said it was meant to kill Alphas.”

Kira’s eyes widened in horror. “Are you kidding me? How the hell does he even have something like that?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. But the way he spoke about it… like it was the only way. He made it sound like Orion was a monster who had to be stopped.”

She sat there in stunned silence for a moment.

Then she frowned deeply. “First, Ben wants Orion dead, and now Kevin and Ruth? Are they working together?”

“I don’t think so,” I replied. “Ben’s desperate and power-hungry for power, and Kevin is manipulative and greedy for wealth. I think whatever this is… It’s separate.”

Kira muttered a curse under her breath. “This is insane.”

“I’m not done,” I added, swallowing. “There’s something else you need to know… something I haven’t told anyone.”

She looked at me cautiously.

“In my previous life, in my original body, I was married to Kevin. I knew him as Jacob.”

Kira’s brows shot up. “What?”

I nodded, forcing the words out. “He left me. Disappeared without warning… and I was pregnant.”

Her mouth fell open, and then a slow laugh escaped her lips.

“So let me get this straight… you got jilted by Kevin when you were you, and now that you’re Ravenna, he’s still showing up? Damn, girl.”

I managed a wry smile.

“What now?” I asked. “Do we tell Orion about Kevin?”

Kira paused, then shook her head slowly. “Kevin’s easier to handle. And Ruth? She’s clever but not invincible. We deal with them after we get rid of Ben. He’s the real threat right now, especially while the full moon’s still high.”

The fire in Kira's eyes hadn't dulled since the moment I mentioned Ben.

She sat still, but I could see the way her fists clenched like she was trying to physically hold back her rage.

"I don't get it," I said after a pause. "If Ben really wants Orion dead, why hasn't he done it himself?"

"Because he can't," Kira muttered. "Not alone. Not in a fair fight. Orion might be hated by many, but he's not weak. Ben knows that."

She turned to me, her voice low but firm. "That's why he's building alliances. Manipulating others, and now he's chasing us like we're criminals."

"You think he's scared?"

"Terrified," she said. "Orion has something he'll never have. Loyalty. Power. And that kind of strength… you can't fake it, Ravenna. You earn it."

I looked at her, really looked at her. The way she sat, defensive and protective.

It made me realize just how much Kira had sacrificed for Orion. How much she understood about him.

"I used to think Orion was just cruel," I murmured. "Arrogant and dangerous."

"And now?"

"I think he's… complicated," I admitted. "There's more to him than what people say."

Kira snorted. "That's the understatement of the year."

We fell silent for a moment, listening to the distant howls echoing through the forest.

Somewhere out there, werewolves were still hunting. Maybe not for us anymore, but the threat remained.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Kevin sooner,” I said quietly.

Kira shook her head. “You told me now. That’s what matters.”

“I don’t want to betray Orion,” I whispered. “I’m scared of what he’ll think… if he finds out I kept something like this from him.”

Kira’s gaze softened. “You’re not the first to keep secrets. And you won’t be the last. But when the time comes, you’ll tell him. I know you will.”

“What if we don’t make it back?” I asked.

Kira didn’t answer right away. Then she smiled, a small, determined thing. “We will.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve seen the way Orion looks at you,” she said. “And if you don’t get back, he’ll burn the entire forest to the ground looking for you.”

That thought warmed me in a strange way, even though I knew it shouldn’t.

I stood slowly. “We should move soon.”

Kira nodded, rising to her feet beside me. “Not too far. Just enough to find higher ground.”

“Still hiding?”

“For now,” she said.

And with that, we stepped out from behind the waterfall.

We hadn't made it ten steps away from the waterfall when werewolves closed in from every direction.

They had found us, no, it seemed like they were waiting for us, like they knew we were there all along.

Kira froze. I spun, heart pounding hard.

At least a dozen of them, all armed and already shifting.

"Run!" I screamed, but it was too late.

Two wolves lunged. I kicked and slashed, my claws barely out before strong arms wrapped around me.

I thrashed wildly, but someone jabbed a syringe into my neck. My vision spun.

"Mistletoe," Kira said grimly as I dropped to my knees, my limbs weakening.

Kira didn't resist. She simply raised her hands in surrender, watching as I was pinned to the ground.

Ben stepped out from the trees, smug as ever.

"Finally," he said, eyes gleaming. "We meet again, Ravenna."

"Thanks to your bite, I finally figured out how to win this war," he said with a smirk.

"Good to see you too, Kira," he waved at her before turning in my direction.

"As you know, I have always desired to be alpha, but killing Orion has been difficult, but now the game has changed."

He walked up to me, crouching. “I don’t need to kill my brother to take his place or become an alpha. All I need to do is kill you, Ravenna.”

His men grabbed Kira next, jabbing her with a second syringe. She staggered but stayed upright as they chained us both.

“Bring them,” Ben ordered. “Alive… for now.”

Chapter 49

Keto's POV

“Kate, listen to me-”

She didn’t. She came at me like an angry wild tiger, no warning, no restraint.

“You think I want to listen to you?” she snapped, eyes blazing blue. “You ruined my life, you killed my friends.”

I caught her wrists just in time. Her strength was unreal under the full moon. “I had no choice, Kate. I was following orders.”

She hissed, ripping free and slamming her fist into my jaw.

Damn, that hurt.

“You hit like a pissed-off tiger,” I muttered, stumbling back.

“Good. I was aiming for your throat.”

She charged again. I ducked, grabbed her leg, tried to throw her off balance, but she was fast, too fast.

She landed like a cat and spun to face me, fangs bared.

“I don’t want to fight you, Kate,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm.

“Too late for that!” she snapped. “I want to fight you!”

She swiped at my face. I barely ducked. “This isn’t you.”

“You don’t know me.”

“Yes, I do,” I growled. “You’re reckless, stubborn, sharp as hell, and you care more than you admit. But this? This isn’t who you are.”

“Spare me the therapy speech,” she said, eyes wild. “You’re always trying to be the damn hero.”

“I’m just trying to save your ass.”

Wrong move. She shrieked and leapt—fangs, claws, full force. But this time, I was ready. As she lunged, I threw the chain.

She didn’t see it coming.

“What the hell—?”

The silver hit her skin, and she screamed, rage twisting into pain.

“I didn’t want to do this,” I said as I wrapped the chain around her, locking her arms tight. “But you’re going to kill more than you already have.”

“You think chaining me like an animal helps?” she snarled, struggling hard. “I’ll rip you apart!”

“Maybe,” I grunted, tightening the last loop, “but not tonight.”

She tried to shift. I saw the glow ripple over her skin—and then the runes on the chains activated.

She screamed again.

“Damn it!” she hissed, panting. “Let me go…”

“Not until you come back to yourself,” I said, holding her against me. “You’re not alone, Kate. Not now. Not ever.”

She glared at me… but for a second, just one, I saw it. The real Kate. Then the rage took over again.

I pulled out my phone, thumb trembling just a bit as I dialed Orion’s number.

The chains rattled against Kate’s body as she continued to pant, her head down, hands clenched into fists.

He answered on the first ring.
“Keto?”

“I have her,” I said. “Chained. She’s not in control, but she’s alive.”

There was a pause, then Orion replied, “Good. Damn good. My men are en route with a blue van. They’ll pick her up and take her to the site.”

“Copy that.” I hung up, sliding the phone back into my pocket.

That’s when I saw a flicker of light through the trees. Headlamps. I turned slowly to see the vehicle coming.

The vehicle that emerged from the brush was white.

Not blue.

And I didn’t recognize the driver or the passenger.

Two bulky men stepped out.

They looked rough and serious, with neutral expressions, all black gear, even earpieces.

But their eyes lingered too long on Kate.

“Orion sent us,” one of them said. “We’re here to bring her in.”

I gave them a nod, but my fingers were already twitching near the chain. “Right. Just give me a minute. She’s… unstable. Let me get her loaded safely.”

“Sure. Take your time,” the second guy replied.

I turned back to Kate.

She hadn’t looked up. Her breaths came fast and shallow, but I noticed her ears twitch. She’d heard everything.

I crouched beside her.

“Kate,” I whispered, my hands already at the lock. “I need you to trust me for five seconds.”

She didn’t say a word, but I saw her jaw clench. That was enough.

I slowly unwound the chain, careful not to draw attention.

The moment the last loop slipped free, her eyes shot open, still glowing blue, but clearer now.

“Not Orion’s men,” I muttered.

She nodded once.

I straightened and turned back toward the fake soldiers, heart thudding.

“Okay, she’s ready,” I said aloud. “But she’s heavier than she looks. Mind giving me a hand?”

The men exchanged a look and started toward me.

“Kate,” I muttered under my breath, eyes still fixed on the men approaching. “I know you want revenge. But you have to save it for later."

She stirred slightly, her fingers curling into the dirt.

“Your first assignment as a werewolf is simple,” I whispered. “Kill the two men in front of you.”

That word, kill, it did something to her.

I saw it in her eyes.

But she didn’t move. She stayed crouched low, breathing shallow, waiting.

I turned to face the men fully, my hands relaxed at my sides.

“Sorry, boys,” I said coolly. “I’m not going with you.”

They stopped a few feet away. One of them smirked.

“We figured as much,” the taller one said, rolling his neck until it cracked. “Keto is not the easiest man to fool.”

Then came the shift.

Muscles expanded, bones cracked, and reshaped. Fur spread over their bodies as their spines arched.

In seconds, they stood tall, massive werewolves with golden glowing eyes. Omegas. Someone had sent them. Someone desperate.

I growled low in my throat and dropped to all fours, my own shift rippling through me.

Before I could launch, Kate exploded forward.

A blur of black fur, claws, and teeth.

She slammed into the first man, catching him off guard, but only for a second.

He recovered with terrifying speed, grabbing her by the neck mid-lunge.

“New wolf,” he sneered. “Your fighting is weak.”

With a sickening crack, he hurled her into the nearest tree.

She hit it hard. The impact echoed through the woods.

Her body collapsed at the base, shifting back to human form in an instant. Limp. Unmoving.

Something snapped in me.

The second omega turned, eyes widening, too slow.

I’d already reached him.

In one smooth motion, I tore his throat out.

His head separated from his shoulders before the rest of his body even knew it was dead.

The first omega whipped around, snarling, only to freeze.

I wasn't on the ground anymore.

I was above him.

I dropped from the tree, claws extended, landing hard on his back and driving my teeth into his spine.

He didn't even get the chance to scream.

I shifted back, panting, blood still on my hands.

Then I heard it.

A low snarl behind me.

Chapter 50

Kate's POV

I couldn't resist the bloodlust curling wide inside my chest.

A low snarl escaped my mouth as my body trembled with unnatural rage.

Keto stood ahead of me, broad and calm like a tree that wouldn't bend no matter how hard I pushed.

But I wasn't going to push, I was going to tear him apart.

He had released me earlier to fight some men I didn't recognize, but I wasn't interested in those men; I was interested in him.

Without thinking, I lunged at him, claws bared and jaw wide.

He moved faster than I could track. A blur. A crack in my throat. The world flipped, and I hit the ground with a bone-deep thud.

Pain exploded through my body. My vision swam, and I coughed, gasping like a fish out of water.

I hated him for being stronger. I hated how small I felt.

Keto stood over me, not angry, just… calm. That made it worse.

"You've got a lot to learn before you can fight someone like me, Kate," he said, crouching beside me. "You have strength, but no discipline. Rage won't win battles."

I wanted to snarl at him again, but just then, the clouds drifted across the moon. Its light faded, and in that breath of shadow, the haze over my mind lifted.

I blinked and sat up slowly, rubbing the side of my neck.

Then I saw headlights breaking through the trees.

A van rolled forward and parked in front of us. Blue. This one was blue.

The doors slid open, and two men stepped out, taller than average.

Keto walked to them casually, like he'd been expecting them. "We were attacked," he said. "Two rogues. I managed to kill them, though."

The men nodded. "We need to move fast," one said. "Rogues don't travel alone during the full moon. More might be on the way."

Keto turned back and offered me his hand.

I took it, shaky on my feet, still quarter-aching from the earlier hit. Assisted toward the van, I asked, "Those men... the ones who came before... who were they?"

Keto's jaw tensed ever so slightly, yet his gaze remained averted. "No idea, but we are going to find out."

One of the men started the engine, and soon the van was on the road again.

My eyelids become heavy, and yet I consistently forced them open.

My need for sleep was exerting its gravitational force on me; every bump along the way sent shockwaves of pain through my muscles.

My head lolled on one side to brush lightly against Keto's shoulder.

"What is... happening to me?" I muttered scarcely loud enough to be heard.

Keto looked down; the expression on his face was inscrutable. “Your body’s still adjusting,” he said. “You were turned under a full moon. That makes the transition rougher.”

I blinked up at him, swallowing thickly. “Why does everything hurt?”

“You’re changing,” he said. “Bones. Blood. Instinct. You need rest, but more than that, you need meat. Red meat. A lot of it. It’ll help stabilize you.”

I let that sink in, but the words felt distant, like they were being spoken underwater.

Then I noticed something, movement in the side mirror.

Headlights. Several of them. Motorcycles moving between the trees, closing in.

“Are those… Orion’s men?” I asked, my voice sharper now, fighting back the fog of sleep.

Keto sat up straighter and tapped the driver’s shoulder. “You recognize them?”

The man shook his head. “No. Same ones from earlier," He answered, "The rogues. They’re following us.”

That sobered me up fast.

The driver exchanged a quick look with the man in the passenger seat. “We’ll handle it,” he said, unbuckling his belt. “You take the wheel.”

Keto nodded, already moving. The van jerked as it slowed to a stop, the two men jumping out and slamming the doors behind them.

Keto slid into the driver’s seat and hit the gas.

I twisted in my seat, still weak but alert now, watching through the side mirror.

The two men were already shifting. Their bodies dropped low, claws tearing into the earth as they ran toward the bikes.

I couldn't see what happened next. Keto swerved us back onto the main road, speeding through the trees.

But in that moment, I realized something.

I was part of a war I never asked for.

And the rules were changing faster than I could understand.

We drove in silence until the van turned into a narrow dirt path, surrounded by towering trees.

Eventually, we reached a massive sports complex hidden deep within the forest.

I blinked at the wide structure, confused. "Who uses a facility in the middle of nowhere?"

Keto opened the door and stepped out first. "It's a training facility," he said, sniffing the air. "Belongs to Orion. Only werewolves come here."

I climbed out after him, wincing at the soreness in my muscles.

I was about to ask more questions when Keto stiffened.

His eyes narrowed, "Something's wrong."

"What is it?" I asked, my eyes darting around the area.

"I smell blood," he whispered.

I scoffed. “Isn’t that normal in a werewolf training facility?”

Keto shook his head, more serious now. “This is a lot of blood.”

We moved quickly toward the building. It was circular, no roof, just open sky and broken floodlights.

The moment we stepped inside, I froze.

Corpses. Dead werewolves were scattered, torn apart, soaked in pools of blood.

“Oh my God,” I whispered, my stomach twisting. “What… what happened here?”

Then I saw a massive bear sprawled across the center of the field, its body torn open.

"Did the bear do all of these?” I asked, stepping closer.

“No,” Keto replied, “This wasn’t the bear’s doing. This was a werewolf battle.”

He turned sharply. “We need to get out of here.”

We didn’t make it far.

Fifteen pairs of eyes stepped into view from the entrance.

And then a particular pair of eyes caught my attention, it was glowing red.

Orion.

His jaw clenched as he stepped into the clearing, surveying the carnage.

His voice was low but deep, “Any sign of Ravenna or Kira?”

Keto shook his head. “No. We haven’t seen them.”

“They were taken, too,” Orion muttered. His voice firm.

Keto moved closer. “We were attacked on our way here, too.”

I couldn’t help myself. “What are you going to do?”

Orion’s eyes flicked to me, and for a moment, I wished they hadn’t.

“I’m going to return the favor,” he said, voice like steel. “With a killing spree. But first, ” his gaze shifted to the horizon, “I find Ravenna and Kira.”

Chapter 51

Orion's POV

The room was dim, the only light coming from the cracked blinds and the soft glow of the map spread out on the table in front of me.

Just last night, someone had orchestrated an attack on my pack, kidnapping Kira and Ravenna.

That was an act of war, and whoever was behind this had to be someone from my pack.

No pack is bold enough to attack me, I had that fearful reputation among werewolves.

I never lose a war, regardless of the opponents before me.

And now, the battle line has been drawn, and I'll have to strike back.

The door to my office opened, and two men came in.

I had called for them, two werewolves with the special abilities to track.

I had trained them over the years to track all sorts of things and people.

They stood before me with their hands behind their backs, bodies leaning, and sharp eyes. Their scent told me they'd just returned from a run.

They knew why I had called them, I never call them unless there is an assignment.

"Start with the driver," I said, voice clipped. "The one who took Ravenna and Kira out of the Mansion. I want him alive. No excuses."

They nodded. One of them, Dax, raised a brow. "You think he gave them up?"

“I think he knows something or perhaps even an accomplice,” I replied coldly. “Everyone talks when I’m done with them.”

The other, Silas, crossed his arms. “And if he’s already dead?”

“Then find out who killed him, and work your way up the chain until you get the truth out of it.”

Silas hesitated. “What if… What if it’s someone from our own ranks, Alpha?”

I looked up slowly, meeting his eyes. “Then they’ve made themselves enemies of the pack. And I treat enemies one way.”

They both nodded in silent understanding.

“You have twenty-four hours. I don’t care if you have to sniff through every inch of this forest. Find Ravenna. Find Kira. Report back to me. Don’t screw this up.”

Without another word, they left the office.

The moment the door clicked shut, I exhaled. My fists clenched at my sides. The silence wasn’t comforting, it was maddening.

How did this happen?

I turned to the window, staring out into the trees beyond. My wolves had been slaughtered. And if news of this event spreads out, it'll cause a bigger issue with my enemies far and wide.

They would see it as an opportunity to attack me.

And worst of all, my thoughts kept circling back to one name.

My brother.

Could he really have done this?

I shook my head. “No,” I muttered to myself. “He wouldn’t… he’s always stood by me. Always.”

But even as I said the words, doubt crept in. There had been signs—small ones, easy to ignore. The veiled questions. The sudden absences. The strange way he looked at Ravenna last week, and his blood on Ravenna's mouth.

I was a fool for not. asking why she had fought with him. I was distracted by the video of her and Keto.

I slammed my fist into the edge of the table. The wood cracked beneath the impact.

If my brother had betrayed me…

Then it would mean one thing, regardless of his position.

I would put him down myself.

I took a long breath, pushing the fury down where it belonged, for now. There was work to be done.

My phone buzzed. A message from Keto: “Arrived at the safehouse. No signs of Kira and Ravenna.”

Good. That meant they were being held captive by their captor.

I replied simply: “Stay alert.”

Then I turned back to the map, eyes narrowed.

If this was war, I'd play it the way I always had—merciless and methodical.
But first, I had to know for sure…

Brother or enemy?

And whichever he turned out to be, I would handle it.

A knock on my door caught my attention.

"Come in," I growled, not turning from the map.

A maid stepped inside, her voice barely above a whisper. "Sir, a man named Kevin is here to see you."

I narrowed my eyes. Kevin? What the hell did he want now?

"Send him in," I answered.

Moments later, Kevin walked in, looking like a deer that had wandered too close to a wolf's den. His eyes darted around the room, like he expected to see someone else hidden in the shadows.

"Make this quick," I said coldly. "I'm not in the mood for any of your pep talks or rumors."

Kevin swallowed hard. "I heard… I heard Ravenna's missing."

I didn't reply. I didn't need to.

He stepped closer, his voice trembling. "I need to know, Orion. Did you… did you kill her?"

I snapped my gaze toward him, and the fury that boiled beneath my skin almost broke the surface.

“Watch your mouth,” I said slowly. “Ravenna was taken. By my brother.”

Kevin’s face paled. “Ben?”

“Yes,” I growled. “Which is why you’re going to tell me everything you know. I’ve seen you with him. You’re close.”

Kevin held his hands up in defense. “Look, Ben never tells me much. He’s always been private—doesn’t let people in. But…” He hesitated.

“But what?” I snapped.

“There was something he said… a few weeks ago. He mentioned sleeping with Nikki.”

My eyes narrowed. “What about her?”

Kevin licked his lips. “He said he was going to win her over… said she was his instrument of war. That he was using her.”

My blood ran cold.

Nikki? So my brother had been planning this a long time ago.

All this time, I harbored guilt for killing Nikki.

Had sleepless nights, couldn't eat, all because I thought I had killed an innocent subject.

What if I hadn’t killed her?

What if Nikki had killed me instead?

And then it hit me.

The weapon.

The only one capable of killing an Alpha.

I had moved it recently. I hid it in a place not even my own pack could guess. The only person who knew where it had originally been was Nikki.

She could've exposed me. She could've given it to Ben.

I took a step back, piecing it together in my mind.

Ben. Nikki. Ravenna. Kira.

He wasn't just taking my women. He was trying to win them over to his side.

I exhaled sharply, calming the storm in my chest just long enough to glare at Kevin.

"Get out," I said flatly.

Kevin blinked. "Orion—"

"I said, get out. Before I decide you're not as innocent as you pretend to be."

Kevin backed away, his shoulders hunched. He reached for the door, just as it opened.

Kate stepped in.

Her gaze shifted between the two of us, sensing the tension.

Kevin gave her a nervous nod before slipping past and disappearing down the hall.

I stared at Kate, the weight of a hundred new realizations sitting heavy in my chest.

“What?” I said, my voice sharper than intended.

She stepped in, closing the door behind her.

“I haven’t seen you since you ordered my capture,” she said, arms folded. “And I have questions.”

I turned away from the window, jaw clenched. “Now isn’t the time—”

“No.” She stepped forward, chin lifted. “You turned me into a monster, Orion. The least you can do is tell me why you picked me," she said, her tone laced with urgency.

Her voice cracked slightly at the end, and I hated how familiar that pain was.

I ran a hand over my face. “Because your life… reminded me of mine. The one I had before this world sank its claws into me.”

She blinked, confused. “But… I thought you were born into this werewolf world. Like Ravenna.”

I turned away from her, staring out into the dark treetops beyond the glass. “You wouldn’t understand. And I don’t want to explain it. Not to you. Not to anyone.”

A silence lingered.

I didn't want to tell her the truth nobody knows about.

Then, softly, I said, “I’m sorry for destroying your world. But this one… this new world, you’ll survive it. You’ll thrive in it. You’re stronger than you know, Kate. You’ll make a powerful Beta.”

She didn’t speak for a moment. Her eyes studied me like she was trying to read something behind my face.

“I saw something last night,” she finally said. “The men who attacked Keto and I… their eyes weren’t blue. They were yellow. Why?”

I turned my attention back to her, surprised she noticed.

“They were omegas,” I said simply. “Same as Ravenna. Omegas have yellow eyes.”

She frowned. “But Ravenna doesn’t have yellow eyes.”

I stared at her. “Yes, she does.”

Ravenna had always been an omega since I knew her.

Kate shook her head, slow and deliberate. “No. I’ve seen her eyes up close. The night she bit me… her eyes were red. Glowing red. Just like yours.”

My breath caught.

No.

It couldn’t be.

“Red?” I asked, stepping toward her, heart thudding. “Are you sure?”

“She was looking right at me, Orion. Her eyes weren’t yellow. They were red.”

I staggered back a step, disbelief hitting me like a punch to the gut.

Red eyes.

Only alphas had red eyes.

Ravenna is an alpha? how?

Chapter 52

Orion's POV

Kate looked worried now. “You didn’t know?”

I didn’t answer. My mind was already racing—flashing through memories, scenes, pieces that hadn’t made sense before.

Her strength.

Her resistance to commands.

And I hadn’t seen it.

I clenched my fists, fury and confusion rising in equal measure.

If Ravenna was an alpha… then everything I thought I knew had just shifted.

Ben didn’t kidnap her to hurt her.

He knew she was an alpha too, maybe he tried recruiting her, or perhaps wants to steal her power.

To build a pack of his own.

Kate took a step back as I growled low in my throat.

“Orion,” she said carefully, “you’re scaring me.”

I turned my eyes on her. “You’re telling me… her eyes turned red?”

“Yes,” she replied. “The night she bit me. I thought it was normal, because your eyes do the same.”

“She never showed them before,” I muttered. “Not once. Not even when she was angry. She couldn't turn into a wolf, and just recently had her powers back.”

Kate hesitated. “Why would she hide something like that?”

“Because alphas attract attention. Enemies. Challenges,” I said bitterly. “If others found out, they’d try to kill her to take her power. Or control her.”

She folded her arms, watching me. “So what does it mean now?”

“It means Ben didn’t just take someone I care about,” I growled. “He took an alpha. He knew he could get to, and I didn't know, if I did, I wouldn't have allowed her out of my sight.”

“Is… is she strong enough to fight him?”

I hesitated. “If she knows who she is, she’s a threat to everyone. Including me.”

Kate’s brows furrowed. “You’re not going to hurt her, are you?”

I looked her dead in the eyes. “No. I’d burn the world down to get her back.”

Kate’s gaze softened, but there was fear there too.

“I didn’t ask for this life,” she said quietly. “I didn’t ask to be turned. And now I’m in the middle of whatever this is.”

“I know,” I said, voice lower now. “And I’m sorry, Kate.”

She blinked, surprised by the apology.

"Ravenna had this strong perception of you, that you are a monster," she admitted, her voice soft, but I'm confused, you don't really look like one."

"Ravenna is not wrong," I replied sharply, "I'm a monster. People fear monsters, and fear keeps people in check."

"So being a monster for you is out of duty? to keep your pack stable?" she asked with a hint of amusement in her voice.

"Yes," I answered, looking away.

She stared at me for a while, then asked, “What do we do now?”

I looked out the window, my jaw set.

“Now,” I said, “we find Ravenna. And we stop Ben before he starts a war no one’s ready for.”

An idea struck me, and I realized I had to call Keto.

I pulled out my phone and dialed his number.

He picked up after one ring. “Boss”

“Where are you?” I asked, my voice sharp, clipped.

“Just left the safe house. Headed back to the city now,” he replied.

“Good. Meet me at the police station,” I said. “The one where you were arrested.”

There was a beat of silence. “Understood. I’ll be there soon.”

I ended the call and slid the phone back into my pocket.

Kate raised a brow. “The police station? Why are we going there?”

I turned to her, letting out a low sigh as I stepped toward the window. “Because you’ll be resuming work soon.”

Her brows furrowed. “What?”

“I’ve spoken to people far above your station chief. The charges, the suspension, they’re all gone,” I said, still staring at the trees outside. “You’re getting your badge back.”

She blinked, clearly stunned. “You handled it?”

“I don’t like loose ends,” I said simply. Then I turned to face her fully. “But you’re not resuming until you master your control. You’ll have to learn how to shape-shift properly. How to contain the urges. Your strength is rising by the day, and you can’t afford a slip, not in public, not around humans.”

Her lips parted slightly, but no words came out at first. Then, finally, “Why are you doing all this?”

I looked at her for a moment. “Because you still have a role to play in all of this. And because you’re very useful to me at the station.”

I gestured toward the door. “Get ready. You’re coming with me. We’re searching for any possible leads on Ben, where he’s been, who he’s been talking to.”

As we stepped outside, the car was already waiting. A pair of drivers stood nearby, one of them opening the door for me.

“No need,” I said, waving him off. “I’ll drive.”

Kate glanced at me, clearly surprised. “Wait, you’re driving?”

I nodded once. “I don’t need an escort today.”

“What if someone attacks you?” she asked, lowering her voice.

I smirked without humor. “No one is stupid enough to attack me.”

I moved to the driver’s seat, sliding in smoothly. The door shut with a firm thud, and I saw Kate hesitate for a second before getting in beside me.

She was buckling herself in when she looked over at me. “You’re serious about all this.”

“I don’t joke about war,” I said as I cranked the engine. “Ben has made his move. And I am not going to be caught off guard again.”

The crunching tires paved our way onto the road, where the forest behind us was already swallowed by shadows.

The road to the station was almost silent, except for the loud hum of the engine.

Kate sat beside me; she rubbed her fingers against her thigh, as if trying to calm an inner storm. I said nothing. I had enough storms of my own.

As we pulled into the station’s parking lot, another car rolled in behind us, Keto’s black SUV.

I stepped out, and so did Keto. His face looked worn, like he hadn’t rested. Good. That meant he’d been thinking.

I approached him directly. “Have you noticed anything… odd about Ravenna lately?”

He stiffened, eyes flicking toward Kate briefly before returning to me. “Yes.”

My jaw tightened. “And?”

He exhaled and rubbed the back of his neck. “She got her powers back.”

I took a step closer, my voice low. “That’s not all. Keep talking.”

Keto hesitated, then swallowed hard. “She’s an alpha now.”

A cold fury crept into my chest. “And you didn’t think that was worth telling me?”

“I wasn’t sure at first,” Keto said quickly. “She didn’t act like one. But… the signs were there. I needed to be certain. And I haven’t seen her since that day.”

I said nothing, just stared at him until he looked away. Then I turned toward the building.

“Let’s go.”

Kate fell in behind us as we walked up the steps into the precinct.

But just as we were reaching the entrance, a broad-shouldered man with shaggy black hair and a bloodied lip pushed the doors open, looking like he’d just been released from lockup.

His eyes locked on Kate. “You!”

Kate froze.

“You’re the one who locked me up,” he growled, storming closer. “You think you can destroy my life and walk away? I’ll make you pay.”

He spat near our feet, then turned to me with a sneer. “And you, what kind of person surrounds himself with trash like her?”

Then, in a final act of idiocy, he kicked the front bumper of my car.

Keto and I stood stunned for half a second, not because of fear, but because of the sheer audacity.

Kate looked to me. “What should I do with him?”

I didn’t blink. “Lock him back up.”

The man snorted. “I’d like to see you try, sweetheart.”

He barely finished the sentence before Kate stepped forward and planted a solid right hook to his jaw.

He dropped like a sack of bricks, unconscious before he hit the pavement.

Keto let out a low whistle, impressed, and bent to haul the guy up over his shoulder.

I led the way inside.

The scent of stale coffee, sweat, and cigarette smoke filled the air.

Officers glanced up as we entered, some recognizing Kate immediately.

But something else caught my attention.

Something stronger. Sharper.

A scent I hadn’t picked up in years.

I stopped in my tracks, nostrils flaring.

“There’s another alpha in the building,” I said slowly.

Keto paused, turning to look at me.

Kate frowned. “Another alpha? Here?”

I nodded once, eyes scanning the station. “And not just any alpha. A powerful one.”

Chapter 53

Lyra's POV

My wrists were restrained behind my back, but the gag placed on my mouth had been taken off, so I could talk.

Kira was facing me with her head slumped against the cell bars on the floor, and she looked as if she was resting on some ancient straw beds.

Looking at her from across the room, I caught her dark eyes staring in my direction.

“He’ll come for us, you know,” she remarked placidly. “Orion. We’re not going to rot in this prison for Ben's amusement.”

I replied, half-chuckling. “He most certainly does not give a damn if we are still alive, and if he does, it is surely to enrich his already bolstered ego.”

I detected her lips pursing together in a stubborn smile. “You’re weak at giving him due credit. He’s a dramatic character based on only what he lets you capture him on. But... he’s meticulous in detail. And then I've seen how he looks at you with intensity."

I choked back what I expected would be a laugh, but my throat’s treachery didn’t allow even that. I forced myself to look somewhere else, focusing on the cracked walls to my left.

“In addition,” Kira added, ever so mischievously, “Tell me, why don't we talk about what transpired between the two of you in his room? You made it clear it wasn't going to repeat itself.”

My head shattered, and heat was coming out of my cheeks. “I have no intention of discussing about it at all."

The chains sulking against her wrists made her laugh with ease. "It's possible that you allowed him to touch you because you don't really hate him after all, but I wouldn't call you a liar when you said you loathe him, so tell me how he was able to have sex with you for the second time?"

The sensation of my jaw strained. "I don't know," I said softly.

Kira raised her head. "Maybe you're in love with him, and you hate yourself for it, you wish you love Keto instead."

I chuckled in disbelief, "That's completely out of point, I'm not in love with Orion."

But the words felt shallow in my mouth, I wasn't certain about my feelings anymore. But I decided not to speak anymore. I squirmed and looked down at the floor.

The calm, almost sly eyes of Kira held my gaze, "There is no need for you to deceive me. There are individuals who have negative traits that you can love. It doesn't make you weak. It just... makes you human.".

Her words caught my heart. "Orion is poisonous," I muttered. "He's unpredictable and uncontrollable, like a storm. It's impossible to predict when he will tear things apart. His attractiveness is perilously high because of this."

Nodding in agreement, she asked. "And Keto?" She inquired.

I admitted that Keto was predictable, peaceful, and that makes him predictable. Safe."

Kira extended her chain to my knee and placed it between them. "You're in a pick-up, right?".

My voice cracked as I admitted, "I don't want to be, I try not to think about it."

For a brief moment, we were in complete silence. Kira and I exchanged a smile. “You’ll figure it out, Ravenna.”. But first… we survive this. Afterward, you can decide who your true love is."

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to believe that survival was even possible.

But for now, I just nodded and looked away, because the truth was… I didn’t know what my heart wanted. I only knew that the thought of Orion’s touch still burned in my veins, even in this cold, miserable cell.

I shifted against the cold stone wall, my thoughts still spinning from Kira’s gentle prodding about my feelings for Orion and Keto. But there was something else, something that clawed at the back of my mind, refusing to let me rest.

“Kira,” I said softly, turning to her. “Tell me about Ben. Why would he betray his own brother like this? Or want to steal the alpha position… What kind of man does that?”

Kira’s eyes darkened, and for a moment, I could see the pain behind them. “Ben… he wasn’t always like this, Ravenna. When we were younger, he was… different. Loyal. Even sweet, in his own way. He believed in the pack’s laws, like Keto does.”

My brow furrowed. “Then what changed? What happened to him?”

She let out a long, slow breath. “Orion became alpha. And Ben… he didn’t handle it well. He was always a little jealous of Orion’s strength, even as a kid. And Orion, he never showed weakness. Not once. Not even as a child. Ben wanted to be seen as strong, too. But he never measured up.”

I swallowed hard. “He told me… that he killed their mother. Because she supported Orion. He said it so casually, like it was the most natural thing in the world.”

Kira’s face went pale. “He admitted that to you?”

I nodded, my pulse quickening. “He wanted to shock me, to control me with it. But I think it’s true. I saw it in his eyes.”

Kira let out a shaky breath, her eyes darting away. “Ravenna… if that’s true, it would destroy Orion. His mother’s death… It’s what broke him. What turned him into the killing machine he is now? He’s never forgiven himself for not protecting her. If he finds out Ben did it.”

My chest tightened. “Should we hide it from him? Keep it secret?”

For a long moment, Kira was silent, her expression troubled. Then she shook her head, her jaw set. “No. Orion deserves to know the truth, no matter how much it hurts. Hiding it would only make it worse in the end.”

I let out a shaky breath. “You’re right.”

Kira looked down at her bound hands, her fingers trembling slightly. “He used to be so much like Keto, you know? Principled, calm. But after Orion became alpha, Ben disappeared. For years, no one saw him. When he came back… he was different. Colder. Cruel. Like all the kindness had been burned out of him.”

A shiver ran through me. “And now he wants to be the alpha himself.”

She met my gaze, her expression hard. “Yes. And he’ll do anything to get it. Even kill his own brother.”

The weight of her words settled down in my chest. I had always thought the boy dangerous, but to hear about the spiral of evil in his heart, how he went on to ruin the very poor souls he once loved… it made my skin crawl.

Kira leaned forward with a hushed voice. "We have to get out, Ravenna. We need to warn Orion. If Ben really killed their mother, there's no saying what he'll do next."

I nodded slowly, feeling that spark of determination reignite within me. Trapped in this cell, I was not going to stay here forever. I would find freedom.

I glanced sideways at Kira and smiled faintly with gratitude. "Thank you," I muttered in a low voice. "For...everything. For helping me keep my secret, even from Orion."

She shrugged. "Well, I figured it was better that way. Safer. At least for a while."

I nodded, the weight of those words deep in my chest. She was right. My secret was far too dangerous to share, too tangled in the past, and too wrapped in the fear of what I might become. Orion had enough to deal with. Kira's loyalty meant the world to me, and I hoped that she knew that.

Heavy footsteps echoed through the corridor outside the cell, my heart tightening. The door creaked open, and two guards lined in. One had a tray of food in his hand while looking about with a dismissive air. "Ben says you should eat," he grunted, setting it down in front of us.

My eyes locked with those of the gaoler, and something primal stirred in my chest. I didn't trust him, didn't trust his smirk as he set down the plates. I could feel the power humming just beneath my skin, sharp and ready.

The gaoler began to turn, but I had moved before even the thought had formed. My claws burst forth, drawing from within in an elegant arc, slicing through his throat. Blood sprayed forth while his hands went to his neck, his eyes widening in shock as he gurgled and choked.

"Ravenna!" Kira's voice was urgent. "The heart goes for the heart before he heals!"

I did not hesitate. My claws glowed with predatory heat as I reached out and slammed my hand down on his chest. I could feel his ribs crack under my strength as my fingers clutched around something hot and pulsing. I ripped it free: his heart with one terrible tug.

The guard lurched forward, limp as if his body were a puppet whose strings had been cut. His empty eyes glazed over, and he fell backward, blood oozing from the wound, staining the stone floor beneath him.

I gazed at my hand, the heart still warm there. My breath came in ragged gasps, half-hysterical agony mixed with half relief clawing at my insides. "I thought... I thought they injected us with mistletoe," my voice trembling. "I thought... it was supposed to stop our powers."

Kira's eyes flicked to mine, her expression calm. "You're an alpha, Ravenna. Alphas don't react to things the way others do. Mistletoe can weaken you, sure, but it can't completely stop what you are."

I dropped the heart to the floor and took a shaky breath. The weight of what I'd just done hit me like a wave. But there was no time to dwell on it.

"What now?" I asked, turning to Kira, my claws still slick with blood.

She gave me a small, fierce smile. "Now? We escape. We kill anyone who stands in our way. And we find Orion."

I nodded, my resolve hardening. Whatever waited for us outside this cell, I wasn't going to cower anymore. My power was mine. My life was mine. And I'd tear through every last one of Ben's guards if it meant I could find freedom—and maybe, just maybe, find some sliver of redemption for the monster I was becoming.

"Let's go," I said, my voice steady now. I stepped over the guard's body, my senses sharp and alive. Kira fell in beside me, her own strength radiating in the narrow cell.

Chapter 54

Lyra's POV

We walked through the doorway into a corridor that was lit with lamps that looked like we were in the 60s.

My werewolf senses were alive, but I still couldn't feel my wolf like I used to anymore, but I could hear sounds from a distance and see in the dark.

I shot Kira a glance as she walked beside me with her shoulders squared.

Her lips were dry, a clear sign of dehydration. And the mistletoe in her system prevented her powers from working in any way.

“Are you okay?” I whispered, my voice hoarse.

“I’m fine, Raven," she said, “Just because I don't have my powers doesn't mean I can't fight or kill if I have to."

"You're a healer," I responded, though my eyes were fixed on the path ahead in the cave. "Healers aren't trained to kill or fight."

"Not in Orion's pack," she insisted, "Orion always insists everyone knows how to fight. But I get your point, so yes, I'm not a killing machine."

She stopped, panting, hardly able to hold herself up by pressing her fists on the wall.

"Kira!" I said frustratedly. "We have to keep moving. Should I carry you?"

She immediately gave me the index finger: "No, I'll walk myself; just let me have a minute to breathe."

Soon, we resumed our pace until we took a corner and bumped into another guard.

I froze, Kira stopped dead in her tracks.

The guard's eyes were fixed on my blood-stained hands before returning them to my face.

"Stay back!" he shouted, but I didn't let him finish. I lunged towards him at an unnatural speed, catching him by the throat.

I slit it before he even had the chance to fight back.

He fell to the ground unconscious, with his blood spilling onto the ground.

Kira crouched down beside his body, took his silver knife from him, and stabbed him in the heart.

"When dealing with werewolves," she said, "always aim for the heart, don't presume they're dead until the heart is punctured or removed."

Then she shot me a sly smile, "But you're getting good at killing."

Was she right? I didn't know, I have never killed as Lyra, and up until today, I haven't killed as Ravenna either, but none of the killings felt natural.

A tremor coursed through my hand, while my stomach was knotted with guilt and horror.

"Let's keep going. I can feel a slight change in the air; we are nearly at the mouth of the cave."

The faintest murmurs came to my ear: guards engaged in half-whispered conversations below; intermittent crashes of keys; and at times, the groan of boots on rock.

Then we saw an iron door at the end of the straight hallway in the cave.

"They're guards behind those doors," I whispered, "I can hear their heartbeats. I'll lead the way."

She nodded her head in agreement, "I'll take the doors, while you deal with the guards."

Slowly, she opened the door, and I peeped to see four guards seated on wooden chairs in a circle, playing cards.

They didn't notice us, they were engrossed in their game, with laughter.

I turned to face Kira, and her gaze met mine. "There are four of them," I muttered. “They're not expecting a fight."

A grim expression was spoken by her, smiling. “Then let’s give them one," she said, her eyes narrowing.

I walked into the room, my steps fast but quiet.

One of the guards saw me, his eyes widening in surprise as he tried to get up from his seat.

Instincts took over, and I found myself slitting his throat with my claws.

Seeing this, the remaining three jerked from their seats, but I was faster, very fast.

I caught one, my claws digging deep into his chest for his heart while my eyes caught the remaining two scrambling for their guns.

Kira stabbed one in the chest, and I found myself leaping into the air to the last one who had picked up his gun and was about to shoot.

I held his neck and lifted him mid-air while Kira finished him up with the knife.

My heart was pounding hard in my chest as I released his dead body to the ground.

Kira collapsed to the ground, her strength failing.

I strode across the space between us and held her, my eyes darting around the room for water.

"Water," she whispered, "I need water."

My eyes settled on a bottle of water on the floor beside one of the dead men.

"Found one," I said, my tone urgent as I crawled to the body and picked up the water.

Opening it, I placed the bottle to Kira's mouth and she drank from it.

"Thank you," she said as she gulped the water.

"We can rest a bit and resume after you've regained some strength," I suggested as I covered the bottle of water.

"It's too dangerous," she responded, "You should leave me behind, find Orion, and he'll come back for me."

I nodded my head in disagreement, "I'm not leaving you behind, Kira."

"It's better if one of us escapes than if both of us get caught," she protested, "I'm slowing you down, Ravenna. Leave me behind."

"He's going to kill you, Kira," I pressed, "We have to leave together, we have to try."

"My death wouldn't be for nothing," she said, "I'd die peacefully knowing you're safe."

I blinked as I fought back tears that were welling up in my eyes.

"No," I said, nodding, "We either leave together or die together. No one is leaving anyone behind."

"Alright, Alpha Raven," she replied, a faint smile spreading across her lips, "Let's go die together then."

I lifted her up and placed her hand over my shoulder for support as we strode through the cave.

I could tell we were close, I could feel the cold air from the trees as we reached the entrance of the cave.

We got to the entrance, surprisingly, the door was slightly open.

But when I pushed it open widely, I swallowed hard.

Ben was standing at the entrance with a gun in his hand.

A slow smile curved his lips as his eyes sparkled in the darkness.

“Going somewhere?” he asked, his tone serious.

Chapter 55

Lyra's POV

I clenched my fists beside my body in anger.

There was something about Ben that I still don't understand; he has no smell.

I can always smell Orion's presence, Keto, Kira, and other werewolves, but Ben was different; it was as if he knew how to mask his scent.

"I knew you weren't going to last long in the cell before finding your way out," he said, "You are resilient just like Orion."

"I'm nothing like him," I said with my teeth clenched.

Ben tilted his head with a nearly sympathetic expression, "Oh, but you have the same Alpha fire, you just don't see it yet."

"Get out of our way, Ben, or I will cut your throat," Kira's voice cut in.

Ben let out a small laugh as his gaze darted to her, "Kira, you are unable to stand up straight. You're still poisoned. And Ravenna might be an alpha, but that doesn't mean she can beat me in a fair fight."

"I've beaten you once before, and you ran away like a terrified squirrel," I blurted out, "I'd make you die this time around."

Ben's smile faded. I witnessed a raw and hazardous flickering across his face as his eyes darkened in anger.

“Alpha," he softly stated, "Let's see what you can do."

As he came forward, I lunged towards him.

The combat was fast-paced and violent. Ben swung, waving his arms in swift motions, like a shadow.

My claws managed to rip his clothes apart, drawing some incisions on his chest.

His strength was unparalleled, surpassing even the strength he had the last time we fought. But I was stronger too.

I grasped his arm, sensing the bone inside cracking under my grip.

He winced as pain flared up in him, he twisted free from me, and slammed his fist into my jaw.

I stumbled back and detected blood in my mouth, but I didn't give up. I wiggled my way back and crashed into his side.

He howled but didn't drop. Then he raised his other hand with his claws on my ribcage.

The pain was intense, but it only served to boost my energy. My jaw dropped, and I slammed him against the cave entrance.

I made another run, but he didn't manage to escape quickly. He fell, and I smashed his throat with my teeth, then he let out a gurgle.

With his blood gushing from his throat, I stood over him, with a dull breath.

Kira walked up close to where I was, her eyes widening, "He overestimated his strength," she whispered, "But until we find our way out of here, it's not over yet."

I kept my gaze on Ben's lifeless body, and for a moment, I felt satisfaction instead of the usual guilt that plagues me after a kill.

"Yeah, you're right. We must keep moving forward," I said with a flat voice.

Kira nodded her head as she placed her hand on my shoulder.

We stepped out into the night, the dense forest covering the moon from sight.

"Have any idea where we are?" I asked as we walked through the bush path.

"I can't say for sure," Kira replied, her voice weak, "But from the look of things, I'd say witches once lived here. I could feel the energy of witchcraft in that cave."

"Witches?" I asked, "I don't think I have ever met one."

Kira stopped, then turned to face me, "Yes, you have," she said, "You have even lived with one all your life, or should I say Ravenna had lived with one all her life."

I held her gaze for a while, still not understanding the message.

"Your stepmom, Ruth," she stated, "She's a witch, in fact a powerful witch, and I think your life will be in grave danger as soon as she hears about your new alpha status."

I swallowed a lump, fear washing over me.

From the stories, if there's something I remember vividly, it's the power of witches, even over alphas.

I shook my head to push the thought aside.

"I'd worry about my stepmom later," I said, "Right now, we need to focus on leaving this cursed forest."

Kira was about to say something when I heard a noise behind me. She heard it too.

We both exchanged uneasy glances until I decided to turn my head to see what was responsible.

My eyes widened in fear at the sight that I saw.

It was Ben, and before I could react or say a word, his punch slammed into my face.

I sprained my body and hit the ground, with my breath trapped in my throat.

He shouldn't be alive. I had killed him earlier, but then it occurred to me that I didn't remove his heart. He healed.

In a swift and unsettling move, he grabbed Kira by the throat and lifted her off the ground as if she were light.

Due to the pressure, Kira's hands pressed against his arm, causing her face to turn red. Ben's gaze flickered before my eyes, a bloody expression emanating from his face.

His raspy voice made me feel a chill down my spine. "Do you really think you can kill me so easily?" He taunted.

As I tried to attack back, but he shoved his thumb even more forcefully towards Kira's throat and made her gag.

"Ravenna," he said, "Don't even think about it, just don't do it or I'll crush her windpipe. Do you prefer to witness her death in front of you?

My heart pounded hard within my chest, my mind racing with how to stop him and save Kira.

"If anything happens to her, I swear on the gods' names I'm going to kill you," I said, my voice loud, "Let her go."

Ben let out a cruel laugh as Kira kicked hard to be free from his grip. "If you don't want her death to be on you, then you'll listen to me and do exactly as I say."

Her eyes were wide open when she looked back at me.

They were weeping, imploring eyes, as the color drained from her cheeks.

"Let us see how far you will go to rescue your friend," his voice went on. "If you accept death and give up your powers, then I would let her live, but if you do manage to save yourself, then know this: I would kill her immediately."

I swallowed hard and thought about my options. But either way, I was not going to let Kira die.

Chapter 56

Lyra's POV

Kira's voice cut through the haze in my head, "Don't believe him, Ravenna. Don't you dare."

I didn't listen to her, "I'll do anything you want," I surrendered, "Just don't kill her."

Kira's gaze landed on me, “Ravenna-”

"I'm sorry, Kira," I whispered, "I can't let him kill you because of me."

A triumphant and evil smile spread across his face.

Then he nodded his head towards the direction of the cave behind him, "Start by going back to the cave," he ordered, "Move your ass."

I complied, my feet trembling as I advanced.

Ben still had his claws close to her throat, even as they followed behind me.

My heart raced as I led the way into the cave.

I still felt my wolf stirring inside me, but I didn't dare use it, not while Kira's life was hanging in the balance.

I walked slowly, through the hallway until Ben's voice cut through, "Take right," he instructed.

I took right, and it led to a place that looked like a room.

My eyes quickly scanned the room for any weapon that I could hide, use later, but there was none. Just plants, jugs and animal skin.

As soon as Ben entered the space, he nodded toward the weeds I saw on the floor.

"Eat it," he ordered.

I narrowed my eyes at the cluster of dark green leaves he pointed out, "What is it?" I asked, though I could tell. My wolf signalled within that it was something foul.

Kira nodded her head dismissively, her eyes widening.

She shook her head and whispered, "Mistletoe, Ravenna, don't eat it. It'll strip your power."

Ben tightened his grip on her neck, and it made Kira bleed.

"Eat," he ordered again, with no option for dispute.

My gut was roiling as I brought it and put it to my lips, the odor filling my senses like ammonia.

I put the leaves into my mouth and chewed and swallowed. It had the same taste as it smell, bitter.

"Keep eating," he ordered, and I did as I put more of it into my mouth.

My body reacted to it, and I could feel my wolf fall back as I drank.

"That's enough," he growled finally, "Now, back to your cell."

I led him in silence, my mind spinning from the mistletoe.

When we reached the cell, Ben kicked the door open and pushed me in. Kira followed, her hand touching mine.

The door slammed shut behind us, and I fell to my knees.

Kira collapsed next to me, her breathing ragged.

"You shouldn't have done that," she gasped, her fingers wrapping around mine. "You didn't have to."

"I couldn't let him hurt you," I said. My voice was trembling, my throat sore. "I couldn't."

She let out a sigh and rested her forehead against mine. "Thank you," she whispered. "For not letting him kill me."

I clung to her, relief engulfing me in a wave.

But our peaceful moment didn't last.

Ben's voice came through the bars, "Don't get too comfortable," he said. “I have no reason to kill the healer yet. But you, Ravenna, you’re going to die. Once I have your power, I’ll disappear for a while. Lay low. And when Orion least expects it, I’ll kill him too.”

His words sent a chill down my spine, and I raised my gaze to meet his eyes, “You’ll never win,” I said, my voice defiant, “Orion will find me. And he’ll kill you first.”

“We’ll see," he replied, smiling.

He turned and stalked away.

I tightened my arms around Kira and took a deep breath.

My body felt weak, my power nearly gone.

Then he came back to the cell, this time with food.

He opened the prison door and tossed it inside, locking the iron door back.

Then his phone started ringing in his pocket.

He took a few steps away from the cell and answered the call.

Even with the mistletoe in my system, I could still hear his conversations.

Ben's response to the call was a clipped question, "Yes, boss?".

Then a male voice answered, "Is everything under control?".

"Yes," Ben answered.

The man continued, "I don't want any mistakes. The faster we get rid of the alpha, the quicker we can cover our tracks."

"I have the alpha," Ben replied, his voice low.

"Good. I'm on my way," he said and hung up.

I walked close to the bars, my hands wrapped around it, "So that's what you're after all, Ben. An errand boy, doing someone else's dirty work."

Ben's gaze caught mine, his anger brewing.

With a soft voice, Kira smiled beside me and said, "It must be tough, living in the shadow of another man. Answering to orders. You can never be an alpha, Ben."

I noticed the way his jaw clenched, he sniffed as though trying to keep his calm.

"Don't you ever get tired of it?" I pressed; my voice filled with disdain. “Simply a lapdog or an underdog. Never the master.”

Ben couldn't stop the snarl that escaped his mouth. "You guys have no idea what you're talking about."

I lowered my head and let out a faint smile, "You're nothing more than a puppet, Ben. A discarded card in someone else's game."

He widened his eyes and moved towards the bars, clawing at the iron. "Enough."

Kira leaned forward, "Your mom was right when she picked Orion as the alpha. She knew that you would never be anything other than a tool for someone else."

The force of his hand against the bars caused them to shudder. "I said enough," he exclaimed, his voice echoing through the dark tunnel.

I remained unfazed. "You can make threats against us, but once your master is done with you, you'll no longer be useful to him; he'll kill you."

He held my gaze for a while before letting out a small smile, "If I were you, I wouldn't be worried about my own death. Your death is this midnight, Ravenna. Think about that."

I swallowed a lump as a shiver went through my spine.

Chapter 57

Lyra's POV

Ben’s footsteps faded, and his words stuck in my head. “Your death will be tonight.”

I pressed my back against the bars, my body shaking.

“Kira,” I said, my voice low. “What if Orion doesn't get to us? What if we don't make it?”

She nodded, her eyes dark. “Don't lose hope, Ravenna. Until it's over, don't act like it's over. You hear me?"

“Yes, I hear you,” I whispered. “But we have to try and come up with plan B, in case Orion doesn't show up. I don't have the kind of faith you have in him, Kira.”

Kira got up from the bench. "I don't expect you to, you haven't seen what Orion is capable of doing, but I'm positive you'd see that tonight."

"So we just wait for him?" I asked, my voice weak.

She nodded her head, "Yes, we wait. We have tried everything we could until there's nothing more we can do. Now we wait."

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my rapid heartbeat.

Time passed slowly, and each second that passed added to the unease in my heart.

I counted the guard’s steps, the changing of shifts. Every thirty minutes. My heart beat faster with every change.

Suddenly, the corridor lit up with flickering torchlight.

Ben was back, flanked by two hooded figures. He carried a black chest, set it on a stone pedestal.

My stomach twisted in fear.

He opened it, and I saw blades, black steel with red runes, a brazier glowing hot, and an old scroll.

Kira gasped in horror when she saw it, as though she knew what it was used for.

Ben smiled. “This is how it ends. This dagger,” he said, holding it up, “will bind your wolf, Ravenna, to whoever stabs you with it. Don't think too far about who that person will be, it'll be me, I'll carry your power. And then, I’ll be unstoppable.”

He let the dagger cool, then sheathed it. “You’re mine now.”

I forced a shaky breath, “I don't think your master is going to agree with you, Ben. I'm sure he wants my power as much as you do."

His eyes flickered, just for a second. “Don’t be foolish,” he snapped.

“I heard your call,” I said. “He’s coming. You’re just following orders.”

“Shut up,” he said, gripping the dagger tighter.

“You’re a coward,” I said, my voice rising, “Even as the brother of a powerful Alpha, you're still weak, weaker than my left foot."

He slammed his fist on his chest.

The two hooded figures grabbed my arms, yanking me forward.

Kira tried to help, but they shoved her back.

Ben's voice was low. "Maybe I won't kill you first, you know. Since you like to run your mouth. I'd kill Kira first instead, make you watch as she dies."

I swallowed hard, "Kira is not an alpha, I'm the one you want."

"You have no idea what I want," he said, his tone sober.

Then he turned to face the men, "Bring them, but start with the alpha."

They entered the cell and dragged me out.

I didn't fight, I just moved with them.

"Come back for the healer once you've dropped her," he ordered as we walked away.

They led me deep into the cave.

We walked until we reached a spot where there was a huge iron door, etched with a wolf's head.

Ben pressed a rune, and it groaned open, heat pouring out from inside.

He looked at me. "This is where it ends."

The room beyond glowed red, an altar waiting in the center.

My breath caught in my throat.

Ben shoved me forward. "Don't tell me you're scared now."

The door clanged shut behind us.

My heart pounded in my chest, and all hope of escape seemed lost at that point.

Death was inevitable.

The heavy door groaned open again, and I saw Kira stumble in.

My breath caught as she was shoved to her knees beside me.

Ben's eyes were bright, almost excited. "Ravenna," he said, his voice low, "step into the altar."

I hesitated. My feet felt glued to the stone floor, but Kira's look strengthened me.

I swallowed. My wolf was silent, watching, but I forced my feet to move.

One step, then another. The altar was cold under my bare feet, the stone slick with something dark.

Ben smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Good," he said. "Good girl."

Kira's voice cut through, "You can't take her power, Ben. Not without a fight. Not unless you have a witch to help you with your precious rituals."

Ben's smile slipped, his jaw tightening. "Shut up, Kira. You think I don't know that already."

"I'd like to take up that fight if you're up for it, Ben," I taunted, hiding the fear in my heart. "Do you think you can beat me?"

Before he could respond, the door behind us swung open again, and one of the guards stepped in, head bowed. "The boss is here," he said.

The room shifted.

Air seemed to vanish from my lungs. Even Ben stiffened, his eyes going flat and hard.

Ben's voice was a low snarl. "Cover them with a veil. Now," he ordered.

The guards moved fast. Rough hands grabbed at me, pulling a veil over my face.

The world went dark and muffled. I heard Kira protest, but the cloth muffled her voice too.

My breath came in short bursts. I tried to calm the rising panic. I couldn't see, but I could still hear. I needed that.

Ben's voice came again, "Remember. Not a word from either of you."

The air shifted, and I felt the presence of someone new as he walked into the room.

The man spoke up, his voice thick and deep.
"I see you have already prepared the alpha for his death."

Ben's voice was respectful, "Yes, boss."

The man walked closer, I couldn't see him. His scent was hidden, too, just like Ben's.

"This alpha isn't Orion," the man snapped. "We agreed it had to be Orion." His voice was calm, but there was anger behind it.

"Sorry, boss," Ben said quickly. "Orion is hard to catch. But this lady, she's his mate. She'd make a fine sacrifice, too."

"That wasn't our agreement, Ben," the man said. "You said you'd get me Orion if I gave you the men. I want Orion's head, not these women."

"I'm sorry, boss, forgive me," Ben pleaded. "Once I take her powers, it'll give me the strength to go head-to-head with Orion."

The man paused, then said, “Good. Because if you don’t deliver, I’ll kill you. You have twenty-four hours to get me Orion’s head.”

I could hear his footsteps retreating. My breath was ragged behind the veil. Kira’s body pressed closer to mine, her presence a small comfort.

My heart raced. I could barely breathe. Kira’s fingers found mine, squeezing tight.

Ben’s voice snapped back to his men, “You heard the boss. Give me the dagger, let’s be done with this.”

I heard the sound of a blade being unsheathed, the scrap of metal against leather. My pulse pounded in my head.

Kira’s fingers found mine through the cloth, squeezing hard. I knew she was as terrified as I was.

Chapter 58

Keto's POV

The minute Orion said there was another alpha in the police station, I knew he felt threatened.

His eyes went sharp, cold, like he was ready to tear apart whoever it was. That look always made me alert because Orion doesn't get rattled easily.

“He smells like an alpha I killed in the past,” he said in that clipped tone of his.

I frowned. “You want me to look into it?”

He shook his head. “No. I’ll wait in the reception. You go with Kate. Check the CCTVs, and find out if there’s anything suspicious that would give us any leads on Ravenna. I want this done fast, Keto.”

“Got it, boss," I said.

He didn’t even look back as he turned and walked off, already dismissing me.

Typical Orion. Always in control, or at least pretending to be. I clenched my jaw and followed Kate.

She was already moving, her badge out, weaving through the crowded hallway.

She greeted a few officers, her face calm but determined. I caught how some of them smiled at her, glad to see her back. She used to be one of them, a damn good cop. Still felt weird seeing her in this place again.

Kate’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts. “We’ll need to see the chief before we can touch those cameras,” she said, her tone brisk.

“Understood.” I didn’t argue. No point.

We reached the office at the end of the hallway. The door was half open, the polished brass nameplate catching the light.

She was about to push it open when I stopped her, hand on her arm.

“Kate,” I said quietly. She turned to look at me, brows raised. “I’m sorry.”

She frowned. “For what?”

“For… for ruining your career,” I said, the words tasting bitter in my mouth. “You were good at this. You belonged here. And I messed that up.”

Her eyes softened a little, though her shoulders stayed stiff. “There’s nothing to be sorry for, Keto,” she said. “You’re returning me to it. Don’t you see?”

“Orion won’t let that happen,” I said, shaking my head.

She let out a small breath. “He already said it himself, Keto. He told me I’d get this chance.”

That surprised me. Orion was usually a control freak, but maybe he saw something in her, too.

Before I could say more, she gave me a small smile and turned to the door.

We pushed it open and entered the office.

The chief of police was well endowed with mustaches and had that berry steak-shape to his belly.

He looked sharp in a well-worn white shirt that was just a size too small for him, while his battered hat must have meant world authority to him.

He stood up, eye crinkles spreading across his face when he saw Kate. "Well, it is Officer Kate, isn't it? It's a pleasure having you at my station again."

Kate smiled and shook his hand. "Chief Douglas."

He grasped it in a way that made him look like he would break her wrist, pumping it vigorously. "And who is this fine young gentleman with you?" He looked at me, eyes narrowing. "Your new boyfriend?"

Kate's cheeks flushed a bit. "No, sir. This is Keto. He's... a consultant. He's here to help me with something."

"Consultant," he repeated, giving me a once-over. "Not police, huh? Hmmm." He let go of her hand and sat back down heavily. "What do you need from me, Kate?"

"We'd like to access the CCTVs," she said, her voice professional again. "We're trying to find someone. Possibly dangerous."

He leaned back in his chair, eyeing me. "And this 'consultant' of yours? You know I don't like civilians poking around in my station's footage."

Kate didn't flinch. "I understand, sir. But this is important. It's related to the case I'm working on with Orion."

Douglas' face shifted when she mentioned Orion's name. Respect, or maybe fear. Orion had that effect on people.

He grunted. "Alright. I trust you, Kate. Just don't let this... Keto fella break anything, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir," she said.

He waved us off, and Kate gave him a tight smile before turning and motioning for me to follow her out of the office.

As we walked down the hall, she let out a small laugh. “Your new boyfriend? Really?”

I rolled my eyes. “Old men and their jokes.”

She grinned. “You handled it well.”

We reached the surveillance room, and she used her badge to get us in.

Inside, there was a young officer manning the monitors. He glanced up as we entered.

“Officer Kate,” he said with a nod.

“Officer Dunn,” she greeted. “I need access to the last 48 hours of footage. Any activity near the forests, cars that pulled in and out. I want everything.”

Dunn didn’t question it. He started pulling up the feeds. Kate leaned over his shoulder, eyes scanning the screens.

I stood back, watching the footage flicker by. My mind was racing. Orion was out there, probably pacing like a caged wolf, and here I was, stuck in a small room with flickering images.

Kate was focused, her eyes sharp. She turned to me. “See anything familiar?”

I stepped closer, squinting at the grainy black-and-white footage. Faces came and went, uniforms, civilians. None of them meant anything to me.

“Wait,” Kate said, pointing. “Rewind that a bit.”

Dunn did, and a face flickered on the screen.

A man in a plain hoodie, his hood up, moving with a kind of predatory grace. I didn't recognize him, but something in the way he moved, the way he paused for a second at the camera, like he knew exactly where it was, made the hair on my neck stand up.

"Who's that?" I asked.

Kate shook her head. "Not sure. But he's been here before. I've seen him around."

I frowned. "He doesn't look like a cop."

"He's not," she said quietly. "But the dude you were after that day at the bridge? Both of them were together in the cell, arrested for burglary. Don't you think that's connected to Ben?"

Ben. The name was like a slap. I clenched my fists.

"Orion's going to want to see this," I said.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Let's get this to him."

We downloaded the footage, and I followed Kate back out to the reception.

Orion was there, leaning against the front desk, arms crossed, his face set in stone. He didn't look up as we approached.

"Orion," Kate said.

He looked up, his eyes flicking to the flash drive in her hand. "You found something?"

She handed it to him. "A man we think might be working with Ben or knows where he is."

Orion took the drive, his fingers tightening around it. "Good work."

"Where was his last scene?" Orion asked, his tone laced with something like controlled anger.

Kate shot me a glance before shifting it back to Orion with a smile, "He was last seen entering the forest with a truck."

Orion then turned to face me, "I want him found, and do not kill him, just bring him to me alive."

"Yes, boss," I replied.

I couldn't shake off the feeling that we'd find Ravenna's whereabouts soon, and just as Orion killed Nikki to save her, he would kill his brother, Ben, too, to save Ravenna.

Chapter 59

Keto's POV

“You’re not taking Kate with you,” Orion said firmly as Kate tried following me.

Kate’s eyes narrowed. “No way. I’m going with him, I want to help," she protested, her hands on her waist.

“You’re not,” Orion said again, his tone leaving no room for argument.

I stepped in. “Kate, it’s better if you stay.”

She shot me a glare. “Don’t start too. I’m not staying behind,” she insisted, "I'm a police officer, I can handle it."

Orion ran a hand through his hair, his patience thinning. “Kate, you’re not going, end of discussion. You can't control your wolf yet, and if trouble begins, you'd likely get killed."

"Keto won't be going alone, I’ll send five of my men with him. That’s all," he added.

Kate’s shoulders slumped, but her eyes were defiant. “Fine,” she said quietly.

I looked at her, feeling that pull in my chest. “I’ll be okay,” I told her. “I'll keep you posted.”

“Just go, please,” she whispered.

I gave her a small nod, then turned and walked out of the station.

It was almost midnight, and the air was very cold. I could tell that winter was coming.

I got in my car, it was an old black SUV. My hands gripped the wheel as I pulled out of the station’s parking lot.

The streets were quiet, the city lights fading in the rearview mirror as I drove.

At least I was glad about one thing. Orion wanted Ravenna to be found.

Given the level of hatred he poised to have towards her, I felt he wouldn't care if she died or lived.

And that would have been difficult for me to cope with because I wanted to save Ravenna, even if it means killing Orion's brother, who I believe should be stronger than me in a one-on-one combat.

The drive wasn’t a long one, but every second felt like an hour.

I kept glancing at the clock, watching the minutes crawl by. The road narrowed, trees pressing close on either side. I turned off the headlights, creeping forward until I spotted a clearing.

Five men stood there close to the trees, already waiting. They looked up when I pulled in and stepped out. The man in front had a thick beard.

“You Keto?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah.” Surprised he didn't know what I looked like.

Sometimes I wonder how big Orion's pack actually is, because I don't know all the dude's in the pack.

“Orion said you’d be coming. We’re splitting up to cover more ground," he suggested, “Although he also said you’d be leading this search, Keto. So what’s the plan?”

I scanned the forest's edge. "We split up into pairs like you suggested. Cover as much ground as possible. He's fast, so move like you're hunting a wolf, not a man. Stay in contact."

He jerked his head toward the trees. "We'll circle back here in an hour. You're going in alone?"

"I'll be faster that way," I replied as I scanned the area.

The man cracked a smile. "Suit yourself."

The others moved to check their gear, flashlights clicking on, knives sliding into sheaths.

I didn't wait around. I stepped into the forest, the cold air wrapping around me like a second skin.

My boots sank into the damp earth, leaves whispering underfoot. I paused, glancing back.

The men were already fanning out, disappearing into the darkness.

The search was slow, methodical.

I found signs, small, but enough to keep me on his trail. A faint scent of sweat and cigarette smoke. He was close.

My earpiece crackles. "Keto, this is Mako. We found fresh tracks heading north."

"Copy that," I said. "Keep going. Don't engage if you spot him, call it in first."

In one quick movement, I darted across the path. There was no sound to my boots crossing the forest floor; my breath was steady and calm.

The joy of the hunt coursed through me.

There was some movement I could make out on the front, a grey shadow between trees. My heart pounded ever harder. Slowly, quietly, I came close.

He stood there as if someone was to meet up with him right then, equally afraid he might get caught. I would have never thought it would be this easy to find him, yet I rejoiced that I did.

"Hey!" I roared, deep and authoritative.

The stranger slowly turned around, our eyes locking for a moment before he ran deeper into the woods.

I tore after him, my legs pumping fast, and the woods turned into a blur about me.

He might have been fast, but I was faster.

I caught up to him as if I could reach out and touch his shoulder, but he spun around and vanished in a puff of smoke.

He gave me a backward glance, a faint smile playing on his lips.

"Who the devil are you?" I snarled almost to myself as I surged forward.

He said not a word, running downhill, disappearing into a ravine unseen.

I went after, sliding down, boots scratching at the earth.

He reappeared at a ledge, and I dashed to his heels.

"Stop!" I called after him, but he only laughed, his tones low, merry.

He disappeared behind a tree, and when I rounded the base, there was no one.

I went down to the ground, scanning the area, half-gasping.

Then I spotted a tunnel entrance like a cave, half-hidden by moss and roots. I knew he'd gone in.

"Mako, I found a tunnel entrance," I said into my earpiece. "I'm going in."

"Copy that. We're on our way," came the crackled reply.

I drew my knife, the cold steel was a small comfort in the darkness.

With a final breath, I stepped into the tunnel.

Instead of one heartbeat, I heard several heartbeats.

That made me confused, I saw one person run into the tunnel. When did the others get in?

Perhaps they had been in here before the chase.

I thought of waiting until Mako and his men arrived so we could go in together.

That would give me a better chance if it turned out I was outnumbered.

But my curiosity got the best of me, and I kept walking deeper into the cave until I caught a faint smell of someone.

I stopped dead in my tracks, then the familiar smell became two instead of one person.

It was the smell of Ravenna and Kira.

My eyes widened in excitement as I picked up my phone to call Orion.

He picked up on the first ring, "Found him?"

"Not exactly," I said, my voice low, "But I found Ravenna and Kira, they're in a cave. I'm sending you the location right now."

I could hear Orion chuckling in excitement over the phone.

"Do not engage, hide in the shadows, and watch the cave until I arrive," he ordered.

Then in a low, deadly tone, he added, "I'm going to kill every one of them in that cave; there would be no mercy."

Chapter 60

Lyra's POV

"Now, remove the veils from their faces and place the alpha's head over the stone of sacrifice," he ordered, his tone laced with malice.

My heart pounded really hard in my chest, it felt like it was going to stop before they got to kill me.

I couldn't fight back the tears anymore as the thoughts of how I had escaped death in the past flashed through my mind.

First as Lyra, then at the fight with Nikki, the gun to my head at her burial, and the first time Ben tried killing me himself.

Ben's men took the veils from our faces, dragged me to a large stone, and forced me to kneel before it.

"I'm in a bit of a dilemma ladies," Ben taunted, "I don't know who to kill first."

Her eyes turned to me, glassy with tears, "You should have escaped when you had the chance," stammered Kira, "Now he's going to kill one of us and the other will just have to watch."

I swallowed heavily, though there never was a moment where I could regret choosing to stay behind with Kira.

"Never lose hope till it's over," I kept hearing her words in my mind, whispering low, "As long as we are still breathing, it can't be over yet."

It was as if those few words had instilled a generous force of vim into her, as I could see her gaze shift from fear to determination.

"So who's going to die first?" laughed Ben again as he stepped tentatively closer.

"You've promised to let her go if I do whatever it is you ask of me," I plead, wrenching my head to meet his gaze.

Ben chuckled lightly, "You're a fool, Ravenna. She was bait to bend your will to mine, I was never going to let her go. She has seen my face and she would tell Orion I was the one that killed you."

"But, if I kill both of you," he continued, "Orion still wouldn't know who was behind the attack, and I know my brother too well, he wouldn't act unless there's evidence."

Kira's voice cut in, her laughter almost made me forget we were just one minute away from death.

"You're the fool, Ben," she snapped, "If you think Orion doesn't already know you kidnapped us."

Ben scoffed, "You put too much faith in my brother, Kira. Orion is not as smart as you think he is."

"Maybe you're the one that's not as smart as you think you're," I cut in, my voice loud.

"Really?" he said, his eyes narrowing, "Let me tell you some of my plans, huh. You want to hear it?"

I didn't say a word but he took it as a cue to continue.

"You see the man that came in the other time, he's an alpha, Orion killed two of his brothers and he wants revenge, but he's too scared to attack Orion directly so I made a deal with him."

I rolled my eyes in disgust, but I knew he wasn't going to stop. Calling him a fool has just triggered him to show me how smart he was.

"Now, I'm going to kill you, get your power, then I'll kill Orion, and lastly I'd kill the man who thinks he can control me. Three powerful alphas will die by my hands, how's that for a foolish man, huh?"

"I'd rather die and get it over with than listen to your delusional speech, big fool," Kira cut in, sighing in anger.

I let out a small laugh, "Are you done babbling Ben?" I asked, although it was more of a mockery than a question.

He clenched his jaws, his eyes narrowing as he paced to and fro.

"Perhaps you had expected us to beg for our lives, or try to worship you, right?" I asked, "Too bad, even with a dagger you still smell like a coward."

"You don't even deserve to be called Orion's brother," Kira added, but he walked close to her and gave her a hard slap on the cheek.

"Shut the fuck up," he barked, and I swallowed hard.

"Place her fucking head on the fucking stone," he shouted, pointing at the man beside me with his dagger.

The man didn't say a word, he turned and moved to push my head on the stone.

Just then, my nose caught a familiar scent.

It was weak but I recognized it.

Ben would have perceived it too but he probably didn't know who smells like that, he would have thought it was one of his men.

A small smile spread across my lips as my head touched the stone.

"What's funny?" the man in the hood holding my head asked.

"There's someone at the door," I whispered, but he didn't hear me.

He leaned in closer, "What did you say?"

"I said, there's someone at the door," I repeated, a soft chuckle bubbled through my throat.

His eyes widened in fear, he understood the message. He was smart.

He raised his head to inform Ben about the door but the door opened before he could open his mouth to speak.

And the next thing that followed was a loud gunshot that rang through the room.

Blood splashed on my face, and without turning to look.

I knew Kate was the one holding the gun, and she shot the man in the hood.

I don't know what kind of gun she used but it blew up his head like an egg falling to the ground.

Ben shouted in fear, and I could hear Kate cocking the gun, to shoot him next.

She released several bullets, and the whole place went quiet again.

When I raised my head to look, I saw dead bodies on the ground, but Ben wasn't among them.

"He escaped," Kate's voice cut in as she approached Kira to untie her.

"You came alone?" I asked, as she untie Kira.

"How did you find us?" Kira asked too, her tone urgent.

Kate walked up to me, "No, I didn't come alone," she said, "And it wasn't me that found you."

I stood up as she untied me.

"You shouldn't have come, Kate. You're not strong enough yet," Kira interrupted, "Ben has more men, and it is going to be one hell of a fight before we are able to leave."

Kate smirked at Kira, "We do not underestimate our enemies, ma'am. And Orion came prepared."

My heart leaped the minute she mentioned Orion.

"Orion is here?" I found myself asking.

Kira and I exchanged a knowing look.

"Yes," she answered, "Orion is here, and he came in his beast mode."

Chapter 61

Lyra's POV

Kate dropped a bag on the ground, "Pick your weapons ladies," she said, "Let's blow some motherfuckers brains off."

I crouched, unzipping the bag to see guns, different types.

Kira chuckled, "We don't know how to use that," she said, her eyes darting to the entrance.

"Alright then," Kate answered, "Would you rather use your claw skills to fight?"

I picked two shotguns, just like the one Kate was holding. I figured a shot from any of these would take any werewolf a lot of time to recover from, that's if it doesn't hit their heads or hearts.

Kira collected one from me and Kate showed us how to use it.

We stepped out of the room and heard gunshots coming from outside the cave.

Then I heard a snarl behind us, without thinking, I turned and fired the gun at the werewolf standing before us.

It hit his left arm and it winced in pain, Kate took the next shot and this time around, the bullet went straight to the head.

Shattering his head as he fell to the ground dead.

"Killing monsters is so much fun than hunting criminals," Kate said, smirking.

"You're barely 24 hours in as a werewolf yet you're already piling up dead bodies, Kate," Kira said, unimpressed, "Now I see why Orion wanted you in his pack, killing is going to be a hobby for you, just like Orion."

Kate placed the gun on her shoulder as we resumed our pace, "I'd take that as a compliment," she said, her tone playful.

I nodded my head as relief washed over me.

We live today to die another day. Once again, I had escaped death.

"How did you guys know where Ben was keeping us?" I asked as we approached the entrance of the cave.

"CCTV cameras, and then Keto followed that lead until he discovered the cave," she said, cocking her gun.

"Keto's here?" I asked as my eyes took in dead bodies at the entrance of the cave, their blood pooling underneath them.

"You did this?" Kira asked, pointing at the dead werewolves.

Kate nodded her head dismissively, "No I didn't, Keto and Orion's men did that. Come on, let's go, follow me."

We followed her quietly as we trailed along the bush path in the forest.

"All the men at the cave are dead, why are we still hiding?" I asked as we tiptoed quietly.

"Ben is not dead, and according to Keto, he has a lot of rogues working for him, so we move quietly until we get to the truck."

"What's rogues?" I asked, the term unfamiliar in my ears.

"Rogues are packs of Omegas without an alpha," Kira cut in as climbed a small steep, "They're like mercenaries who pledge their allegiance to any one who can afford to pay for their services."

"Oooh, I see," I expressed as we approached a clearing in the forest where we saw a white truck.

I could smell Keto's presence here, I didn't even wait for Kate to say a word, I ran towards the van but instead of Keto, I saw a huge bald man with a thick beard standing by the van.

Funny how I didn't pick up his own scent, but I didn't have time to think about that.

"Who are you?" I asked, "And where's Keto?"

The thought that he could be part of Ben's men never occurred to me, and if he was, I could already feel the mistletoe effects in my system wearing off. He won't be able to fight me and Kate successfully, that's if he's not an alpha.

"You must be Ravenna, huh? The princess we have been looking for," he asked, his tone playful.

Definitely not a part of Ben's team.

I nodded my head, still patiently waiting for him to answer my question.

"I'm Mako," he said, "Orion marksman."

He had some sort of Russian accent, but the thought of Orion having a sniper around him made me wonder if he's actually as strong as he claimed to be.

Kate and Kira caught up with me, and both of them seemed to know Mako.

"Mako," Kira called, "Good to see you."

"Good to see you too, healer. I'm glad you're both okay," then he turned to face Kate, "Good job newbie, expect a deer from me."

Kira smiled, but his playfulness vanished as though he timed it.

"Alright ladies, let's be on our way, the battle is far from over," he announced as he motioned to the driver in the truck to start the vehicle.

"Where's Keto?" I asked again, "I can pick his scent."

"He just left in his car," he answered, "You missed him."

I swallowed hard as Kira and Kate walked past me into the truck.

"The healer stays in the passenger's seat with the driver. Kate and Ravenna you stay with me on the truck," he instructed.

I didn't argue, I stepped onto the truck and gave Kate a hand as she climbed too.

The driver started the engine and soon we were on the way again.

But I noticed the headlamps weren't on.

"Werewolves can see in the dark," Mako said, as though he knew what I was thinking, "We don't need the lights."

Five minutes into the journey, his phone rang, and he picked up.

I could hear Keto's voice from the phone and knew he was the one calling.

But I didn't pay attention to their conversations.

I wanted to hear his voice in person and not through a call with someone else, especially someone I don't know.

Mako hung up the call and turned to face me, "The roads have been blocked," he announced, "This is going to be a war between werewolves."

I nodded my head, "I don't understand, Ben didn't know you guys were coming, how could he bounce back so fast?" I asked, my tone laced with unease.

"He didn't know, but he was prepared just In Case things go sideways," Mako explained.

My eyes widened at the realization of something.

"What if he knew?" I asked, "What if he planned the whole thing and set me up as bait so that Orion can come here?"

Kate nodded her head, and Mako's eyes narrowed.

"Are you saying someone told him we were coming?" Mako and Kate asked simultaneously.

I nodded my head dismissively, "No, I'm saying what if Ben had us fooled thinking I'm the target, because he knew he couldn't take my powers unless he had a witch to assist him yet he wasn't worried about that."

Kate took two steps closer, "So you're saying, Orion had always been the target, and Ben kidnapping you was just a bait to bring Orion to this place?"

Mako shook his head, his breath hitching, "That explains why the roads are blocked, we walked into a fucking trap."

I guess Ben wasn't stupid after all. He had us cornered and the thought of having his way tonight made my skin crawl.

"We're all fucked, Kate," I confessed, my tone laced with worry, "This place was a ground for witches for a reason, and all it takes is just one and none of us would leave this place alive, including Orion."

Chapter 62

Lyra's POV

"What's a witch?" Kate asked, obviously confused by the word.

"A witch is a werewolf's nightmare," Mako answered her, his tone serious.

"I didn't think werewolves have nightmares," Kate said, her voice weak, "I thought they were the apex predators."

I could see the fear in her eyes, I was afraid too, though I haven't seen a witch before but from the stories I have heard concerning them, especially the powerful ones, they can weaken an alpha with their mysterious spells.

"Now you know, newbie," Mako warned, "You don't want to fuck around with one."

Kate swallowed hard, "How about we drive back to the cave, hide out till morning," she suggested.

I liked the idea too but Mako cut in before I could speak up.

"That's a terrible idea, that cave is cursed already, there's a reason Orion didn't want to be the one to bring Ravenna and the healer out himself. Dude was suspicious, and if Ravenna is right about her words, once the original target enters the cave, he won't be able to come out."

"That's very true," Kate added, "Orion was worried that the cave might be cursed, that's why he suggested I go in. According to him, Ben doesn't know me and wouldn't be expecting me to show up."

"I must say at this point," Mako cut in, "Those two brothers are psychos, but it's a shame one of them would die tonight, and we can only hope it's not Orion."

I felt a wind of thread coursing through me like a laser beam.

The truck slowly came to a halt near a car, which I believe belongs to Keto.

I was the first to jump down as I sighted him leaning on his car. I ran towards him and jumped on his body, hugging him tight.

He hugged me too as his chest pressed into mine.

"Where have you been?" I whispered as I pulled back.

He held my hands, "Doing the alpha's business," he replied.

I didn't know when I said it, it just sort of slipped out of my mouth, "I'm an alpha now, Keto," I said, hoping to catch the surprise look on his face but I was disappointed.

He didn't look surprised, it almost felt as if he knew.

"I know, Ravenna," he said, his voice low, "And Orion knows too."

I swallowed a lump, "How?"

"Enough catching up," Mako's voice cut in, "Let's join the rest."

"Have they started tearing each other apart yet?" Mako asked, facing Keto.

Keto released his grip on my hands.

"No, not yet, they are waiting for us to attack first."

"What's stopping them?" I asked, "Where's Orion?"

Keto held my gaze for a while, "Orion is not going to fight, Ravenna," he started, "You'll be the one to lead the fight, you're alpha now. Orion orders."

I swallowed hard, my eyes widening in shock.

Mako shook his head and walked away, as though if he lingered he might be tempted to ask if Orion is afraid to lead his own pack to a fight.

Kate's gaze kept flickering between Keto and me.

She chuckled in disbelief, "You're kidding right?" she asked as Kira and the driver approached us.

Keto nodded his head, "Unfortunately, I'm not kidding."

"Kidding about what?" Kira cut in.

"Orion wants me to lead the fight? Kira," I explained, "He's putting the whole weight of the pack on me."

"That's not even the problem," Kate interrupted, "The problem is what battle experience do you have?"

Kira shot Kate a sarcastic glance, "Technically, she doesn't need to have any battle experience to lead the fight, And may I remind you, that she's Ravenna, not some weak lady. She's the queen of one on one combat. Even as an omega, she was a force, now that she's an alpha, what do you think would be the fate of any one who dares to challenge her?"

I let out a small laugh. I wasn't expecting Kira to defend me, but worse that the defense was the fact that she knew I wasn't Ravenna. I was Lyra trapped in Ravenna's body and yet again I have to live up to Ravenna's past as a warrior.

"Ben made me drink mistletoe," I blurted out, hoping to find an edge out of the fight.

Keto smiled, "I've got it covered," he said as he opened his car and brought out a bottle containing a liquid I was familiar with.

He handed it to me, "Drink it. All of it," he said, "Your wolf will be back in no time."

I opened the bottle and gulped the liquid until the bottle was empty.

"Anything I need to know before we get to the battle front?" I asked, my eyes fixed on Keto.

"Nothing much," he answered, "Just shift and howl, then the rest of the pack will take it from there."

I took a deep breath, closing my eyes for a second to muster up any form of courage I had left.

"Alright," I said, my eyes opening, "I'm ready."

Keto led the way, while the rest of us followed after.

I could hear different sounds of werewolves howling as we approached the big space outside the forest.

It was a field stretched out wide, wider than the stadium I had fought weeks ago.

I saw Orion's men as we approached, all shirtless and ready to fight, some of them had shifted already but they were waiting.

Beside me, Kate cocked her gun, and the sound of it sent a chill down my spine.

This was my first war as a werewolf, and I wasn't just a bystander, I was going to lead it.

Keto pulled his shirt in front of me as we approached the men who gave way to let out pass.

Kira held my hand, a form of comfort in the midst of the troubles raging within me, "You can do this, Ravenna," she whispered, "Note this; Ravenna was an omega, but you, Lyra, you're the alpha so own it."

I felt my jaw clenching at her words as I reached out to the front of Orion's men.

Ben's men lined up opposite us, a great distance divided us, but they were ready for battle.

Ben was there, I could see him smirking as soon as he saw me.

Just then, a flash of memory went through my mind and I rolled my head as it played.

It was Ravenna's memory, she had been in a battle like this one before, but with her father and according to what I saw in the vision, he was educating her on warfare.

"Listen up, Ravenna," he said in the memory, "In a war like this, the numbers doesn't always count or guarantee victory. It's the alpha's strength that counts."

Chapter 63

Lyra's POV

Then a hush fell over the field.

The wind whistled through the trees, brushing through the tall grass like it was trying to warn us to turn back now.

But it was too late for that. I had already stepped forward, the weight of every eye behind me pressing into my back.

Then Ben stepped out from among his soldiers like a king approaching the gallows.

I squared my shoulders and locked eyes with him.

“Well, well, well,” Ben’s voice carried across the open field like oil over water. “So Orion sent the little girl in his place. The big, bad Alpha chooses to cower behind a woman’s legs. Typical.”

I clenched my fists, jaw tightening, but I didn’t look away.

“I suppose I should be merciful,” he continued, spreading his arms. “Since Orion has chosen to be a coward and shy away from battle, I’ll give you, Ravenna, a chance to surrender. You don’t have to die today.”

Behind me, I felt the low growl of Keto rumbling through the silence, and even Kate let out a breath that sounded like a snort of disgust.

I took a step forward and let out a laugh.

The sound startled even me, but it rolled out of my chest without thinking.

Soon enough, the men behind me joined in.

Laughter rippled across Orion's side like a tide of defiance. Even those in wolf form howled or huffed in amusement.

When I stopped, I met Ben's glare without blinking.

"You think I'll surrender now?" I asked, raising my voice. "I didn't surrender when I was your prisoner, Ben. What makes you think I'd bend the knee now that I'm free, and leading an army?"

Ben's smug smile faltered for a second before he covered it up.

"You're fighting a losing battle, Ravenna," he said, his voice now deeper, "This is your last chance. Surrender, or-"

BANG.

The sound shattered the moment like glass on the ground. Someone had fired a gun.

I froze.

Ben staggered where he stood.

His eyes widened in disbelief, then looked down at the red fluid coming out of his chest.

His hand came up, trembling, to cover the wound, but the blood poured faster than his fingers could block it.

Gasps broke out on both sides of the battlefield.

My heart slammed into my ribs, and I whirled to the side, trying to understand what had just happened.

I heard the click before I saw her.

Kate was cocking her gun again, expression cool and unbothered.

“He talks too much,” she said dryly. “Let the battle begin already.”

My mouth opened in shock. “Kate, what the hell?”

“What?” she shrugged, raising the gun for another shot. “You heard him. He wasn’t going to shut up. We both know we’re fighting. Might as well get it over with.”

I blinked, trying to recover.
“That bullet, it hurt him. That shouldn’t be possible.”

Kate gave me a grin. “Silver bullet. Straight to the chest. That one’s not healing unless it comes out. And trust me, I didn’t make it easy.”

I turned back to Ben just in time to see two of his men dragging him away from the front lines, one on each side, his body slumping between them.

His eyes caught mine just before they vanished behind the line, burning with pain, and something else. Rage.

But he was out of the fight.

One less threat.

The howls began again, this time louder.

Behind me, Keto had already started shifting, bones cracking, limbs extending into powerful wolf form. Mako dropped his jacket and did the same.

I looked at Kate. “You know, for someone without claws, you sure know how to start a war.”

She winked. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Kira stepped up beside me. “The pack is waiting, Alpha.”

My chest rose and fell as I swallowed back every fear trying to claw its way up my throat. I wasn’t just Ravenna anymore. I wasn’t just Lyra either.

I was both.

“Time to shift,” I muttered, backing away from the center.

I felt it stirring inside me, the power, the beast beneath my skin.

My body began to tremble, the heat building as the transformation began.

I let it take me. Bones snapped, muscles tore and reformed, my senses sharpening, my vision changing.

Then I stood on four legs, with my claws digging into the earth.

I was massive, bigger than I’d ever been.

And I howled.

The sound tore through the air like a battle horn.

My pack responded.

Howls exploded behind me, echoing across the field like thunder.

Across the divide, Ben's soldiers snarled, some already mid-shift, others preparing for combat.

I could see the hesitation now. Their leader was down. The surprise had shaken them.

And we had no intention of wasting that advantage.

I glanced sideways. Keto, now fully transformed, nodded at me.

Without waiting for another beat, I charged.

My paws pressed against the earth, tearing up dirt and grass as I gained momentum.

Then, I leapt.

The wind blew past me as I soared through the air.

I landed right in the middle of them like a missile crashing to earth, claws sinking into the ground, a snarl ripping from my throat.

The first man lunged at me, and I met him mid-air, my jaws tearing down on his shoulder as I twisted.

I threw him like he weighed nothing at his fellow comrades.

Before the others could regroup, I was already moving.

A particular wolf, big with yellow eyes, jumped at me, but I was too strong for him; his heart was in my hand within seconds.

Then, I heard it.

More howls.
Dozens of them.

My pack surged forward.

I could see Keto fighting like a raging tiger, ramming two wolves to the ground.

I had never seen him in his wolf form before.

Then, Mako, his wolf form was bigger; he slashed through a man with silver blades in both hands, fighting beside Kate, who refused to shift but relied on her guns.

The battlefield exploded into chaos around me.

War had truly begun.

Chapter 64

Lyra's POV

Ben’s men scattered in shock, but I didn’t wait. My claws ripped through the first two before they even turned to fight.

One tried to swing his blade. I ducked and drove my elbow into his ribs, hearing the sickening crack. Another aimed a gun. I kicked it out of his hand and slammed him to the ground.

The battle exploded behind me.

Howls filled the air as my pack surged forward. I saw Keto charging with Mako beside him, their forms shifting mid-run. Kate fired shots from her angle.

Kira let out a scream and shifted, running straight into a wall of enemies with her fangs bared.

I grabbed one of Ben’s soldiers by the neck and tossed him into two others.

This wasn’t like anything before.

My blood was on fire. I could feel it, Ravenna. Her strength. Her memories. Flashes of things I had never lived through. Battles. Screams. Cold steel. Her rage mixed with mine until I wasn’t sure where I ended and she began.

I saw a werewolf charging at me, big, armored, fast.

I met him head-on.

We crashed into each other with a thud that shook the ground. His claws slashed at my side. Pain burst through me. I growled and bit down on his shoulder, tearing flesh. He roared and threw me off, but I landed on all fours, already healing.

He came again. I ducked under him, rolled, and stabbed my claws into his spine. His body jerked, then went limp. I tossed him aside like garbage.

The ground was soaked in blood.

Smoke curled up from fires.

Keto slammed a man into the dirt beside me. “They’re holding the line, barely!” he shouted.

“We push through,” I growled. “Don’t stop until they’re all down!”

He nodded and ran off again.

I leapt into the air, scanning the battlefield. My people were fighting hard, but Ben’s side was bigger. Stronger. More prepared.

Until I howled again.

It tore through the sky like thunder.

Everyone stopped for a second. Just one second.

Then our pack surged forward with new strength. They howled back, answering my call.

One of Ben’s elite fighters broke through our line and came straight for me. I met him halfway. He had fast claws. I ducked, dodged, fought. His blade cut into my thigh, but I didn't fall. I slammed into his chest, knocking the wind out of him, then finished it with one blow to the neck.

Blood sprayed. He dropped.

I stumbled for a second. Breathing heavy. Blood running down my leg.

Then I heard Kate's voice behind me.

"Ravenna, your side!"

I turned just in time to block another strike. Two more werewolves had flanked me.

I spun, claws flying, taking one down. The other tried to bite me, but he missed. I tackled him and drove my claws into his gut.

Pain didn't matter.

Blood didn't stop me.

I could feel something rising inside me, a rage I had never felt before.

Then I heard a sound that sent chills down my spine.

Not a roar. Not a howl.

Something… different.

I turned my head.

And saw her.

A figure standing at the edge of the trees, hidden in black robes. Face covered. Arms raised slightly.

Watching me.

No movement. No sound. Just watching.

The battle raged on.

But all I could feel now was her presence.

Something dark had arrived.

The air shifted.

One second, I was claw-deep in another fight. The next, a chill swept over the field like a warning.

Then a powerful fog.

Thick and cold. It rolled in like smoke from the underworld, rising fast and blanketing the ground.

I could barely see my hands. I spun around, eyes glowing, searching for my pack, but their shapes were blurred.

“What the hell,” I muttered, stepping back.

“Ravenna!” Keto’s voice broke through the mist as he ran toward me, bleeding from his shoulder. “We need to pull back. Now.”

“What? Why? We’re winning!” I snapped, my heart still racing.

“Not anymore,” he growled. “Look around. The fog, it’s messing with our vision, our scent, our instincts. I just saw two of our men kill each other, thinking they were enemies.”

My stomach dropped.

“Keto-”

“Now or never, Ravenna. Call them back. Before it’s too late.”

I clenched my fists. Every part of me screamed to fight. But something in me, maybe Ravenna, whispered caution.

I shifted back into my wolf and raised my head to the sky.

This howl was different.

Not a cry of war.

A command.

Retreat.

The sound echoed through the fog, reaching every corner of the battlefield.

One by one, I saw shadows moving back. My pack was falling into formation, dragging the wounded, covering each other, retreating to our original line.

Ben’s men didn’t chase. They stayed still, like statues in the mist.

But I saw her again. Still watching.

And though the fog was thick, I could feel her eyes.

Not on the pack. On me.

As soon as we got back behind the line, I shifted back to human form, my breath sharp in my chest.

Blood and dirt smeared my arms, but I didn't care. I turned to Keto. "What now?" I asked. "We just wait?"

Keto wiped sweat off his brow, still watching the fog. "Yes. We watch. We wait to see what our enemy is planning."

I frowned. "So we're playing defense now?"

"We have no choice. We fight blind in that fog, we lose. It's not about pride now, it's survival."

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to calm my nerves. "Is Orion ever going to show up?" I asked, unable to hide the edge in my voice. "This was supposed to be his fight, too."

Keto shook his head. "I don't know what he's doing, Lyra. Maybe he has a plan. But whatever it is, we need to keep our side together. No cracks. If we break now, we lose the fight."

I nodded, even though my insides twisted with frustration. We had momentum until that witch showed up. Now the whole battle felt like a trap.

Then, just like that, the fog started to clear. Slowly, as if it had never been there.

The field came into view.

And that's when I saw someone who made my skin crawl.

I froze.

"Is that?" I stepped forward.

At the very edge of the battlefield stood Ben.

Standing tall.

A smug smile on his face.

No blood. No wound. No sign of the silver bullet Kate shot into his chest.

“That’s impossible,” I whispered.

My heart skipped.

He was supposed to be dead.

So how the hell was he standing there, grinning like nothing happened?

Chapter 65

Lyra's POV

Ben’s voice rang out across the field, loud and arrogant. “Did you really think you stood a chance, Ravenna?” he sneered. “Or that a silver bullet was enough to kill me? Not when I have a witch by my side.”

He spread his arms, showing off his unscarred chest, "The gods have decided the victor of this battle right before it began, and the coins of the oracle have been tossed in my favour."

“You can still end this, Ravenna," he said, "Your pack doesn’t have to die for Orion’s cowardice. Killing you has never been part of the plan, Ravenna. I've always admired your strength and courage and desired you for myself, but then again, my brother always has a way of taking things that belong to me, first my alpha position, and then the woman I had always wanted to mate with."

My breath caught in my throat. Did he just admit to wanting me for himself in the middle of a battle? In front of everyone, to the hearing of everyone.

Seems like Ravenna was the desire of most powerful men in this part of the country.

I didn't even know what to say to Ben, my mind was pretty much occupied with how we could turn the battle in our favour and deal with the witch, stop her from using her spells to disarm us.

"Bring him out. That’s all I want. Hand Orion over, and this fight will be over," he added, his voice ringing loud and clear.

I stepped forward, a surge of defiance building up in my chest, refusing to back down. “So you need Orion to win. That’s the truth, isn’t it?” I said, loud enough for all to hear. “Because as long as the Alpha lives, the fight isn’t over.”

Ben's smirk faltered.

"You can slaughter every one of us," I went on. "But if Orion is alive, we'll keep standing. The moment he falls, the pack crumbles. That's what you want. You want to take him out, not us."

A gunshot rang out beside me, It was Kate again, I knew it. She always had a way of waiting for me to give my speech before cutting the enemy off with her gun.

And part of me wished, most of the pack warriors here were like Kate, excellent shooters with their own guns. This battle would have been easier to deal with from the beginning. And I don't think the witch would be able to heal many wounded werewolves.

Ben flinched, but the bullet never reached him.

The bullet froze midair.

Just hung there like the whole world had paused, like someone had stopped time.

"What the hell?" Kate muttered, cocking her gun again.

She fired a second shot, same thing. The bullet stopped just a few feet in and hovered before dropping to the ground.

Then a third.

It fell, lifeless, like the others.

Gasps spread through our side of the field. Men muttered. I heard it ripple through the ranks like thunder.

"A witch, a witch," they murmured among themselves, their voices filled with fear.

I scanned the enemy's line, and then I saw her.

The woman I'd spotted earlier, lurking near the trees, stepped out of the shadows.

She moved calmly, like she wasn't even part of the chaos around her.

I didn't need to be told. I knew it had to be her.

It was her spell that stopped Kate's bullets.

And I could only imagine what else she had done in favor of Ben's army.

My fingers curled into fists. This wasn't just a battle of strength anymore. It was turning into something else, something darker.

And we weren't prepared for it.

Mako stepped in front of me, his face pale and drawn. "Ravenna," he called, "We should run. If we keep fighting, this battle will turn into suicide."

I swallowed hard. My throat felt dry. I looked over the battlefield, my people bruised, bloodied, but standing. Still standing strong in the face of imminent defeat.

"No," I said, my voice firmer than I felt. "We're not running. Orion will come. He'll know what to do about the witch."

Mako stared at me. "And what if he doesn't show up?"

I didn't answer him, I didn't even know what to say to him.

He took the silence as his cue to step back and leave me alone with the weight of leadership crushing my chest.

Then something else started, something strange that I had never seen in my life.

I heard it before I saw it, people behind me, gasping for air, like they were being strangled, and were desperately gasping for oxygen.

I turned and saw them, my men, Orion's men. Clutching their throats, eyes bulging and blood coming out of their eyes in place of tears. Their Fingers clawed at the invisible noose choking them.

One dropped to the ground dead.

Then another one joined, and more joined. Until they were twelve in total.

Twelve of my warriors dropped like flies. Blood streamed from eyes and ears.

Just like that.

I froze.

Ben's voice rang out, cold and amused. "That's death without a chance to fight. You can keep being brave, Ravenna. But they'll keep dying. Like chickens. One by one. Until you bring him out."

My hands trembled. My heart thundered. I let out a sharp, guttural snarl, shaking with fury.

And then,

Everything stopped.

My body locked up. I couldn't move. I couldn't even twitch a finger.

Panic surged through me like wildfire. I was frozen. Something, someone had taken hold of me.

And then I was rising.

My feet lifted off the ground, and I was pulled forward, toward Ben's line.

I wanted to scream, to fight it, to shift and break free, but I couldn't. I was trapped inside my own body.

The invisible force stopped me in the middle of the field, suspended like a doll.

And then I saw her.

The witch.

She stepped out from Ben's side. Calm. Steady. Deadly. Her cloak rippled behind her as if carried by wind, but there was none.

Her eyes locked on mine, and my blood ran ice cold.

I couldn't breathe.

She kept coming, one step at a time, as if she had all the time in the world.

And me?

I was stuck.

Waiting for the storm to hit.

Chapter 66

Lyra's POV

I couldn’t move.

My limbs were frozen mid-air, like I was caught in a stringless web. The air around me crackled with power that didn’t belong to this world.

Her long black veil fluttered as she moved, hiding most of her face. But I could see her eyes, they were sharp, ancient, dark as the abyss, and they were staring straight into me.

She stopped a breath away and smiled. “I won’t kill you,” she said, her voice soft, “At least, not now.”

I tried to speak. Nothing came out.

She tilted her head, still watching me like I was a puzzle she was trying to solve. “You’re not what I expected. Are you really Ravenna?” she murmured. “Or just a girl playing dress-up in a dead woman’s skin?”

My heart slammed in my chest. Then she leaned in, so close her breath tickled my ear.

“Orion isn’t coming,” she whispered. “He can’t. Killing his own brother, he’s not strong enough to deal with that. But he told me to give you a message.” She paused. “Make sure Ben doesn’t survive this battle.”

I stopped breathing.

She pulled away without another word and turned, but not toward Ben, not toward the battle. She drifted sideways, walking off into the trees like she had just taken a stroll and was done now. Done playing.

I looked at Ben, his face twisted in confusion. He didn't understand what had just happened.
Nobody moved.

That's when I realized: she'd veiled us all. Froze the whole field just to say those words and walk away.

And then, I dropped.

My feet hit the ground hard. The moment I could move again, rage exploded in my chest.

I let out a deep, guttural howl, one that carried fury.

And I charged.

Ben was in my line of sight, and I didn't stop to think.

I darted forward with every ounce of power left in me. The others behind me heard the call, and they moved too. I felt them surging behind me, ready to fight, ready to end this.

Ben's eyes widened just before I reached him. He saw me coming, but he wasn't fast enough.

I launched at him, all hesitation burned out of me. He raised his hand like he thought he could stop me with words, but I wasn't listening anymore.

My claws tore through his chest, and his blood sprayed across my face.

He let out a growl, then a gasp, and crumpled.

I didn't stop. I slashed again and again, until he stopped moving. Until his eyes rolled back. Until his body went limp beneath me.

The battlefield roared.

Ben's fall sent a wave through the enemy lines. His soldiers faltered, their formation scattered. Confusion hit them like a storm. Some turned and ran. Some hesitated too long, and our warriors were already on them.

Kate was shooting again, this time her bullets hit. Mako shifted mid-air, tearing through two enemies in one swipe. Keto led a small pack toward the right flank, cleaning it out like fire eating dry grass.

I wiped Ben's blood off my face and stood.

I could still feel the witch's words in my ear, "Make sure Ben doesn't survive the battle."

He wouldn't.

And he didn't.

Without their commander, their witch, and their confidence, the rest of Ben's army folded in minutes. Our wolves tore through them with practiced fury, cornering the last fighters and giving them one chance to surrender. A few dropped their weapons. Most didn't get the chance.

By the time the last enemy fell, the field was covered in bodies and blood.

And then silence followed.

I stood in the center of it, my chest rising and falling, my claws soaked, my heart beating fast, not from fear, but from adrenaline.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Kira walking up to me slowly, her eyes sharp. She barely glanced at Ben's body lying in the dirt, his blood soaking into the earth.

Then her gaze returned to mine. "You should've taken the heart," she said simply.

I blinked, still catching my breath. "What?"

She nodded toward the body. "Earlier, that's why he healed. That's why he came back. With werewolves, if you don't remove the heart, it's never really over."

I stared at Ben's chest, what was left of it, and didn't argue.

I knelt down and did it. No hesitation this time. My fingers moved like they already knew what to do.

The heart came out slick and heavy, still warm. I tossed it away without looking where it landed.

Kira nodded in approval. "Now come. We need to wash. There's a river close."

I followed her as she walked away from the battlefield. My hands, my arms, were still covered in blood.

But before we reached the trees, I paused and turned.

Orion's men had gathered around Ben's body. Two of them were already lifting him carefully, like he was still someone who mattered.

I looked at Kira.

"He betrayed us," I said.

She gave me a tired look, “He was still part of the pack, and more importantly, Orion's brother,” she replied. “He’ll be buried like the rest of the pack who died, maybe even beside Nikki.”

I didn’t respond, I just kept walking.

When we reached the river, others were already there.

Some sat in silence by the rocks. Others stood waist-deep in the water, scrubbing away the blood with slow, tired hands. No one said much. No one smiled.

It didn’t feel like a victory.

It felt like mourning.

Even I… I should’ve felt proud. We won. I killed Ben. I did what had to be done. But inside, I felt nothing. Or maybe too much. It was hard to tell. I just felt hollow.

I sat by the edge of the river, dipping my hands in slowly. The water ran red for a second, then clear again.

I kept watching the ripples, hoping they’d explain whatever was going on inside me.

“You feel it too,” Kira said beside me, kneeling. “The weight?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I thought I’d feel relief. But I just feel.” I stopped, searching for the word.

She helped me. “Empty.”

“Yes,” I breathed.

“That’s the Alpha’s effect,” she said, her voice soft. “Orion, he’s in pain. Deep grief. And because he’s our Alpha, the pack feels it too. All of us. Even you.”

I turned to her, stunned. “But I’m not,"

She raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t you?”

Before I could respond, a loud gunshot cracked through the air.

Everyone froze.

Some stood. Others reached for weapons out of reflex.

I jumped to my feet, heart slamming in my chest.

Chapter 67

Lyra's POV

“What the hell was that?” I asked as I rose from the edge of the river and turned my neck to see what was happening.

No one answered. But eyes were already turning toward the trees.

The whole pack was on alert until they saw Kate lowering her rifle.

She stepped into view, dragging a deer toward the river, rifle slung over her shoulder.

Everyone stared at her, like they were wondering if scolding her was the right move.

She looked around, frowning.
“Did I do something wrong?” she asked.

No one answered. One by one, they went back to what they were doing, quiet as before.

Kate sighed and walked over to where I was kneeling at the water’s edge. She dropped beside me and started washing her hands. The blood on her sleeves stained the river pink for a moment before fading.

“You did well today. You were a force on the battleground," Kira said, turning to face Kate.

Kate let out a dry laugh. “Only with a gun. As a wolf, I’m still not in control.”

I looked at her. She had fought bravely, no doubt. “Don’t say that. It was your shot at Ben that gave us the opening we needed. You caught them off guard, and it changed everything.”

She gave a small nod, then glanced at the water. “Yeah. Until one goddamn witch showed up and turned the whole thing upside down. Just one. What if there had been more? Seven, or twenty?”

She looked at me. “We’d all be dead. Did you see what she did? She didn’t even touch anyone, and still, she killed some of our men.”

Kate’s eyes suddenly widened, like something just clicked in her mind.

She turned to me quickly, her expression sharp.
“Wait, why did the witch leave the battle?” she asked. “She was supposed to fight for Ben, wasn’t she? But then she just walked away. And we won.”

Kira looked at me, too, her gaze narrowing.
“What happened when she approached you, Ravenna?”

I hesitated. I couldn’t exactly tell them that the witch had stared at me like she saw through my soul… or that she suspected I wasn’t Ravenna. That part was too dangerous because of Kate, even though Kira already knew. So I told them what I could.

“She said she wasn’t going to kill me,” I replied, my voice low. “At least not now. Then she said Orion couldn’t come. He couldn’t deal with killing his own brother. So he told her to tell me to make sure Ben didn’t survive the battle.”

Their jaws dropped at the same time.

“She was working for Orion this whole time?” Kate said, stunned. “And pretended to fight for Ben?”

Kira swallowed hard, her eyes searching mine. “Are you sure?”

I nodded slowly. “I know it sounds crazy, but that’s what she said. Still doesn’t make full sense though.” I looked at Kira. “Why would she pretend? Why not just fight with us from the beginning? It would’ve made the battle so much easier.”

Kira sighed and glanced away for a moment before speaking. “Because if Ben knew we had a witch on our side… would he have dared to start a war?”

Kate let out a breath and nodded. “That actually makes sense. It was the strategy. Orion set the whole thing up. But how? How did he manage to pull that off without anyone knowing?”

I shook my head. “We’ll never know. Not unless we ask him ourselves.”

Then I noticed as one by one, people started leaving the river. The mood was still dull, but there was a quiet sense of relief hanging in the air.

Just as I was about to stand, Kira stretched out on a flat rock and tilted her face to the sky.

“We should stay back for the night,” she said, her voice soft but firm. “Enjoy the calm, just for a while. Look at that.” She pointed toward the deer Kate had dragged in earlier. “That’s breakfast right there.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Breakfast? I don’t know about you, but I haven’t had a real bath since Ben kidnapped us. I’m desperate for a proper shower.”

Kate chuckled beside me. “You’ll get your shower. Keto came with supplies. I made sure of it.”

That caught my attention. I looked around, scanning the trees and the path beyond the river. “Wait, I haven’t seen Keto since the battle ended. Where is he?”

Kira sat up and ran her fingers through her damp hair. “He probably went to report back to Orion. You know how he is, always duty first. But I’m sure he’ll be back soon.”

Kate turned to Kira and asked, “Where are we camping for tonight? I can't wait to set up the sleeping tents, although it is still morning, but setting it up won't hurt."

Kira stretched her arms and pointed toward the trees just beyond the river. “Somewhere in there. Still close to the river, but covered enough so we’re not too exposed.”

Kate nodded. “Alright. I’ll be right back. I want to grab the sleeping tents and the food supplies before someone decides we don't need them and takes them back to the house.”

Without waiting for a response, she turned and walked off, her footsteps crunching lightly over the forest floor.

I waited until she was completely out of sight. Then I glanced around quickly to make sure no one was close enough to hear.

The river was almost empty now, just three of Orion’s men lingering by the edge. They looked like they were packing up, slowly drifting away.

When I was sure it was safe, I leaned a little closer to Kira. My voice dropped to a whisper.

“She knows,” I said, my voice urgent.

Kira blinked, startled and confused, “What?”

“The witch, Kira," I said, "She knows. And I’m scared she might tell Orion.”

Kira’s brows furrowed. “Knows what exactly?”

I swallowed hard, my chest tightening.

“She knows I’m not Ravenna.”

Kira’s eyes widened like I’d just slapped her across the face.

Chapter 68

Lyra's POV

Kira looked thoughtful for a moment before she said, “This is not good, If she’s truly working for Orion, she’ll probably tell him something, maybe not directly, but just enough to hint that you’re not Ravenna.”

I frowned. “You think so?”

She nodded. “Witches are very cunny, Ravenna. They don’t always tell the truth, but they don’t lie either. They play in between. They keep things to themselves until it matters, and when the stakes are high, they speak up, just enough to use the truth to their advantage.”

I slowly nodded, trying to take that in. “I’m not sure if what you just said is supposed to comfort me or make me panic more.”

Kira let out a soft laugh but it didn’t reach her eyes. “All we can hope for now is that she doesn’t show up again.”

“Do you think she will?” I asked, my tone edgy.

“I don't know, but with Orion, you never know. He’s very discreet. Nobody even knows he has a secret witch working for him.”

That part confused me. “Why is it such a big deal? Are witches really that hard to find or afford?”

Kira shook her head. “Not really. But witches tend to see themselves as higher than werewolves. They won’t just work for any Alpha. Most of them want equal power, or even more than the Alpha. It takes a lot of influence to get one on your side. And they’re not scared of Alphas either, that’s the thing.”

I let out a breath and shook my head. “Wish I was a witch. Maybe life would’ve been easier.”

Kira chuckled. “Funny thing is, it’s actually possible to be both. A witch and a werewolf at the same time.”

My head snapped toward her. “Wait. What? How?”

“Simple,” she said, shrugging. “Witches fall in love too, and sometimes they fall in love with werewolves. When that happens and they have a child, that child can become both a wolf and a witch. And trust me, those ones are the deadliest.”

I nodded slowly. “I can imagine."

Kira turned to me with a serious expression. “No, Lyra. You can’t imagine. A witch who’s also a wolf? She could kill the most powerful Alpha with her claws and not even break a sweat.”

“Wow,” I whispered. “That’s a lot of power. But are all witches women? What about guys? Are there male witches?”

Kira looked uncertain. “I’ve never heard of one. If they exist, there must be very few.”

I hummed, thinking about that. A witch who’s also a wolf… now that would be something.

Then I saw Kate walking towards us, dragging a big bag with her.

She dropped it right in front of us as soon as she reached where we sat down.

“Why do you both look like you just came out of a bad breakup?” She asked, raising a brow.

I couldn't help but chuckle, she could notice we were talking about something serious, and I hoped her werewolf senses didn't offer the edge to eavesdrop into our conversations.

Kira stretched her arms and then looked at Kate. "If I were to be honest, Kate, your adaptation to this werewolf life has been fast. Like, surprisingly fast. Faster than any case I've handled like yours."

Kate blinked. "Wait, I thought I was the first human Orion ever recruited?"

"Me too," I added.

"You're both right," Kira replied. "But some betas have bitten humans before, and I was the one who had to step in and manage the fallout. So technically, yes, you're Orion's first official recruit. But more importantly, you're the first human he's ever taken a personal interest in."

Kate raised her brows a little at that, but didn't say anything.

I reached for the bag and unzipped it, sorting through what she brought. Inside were bars of soap, a couple of toothbrushes, toothpaste, bottled water, clean clothes, food supplies, and guns.

"Wow," I muttered, pulling things out. "Kate really came with supplies."

She grinned. "I told you I'd be back with lots of them."

"I need to freshen up if I'm going to feel even half normal again," I said, getting to my feet.

"Same here," Kira said.

We all grabbed our own things from the bag, locked it up, and headed toward the river together.

When we got to the river, I looked around, feeling uncomfortable. I have never bathed in a river before, and the last thing I wanted was prying eyes or some weird animals paying us a visit.

"Are you sure we are alone in this woods?" I asked Kira as I pressed the paste on my toothbrush.

"Well, you're a werewolf, tell me, do you pick up any extra scents around?" She responded swiftly.

I nodded, "You know my sense of smell isn't very sharp yet, so I can't always tell if someone was around by smell."

"But you can tell Orion is around by his scent?" Kira taunted, wasting no time to pull her clothes.

"Orion is different, plus he's an alpha," I protested.

"Yeah, she's right," Kate supported me, although I don't know why, she hardly knows anything about werewolves, yet to know for sure if I'm right or wrong.

"It's not because he's an alpha, it's because you fucked him," she blurted out without reserve.

Kate turned to me, her eyes widening, then she shifted it back to Kira, "Wait what? Ravenna is fucking the alpha?" she asked, "I thought Keto was her fuckmate. Now I'm confused, is she fucking the both of them."

I didn't even know what to say, I just buried my face in my hand, "I'm not fucking the both of them, and the sex with Orion was an accident," I said raising my head up.

"An accident that happened twice," Kira shot back as she turned to face me, wearing only her bra and pants.

I noticed some carvings along her stomach, and I was sure I had seen those drawings before, just not sure where.

"To be honest," Kate's voice cut in, "I want to be laid by the alpha, see how it feels like, maybe my blue eyes will turn red like Ravenna's own."

What the fuck did she just say?

Kira shot her a surprised glance.

Chapter 69

Lyra's POV

"Be careful what you wish for," Kira said. "Learn from Ravenna. She's in a pit so deep, she's never getting out."

I didn't respond. I just turned back to brushing my teeth, pretending her words didn't rattle something inside me. But they did.

After a moment, I turned to Kate and asked, "Do you smoke?"

She looked surprised. "I used to. Why?"

I nodded slowly and smiled. "You should stop."

Then I winked at her.

She laughed, finally catching on. "Tease," she said with a grin.

I smiled, rinsed my mouth in the river, and then focused on the cold feeling. Her words stirred up longer than I cared for.

I kept glancing around to make sure there were no unwelcome eyes present.

The hush of the river seemed too nice to be disturbed by unwanted company.

The thought of being alone there grew stronger, and I removed all my clothes and wandered into the chill.

Kate got out of her clothes, too, and soon enough, our merry band was waist-deep in the river.

I turned to look at Kira, she really had a wonderful shape and beauty for a lady who is single.

"Kira, you'd like to marry someday, don't you? I've never seen you with a man or heard you talk about one," I asked, my tone playful.

It changed the atmosphere of the moment immediately. Frozen in water, her back straight, she stared into the abyss.

"I don't think I ever will," she said, with a pause, almost whispering.

"Why?" Kate softly asked.

Kira was silent for a moment. At last, she almost whispered: "I was married, and I had a daughter."

Kate and I shared a look. Neither of us had ever guessed.

“But then he changed. He started hurting me. And then he started hurting her too. My little girl.” Her voice cracked slightly. “She didn’t survive it. After that, everything inside me changed.”

My chest tightened. I didn’t know what to say. Kate stepped closer to her and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m so sorry,” I said quietly. “You didn’t deserve that.”

Kate nodded in agreement, her expression soft.

“What about your husband?” she asked carefully.

Kira looked straight ahead. “He’s dead. I told Orion what he was doing. Orion warned him, but he didn’t stop. So… Orion killed him.”

Kira exhaled slowly and gave a little, bittersweet smile. "So no, I guess marriage isn't for me anymore."

I reached beneath the water, grasping her hand in a gentle squeeze.

There was no need to say more.

We stayed in the water for some time, but I was uncomfortable. Either the water had gotten cold, or my mood had turned.

As the sun was further than halfway through its transit across the sky, it was probably perfect timing to exit the river.

I swam toward the edge, climbed out, grabbed the towel, and wrapped it hastily around myself.

Soon after, Kira emerged. I saw that tattoo again as she waddled out, and for a moment, I almost asked her about it.

But then I stopped myself. She'd already shared more than I thought she would today, and I didn't want to spoil a nice moment by digging into more of her past.

She got dressed quietly and then looked around. "I'll go get some firewood. We need to roast that meat."

Before I could say anything, Kate started swimming toward the bank. "I'll come."

But Kira shook her head. “No, stay with Ravenna. I won’t be long.”

Kate looked a little disappointed but didn’t argue. Kira gave us a small smile before turning and heading into the woods, leaving Kate and me by the river.

Kate cleared her throat.

I didn’t need to look up to know she was about to speak. It was that particular way she did it, soft, yet purposeful, like she was bracing herself. I kept my gaze ahead, but I was already preparing for whatever was coming.

"Does Keto know you slept with Orion?" Kate asked suddenly, breaking the moment like a stone through glass.

I froze.

Of all things she could ask.

I took a deep breath to steady my heart from beating so hard. The question shouldn’t have rattled me in any way, especially not from Kate, but it did.

After a pause, I finally answered, my voice barely above a whisper. "No. Keto isn’t aware."

Kate didn’t judge. She just nodded, thoughtful, calm.

"Do you plan on telling him?"

I shook my head slowly. "He doesn't need to know… and I don’t want to think about it right now."

"Fair," she said. "Whatever it is, I believe you'll figure it out."

There was no pressure in her tone. Just that calm, grounded certainty she carried around like a second skin. It made me feel less like a mess, even if only for a moment.

We kept walking back toward camp, and for a while, neither of us spoke.

Then I glanced sideways at her and asked, "Were you serious earlier? About wanting to have a thing with Orion?"

Kate smiled. A playful one. "Not really. I'm not exactly into Orion… but I'm also not against the idea of being a little adventurous with him either." She laughed, then added, "Honestly, it was my ovulation talking. Not me."

I chuckled. "Right."

By the time we got into the camp, the tension had eased about enough for the sun to shine upon us once again.

"Look through the bags," I ordered her while brushing away strands of hair from off my face. "Make sure nothing has been taken."

Kate nodded and crouched beside the bags. I stood back, watching her unzip and sort through everything while the quiet woods hummed around us. Birds, breeze, and the occasional rustle in the underbrush. Nothing unusual… yet.

Kira joined in, lifting one of the bags and checking its compartments. "Nothing's missing," she said at first. Then she stopped.

Her expression shifted.

Her eyes widened with alarm.

"The deer," she said, straightening up, her voice sharper now. "The one I killed… it's gone."

My blood ran cold.

I looked around instinctively, the hairs on my arms standing.

We weren't alone in the woods.

Chapter 70

Lyra's POV

I stared at the empty spot where the deer had once been, my heart slowly sinking.

“You’re sure this is where you dropped it?” I asked, scanning the clearing again.

Kate didn’t hesitate. “Yes. Right here. I made a mental note of that tree stump behind it,” she pointed. “I even placed a rock near the leg to keep it from sliding.”

"And you're sure Kira didn't touch it, perhaps kept it from plain sight. Maybe we should wait till she comes back."

Kate nodded her head dismissively, "No, we all left for the river together and It was still here when we were leaving. And Kira didn't come this direction. So it wasn't her."

I crouched, brushing my hand against the soft soil. No blood. No drag marks. No prints. Nothing. Just disturbed leaves that told half a story and left out the most important parts.

Without another word, Kate dropped to one knee, unzipping the side of her bag. Her fingers wrapped around the cool metal of a gun, and she pulled it free like muscle memory.

“That serious?” I asked, rising.

She clicked off the safety. “There’s no trail. No footprints. No scent.” Her voice was tight, professional now. “That’s not just strange. That’s intentional.”

My eyes narrowed. She was right. “The supplies are untouched,” I muttered, mostly to myself. “Who steals a deer and leaves the food bags?”

“Exactly,” Kate said, standing beside me now, her gun lowered but ready. “This wasn’t a hungry traveler. Someone left our dried meat, bread, and water, but took the fresh kill. That’s either someone with very specific needs or someone trying to mess with us.”

I snorted, but there was no humor in it. “Which is exactly why I kept asking Kira if we were alone out here.”

Kate’s jaw tightened.

“It’s funny,” I added, my voice quieter, “None of us picked up a scent. Not even Kira. That’s not normal.”

Kate gave a single nod, her eyes scanning the woods like a hunter on edge. “We stick together. No splitting up until we know what we’re dealing with.”

She gestured toward the narrow trails stretching out through the trees. “Whoever took it had only a few options. East, where Kira went — if they took that path, she may have already run into them. South leads back to the river, and we just came from there. West is the path back to the main road, and we’d have heard movement that way.”

“And that leaves north,” I finished for her.

She nodded again, this time with a little more weight. “The direction of our fight with Ben. And whatever the hell that was we encountered there.”

I felt a shiver crawl up my spine.

Without another word, we started walking. Kate led, gun at the ready. I followed closely, my senses sharp. Every crack of a twig made my pulse hitch.

We moved through the trees in silence, the forest was still kinda damp with early morning mist.

Kate kept her gun raised, eyes sharp, body tense. I didn't blame her. Whatever took the deer didn't want to be found, and yet here we were, chasing a ghost.

After several minutes, we reached a clearing near a cliff that jutted out from the earth like a jagged tooth. That's when I saw the deer or what was left of it.

Chunks of the deer's flesh were scattered around the scene like some gruesome ritual.

Kate froze beside me. "What the hell? I hope this isn't some witch shit ritual, Ravenna," she muttered, lowering her gun slightly.

"Why would a witch do something like this with a deer?" I asked, my tone low.

"To scare us maybe, to show us how she is going to kill us, assuming it's a she," she replied.

"I doubt that," I said, "we didn't kill Ben to end up like this, whatever this is."

Then I crouched beside the carcass, not touching it, just studying it.

Kate kicked a piece of rib cage and let out a growl of frustration. "Someone really had to mess with our breakfast, huh?" she snapped.

I didn't answer. Not immediately.

Something felt off to me at that moment. The air around the clearing had shifted, subtle but noticeable.

That prickle at the base of my neck returned, that whisper that told you when something with vicious eyes was watching, like a predator watching a prey.
Then I decided to turn, that was when I saw it.

It was the eyes I saw first, amber eyes. Low to the ground. Half-shielded by brush but visible enough for my heart to stutter.

“It wasn’t a human that took our deer," I said quietly, rising to my feet.

Kate turned to me, confused. “What?”

I pointed ahead, steady and calm. “It was a leopard.”

Her eyes widened, just as the creature stepped out from the trees, its golden fur dappled with shadows, and its face, its mouth, dripping in fresh blood.

It was huge. Muscles rippled beneath its coat. Its tail swayed low and slow. And its eyes were locked on us.

Then it started advancing.

Not fast. But purposeful.

“Back up,” Kate said sharply, raising her gun again. “Back up, Ravenna.”

“No.” I protested, waving my hand at her to stop, "Don't shoot it."

She whipped her head toward me. “No? Are you out of your damn mind, Ravenna?"

“I said don’t shoot it,” I repeated, louder now. My voice cut through the tension.

Kate gritted her teeth. “If I don’t shoot it, it’s going to rip us apart. We either kill it or it kills us.”

I stepped forward, just a little, my hands raised. My heart was hammering against my ribs, but I held my ground. “Let me handle it.”

Kate didn’t move. “You better be right.”

The leopard came closer.

Its ears twitched.

Its lips peeled back slightly, showing white teeth tinged with pink.

Kate closed her eyes, just for a second, maybe praying, maybe preparing for impact.

Then, like a coil snapping, the leopard leapt into the air, aiming straight at me.

And I didn't run.

Chapter 71

Lyra's POV

My hands moved on instinct, with my claws coming out of my fingers as it soared through the air, jaws open wide, I met it halfway, and caught it with my both hands clamping around its bloodstained snout.

It snarled, twisting midair, but I held firm. My fingers drew themselves up against the edge of its mouth, and with a horrendous roar of effort, I wrenched its jaws open beyond that allowed by nature.

An ugly crack bore into the air through the forest.

The beast suddenly collapsed; it twitched once and then went still.

Blood splattered across my arms and chest.

I was standing over it, chest rising and falling, muscles humming in residual adrenaline.

Behind me came a choking gasp from Kate.

I slowly turned around, wiping my cheek behind the back of my hand.

Her eyes were wide. “What the hell did I just witness?”

I shrugged. “Guess I was hungry.”

She blinked. “You snapped its jaw apart, like it was nothing.”

I cracked a tired smile. “Just werewolf strength. A normal human can try this.”

Kate shook her head, stepping forward to inspect the kill. “I swear, I wish I could do that instead of depending on guns. That was badass.”

“You will,” I said simply. “With time, Kate, you will.”

She glanced at me, still processing everything, then sighed. “So, now that our deer is breakfast for the worms, what the hell are we going to eat?”

I nudged the leopard’s lifeless body with my boot. “This. should be the replacement of the deer.”

Kate looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “You’re kidding me right?"

I raised an eyebrow. “Do we have another option? Besides, it’s exotic meat. Could be a once in a lifetime taste.”

She crossed her arms, still staring at the body. “You know eating leopards is against the law, right?”

I glanced left, then right. “And yet, no police officers in sight. Unless you’re about to arrest me?”

Kate scoffed. “Don’t tempt me.”

I smirked. “If you're not going to arrest me, then you should join me in this daring feast.”

She paused. “Have you ever eaten leopard before?”

I shook my head. “No. But ever since I became an Alpha, I’ve been craving weird things. My appetite’s changing.”

Kate snorted. “Weird is one way to put it.”

“Are you in or not?” I asked.

She sighed dramatically, then gestured toward the body. “Fine. But you’re carrying it. And if we run into someone, I’m saying you kidnapped me and forced me to eat it.”

“Deal,” I said, hoisting the animal over my shoulder. It was heavier than I expected, but manageable. The heat of its body hadn’t faded yet.

As we started making our way back, Kate muttered, “This meat better be sweet, I swear.”

I chuckled softly. "Only one way to find out."

For more than a few seconds, we kept going silently, with the adventitious sounds of far-off rustling from afar, and the gusts of wind almost traveling in concert with one another.

Kate said, "If she's not back at the time of our return, we'll have to look for her to make sure she's okay."

"Good," I said, "Hopefully, nothing bigger than this leopard has crossed her path."

Kate shot me a look. “Let's not tempt fate.”

We both quickened our pace, and soon we arrived at the camp.

My shoulders were already aching from carrying the damn heavy leopard.

The second we stepped into the clearing, I noticed the small pile of firewood stacked neatly beside our bags.

Kate noticed it too. “Looks like someone beat us back.”

I exhaled in relief. “Kira.”

Before I could call her name, her voice rang out from behind the trees. “Where the hell have you two been? I’ve been looking all over.”

She stepped into view, her eyes locking onto Kate first, completely missing the blood smeared across my body.

Kate opened her mouth, but Kira was already frowning. “What happened to the deer? Don’t tell me it was stolen.”

Kate rubbed her temple. “It was stolen. And we went looking for the thief.”

Kira’s eyes narrowed. “Did you find it?”

I stepped forward then, still dripping blood and sweat, and said, “We found pieces of it.”

That’s when Kira looked at me, really looked at me. Her gaze swept over the drying blood on my arms, my chest, my cheek.

Her eyes widened. “Whose blood is that? The deer or the thief’s?”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “The thief’s.”

Her face went pale. “Ravenna, you killed someone?”

Before I could respond, Kate burst into laughter. “Not someone, Kira. Something.”

She gestured toward the spot where I’d dropped the leopard like a sack of potatoes.

Kira followed her gaze.

The moment she saw the mangled body lying motionless on the dirt, a slow smile spread across her face. “That was the thief?”

I nodded once.

She crossed her arms and gave an approving nod. “Very good.”

Kira looked between us, then said, “Alright, wild animal taken care of. Now, do you know how to start the fire?”

“Of course I do," Kate said, brushing past us toward the firewood. Then she paused and gave Kira a sideways glance. “Although, I’m surprised you didn’t even blink at eating leopard. You act like you’ve had it before.”

Kira smirked. “I have. Stick around Orion long enough, you’ll eat all kinds of wild things. That man has a special weakness for tiger meat.”

Kate blinked. “Tigers? Seriously?”

“Yep,” Kira said, crouching beside the firewood. “He says they’re spicy. I think he just likes the challenge.”

Kate shook her head and muttered under her breath, “You people are something else.”

Kira chuckled and waved her off. “I'll prepare the meat. You go get this fire going.”

“I’m going to the river,” I announced, already turning away. “I need to wash this blood off before I start smelling like something that needs to be hunted.”

Kate made a face. “Yeah, good idea.”

I walked away from them, heading for the river, the sun was up now, and I already made up my mind not to stay too long in that river.

By the time I reached the river, the blood on my skin had dried.

I scanned the area carefully. The trees were quiet, save for the occasional rustle of leaves above. No scents. No movement. Just me.

Good. I needed this moment to myself.

Peeling off my shirt, I hesitated only a second before slipping out of the rest of my clothes and stepping into the water.

I lowered myself in, letting the current wash away the blood. I tilted my head back and let the water cradle me, eyes closed.

Five minutes, maybe less. That was all I had before the air shifted.

I heard footsteps.

At first, I thought it would be one of the girls, maybe they came to fetch water for the meat.

Then came the sound of a low, casual whistle of a man that made my heart skip a beat.

My eyes flew open.

Shit.

Chapter 72

Lyra's POV

I plunged deeper, the cold water encasing me like a second skin as I hugged the bedrock of the river to hide from the man.

My lungs began to ache, warning me that I couldn't stay hidden forever.

More waiting seconds ticked to sustain torture before I was able to wait no more.

I decided to swim up for air. And then when I did, I saw his boots. He was still there, closer now.

"Ravenna," a familiar voice called.

My heart jumped. I knew that voice. I relaxed almost immediately, releasing a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. "Keto," I said, blinking up at him. "I thought you were someone else."

He stepped forward slightly, arms relaxed at his side, eyes watching me carefully. "You couldn't pick my scent, could you?"

I shook my head, wiping water from my face. "Not at all. How?"

"I masked it," he said, crouching near the riverbank. "It's part of the assignment Orion sent me on. I can't talk about it."

I studied him, his face calm, a little unreadable. That was Keto. Always carrying things on his shoulders and never sharing more than he thought necessary.

“It’s alright,” I said gently. “I was just worried about you. I looked for you after the battle. Is Orion okay?”

“He’s fine,” Keto replied with a nod. “We have to return soon for Ben’s burial.”

I stilled at that, the mention of Ben sending a pang of sadness through my chest. “When is it?”

“Tomorrow,” he said. “I came to pick you all up.”

I brushed my face, removing the strand of hair blocking my view. “We'll be coming back tomorrow morning. We aren't quite ready to leave just yet.”

“That can work too,” was his simple answer.

I hesitated, shy about trying to address things without it sounding awkward.

He has seen me naked before. Somehow, it was different now.

I didn't want him to see me like this again. I just couldn't put into words the feelings of exposure I was experiencing, which had absolutely nothing to do with the water but with his presence.

Keto crouched closer to the edge, his gaze still kind. “How’ve you been holding up?”

I nodded. “I’m okay.”

“You did well,” he said. “Orion’s proud of you.”

I laughed under my breath. “Orion? Proud? That’s hard to imagine. He’s only ever proud of himself.”

“I’m serious,” Keto said. “He may not say it directly to you, but he meant it when he said it to me.”

I tilted my head. “And you? Are you proud of me?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Of course. I’ve always been proud of you, even before the battle.”

Something in his voice softened the knot inside me.

My fingers curled slightly beneath the water. “Kira and Kate are in the woods,” I said, changing the subject slightly. “I just came to wash off the blood.”

He raised a brow. “Blood?”

“I killed a leopard,” I said, trying to sound casual. “We’re having it for breakfast.”

Keto smiled, a crooked, boyish grin that made my chest flutter for a reason I didn’t want to admit.

“You killed a leopard. Of course you did. And lucky me, I get to eat with you.”

I gave a small smile, still standing in the river, soaked and bare.

“Kate said you were the one who found us when Ben kept us captive,” I said softly, brushing a finger along the water’s surface.

Keto nodded, his eyes fixed on the river’s flow. “Yeah. We were tracking someone else in the woods, someone dangerous. While he was running, he unknowingly led us to the cave.”

I looked up at him, meeting his gaze. “So, you practically saved our lives.”

“You could put it that way,” he said with a small shrug. “But to me, it was a group effort. Kate, Orion, and I… we all played a part.”

“I didn’t think Orion would bother looking for us,” I admitted, a bitter edge lacing my voice. “But Kira, she was hopeful. Said he would come.”

Keto glanced at me. “Orion might be a cold dude sometimes, but when it comes to his pack, he doesn't mess around. If you're in trouble, he’ll cross oceans to find you.”

I studied Keto quietly, something unreadable flashing behind his words. “You speak like he’s saved you before,” I said gently. “Has he?”

He hesitated.

A muscle in his jaw flexed. “Maybe,” he said. “It’s a long story, and I’m not sure I want to talk about it.”

I didn’t press him. We all had our stories.

Then, his voice dropped into something softer, curious. “Can I join you?”

I froze. My breath caught halfway in my throat.

Before I could even form a reply, he was already tugging off his shirt. “Keto, wait."

But he didn’t. The shirt hit the ground. Then his shorts.

My jaw dropped. I barely had time to gasp before I turned around with a yelp and squeezed my eyes shut. “Oh my God!” I blurted. “Keto!”

He chuckled, unbothered. “Relax. We’re alone. No cameras. No patrols. You can breathe.”

“I am breathing,” I muttered, still keeping my eyes shut. “Barely.”

I heard the splash as he dove into the river. Water rippled around me, warmth fading into nerves.

I opened one eye… then the other.

He was in. Naked. And so was I.

Oh God… this isn't good.

I turned away, trying to give both of us space, whatever that meant when the space between us was made of nothing but river water and tension.

"Are you alright?" he asked, swimming closer, his voice low and laced with something that made my stomach flip.

"I'm fine," I lied.

He smiled. I could feel it more than see it. Then, he reached me.

His arms slipped around me in a quiet embrace. My breath stuttered.

And then I felt it, the pause.

The moment he realized.

His body tensed. He pulled back slightly, eyes searching mine as it dawned on him. I was naked. Completely.

He looked surprised.

Please don't, I pleaded in my mind, though I didn't say a word out loud.

But he did.

He pulled me closer again, his hand sliding down to my waist, then lower, resting against the bare curve of my backside. His eyes burned into mine.

And then his lips found mine.

Chapter 73

Lyra's POV

"Ravenna," a female voice called. It was Kate.

I froze at the sound of her voice.

Keto pulled back immediately, and I could barely look at him as we turned toward the shore.

Kate stood there with one hand on her waist, staring at us like she was piecing together a puzzle she never wanted to solve.

She didn't say a word.

Just nodded.

"Nice to see you, Kate," Keto offered, like we hadn't just been caught lip-locked and naked in a river.

Kate didn't even blink. Her eyes were on me the entire time. "Food's ready," she said. "And I'm not leaving until you come with me."

Keto gave a sheepish smile. "We weren't doing anything."

"I never said you were," Kate replied, her voice flat.

Keto turned back to me. "I'll go first."

He started swimming away, and I leaned toward Kate, whispering, "He's naked."

I pointed urgently, but she gave me a confused look, until Keto stepped out of the river, very naked.

“Jesus!” Kate yelled, turning around so fast she nearly slipped. “Why the fuck didn’t you tell me you were naked?!”

Keto scratched the back of his neck. “I'm sorry, Kate, I'm naked.”

“Too late!” she snapped, not daring to turn back around.

I giggled, trying to cover my mouth. “I tried warning you.”

Kate was still facing away. “Keto, what the hell are you doing naked in a river with a naked girl? Are you insane?”

“I didn’t know she was naked,” Keto said quickly.

“Oh, please,” Kate said, turning her head slightly. “Her clothes are right there. You’re telling me you didn’t see them?”

He looked genuinely confused. “Honestly? I didn’t.”

"Please, lead me to the spot where you guys are camping," Keto added, fully dressed.

Kate groaned. “Unbelievable. Just go straight ahead. You’ll find the camp. I’m not walking with you. I need to speak with Ravenna.”

Keto nodded and walked off, and I slowly swam to the shore, dripping wet and dreading whatever Kate was about to say.

I wasn’t even fully out of the water when she asked, “So, what exactly was going on between the two of you in there?”

“Nothing,” I said quickly, reaching for my clothes. “Just like Keto said.”

Kate's eyes narrowed slightly. "Really. So you're telling me two naked bodies in a river, and him all up in your space like that, nothing was happening?"

I looked away. "He was about to kiss me," I muttered. "Then you showed up."

Kate folded her arms. "Do you like that I showed up? Or do you hate it?"

I hesitated. "Honestly? I'm glad you stopped it."

She blinked, surprised. "Why?"

I sighed, tugging my shirt over my head. "Because… I'm not sure I want to be tangled up with both an Alpha and his Beta. It's a lot. And it's messy. The drama, the expectations, the way it'll twist everything, we're barely surviving as it is."

Kate nodded slowly. "That's fair. But unless you make it very clear to Keto, he's going to keep trying."

"I know." I glanced down at my hands. "That's the problem. I can't seem to summon the courage to tell him no. And at the same time, I can't pretend Orion doesn't affect me. I am his claimed mate, like it or not. And even if I'm mated to Keto, I belong to Orion. Legally. Emotionally, I don't even know anymore."

Kate was quiet for a beat. Then she said, "You like him. Orion."

"I hate it," I said, voice low. "But I think I'm growing fond of him."

Kate exhaled and rested a hand on my shoulder. "I don't have an answer for your problem right now, Ravenna. But you're going to have to choose. Because if you don't, someone else will make that choice for you."

I sighed as we started walking towards the camp, "I'd figure it out anyway."

She nodded once, "Yeah, I trust you would."

"What about you?" I asked, looking at her, "Any lover?"

"Used to have one, but then he died of cancer," her tone sounded calm, but I could tell there was pain underneath it.

"I'm sorry you had to lose him," I consoled her, patting her back.

"It's fine anyways. It's over one year now," she replied, smiling to hide her unease.

I looked away, drying my damp hair with my fingers when I caught a whiff of something, smoky, spicy, and unexpectedly mouthwatering.

I sniffed again. “You smell that?”

Kate lifted her nose and smiled. “Oh yeah. That’s Kira.”

We both picked up the pace, the aroma growing stronger with every step, seasoned meat roasting over fire, herbs simmering in fat. My stomach rumbled.

As soon as we stepped into the clearing, Kira’s voice rang out.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the lovebirds returning from their little river romance.”

I groaned. “Kira.”

“You took forever,” she said, raising a brow as she stirred the pot. “Wonder why.”

Kate chuckled and sat beside the fire. “Don’t worry, I made sure there was no romance happening.”

Kira laughed, dishing out generous portions of the cooked meat. She handed me a wooden bowl, and the moment I took a bite, my eyes widened.

“This is actually amazing,” I said, chewing slower. “I thought it would be weird, but, wow. You’re a great cook.”

Kate elbowed me lightly. “Ahem. I helped, too.”

“You lit the firewood,” Kira said with a smirk. “Let’s not stretch the truth.”

Keto, now fully dressed and seated beside us, hummed in satisfaction. “This is good. But I’ll go hunt a proper deer later, so we can have a real dinner.”

Kate raised a brow. “Four of us can’t even finish this one.”

“You’ll be surprised,” Keto said, and sure enough, he was right.

The conversation dulled as we all focused on eating. Bite after bite disappeared, and none of us paused until the last strip of meat was gone.

Then, slowly, I started to feel dizzy.

My eyelids drooped, Kate rubbed her eyes. “Is it just me or?” I asked.

“I feel it too,” Keto said, leaning back on his hands.

I blinked hard, trying to fight the sleep pulling at me, when Keto’s voice cut through the haze.

“Ravenna… your stepmother will be arriving tomorrow.”

My breath caught.

“What?” I whispered, every ounce of sleep vanishing in an instant.

Keto nodded. “Ruth. She’s coming.”

My chest tightened. That name was a ghost, and now, she was coming with her troubles.

Chapter 74

Lyra's POV

My hands went sticky from the meat, but I hardly noticed. My head was spinning because of her name; he just dropped like it was nothing.

“Why is she coming?” I asked, trying to sound casual, indifferent even, but I heard the sharpness in my own voice.

He leaned in a little more, elbows resting on his knees. "News of the fight spread faster than I thought. Word is, the Omega who led the charge is now an Alpha overnight." He smiled weakly, as if it was something to boast about. "Ruth may wish to visit her stepdaughter. Maybe even offer condolences to Orion for Ben."

My stomach churned. Stepdaughter. The word was bitter on my lips.

Kira leaned back in her seat, stroking the back of her hand over her mouth. "I don't know her, but I know everything about her. She's mean. Brutal. There's a rumor she killed Ravenna's father."

My blood ran cold. I didn't shift my face, didn't blink, but I felt something within me shatter.

Kate was laughing, brushing at a dust that wasn't there on her lap. "She's just an old woman. What could she possibly do? All we require is Ravenna's agreement, and we'll kill her before she's had a chance to say a word."

I fought Kate with my eyes, straight into her cold, hard eyes, and forced myself to breathe. In and out.

"You don't know what she can do," I said, more softly than I meant to.

Kira tilted her head at me. "You alright, Ravenna?"

I nodded, flashing a smile that had been little more than cracked glass. "Yeah. I'm fine."

But I wasn't.

Ruth was coming.

I couldn't get rid of the odd feeling that there was something wrong with her visit.

I stood up and began walking out toward the tree line. I needed fresh air. A minute to process.

Then I spun and slumped against the tree, curving my back, and gazed straight into the sky with the leaves. My hands were now curled into fists against both sides. "Ruth," I muttered softly.

"Didn't think you were the sneaking-out type." My body stiffened from the moment I heard the voice. Keto.

I faced the road where he came walking towards me. He was walking slowly, his hands in his pockets, and had a worried look on his face.

"Didn't take you for the follow-type!" I remarked, trying to smirk, but the smirk did not seem to land.

He shrugged. "You've been acting strange ever since dinner. Decided I'd just check in."

"I'm fine," I lied.

He approached me, his brows furrowing. "No, you're not. You've not been yourself lately. Not since the battle, maybe even before that." He paused. "What happened, Ravenna?"

The way he said my name, as if to make me relax.

I looked away, my arms crossed over my chest tightly.

"Now's not the time, Keto."

"Then when?" he asked softly. "You don't have to carry whatever it is alone.".

I breathed in through my nose, hard and deep, and turned to him full face. "Thanks. I do. But not today. I can't talk about it now."

He stared at me for a moment longer, as if he was going to push, but then he nodded slowly. "Okay. I won't push."

I walked back to camp, but before I had taken a single step, he said, "You know, whatever it is, you don't need to fake it with me."

I looked back over my shoulder. "I'll remember that."

And I left him standing by himself under a tree.

When I went back to camp, the fire had burned down to coals again, which reddened Kira's face in the light as she sat cross-legged by the fire.

She did not reply at first but merely glanced up at me with those keen eyes as if waiting.

"You can't keep hiding from Keto forever," she finally whispered, but firmly.

I took a breath, pulling at my hair. "I'm not hiding from him."

Kira tilted her head. "Could've fooled me."

I gritted my teeth, turned away. "He'll figure it out eventually. I know that. Just not yet. I'm not ready to tell him yet."

She barely nodded, as if she got what I was saying to her, but never did her eyes give. "Secrets don't stay buried long, Ravenna. Especially not in this pack. Especially not with him."

I said nothing. She was right. But that information did not make things any easier.

I waited a long time before I asked, "Where's Kate?"

Kira stretched out her hands. "She's sleeping in her tent. Said her stomach was too full to think straight."

That sounded real enough. I grinned weakly at the image of Kate curled up, sleeping as if she didn't care for anything.

Truth be told, I was probably more in need of that nap than she was.

"Me too," I said, already heading for my tent.

Kira yelled after me, "Don't count on sleep to fix everything."

I hesitated. "No... but it might make me forget for a couple of hours."

With that, I crawled into my tent, closed the flap behind me, and fell onto the meager bedding.

Sleep caught up with me earlier than I had expected. As though my body had been holding together by sheer willpower and had finally run out.

When I opened my eyes again, the sky outside had transformed to early evening.

I stepped out of the tent, stretching my arms above my head.

The camp was quiet, as though each slept in their respective tents, but when I looked. There was no one there, no Kira, Kate, or even Keto.

They left their packs behind, but the camp felt abandoned, as though they had hastily left.

Where the heck were they?

I surveyed around the surrounding trees and whispered, "Kira? Kate?"

There was no one answering.

I did not panic, not yet. Maybe they had gone for a walk or were out shopping for something. But all three of them? Without a word?

I breathed in and decided not to worry. They could not have gone very far. Instead of chasing shadows in the forest, I pulled out my backpack, searched for a granola bar, and sat down on a tree stump.

A couple of minutes passed. Then I started to hear noises, some snapping twigs, distant laughter on the breeze from the forest.

I stood stock still, attempting to listen. It was Keto's voice. And Kira's laughter. I smiled to myself. Maybe they were just joking. I released a tiny amount of tension and chewed another mouthful.

Then laughter stopped.

And that's when I picked up scents, it didn't smell like either of them.

I slowly raised my head, my heart already pounding. My fingers clenched on the granola bar more tightly as I looked in the direction of the sound.

Three people appeared out of the forest.

They were strangers, and they had their guns on me like I was a criminal.

Chapter 75

Lyra's POV

There were three men. Identical with bald heads, and they looked like triplets, only their expressions differed slightly; one was amused, one bored, the third dangerously alert.

The one in the middle narrowed his eyes. “Who the hell are you?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat and tried to keep my voice calm. “I’m just… camping. With friends. I didn’t mean to trespass.”

“This is private property,” said the one on the left, his voice suspicious.

I raised my hands slightly. “I didn’t know. No signs anywhere, nothing to show it was claimed.”

The one on the right cocked his head. “Then maybe you’re not very observant.” His gaze dropped to the snack in my hand.

I stiffened, the back of my neck prickling. “Look, I wasn’t trying to cause trouble. I had no idea we were in someone else’s territory. We’ll leave in the morning.”

“You won’t be going anywhere unless we say so,” said the middle one. “You’re coming with us.”

I hesitated. “I can’t just leave. My friends”

Click. The sound of the gun being cocked made me freeze again. It was the one on the right. He raised the weapon a little higher now, his stance shifting, ready.

I knew I could take them if I shifted. But that would reveal everything, what I was, what I could do. If they were human, it would put them in danger and expose me. If they weren't, well, then I'd just show my cards too early.

And I didn't know what they were yet.

I looked down at the granola bar still in my hand, suddenly nauseated. Slowly, I bent and placed it gently on the forest floor.

"Alright," I said, voice steady. "I'll come with you."

One of them gestured with the barrel of his gun. "Smart girl. Move."

I started walking, my mind already racing. Where the hell were Kira, Kate, and Keto? And what kind of trouble had I just walked into?

We had only walked ten steps when I muttered Screw it under my breath. I wasn't going with them.

I paused mid-step, muscles coiling tight. I could feel their eyes burning into my back, but I didn't care. I tilted my head just enough to glimpse the edge of the woods.

Then I bolted, fast, sharp, to the left.

"Hey! Stop!" one of them barked, and I heard the metallic snap of a gun cocking.

Too late.

A shot rang out. I ducked, veering behind a thick tree trunk just as the bullet cracked through the air where I'd been seconds ago.

Another gunshot echoed, but this one was different. Louder. Cleaner.

I peeked around the tree just in time to see one of the triplets collapse forward, blood spurting from his thigh. Behind him, a familiar figure emerged.

Kate.

Relief flooded me. But the bastard got up again, too fast, too smoothly. Human? No way. That shot should've dropped a man for longer than a second.

I sniffed the air. Damn it. They'd masked their scent.

My skin bristled. No more games.

With a growl, I shifted, bones snapping and fur erupting from my skin until my wolf form stood in the clearing.

The other two dropped their human guise, shifting with inhuman speed into feral werewolves with ash-gray fur and blue eyes.

Keto appeared from the opposite side of the woods, already mid-shift, and without wasting a breath, we charged.

It was chaos, snarls, claws, fur, the crash of bodies slamming against trees. They were strong, no doubt, but they were sloppy.

Keto tackled one and tore into his shoulder. I lunged at the second, slamming him to the ground and digging my teeth into his neck until he howled in agony.

It didn't take long. They were no match for us.

The one Kate shot didn't shift; he just writhed on the ground, groaning, clutching his thigh. Steam hissed from the wound. I shifted back into human form, panting hard.

Kate came closer, her gun still drawn. "Silver," she said, nodding at the bleeding one. "That's why he's not healing."

I wiped blood from my cheek. “You knew them?”

“Sort of,” Kate replied. “They’re wanted. Human traffickers. Organ harvesters. Disappearances in the west woods. I’ve seen their faces on wanted boards. I didn’t know they were werewolves.”

She reached for her phone. “I’m calling the police.”

“No,” Keto said sharply, shifting back into human form. His chest was still heaving. “You can’t hand over werewolves to human cops. You know what’ll happen, they’ll end up killing more people or exposing us.”

Kate frowned. “So what, we kill them ourselves?”

Keto met her eyes. “We handle our own. Here and now.”

My heart pounded as I looked down at the wounded man.

Were we really going to execute them?

Kira emerged from the trees, dragging a deer across her shoulders like it weighed nothing.

“I’ll drop this at camp,” she said, nodding toward the still-struggling werewolves. “You guys handle this mess. I’ll start getting dinner ready.”

She shot me a quick glance, her lips twitching into a half-smile. “Try not to let anyone die before I finish seasoning the meat.”

Then she turned and disappeared toward the camp, her hair bouncing behind her.

I turned back to the three on the ground. The scent of silver was strong on the one Kate had shot, his leg oozing around the charred wound. They hadn't said a word since the fight ended.

Keto crouched in front of them, folding his arms. "Werewolves don't usually get involved in trafficking and organ harvesting," he said. "Unless someone powerful is pulling strings."

None of them spoke.

He tilted his head. "So, who are you working for?"

Silence.

Keto sighed. "This is where Orion would come in handy. He's good at making people talk. Exceptional, actually."

The mention of Orion's name made their eyes widen. I didn't miss the way one of them flinched.

Keto grinned. "There it is," he said, standing slowly. "They always shiver when they hear his name. You think I'm scary? You don't know fear until you've been in a room with Orion and no exits."

He pulled out his phone.

"I could call him right now," Keto said, casually swiping his screen. "He'll be here in minutes. You've got one last chance to confess. Anything. Or he deals with you."

They said nothing.

I watched them carefully. Something in my gut twisted. I wasn't sure if it was fear or anticipation.

Keto pressed a button and raised the phone to his ear. It rang once.

Then I heard his voice.

“Keto.”

That one word had more weight than anything else said tonight. Calm. Cold. Controlled. It sent shivers through the men.

But it hit me differently.

My breath caught.

A slow burn spread through my chest, my stomach, my thighs. His voice had always done this to me, whether I wanted it or not.

Keto straightened. “We’ve got a situation. Three werewolves attacked Ravenna. Won’t say who sent them. I’m sure they were sent, though.”

A pause.

“How many?” Orion asked, tone clipped.

“Three,” Keto said.

“Kill two. Leave one alive for me. I’m on my way.”

Chapter 76

Lyra's POV

Keto ended the call and looked up at the men. They were trembling now.

“Guess what?” he said with a cold smile. “Only one of you gets to leave here breathing.”

Their fear thickened in the air.

And mine? Mine was tangled in a thousand knots I couldn’t begin to unravel, because Orion was coming.

And part of me wanted to run. But a darker part? It wanted to wait.

“I’ll talk!” the one on the left said quickly, his hands trembling. “Please, don’t let him come. We didn’t know you actually knew Orion.”

“We thought you were bluffing!” the other added, his voice cracking.

The third guy, the one bleeding from Kate’s silver bullet, tried to push himself up. “We’re sorry, we’ll talk! Just don’t let him come here.”

Keto didn’t even flinch. He put the phone down and turned to them. “Too late. He’s on his way.”

The men looked like they’d seen ghosts.

Keto looked at me, then at Kate. “What do you think? Should we kill two and leave one for Orion, like he asked? Or, let them all live?”

I didn't have to think long. "Honestly? Given how Orion handles things, it's actually more merciful to kill two of them now."

"Wait, wait!" the one on the right shouted, hands up. "Money. We'll pay. Anything. Just let us go, and tell Orion we escaped or something."

Kate arched her brow. "Any amount, huh?"

The man nodded eagerly.

She smirked. "Alright then. Let's say... two hundred million dollars. Can you afford that?"

The three of them froze. Then one stammered, "I can only afford fifty thousand dollars."

Without hesitation, Kate raised her gun and pulled the trigger.

BANG.

The shot echoed through the woods.

The man collapsed to the ground, dead.

I jerked back, even Keto blinked.

Kate blew air from her lips like she was bored. "Well, that makes it easier for you two. Now you only have to pick one."

And just like that, she turned and walked off, heading back to the camp without another word.

The remaining two men stared at her lifelessly, then looked at each other, and at me.

I glanced at Keto, waiting for the next move.

Keto stared after Kate, still holding his gun. He let out a short laugh, shaking his head slowly.
“She looks so much like Orion sometimes… you’d think they came out of the same womb.”

I raised a brow at him. “I know. It’s scary how comfortable she is with killing.”

He nodded. “I didn’t think she had it in her like that.”

I folded my arms, eyes flicking to the two men still on their knees, pale and shaking. “It can only get worse from here,” I said quietly. “Maybe, maybe this is why Orion wanted her close all along. She’s like him.”

Keto glanced at me. “Could be. But right now, it’s up to you.” He gestured toward the remaining two men. “Orion said we kill two, leave one. You pick.”

I sighed and looked at them. One was clutching his bleeding arm. The other kept staring at his dead brother on the ground like he couldn’t believe what just happened.

“I’m not cruel,” I said. “But you tried to hurt me. You pointed a gun at me. So maybe you should tell me, where were you taking me? And don’t lie.”

The man with the bleeding arm looked up quickly. “W-We were taking you to our boss.”

“Who’s your boss?” I asked.

He swallowed hard. “We don’t know his name. We just get orders. We meet at drop points. He pays well. That’s all.”

Keto stepped closer, but I raised a hand to stop him.

“You expect me to believe you risked your life for someone you don’t even know?”

The other man, the one with sweat dripping down his face, added nervously, “He’s not someone we question. If he tells us to bring someone in, we do it. We don’t ask.”

I turned to Keto. “Kill him. He doesn’t know anything useful.”

Keto didn’t flinch.

In one smooth motion, he reached forward, grabbed the man by the collar, and yanked him to his feet. Before the guy could beg or scream, Keto’s hand pierced his chest. Blood sprayed as he ripped the heart out, the man’s eyes still wide with fear as he dropped.

I looked away for a second, pressing my lips together. The sound of the body hitting the ground thudded in my ears.

Keto wiped his hand on the dead man’s shirt and turned to the last one.

He was shaking now, like a leaf in a storm.

I stepped closer. “I hope you’ve got something better to say… or Orion will get his hands on you next.”

I watched as he breathed hard, scared out of his mind. Blood from the other two soaked the dirt around us. I crossed my arms and turned to Keto.

“So, what are we doing with him? Are we bringing him to the camp? Or should we tie him up here?”

Keto’s eyes stayed on the man, unreadable. “We’re not taking him to the camp.”

I nodded slowly. “Good. I wouldn’t feel comfortable seeing his face around the fire tonight.”

“I’ll stay here,” Keto said, already crouching by one of the dead bodies. “Wait for Orion. Then we’ll clean up the rest.”

“You sure?” I asked, my eyes narrowing.

He looked up at me and gave a small nod. “Yeah. I’ve got it.”

I gave one last glance at the prisoner, who wouldn’t meet my eyes, and then turned around.

My feet felt heavier as I walked away, the air thick with blood and smoke and tension.

But I didn’t look back.

I headed straight for the camp.

As I stepped into the camp, the smell of cooking deer hit my nose. Kira was by the fire, focused, carefully turning the meat on a flat stone while Kate crouched beside her, handing over spices from a small pouch.

They looked relaxed. Normal. Like nothing dark had happened just minutes ago.

Kate looked up and smiled. “Dinner’s almost done. Hope you’re hungry.”

I nodded and walked over to sit beside them. My legs were just starting to relax beneath me when

Bang!

A gunshot cracked through the air. Loud. Sharp. From the direction we just came from.

We froze.

Kira's hands stopped moving. Kate's eyes snapped toward me. My breath caught.

"That came from Keto's direction," Kate said, already standing.

"But, it was only one guy left," I said quickly, heart racing. "Keto wouldn't shoot. Right?"

Kate didn't answer. Her expression had gone hard, serious.

She grabbed her gun from where it sat beside her, eyes already scanning the trees.

I stood too. "Let's go."

Kira stayed by the fire but nodded silently, her face pale as she turned back to the deer.

Kate and I didn't waste another second; we ran, feet thudding against the dirt, our minds spinning with questions.

Who fired that shot?

And why?

Chapter 77

Lyra's POV

The trees blurred past us as Kate and I sprinted through the woods. Branches snapped under our feet. My heart pounded like a war drum in my chest, every beat louder than the last.

That gunshot hadn’t come from the captive. It had come from Keto. But why? There was only one man left. What the hell had gone wrong?

Kate was ahead of me, moving like a shadow, fast and focused. My breath caught in my throat. Please don’t be dead. Please don’t be Keto.

We broke through the trees and reached the clearing.

Keto stood alone.

The last of the triplets was lying face down in the dirt, blood pooling beneath his head. Keto had a gun in his right hand. His expression was unreadable, too calm.

"What happened?" Kate asked first, her voice sharp.

Keto didn’t flinch. "He tried to run."

I stopped a few feet away, catching my breath. My eyes flicked from the body to the gun, to Keto’s face. "You said you’d wait until Orion came."

Keto looked at me slowly. "He tried to run," he repeated.

The silence that followed was too heavy. My gut twisted.

"You shot him in the head," I said.

"He gave me no choice."

Kate didn’t argue. She crouched to examine the body like it was roadkill.

I didn’t move.

Something in Keto's posture made it hard to believe. He was too calm. Too steady. Not even winded.

"Are you sure that’s what happened?" I asked.

His gaze cut to me. "You think I’m lying?"

I didn’t answer.

"Maybe he realized who I was. Maybe he panicked. Maybe I didn’t want to take the risk of him trying anything before Orion arrived," he said, voice flat. "Does it matter?"

Kate stood. "It doesn’t to me."

She started walking back toward the camp.

Keto and I remained in the clearing.

"I thought we agreed to keep him alive," I said quietly.

Keto stepped closer to the body and nudged it with his foot. "We did. Then I changed my mind. Orion doesn’t need him to understand what kind of threat we’re dealing with."

I crossed my arms. "I just… don’t want us turning into him."

Keto looked at me then, a long, unreadable stare. "That's what you're afraid of? Becoming Orion?"

I nodded.

He stepped past me. "Then stop pretending you don't already understand him. You just don't want to admit that you agree with the way he does things."

I turned to face him. "That's not fair."

"Maybe. But it's true."

We stood in silence.

"Come on," he said. "Let's move the body."

We dragged it deeper into the woods, hidden beneath thick brush. Keto said he'd burn it after dinner.

When we were done, we made our way back to camp.

Before we reached the clearing, he said, "Orion is still coming. Don't bother lying. He'll know the truth before you open your mouth."

I didn't answer. Because he was right, but Orion wouldn't be pleased that we killed all of them before he arrived. I still don't know how Keto is going to deal with that.

I wiped my palm down my thigh, still a bit shaken.
"You should still call Orion," I told him, my voice low. "Let him know they're all dead before he gets here. Just so there's no misunderstanding or suspicion."

Keto nodded. "You're right, I'll do that right away."

He pulled out his phone, thumb hovering for a second before he dialed.

I watched him pace as it rang. Once… twice… then it stopped.

“He didn’t pick,” Keto said, frowning.

“Try again,” I said.

He did. The second time, same result, no answer.

A third time.

Still nothing.

“He’s not picking,” Keto muttered, lowering the phone. His jaw tightened.

I folded my arms, suddenly uneasy. “That’s weird. He always picks your call.”

“Exactly.” Keto glanced toward the woods like he could sense something coming. “Unless he’s already on his way here.”

“Still,” I said, “you should leave a message. Let him know what happened. That we killed all three before he arrived.”

Keto nodded and started typing. “Smart.”

I looked back at the place where we were coming from. My mind racing, we had just killed triplets, but I didn’t feel bad for them. Not even a little.

Keto slid the phone back in his pocket. “Sent.”

“Alright. I’ll head back to the camp now,” I told him.

“You sure?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. You’ll wait here for Orion?”

“Yeah,” he replied.

I hesitated for a second, then said, “Be careful. You know how Orion gets when things don’t go according to plan.”

“I’ll handle it,” Keto said.

I gave him a small nod and turned around.

As I walked back toward camp, a strange weight pressed on my chest. Not fear exactly, more like anticipation.

Something about Orion not answering felt off. And I didn’t like it.

By the time I reached the camp, the fire had grown steady again, crackling softly under the deer Kira was carefully seasoning.

“The next time we go camping,” Kira said, flipping a slice of meat, “we’re using a place that actually belongs to Orion. That way, no more unpleasant surprises.”

Kate snorted. “Amen to that.” And I chuckled lightly.

Kira shook her head. “This trip was supposed to be just the three of us. Then Keto showed up, brought some drama with those funny-looking triplets, and now,” she sighed, “Orion’s on his way too. And God knows who he’s bringing with him.”

Kate smirked. “At least we had some moments to ourselves… quiet ones.”

I chuckled, dropping down beside them. “Short-lived peace,” I said.

I was just about to say more when a sharp scent brushed my nose. That scent, I knew it too well. My body went still.

Kate froze, too. Her head lifted slowly. “You smell that?”

Kira dropped the wooden spoon in her hand and sniffed the air. “Yep.”

All three of us said it at once.

“Orion.”

Chapter 78

Lyra's POV

There was no mistaking his scent. It filled the air thick and strong, like cold steel, pine, and a hint of smoke.

He was close.

Very close.

I stood up slowly, brushing my palms on my pants. “He’s here.”

Kira looked around. “Where’s Keto?”

“He stayed back to pick Orion when he arrives,” I said, not taking my eyes off the trees.

“Hope he had enough time to explain everything before Orion reached him,” Kate muttered.

My heart was beating a little faster now. Not because I feared Orion, well, maybe a little. But it wasn’t just fear. It was something else. Something deeper I didn’t want to name.

Heavy footsteps approached from the woods. The branches shifted. And then I saw him.

Orion stepped out like he’d always been there, like the forest made space just for him.

Black shirt, sleeves rolled up. Blood on his boots. His eyes scanning all of us, cold and unreadable.

Behind him were two of his men. I didn't know their names, but I recognized the same no-nonsense aura they carried.

Orion's eyes landed on me. They held. Didn't move.

Something in my chest tightened.

He spoke, voice low, calm, and dangerous. "Which one of you killed the third one?"

None of us answered immediately.

But Orion didn't need answers. He already knew.

He turned his gaze to the campfire. The scent of deer meat hung in the air.

Still staring at the flames, he said, "Next time someone disobeys me, make sure I don't have to come clean up the mess."

Kira cleared her throat, her voice cutting through the thick silence. "Keto killed him. The last one. He was trying to escape."

Orion didn't blink. He just stood there, jaw tight, eyes focused on the fire like it had just insulted him. Then he turned his gaze back to us.

"So I came here for nothing," he said, voice flat and sharp like a blade.

I swallowed hard, unsure of what to say.

Then he asked, "Where's Keto?"

I shifted a little. "He was supposed to bring you to the camp," I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

Orion's eyes flicked to me, unreadable. "I don't need anyone to bring me anywhere. I could smell you from a mile off. So… where the hell is he?"

"Boss."

We all turned as Keto stepped into the clearing behind Orion, his shirt still damp with blood, his expression unreadable.

Orion slowly turned to face him. "You should've at least told me you got something useful from those bastards before finishing them off."

Keto nodded once. "I did."

Orion raised an eyebrow. "And?"

Keto stepped closer, his voice calm. "They were working for someone. Claimed they didn't know who. Said they only followed orders and delivered people to a location."

"What location?" Orion asked sharply.

"They didn't say," Keto replied. "One of them lied about the land being private property, said they were supposed to bring Ravenna to their boss."

Orion looked over his shoulder at me. "Did you ask who the boss was?"

I shook my head slowly. "They said they didn't know. That they just take orders."

Orion's eyes darkened.

He turned back to Keto. "So we have no names, no coordinates, nothing."

"No," Keto admitted. "But they were definitely werewolves. Masked their scent well. Organized."

Orion's lips curled slightly, not a smile. More like disappointment dressed as indifference. "This was a waste of my time."

No one dared speak after that.

He turned around again and faced the fire. "Next time you deal with anyone who tries to snatch a member of my pack, you bring them to me. Alive. Understand?"

"Yes, boss," Keto said quietly.

Orion nodded once, cold and sharp.

Then his gaze found mine again.

And held.

But he said nothing.

That stare alone said too much.

And I hated how it made my heart pound.

I thought he would leave. That was what Orion usually did: show up, give an order, walk away like the wind. But he didn't. Instead, he turned to Keto and said, "Go with my men. Get to the mansion and get me a proper wine and a tent set up. I'm spending the night here with you guys."

I blinked. What?

"Just in case anyone else decides to come sniffing around," Orion added, like he was casually choosing a seat at a dinner table and not dropping a bomb. "I'd rather deal with them first-hand."

Keto didn't argue. He just nodded and left without another word.

Orion faced the fire again, eyes low like he could see something none of us did. Then he asked, “How long before dinner’s ready?”

Kira, still crouched beside the roasting meat, glanced up. “Twenty minutes, max.”

“Good,” Orion said, then turned to me. “Ravenna. Take me to the exact spot where you killed Ben.”

My stomach tensed. “Now?”

“Yes,” he said, without looking at me.

Kate stood abruptly. “I’ll come too.”

“No,” Orion said firmly. “Just her. You stay with Kira.”

Kate narrowed her eyes, but said nothing. She looked at me as if trying to read something in my face. I didn’t meet her gaze.

Orion was already walking. I had no choice but to follow.

As I caught up to him, I noticed the quiet in the air around us. No birds. No leaves rustling. Just footsteps and that faint buzz of tension I couldn’t shake.

I led him through the trees, the path familiar now, burned into my memory from earlier today. The place where Ben died. Where I ended him.

I could feel Orion’s presence beside me—calm, tall, unreadable. Like walking beside a storm you weren’t sure had passed yet.

“You didn’t have to stay,” I finally said.

“I didn’t ask if I had to,” he replied.

We walked a little farther.

“You think these men were sent?” I asked.

"Very certain,” he said without hesitation. "Just when I thought I had dealt with my brother, now it appears another enemy is brewing around the corner.

Chapter 79

Orion's POV

The forest was quiet, but not peaceful.

Each step I took beside Ravenna felt heavier than it should. Not because I was tired, but because something old had been stirred in me. Something I thought I had gotten rid of. The guilt that plagued me when I killed Nikki.

Ravenna walked just ahead, silent, eyes scanning the dark path like she knew exactly where we were going. Although she knew I had asked her to lead me there.

She didn't talk much, but her presence wasn't subtle. She had a pull. One, I had been trying too hard to ignore tonight.

Ravenna finally spoke, her voice quiet but clear. "Why didn't you show up during the fight?"

I kept walking, brushing past a low branch.

"I already had Ben," I said simply. "Had him trapped. I didn't need the battle to win."

Her footsteps slowed. "Then why allow it to happen?"

I stopped, turned slightly. "To let you lead."

She scoffed, not turning to face me. "Since when do you care about leadership?"

I didn't answer.

Because I didn't have an answer that made sense.

It wasn’t about leadership. Not really.

It was about her.

About seeing if she could rise.

If she was ever going to be my luna, then she has to step up and prove herself to me.

We went on, the silence pushing itself once again into infinite space. But this time, it was not emptiness but an ocean of all the nonverbal things that we would not say to each other.

Approaching the clearing, the scent of blood hit my nose, and I knew it was there that the battle had taken place.

I entered the clearing and halted silently. I was aware of the silent tension of this place.

I let my gaze wander through the trees, blood, silence.

There she was beside me. She said nothing, then steadily reached out and took hold of my hand.

"I'm sorry for your brother."

I had no answer. I wanted to feel something; I wanted to cry. I simply gazed numb and mute into the distance.

After some time, I said, "You will resume training with me."

She blinked at me. "What?"

"You're an alpha now," I said, "But you still don't fight like one."

She furrowed her brow. "Is this really the time for that? You're trying to act like Ben's death didn't affect you. You don't have to hide how you feel all the time."

I slowly emerged to turn towards her. "Wars are not won through emotions," I whispered. "Strategies are applied, and ruthlessness has to prevail."

She shook her head. "We're certainly not on a battlefield now. It's just the two of us here."

I turned away, lost for words. She was drawing herself closer to me; I could feel it, and I did not avoid it. I wanted to avoid it.

She cared.

For just that beat, I wanted to pull her close and give her a kiss in that quiet little open space where neither of us would be seen.

But I didn't.

I couldn't.

I found myself still grieving for my brother. And whenever I grieve, I don't touch; I don't feel; I don't let anyone in.

She held down my hand with more force as if she sensed what was running through my mind.

I gently pulled my hand away.

Her eyes stayed on me, soft but knowing. Like she could see through the hard shell I always wore.

I looked out at the clearing again and took a breath.

“I’ve seen what I came to see,” I said. “Let’s go back.”

She didn’t argue. She just nodded and turned with me.

We walked back through the trees in silence, but something between us had changed. We didn’t speak, but we both felt it.

And I knew it wouldn’t be the last time I’d almost kiss her.

When we got back to the camp, the smell of roasted deer filled the air.

Kira stood near the fire, a stick in her hand. “Dinner’s ready,” she said with a small smile.

I nodded and walked toward the log by the fire. As I sat down, Keto arrived through the trees, alone. He carried a rolled-up tent under one arm and a bag clinking with glass.

He dropped the tent beside the others and pulled out three bottles of wine. “Got what you asked for, boss,” he said, handing me the wine.

I took it from him. “Now that’s how to camp,” I said, holding the bottle up. “A good fire and good wine.”

Kira stepped closer, her eyes softer than usual. “I’m sorry about your brother, Orion,” she said quietly.

I gave her a small nod. “It’s fine.”

It wasn’t, but I wasn’t about to spill my feelings in front of everyone.

I opened the first bottle, took a swig straight from it, and leaned back against the log.

The wine was strong and dry. Just the way I liked it.

Kate glanced at the tent on the ground. “You want me to set that up for you?”

“No,” Keto said quickly. “I’ll do it.”

He started unfolding the tent while I watched the flames rise higher over the firewood. The crackling sound was the only noise for a few seconds.

The deer meat sizzled and popped, and Kira began slicing off pieces with her blade.

She handed the first cut to me. “Eat. You need it.”

I took it without a word.

As the warm meat touched my lips, I didn’t taste much, but I kept eating anyway.

Sometimes food wasn’t for pleasure. It was for staying grounded.

Keto finished setting up the tent and came back to sit near the fire.

No one said much.

Just fire, wine, and quiet chewing.

And even though I was surrounded by them, I still felt like I was alone.

Mourning had a way of doing that.

Kate broke the silence. “You should’ve seen Ravenna during the battle,” she said, grinning. “She was a beast. Like full-on savage mode.”

I looked at her. “Says someone who knows nothing about werewolf fights.”

Kira burst out laughing, and even Keto bit back a chuckle.

Ravenna raised a brow at me, a small smile forming. “Wow. Is this the first time I’m hearing you throw a joke?”

Kira leaned forward. “Orion can be funny. You just haven’t seen that side yet.”

I didn’t reply. I just took another sip of wine.

“Kate,” I said, turning to her, “Keto will start training you. Immediately.”

Keto nodded. “Got it.”

“She only uses her guns,” Kira added. “She can’t shift.”

Kate didn’t say anything. She just sipped her water, eyes on the fire.

Then Ravenna turned to me. “Can I ask something?”

I gave her a small nod. “Go ahead.”

Her eyes stayed on mine, calm… but curious.

“Who was the witch that helped us during the battle?”

The question hit me harder than I expected.

My grip on the bottle tightened just a little. I didn’t answer right away.

Everyone was suddenly quiet again.

Even the fire seemed to hush.

I looked into the flames, avoiding her eyes now.

She noticed.

“Orion?” she pressed, gently.

I looked at her again, straight this time. My eyes met hers. No more dodging.

Chapter 80

Lyra's POV

I didn’t plan to ask the question.
It just… slipped.

But once it left my lips, the whole camp went quiet. Even the fire stopped crackling, like it was waiting, too.

“Who was the witch that helped us during the battle?”

Orion did not react.

He just gazed at the fire. Still. Silent. His hold on the bottle of wine tightened infinitesimally, though.

That alone was enough to make me aware that this was no random witch.

I sat there, watching him. "Orion?" I spoke softly this time.

He turned to me at last.

There was something in his eyes that eluded me. Pain, maybe. Or memory. Or both

"She's someone you all will meet soon," he whispered.

That was it. No name. No history. Nothing more.

Kira blinked. "So you're not going to say who she is?"

Orion sipped from the wine. "No."

Kate frowned. "Why not? She's the one who saved our lives. We have a right to know."

"She assisted because I requested it," Orion replied. "That's all you need to know for the time being."

I looked up fractionally. "So we'll see her again?"

He nodded. "Soon."

He spoke calmly, but I saw the wall going up in him again. Whatever had occurred with that witch, it still smoldered in him. Deep and secret.

Kate settled back, unimpressed. "Well, I certainly hope not one of those others. Can't trust a lot of them."

Kira shrugged. "She saved Ravenna, and she helped us win the battle. That's all I need."

Orion said no more. He just filled himself up with wine and stared into the fire again as if the conversation was over.

But I kept watching him.

For even though he said no more.

I could see, the witch meant a lot to him. More than he wanted us to know.

When we finished dinner, Keto stood up and rubbed his hands.

“I’ll take the first watch,” he said, then walked into the trees without another word.

It was obvious Orion's presence changed the atmosphere in the camp; nobody felt really free around him.

Kira stretched her arms and yawned. “I’m going to my tent. That deer wore me out.”

Then she stood and disappeared into her tent.

But Kate stayed behind, "I'll stay back," she said, as though they were going to leave Orion and me alone.

"You don't have to guard," Orion said, gentle but firm.

"I do," she replied. "I'll stay at the other end. Just in case." She picked up her gun and set off towards the far trees.

Now we were on our own. Me and Orion.

I sat with him, the flames burning low between us.

"We were having a good time," I said to him, poking at the ground with a stick. "Just the three of us. And then you and Keto came and spoiled it."

He did not say anything right away. Just stared into the fire.

Then he said, "We can go camping again. Another day. Just us.".

I stared at him. "You? Camping? You don't exactly seem the type."

"I am," he shrugged. "But not with deer or chicken."

I raised an eyebrow. "Then what do you camp with?"

"Lions. Tigers. Every now and again wolves," he said matter-of-factly. "Out in the wild. Sometimes by themselves."

I blinked. "Is that supposed to impress you?"

He stared at me, a small smile on his lips. "To be a beast, you must fight beasts."

I rolled my eyes, smiling slightly. "So it's proving something, then?"

He didn't respond. Just went back into silence.

I took a deep breath. My chest constricted, but I spoke anyway.

"I heard my stepmother is coming to see you. Can you let me know why?"

Orion's face didn't change. Just stared at the fire, as if he hadn't even heard me.

I stood stock still, waiting. The silence stretched on too long.

"Really?" I asked again, this time softer. "That Ruth is visiting you?"

He did not look at me when he answered. "Yes."

That one word cut harder than I had expected.

"Why?" I pushed forward, trying to sound casual, not caring about. But I was. Deeply than that, I was.

And then he considered me, moonlit dark eyes. "Word travels quickly. Your name's everywhere now. Ruth wants to see for herself."

I swallowed. "That's all? Just curiosity?"

His lips curled, nearly a smile, but not warm. "She's your stepmother, Ravenna. You know her better than I do."

I shifted my head, my chest tightening. I hadn't known why I even asked. Maybe I'd wished that he would answer in a different way, like that he was protecting me, that he didn't trust her, either.

Instead, he continued, "You and your stepmother don't exactly get along. I'm sure she will try to subjugate you."

I laughed. "I think she'd like to find a way to kill me permanently."

He ground his jaw as if remembering something, "I guess it does run in your family. Betrayal."

I was not expecting that. I had no idea what to say, and he said it as though someone in my family, Ravenna's family, had betrayed him at some point.

The fire crackled softly. We both lapsed into silence again.

The silence was too prolonged between us. I looked at him, his face still, eyes lost in the fire.

Something in me strode ahead. A yearning I couldn't explain, and before I could stop myself, I leaned in.

Enough to feel the warmth of his skin.

But before our lips would have met, Orion stepped back.

He didn't say a word for a moment. Then he stood up.

"Goodnight, Ravenna," he said brusquely.

I stared in surprise. Before I could open my mouth, he turned and went toward his tent and disappeared inside.

I looked at the empty space he had taken, my heart twisting hard.

What just occurred?

Furious and confused, I stood and swept away the dirt from my legs. My chest felt heavy.

I needed some air, maybe something else to occupy myself.

So I went and checked up on Keto.

He was lying on a log at the edge of the trees, his eyes scanning the blackness that enveloped us.

He turned as he heard my footsteps. "Hey."

"Hey," I said quietly. "Orion's in bed."

Keto nodded. "Figured."

I tilted my head. "Aren't you going to bed at all soon?"

He shrugged. "I don't know yet."

I sat with him for a bit, and he continued, "You know, we haven't really talked since Orion's birthday."

I stared at him, surprised at his tone.

He looked down at his hands. "I kinda miss that. Talking with you."

I released a soft laugh. "You're overacting."

He forced a smile. "Maybe. But I'm serious."

I didn't know where this was going, but I had an inkling. One, I did not wish to be proven true.

I got up. "We'll talk about it tomorrow, okay? I want to go visit Kate before I go to bed."

I started to make my exit, but he stopped me with a hold on my hand.

"Wait," he said.

Before I could even question him as to what he was doing, he stood up and pulled me closer, and kissed me.

I froze.

His lips were warm. But not the lips I wanted.

I didn't respond at first. Then, gradually, I began to yield.

Until footsteps.

We both heard it.

We separated the moment we did, as though caught in the act of doing something naughty.

My heart pounded in my chest as we turned to see who it was...

Chapter 81

Lyra's POV

My heart lurched, expecting to see Orion. Only God knows what he'll do this time around to Keto for kissing his mate.

But it wasn't Orion. It was Kate.

Her braid swung as she cleared her throat. "Didn't see you in your tent, Ravenna," she said, her voice low but pointed. "Thought I'd check if you were with Keto."

I pulled away from Keto, my cheeks burning, "I was just leaving," I said, too quickly, smoothing my dress as I stood.

Keto's hand brushed mine, but I didn't dare look at him. "Good night, Keto."

He murmured a soft reply, his voice rough with unspoken words.

Kate's lips quirked as she stepped aside to let me pass. "Get some sleep, Keto," she called over her shoulder. "The gods'll watch over us tonight."

We walked in silence for a moment. Then she spoke, her voice low, "You're playing a dangerous game, Ravenna. And Keto's in way over his head."

I swallowed, my throat tight. She wasn't wrong, but I didn't have the words to argue.

"Good night, Kate," I said instead, my voice flat as I walked toward my tent.

"Good night," she replied, her tone softer now, almost pitying.

I slipped inside, the canvas flap falling shut behind me.

My bedroll was cold; the furs could barely give any warmth to my curled-up body, and I thought that sleep was impossible: thoughts about Keto's touch, Kate's warning, and Orion's very name all tied my mind into knots.

Restless sleep accompanied me in and out until a soft rustling woke me so sharply I could barely breathe.

I froze, heart pounding, as a figure crept into my tent; a tincture of red interlaced with the shadows. It was Orion.

My breath hitched. He knelt by my side, dark hair falling over his brow, expression unreadable but intense.

"Couldn't sleep," he said, and the very sound of his voice sent a chill down my spine.

"Neither could I," I barely whispered.

I felt no clue why I said those words or why I didn't send him away by force. Maybe it was because of the way his fiery gaze seemed to sear through me.

He edged nearer, his hand caressing my arm.

I don't know who initiated it-the action, whether it was me or him-but suddenly we were joined, his lips on mine.

His hands were like a caress, forgiving each forbidden area, sliding under my dress, clutching my breast with his thumb gently brushing over my nipple, causing me to exhale sharply into his lips.

My body merged in reaction to his touch.

He pulled back just a little, allowing time to drag my clothes over my head. I fumbled with his belt, that soon gave way, and he pressed himself against me.

His hands gripped my hips, guiding the opening of myself to him, and inside he went, filling me with such slow thrusts that, aided by heavy breaths, I could hardly breathe.

I bit down on my bottom lip, trying to suppress the moan, but it scarcely had time to escape before-

Orion's hand clamped over my mouth, his heated breath brushing my ear.

"Shh. Don't want to wake the others."

I nodded, locking my eyes on his right as he drove deeper and harder, henceforth glistening underneath his touch.

His hand stayed over my mouth as the tight coiling of pleasure within me burst, my body clenching around him.

His hoarse murmurs carried on as he too found release, his grip becoming more firmer as he buried the face of his neck in mine.

For several moments, we remained in that position, his hands were off me for a little while as it rested gently on my cheek.

The harsh wash of exhaustion hit me, and I went down deep into sleep.

When I opened my eyes to the sunlight, I found myself automatically reaching out for Orion's body, and I only met with an empty spread of furs.

He was gone.

I sat up, pulling the fur closer to my chest. My legs ached faintly, a reminder of what we'd done.

My heart twisted. No word. Nothing but silence and the faint smell of his body in the furs.

Was it just a moment to him?

Or was it something more, and he's just afraid to show it?

I dressed slowly, letting the questions circle in my head without answers.

Maybe I shouldn't have let it happen. Maybe I should have stopped myself before I fell any deeper into whatever this thing was between us.

But I hadn't. And now I had to face the day, and him, if he was still around.

When I stepped out of the tent, the smell of herbs and meat drifted through the camp.

Kira and Kate looked up when they saw me.

"You're up," Kira said with a small smile. "We didn't want to wake you. You looked… peaceful."

I tried to return the smile, but it felt weak. "Thanks."

Kate's eyes narrowed just a little. "Orion already left. Said he had things to take care of."

So he was gone. I nodded slowly, hiding my disappointment.

Kira handed me a flask of warm tea as I settled beside the tent.

"You just missed them," Kira said, her voice calm. "Orion had to head back. Keto took him."

I blinked, trying to hide the twist in my chest. "Just like that?"

Kira nodded, “He said there were matters waiting for him at the house. Keto will come back for us soon.”

Kate didn’t say anything more. She was packing up her tent, her movements sharper than usual.

I tried not to let the silence get to me, but I could feel her eyes on me, like she knew exactly what had happened last night, even if she didn’t say it out loud.

I sipped the tea slowly, keeping my gaze low.

We broke camp quietly. No one spoke about the night before.

By the time we were done packing, the sun had fully risen and warmed the woods. We sat on a log together, waiting for Keto.

Kate finally broke the silence. “Alright,” she said, stretching her legs, “what happened last night?”

I blinked. “Nothing.”

Kira raised an eyebrow and cleared her throat dramatically. “Nothing?” she repeated, then gave me a sly look. “Because I could’ve sworn someone was moaning like they were being kidnapped.”

My face went hot instantly. “Kira,” I hissed.

Kate blinked, then turned fully to me. “Wait. Was it Keto or Orion?”

Before I could answer, Kira snorted. “Orion. I saw him coming out of your tent this morning. Looking like nothing happened.”

Kate’s mouth parted in surprise. “No way.”

I looked away, cheeks burning. “Can we not talk about this?”

Kira shook her head, almost smiling. “Keto also knows, Ravenna. I said you can’t hide it from him. Didn't I?"

I turned sharply. “Wait, what?”

Chapter 82

Lyra's POV

Kira gave me a pointed look. “He knows. I didn’t tell him, if that’s what you’re thinking. But he’s not stupid. He noticed something was off last night.”

My stomach sank.

Kate leaned back against the tree, arms crossed. “This is going to get complicated.”

“It already is,” I muttered.

They both went quiet, giving me space—but I could feel their eyes. Judging? Maybe. Or maybe just concerned.

I hated this.

The waiting. The silence. The feeling that no matter what I did, someone would get hurt.

Before I could say anything else, a familiar engine sound rolled in through the trees.

Keto.

I stood up slowly, brushing dirt from my pants.

Back to reality.

Kira leaned closer to me with a small smile. “By the way… I was joking earlier.”

I blinked at her. “What?”

She shrugged. “Keto didn’t see anything last night. He was on watch the entire time. If he had noticed Orion sneaking into your tent, trust me, you’d know by now.”

Kate raised an eyebrow. “Then maybe he suspected something. Maybe that’s why he didn’t come near the camp. He didn’t want to hear anything… especially not Ravenna moaning.”

Kira gasped softly, nudging Kate. “Ouch. That was harsh.”

I shook my head, sighing. “Alright. You’ve both proven your points.”

But Kira wasn’t done.

“No,” she said softly. “I still don’t think you get it, Rae. It’ll hurt more if Keto finds out from someone else… or worse, if he figures it out on his own. You should tell him yourself. It’ll sting less coming from you.”

I swallowed hard, eyes on the forest floor.

Before I could answer, we heard the sound of his footsteps.

Keto.

The three of us fell silent instantly. The breeze moved the leaves gently as he stepped out of the tree blocking him and walked toward us.

“Morning,” he said, his voice light. “Hope you all had a great night.”

“Yes,” we chorused almost too quickly.

He smiled. “Great. You all packed?”

We nodded, and he gestured toward the car. “Alright then, let’s go.”

We picked up our bags and followed him quietly. No one said a word as we placed our things in the trunk.

Kira slid into the front seat beside Keto, chatting lightly as if nothing had happened. Kate and I sat in the back. I looked out the window, my chest tight.

I could feel Keto’s calm presence in front, driving, making jokes with Kira.

And I wondered if he really didn’t know.

Or if he was just waiting for me to say something.

The car moved smoothly along the dirt road, and for a while, no one said a word. Just the humming engine and the soft wind slipping through the windows.

Then Kate broke the silence.

“So, now that Ben is gone,” she said, glancing at all of us, “things go back to normal, right?”

Keto let out a low chuckle, but it didn’t sound amused.

“Normal?” he repeated, his hands firm on the wheel. “Nothing’s gone back to normal. Ben’s death, that’s just the beginning. The tip of the iceberg compared to what’s coming.”

A cold feeling spread through my chest. I turned to look at him, and even Kira leaned forward slightly.

Keto continued, his voice calm but serious. “Orion revealed his secret weapon during the battle. Now, every pack out there knows he has a witch on his side. A powerful one.”

He glanced at us through the rearview mirror. “You know what that means?”

None of us answered.

“It means they’ll unite,” Keto said quietly. “The other packs… they’ll see Orion as too powerful. Too dangerous. And when fear rises, war follows.”

The mood in the car shifted. Dread filled the air like thick smoke. We all felt it.

“So what’s the plan?” Kate asked, her voice softer now.

“For now,” Keto said, “Orion wants to clean house. He believes someone, or maybe more than one person, in the mansion was working with Ben. They already caught the driver who kidnapped you and Ravenna.”

My jaw clenched. “Now I wish we hadn’t left the camp.”

Kira looked at me, then at Keto. “But, the burial? It’s still today?”

Keto nodded once. “Yes. Ben gets buried before sunset. Then… everything begins.”

None of us spoke after that.

We pulled up to the mansion, and the first thing I noticed was the security.

There were more guards than usual, double, maybe even triple. Men in black moved around with serious faces, guns strapped to their sides.

They didn’t stop us, though. Keto was behind the wheel, and all it took was one nod from him for the gates to open.

As soon as he parked, we all got out, stretching a bit from the long drive. But before I could ask where we were going next, Keto turned to Kate and Kira.

“I’ve prepared your rooms,” he said.

Kate raised a brow. “Our rooms?”

Kira glanced at me. “I thought we’d all be staying together.”

I thought the same. “You said they’d be with me,” I said to Keto.

He didn’t meet my eyes at first. “Change of plans,” he said. “Orion wants you all in separate rooms.”

My heart dropped a little. It felt like a small shift, but it stung more than I expected.

Keto continued, “No more cameras in your rooms. Orion gave the order himself. Full privacy. You’ve all proven yourselves loyal.”

Kira gave a small smile, like she appreciated that. Kate just nodded.

But then Keto added one last thing.

“And… Ruth is here.”

I blinked. “What?”

“She arrived this morning,” he said quietly, his tone soft but steady. “Orion let her in.”

My breath caught in my throat. Just like that, the calm I’d tried to hold onto shattered. My stomach twisted painfully.

Ruth.

I barely heard anything else. My ears rang, and for a second, the noise around the mansion faded to nothing.

She was here.

In this house.

The same house where Ben once walked. Where I had finally started to feel… safe.

And now she was here.

Chapter 83

Lyra's POV

We came down from the vehicle and headed straight to the mansion. Keto went in first, and I went in behind him.

As soon as I stepped into the living room, the cold air from the Air conditioner hit my face.

And then I saw her, Ruth, the woman who I believed had brought misfortunes to Ravenna since she was born, and now I seem to have inherited her troubles.

She sat in the living room like she owned the place. Her legs crossed, arms resting neatly on the armrest, a cup of tea balanced in her hand.

Her gaze landed on me like a knife.

She didn't blink. Didn't smile. Just stared with that same sharpness I remembered, like she was trying to read everything I didn't say.

I greeted her first, my voice steady. "Good afternoon, ma'am."

Kate and Kira followed politely.

But Ruth didn't respond to them. Not even a nod. Her cold eyes stayed fixed on me, like the others didn't exist.

"Well," she finally said, her voice smooth but thick with sarcasm, "someone's clearly doing better under Orion's protection. You look refreshed."

The weight of her stare made my chest tighten. But before I could say a word, Kate stepped in, nudging me gently forward.

“Sorry, ma’am,” she said, her tone light but firm. “You and your stepdaughter can catch up later. We’ve had a long day and, as you can see, we’re barely standing. Some rest first.”

Ruth blinked, clearly stunned by the interruption. Her gaze shifted for the first time, focusing on Kate with a mixture of surprise and interest. “And you are?”

Kate smiled, unfazed. “Kate.”

Then she turned away like the conversation was over, and Kira followed her up the stairs. I gave Ruth one last nod before trailing behind them.

But as we climbed, I could feel Ruth’s eyes on me.

And more than anything, on Kate.

Upstairs, the hallway was quiet, thick walls muffling the world downstairs. But not our thoughts.

Kate shook her head. “Your stepmom is a classic witch. The type that drinks her own bitterness for breakfast.”

Kira chuckled. “That interruption back there? Epic.”

But I wasn’t smiling. I knew what Ruth was capable of. I had lived it.

I sighed. “Yeah, well… congrats, Kate. You’ve just joined the hate list.”

Kate smirked. “I don’t care. Let her hate me. She should know Ravenna’s not alone anymore.”

That made something warm stir in my chest. I didn’t say it out loud, but I was grateful.

Keto pointed to the door on the left. “Kira, this one’s yours.”

Kira didn’t even hesitate. “Don’t knock. Don’t call. I’m sleeping.”

She opened the door, disappeared inside, and shut it behind her.

Keto gestured to the next room. “Kate, you’re here. Ravenna, I believe you know your room already.”

I nodded.

He gave us one last look. “Rest well. I’ll be downstairs.”

“Thanks, Keto,” we both said.

He turned and walked away, footsteps fading down the stairs.

Kate leaned closer as we started down the hall. “I’ll come to your room later. Just want to freshen up a bit.”

I nodded. “That’s fine." We parted company at her door, and I went on to mine.

After entering, I locked the door shut and sighed while leaning on it with tired strength.

As I looked up into one corner of the room, that was where the camera had once nestled into its little nook.

Gone now.

Finally.

I felt my very inborn sigh of relief being let loose; all the weight seemed to have been lifted off my shoulders. Now it looked like the room belonged to me; it had become safe for me.

I then put my bag down near the closet and stretched. The dull ache from the day's events sank into my bones.

I sincerely trusted the day had no more run-ins with Ruth lined up for me.

Slowly, I returned the day's clothes to their hideaway. It was a day when hardly anyone had the energy to rush.

I went into the bathroom, switched on the shower, and stepped under the flow of water.

The warm water was pouring all over me as if it were a river of relief.

I stood there for a long time, having a proper bath.

When I finally stepped out, I stood in front of the mirror, then I noticed a thin red mark where Orion’s fingers had held my chin the night before.

I didn’t know what to feel. Orion had made me feel wanted… and yet, he left without a word. No note. No knock. Just the echo of him.

And Keto, unlike Orion, has made it plain that he loves me.

I dried off, pulled on one of the oversized shirts I liked to sleep in, and climbed into bed.

The mattress felt softer than anything at the camp, but my body was too alert to relax.

I turned on my side, pulling the blanket over me, staring at the empty space beside me.

Was I being reckless? Or selfish?
Maybe both.

I closed my eyes and tried not to think.

But Ruth's glare.
Keto's kiss.
Orion's mouth on mine.

They all kept replaying like unfinished songs in my mind.

Just as I started to drift off, a soft knock landed on the door.

"One second," I called, pushing myself out of bed.

I slipped to the door and opened it.

Kate stood there with a bowl of fruit in one hand and two bottles of water in the other. "You thought I forgot?"

I smiled a little. "I was hoping you wouldn't."

She walked in like she owned the room, setting everything on the side table. "Bathroom steam still lingering. That's good, huh?"

"Almost made me forget Ruth exists," I muttered, sitting on the bed again.

Kate flopped beside me and handed me an apple slice. "Well, you're lucky. I could hear her pacing downstairs after we left. She's definitely plotting your slow, dramatic demise."

"I'm not surprised."

"She stared at you like you stole her last breath," Kate said, then added, "Or maybe her man."

I groaned. "Can we not do this today?"

“Alright, alright.” She leaned back on her elbows. “Let’s pretend we’re normal girls in a normal mansion, who didn’t just survive a wolf war, who aren’t being glared at by witches and stalked by bosses we may or may not have kissed.”

I threw a pillow at her, but we both laughed.

For a moment, it felt like things could be okay.

Kate sipped her wine slowly, eyes steady on me as if waiting for the right moment to speak.

Then she asked, almost casually, “Ravenna, do you know who your real mother is?”

The question landed like a slap.

I blinked. “What?”

Chapter 84

Lyra's POV

She leaned forward and set the glass on her knee. "I mean, not Ruth. Your actual mother."

My throat closed up. "I was told she died when I was a baby."

Kate nodded slowly, but her gaze never wavered from my own. "That's what you were told. Do you remember anything from being a kid? Anything prior to Ruth?"

I opened my mouth, but I couldn't speak.

I didn't know. I couldn't know. I was never Ravenna to start with.

But I couldn't tell her that.

"I... don't remember," I said cautiously, hoping that would suffice.

Kate leaned forward, intrigued. "You're saying that you don't remember your childhood?"

I shook my head, reluctantly.

She frowned. "Not even one thing? That's not normal, Ravenna."

My heart pounded.

She went on, "If I didn't know you, I'd say someone deleted your memories."

Something like a knife prodded behind my eyes.

A flash.

A scream.

A mirror.

A name I didn't know was yelling in my head.

And then it was gone.

I wheezed for air.

I tried to keep a neutral expression, but in my head, I was disintegrating.

She had no idea what she was really requesting.

I wasn't Ravenna. I didn't know the real mother of Ravenna, and what I did know I'd found out from rumor and inference. I looked at my hands, not knowing how to react.

"I guess I never really asked," I said softly, trying to make that ring true.

Kate leaned back, thinking. "Odd. You'd think you'd be curious about something like that."

I tried to smile at her weakly, but something cold was crawling up my back.

And a shock. Not hurt, but pull. As though something were opening inside me.

My head spun again.

Glance of sight:
A woman with silver eyes, placing her hand on the chest of a child.
Speaking something in a sound I couldn't distinguish.

And then it was gone.

Kate was talking, and I heard nothing. My heart tightened. My heart thundered in my ears.

I sprang up off the bed. "I need air."

"Ravenna?" Kate got up too. "You okay?"

"I just need a sec."

I walked out into the hallway, wide-eyed, frantic pulse. My mind in a jumble. My breathing is uneven.

Then I heard it.

"Ravenna," a voice I knew said.

I whirled around.

Kevin was at the end of the hall.

Seeing him made me sick.

Not tonight. Not him.

He stepped a little closer to me. "Hey. You okay?"

I glared. "I'm not in the mood for your talks or whatever dumb scheme you've got going on for tonight. Save it," I growled.

His brows were furrowed. "What the hell? What's wrong with you?"

I couldn't keep it in anymore. Not with the world ending around me.

I took a step forward, my tone curt and acidic. "I'm sick of playing along. You disgust me. Seriously? I wish you were dead sooner. For goodness' sake."

That wiped the smirk off his face.

He looked over his shoulder, like maybe I was talking to someone else.

When he did not notice anyone around, he nervously chuckled. "Alright. You have to relax. You know, Ruth is plotting something. She wants you out. I'm the only one who can help you."

"Go to hell," I growled, cutting him off.

His face contorted, my hand on his face. Before he could talk any more, I used it to hit him.

"Or should I say... Jacob?" I inquired, "You can never change."

The name was like a punch in the stomach.

He toughened.

His face grew pale.

For a moment, he was as though a man who'd just seen a ghost.

"You, what did you just say?"

I stepped closer, looking directly into his eyes. "Don't lie. Jacob. That is your real name, isn't it?"

He didn't answer.

Didn't even blink an eye.

Just stood stock still in place.

Then he tried to cover, sneering. "You're getting me mixed up with another person."

"Don't try to be obnoxious," I growled. "You're a phony. A wimp. You never have changed."

His mask slipped then.

He reached for my arm, maybe to grab me, maybe to silence me.

Bad plan. I curled my hand around his wrist and spun him into the wall and held him up by the throat.

He struggled and kicked, heels scraping against the floor, eyes bulging.

"Touch me once more," I said quietly, "and I swear on my life, I'll kill you outright. No more lies. No more lies. No more hurting people who believe in you."

He squirmed in my grip, explosively coughing.

I released him. He collapsed onto the ground, gasping for air.

I leaned over, looking into his eyes once more. "Now get out of my sight before I change my mind, which I do admit is not a good idea."

He staggered away, coughing, and went down the corridor without saying a word.

I stood there for a few seconds, trying to keep the fire inside.

I wasn't going back to my room.

I was walking right into Kira's.

I knocked gently, sneaking the odd look down the corridor to make sure Kate wasn't coming out.

The door creaked open. Kira stood there in her top, smiling when she saw mine.

"Something wrong?" she demanded immediately.

I slipped in unheard.

"I think I blew it," I said to her, my voice lower than usual. "I lost it. I could have blown it for me."

Kira's brow furrowed. "What happened?"

"I bumped into Kevin. He tried to talk to me, and I lost it. I called him, Jacob."

Kira blinked. "Jacob?"

"That's what I used to call him. When I was in my body. It just escaped me." I smoothed my hair back, going slowly and carefully. "He's going to wonder. He's going to wonder why on earth I would have remembered that name."

Kira crossed her arms, thinking about it. "If he investigates, he won't find anything. There is no paper trail, no proof that links Ravenna to who you once were. You're safe."

I began speaking, my mouth open in reaction, and then it hit me.

A flash. A vision.

So real it made me lurch.

I grasped the rim of the table next to Kira's bed to hold myself up as the vision hit me.

Ruth.
Her face relaxed, expressionless.

A knife. A knife in her hand.
Blood. A huge amount of blood.

A woman falling to the ground, gasping, eyes open.
And in the corner, a little girl.
Paralyzed. Motionless. Staring.
Ravenna.

I stepped back, my throat catching its breath.

I was shoved back by Kira. "What? What is what?"

Chapter 85

Lyra's POV

“I had a flash,” I told Kira, my voice shaky. “A piece of Ravenna’s memory. I think I know who killed her mother.”

Kira leaned in. “Who?”

“It was Ruth,” I whispered. “She killed her. I saw it clearly. Ravenna was just a little girl, hiding in a corner. Watching. She saw everything.”

Kira stared at me, wide-eyed. “Are you sure?”

I nodded slowly. “But… what I don’t understand is, why didn’t Ravenna do anything about it? She must’ve remembered. There’s no way she could forget something like that.”

Kira stood abruptly and began to pace. “You can’t tell anyone else about this. Not yet.”

She turned to me, her voice lower. “Where’s Kate?”

“In her room.”

“Stay here.” She left the room, her footsteps disappearing down the hall.

I sat, pulse still racing, and sipped the water Kira had handed me. My mind was spinning. The vision had been too vivid to dismiss. If it was real, and it felt real, then Ruth wasn’t just a problem. She was a monster.

A few minutes later, Kira returned with Kate trailing behind her, arms folded.

“Come on,” Kira said. “We’re going downstairs.”

Kate arched her brow. “What’s the plan?”

“Rattle Ruth,” Kira said. “Nothing aggressive. Just enough to make her slip. We need to know why she’s really here.”

Kate’s eyes darkened. “Or we could skip the games and kill her.”

Kira gave her a sharp look. “That would start a war. One even Orion doesn’t want to fight. We do this smartly. If she’s here on some secret mission, she’ll show her cards. We just have to watch.”

I hesitated. “Are you sure about this?”

“You’re not going to get answers sitting up here, are you?” Kira said gently, but firmly.

Kate smirked. “Besides, I’m kind of in the mood to mess with someone.”

Kira opened the door. “Let’s go.”

We walked out together, three women with one shared purpose: get Ruth to talk.

When we reached the living room, we were surprised to see that she was no longer there.

No Ruth. No smug smile. No lingering teacup.
Instead, two men and a woman I didn’t recognize sat casually on the couches, whispering among themselves.

Strangers. From other packs, maybe?

Kate glanced at Kira, then at me. “Where the hell? It seems she has gone, and-"

Before she could finish, the door to the hallway opened, and Keto stepped in.

“There you are,” he said, lowering his voice but not his concern. “What are you doing down here?”

“We came to talk to Ruth,” Kira said, watching the strangers carefully.

Keto stepped closer, his voice even quieter now. “You’re supposed to be resting. The burial is this evening, remember? Emotions are going to run high… especially with what’s coming.”

“Where’s Ruth?” I asked, ignoring the tension in his tone.

“In a meeting,” he replied. “With Orion. And a few leaders from different packs.”

Something tightened in my chest. “What kind of meeting?”

Keto hesitated, then leaned closer. “Private. Political. Ruth feels threatened by you, by the way.”

“Me?”

He nodded slowly. “You’re an Alpha now. Official. Recognized. Ruth’s afraid the packs will begin to see you as the next true leader, and not her. She's fighting for relevance.”

Kate folded her arms. “She’s scared Ravenna will replace her?”

Keto gave her a look. “She’s not just scared. She’s preparing.”

I felt a chill crawl down my spine.

“What does that mean?” I asked carefully.

Keto looked around, made sure no one was listening. “I don’t know yet. But whatever they’re discussing in there… It’s serious.”

“Do you think she’ll try something tonight?” Kira asked.

Keto’s jaw tightened. “She might not get her hands dirty. But if she’s trying to regain control, Ben’s burial is the perfect time to play her next card.”

He stepped back, voice returning to normal. “Go rest. You’ll need your strength. Especially you,” he said to me. “Eyes will be on you tonight.”

He turned and walked away, disappearing through the hallway.

The three of us stood there for a beat, uncertain.

Kate finally broke the silence. “This smells bad.”

Kira nodded. “Whatever Ruth’s planning, we need to be two steps ahead.”

I looked in the direction Keto had gone.

My fingers clenched into fists.

“I just remembered,” Kira said, snapping her fingers. “As the pack’s healer, I have every right to be in that meeting.”

I frowned. “What meeting?”

“The one Ruth is having with Orion and the other pack leaders,” she replied. “If she’s discussing anything about the pack’s leadership, I need to be there. And you, Ravenna,” she pointed at me, “you’re coming with me.”

I hesitated, the weight of it all settling in my chest. “Kira, I don’t think that's a good idea.”

“You’re an Alpha, Ravenna,” she cut me off gently. “And the current face of the pack. You’re the reason the others feel safe right now. If anyone should be in that room, it’s you.”

Kate chimed in from the hallway behind us. “I agree. You should go. Kira’s right. People will want to see you.”

I looked at both of them, then exhaled sharply. “Fine. But only because I want to know what Ruth’s really doing here.”

Kira nodded. “Exactly.”

She turned, adjusting her posture and brushing imaginary dust off her sleeves. “Let’s go before they make any major decisions without us.”

And with that, we headed toward the meeting room.

I swallowed hard. “I’m not hiding. I just don’t want to start a war with a stare.”

She stopped, turned to me with sharp eyes. “Then don’t blink first.”

That shut me up.

When we reached the hallway that led to the main hall, the energy shifted. I could feel it. Thick, heated, charged. Like something just under the surface was about to explode.

Two guards stepped aside when they saw us. No questions. No hesitation.

Inside, the room was full. Wolves from different packs. Some I didn’t know. Some I’d only heard stories about. And at the far end of the long table, sat Orion, his expression was unreadable.

And beside him,

Ruth.

She turned as we entered. Her smile was thin. Controlled and deadly.

Chapter 86

Lyra's POV

She didn’t say a word. But her eyes followed every step I took.

Kira cleared her throat. “Pack healer. Alpha Ravenna,” she said to the table, her voice even.

A few murmurs rippled through the room. Eyes shifted toward me. Some nods. Some stares. Some unreadable expressions.

Orion’s gaze met mine. Just for a second.

Then he looked back down at the file in front of him.

Ruth broke the silence. “Oh. I didn’t know this meeting was open to the newly crowned.”

Kira smiled politely. “Health matters affect every pack. And Ravenna, well, she did just save everyone’s lives.”

A beat of silence.

Then someone further down the table muttered, “Let her stay. We all need to hear this.”

Ruth’s jaw tightened. But she said nothing.

I took my seat. Right across from her.

Ruth cleared her throat, "As I was saying," she started, “I handed Ravenna, an omega, to Orion,” she said coldly, gesturing at me without looking. “Now she’s suddenly an alpha. I believe we all deserve an explanation.”

A few murmurs echoed across the table.

“And,” Ruth continued, her eyes now narrowing at Orion, “there’s word that you’ve secretly employed a witch. Everyone knows it’s forbidden. Witches have their own domains, ours is the territory of the claw and moon. If you breach that, others will too. And then chaos begins.”

She stood slightly. “I respect the western packs’ loyalty to Orion. But the other territories, north, east, and even the far south, won’t look kindly on this. If you want to prevent war, Orion, you must appease them.”

Orion sat silent, jaw flexing, but I could see the burn in his eyes.

One of the gray-haired Elders nodded slowly. “We agree. At the very least, the witch’s identity must be revealed. And we require a clear explanation of how Ravenna ascended.”

Another chimed in. “This could set a precedent we’re not prepared for. We need answers before the ceremony tonight.”

My pulse quickened. I could feel Kira tense beside me. And I couldn’t keep quiet anymore.

“This is ridiculous,” I said, stepping forward.

Ruth didn’t even glance at me this time. “You are not permitted to speak during an elders’ summit.”

“She speaks because I allow it,” Orion said, voice like steel, cutting through the tension.

Everyone went quiet.

His eyes never left Ruth's, and for a second, I thought I saw her flinch.

"Go on," he told me, his tone gentler now.

I looked around the table, fire building in my chest. "He just lost his brother. His blood. But instead of offering your sympathies, all any of you seem to care about is who helped us win."

I swept my gaze across the room. "You don't want answers. You want tools. You want the witch for yourselves. You want power."

No one spoke.

I didn't care. I was already in too deep.

"Well, too bad," I said, voice shaking slightly. "You weren't the ones bleeding. You didn't watch your people fall. Orion did. And he still came out victorious. Isn't that what really bothers you?"

Orion tilted his head just slightly. I couldn't tell if it was amusement, pride, or both in his eyes.

The silence that followed was heavy.

Then Ruth stood fully now. "She's too emotional to lead. Just like her mother."

"Enough," Orion said sharply.

His chair scraped slightly as he stood, every bit the dominant force in the room. "We will reconvene tonight after the burial. Until then, no more discussions about witches or Ravenna's rise. You'll get your answers when I'm ready to give them."

He glanced at me once, then looked around. “And that’s final.”

Orion’s voice was cold and steady as he asked, “Any other questions?”

The room was quiet for a heartbeat.

Then, an elder from the far end raised a hand slowly. His hair was silver, braided back with tiny wolf teeth strung into the tie, a symbol of old battles.

“We do not undermine Ravenna in any way,” the elder began, his voice calm but laced with something heavier. “Nor do we question her ability or bravery. She’s earned respect.”

He paused… then added, “But may I remind you all, she is not yours yet.”

The weight of his words landed like a rock dropped in still water.

Orion didn’t move. Not a flicker of emotion.

The elder continued. “An alpha from the Northern Region challenged you the day you killed Nikki. Challenged for Ravenna’s life. And by our law, until you face him in battle and win, she does not belong to you.”

My heart skipped. Whispers buzzed through the room. Kira subtly shifted beside me. My pulse throbbed in my ears.

The elder wasn’t done. “If you lose that fight,” he said, “Ravenna becomes property of the Northern Pack. And given her new title and her rising fame, there’s little doubt the entire North will see to it their alpha wins.”

For a second, just a second, Orion’s jaw flexed. Something passed through his eyes. Not fear.

Calculation.

But Ruth wasn't going to let it go.

She leaned forward, a cruel smile. "And rumor has it… that alpha is ten times stronger than you."

Silence.

The words sat heavy in the air.

Orion's lips twitched. Not into a smile. Into something darker. "Then he better hope the rumors are true."

And he sat down slowly, his fingers drumming the table. "Because if they're not…"

He looked straight at Ruth.

"…I won't just take Ravenna back. I'll take his fangs, too."

No one dared speak after that.

I stood there frozen, watching the others file out of the room, murmuring low to themselves. Some threw glances my way, curious, calculating, or pitying. I couldn't tell which stung more.

Kira gently touched my arm. "Come on."

But I didn't move immediately.

My eyes were locked on Ruth… still seated at the table, her spine straight, lips pressed into a line. She hadn't moved. Hadn't even blinked.

"I need a word with him," Ruth said, without sparing me a glance.

Her voice carried power, sharp and entitled. Like she owned the very air in the room.

Orion didn't argue. He simply nodded once, turning his head slightly in my direction. Not a full look, just enough to say go.

I clenched my jaw and walked out with Kira.

But as we stepped into the hallway, the weight in my chest doubled.

Because suddenly, it all came crashing in again.

It had always been like this. Trouble after trouble.

Running from the shadow of who I thought Orion was…

Only to discover a deeper, darker world, and now rumors of being taken from him.

Taken… again.

Will it ever end?

Ben had kidnapped me right under Orion's nose. Who's to say another wouldn't try the same, only this time, succeed?

The moment we were far enough from the meeting room, I stopped.

Kira turned to me. "You okay?"

"No," I said quietly. "I'm tired, Kira. Tired of fighting. Tired of surviving. I just… started feeling safe. And now there's a new threat. A new challenge."

She sighed and pulled me into a brief hug. "You're strong. Too strong to break now."

I wanted to believe that. I really did.

But back in that room, Ruth was planning something. I could feel it in my bones.

And whatever she wanted to say to Orion wouldn't be good.

Chapter 87

Ruth's POV

They've all left the meeting. The room went quiet. Just how I like it.

The meeting was a necessity, but it wasn't my main point of target. And as soon as it was over, my mind went scheming to the original reason I had come in the first place.

I watched Orion from behind, tall, proud, stubborn. He didn't even turn to acknowledge me. That's fine. Men like him only listen when they think they're in control.

"Orion," I said softly, like a mother trying to console her angry child. "I only need a moment of your time."

He still didn't turn. But I could tell he was listening. They always do, in the end.

"You've been through so much," I continued, slowly making my way toward him. "You've carried this pack, buried your own brother, and yet here you are. Standing. Thinking. Always thinking."

I could tell he was tense.

"Strength like yours isn't common, Orion," I continued, "It's not something everyone understands. Especially not children."

That word, children, I let it linger. He doesn't like it, I know. It cuts right where I want it to.

"Do you even know who she is?" I asked, not hiding the distaste in my voice.

Finally, he turned to face me.

“What do you mean?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

There it is. The crack I needed.

I give a soft laugh. Not mocking. Gentle. The kind that disarms people.

“I mean Ravenna,” I said, letting her name sit heavy in the air. “She’s spirited, yes. But reckless. Loud. Always speaking when she should listen.”

He said nothing, but I saw the twitch in his jaw.

“The other territories are watching. Waiting for you to slip. Do you really think they’ll kneel to you, with her standing beside you?” I asked again, hoping this question was going to strike a chord.

I paused, watching the flicker in his eyes.

“The North already wants her. It’s no longer rumor. You know this.” I lower my voice. “And when they come, will you fight for her? Trade your legacy for a girl who doesn't even know who she is?”

I step closer, slowly, careful not to press too hard, just enough.“You’ve worked too hard to build this empire. I only ask you to consider what you're risking by keeping her.”

Still, he said nothing. But I saw it. The hesitation. The shadow of a doubt.

Good.

I leaned in, speaking low and slow.

“You don’t need to do anything drastic. Just think. If she becomes a threat… sometimes the hardest choices are the ones that protect us the most.”

I stepped away.

He turned from me, silent again. But the seed is planted.

He won’t act now. He’s too disciplined for that. But the doubt will grow. I made sure of it.

I walked away without looking back, my heart calm and steady.

I don’t need to kill her. I only need to let him believe he should.

And if he couldn't, maybe he ends up blind by her love. Then I'd move to plan B, and this time around, it wouldn't just be about killing Ravenna anymore, it would also be about destroying Orion and everything he holds dear.

I stepped out of the meeting hall, my mind already spinning with possibilities. I wasn't ready to attend the burial yet. There were more important things to set in motion.

That's when I saw Keto.

He was standing in the hallway, arms folded, his eyes distant. Loyal to a fault, but I’d heard the whispers. That he cared too much about Ravenna. That his loyalty might be divided. I decided it was time to test that theory myself.

I walked toward him with quiet steps. He straightened a little when he noticed me.

“Ma’am,” he said with a polite nod.

I smiled. “Tell me something, Keto. Is it true what I’ve been hearing?”

His brow furrowed. “About what?”

“About you and Ravenna," I asked, my gaze boring into his as though I looked to them for answers instead of his lips.

“I don’t know what you mean," he denied, his voice firm.

“Don’t play dumb. I didn’t ask if anything is going on between you two,” I said. “I asked if you love her.”

He didn’t answer, but the flicker in his eyes was more than enough for me to know the rumours were true. He was in love with her. Very good, another pawn in my game.

I stepped a little closer. “Don’t lie. I’ve seen the way you look at her. Especially when Orion is around. You don’t look at her like a guard. You look at her like a man who’s scared to lose her.”

Still, he said nothing. Smart boy. I lowered my voice. “Do you think Orion truly wants what’s best for Ravenna?”

His jaw twitched. He didn’t like where I was going.

“Don’t tell me he’s loyal. That much is obvious. But loyalty doesn’t mean love. Orion is a leader. He protects what benefits him. Ravenna is useful now, but when the pressure starts to rise, when every pack is pointing fingers, will he still choose her?”

Keto’s gaze dropped. I knew I had hit something.

“I’m not asking you to betray him, Keto," I continued softly. “I’m asking you to protect her. Because I know what men like Orion do when their backs are against the wall. They choose their pride. Their crown. Their legacy.”

Still no answer from him. But he didn’t need to speak. The silence told me everything I needed.

“You care about her. That’s all I need to know,” I said. “Remember that when the time comes.”

I stepped back and walked away without looking back. One seed was enough. Just a little doubt, watered with guilt and love. That's all I needed.

Divide them first. Then I'll crush them all.

I walked into the living room, and there she was.

Ravenna.

Laughing softly, surrounded by three elders who looked at her like she was some goddess who had descended straight from the moon to bless their sorry old lives.

They hung on her every word. Their eyes wide, filled with admiration. One even reached out to touch her arm, as though her skin might shimmer under his fingers.

Pathetic.

I stood for a moment, watching, letting the irritation sink beneath my skin. I expected resentment. I expected fear. Not this… worship. She wasn't supposed to be loved.

She was supposed to be doubted, questioned, maybe even feared. But no, Ravenna had them eating out of her palm without even trying.

Fine.

I smoothed down the sides of my dress and forced a soft smile onto my face. If poison wasn't working, maybe it was time to try honey.

I walked toward her, slow and warm, the way a mother would approach her beloved daughter. My voice came out sweeter than I imagined it could.

"Ravenna."

She turned to me, surprise flickering in her eyes like a candle. "Stepmother."

I smiled a little wider, just enough to make the elders pause. “You’re glowing, dear. Truly. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you like this.”

The compliment caught her off guard. Her lips parted slightly before she could think of a response.

That was the moment I needed. The pause. The confusion. It was always easier to strike when they didn’t know which way the blade was coming.

“Your strength during the recent battle,” I continued, turning to the elders, “was nothing short of legendary. I heard she tore through those men like they were paper.”

They nodded eagerly. One of them said, “She fought like an Alpha twice her age.”

“Of course she did,” I said, turning back to her. “It’s in her blood. Some things can’t be taught.”

Ravenna offered a small, wary smile. She didn’t trust it, not yet, and I didn’t expect her to. But this wasn’t about her trusting me.

This was about everyone else watching her. Watching me.

I reached out, brushing a strand of hair from her face like I cared. “We’ve had our differences,” I said softly, “but perhaps that’s because I saw the power in you before anyone else did. And it scared me.”

She said nothing. But her eyes, her eyes were searching mine like they were trying to see through the performance.

Let them look.

Let her guess.

Because this time, I wasn't going to play the villain in the open.

Not yet.

Chapter 88

Lyra's POV

I wasn't trusting her smile. Not even for a moment.

The same lady who had looked at me like dirt hours earlier was now softly brushing hair out of my face like I was her beloved daughter? No. Something was off. Her tone was honeyed, but her eyes rang hollow. There was calculation there, beneath the smile she was attempting to adopt as perfume.

The elderly there were scarfing it down, though. One of them even nodded, as if we were finally putting the hatchet to rest. As if that was something I wanted.

I didn't speak. I couldn't. If I'd so much as opened my mouth, I had no idea what would come out. A thank you? A threat? A wail?

So I smiled. Tight. Controlled. Because if Ruth was going to be sweet, I could pretend to be too.

"Thanks," I finally said, my voice steady.

She smiled broader, but the kind of smile that made me shiver.

Her hand lingered a fraction too long before she withdrew it. "You've become something. powerful," she breathed, still loudly enough for the elders to hear. "Your mother would be proud."

Something constricted inside me.

My mother? Or rather, Ravenna's mother.

She didn't mention her name, and yet the relaxed tone Ruth used cut like a knife through my side.

I nodded once, stiffly, before I turned back to the elders again, attempting to breathe around the lump that had formed in my chest.

She was playing a game. That was an absolute truth. The question was: what's next?

And was I ready for it?

I had to know, and I had to know it from Orion. Pretending with Ruth was something that I would not be able to maintain any longer, not when all of that inside me was bubbling. Her faked warmth, her perverted fondness, it gave me the shivers.

I apologized to the elders and set off down the corridor, striding straight to the hall where I knew that I would be able to find Orion. But I had not walked more than a few steps when Keto emerged around the corner.

He was standing there as if he had waited.

"Are you coming to see me?" he asked gently.

"Sort of," I replied without slowing.

He appeared in my way quietly, putting a hand to my chin before I could continue. His fingers were warm, stable, but a quiver of uncertainty passed down my spine at the touch.

"With all that's been happening lately," he said, his gaze into mine, "you might be in danger."

I laughed without humor. "Yeah. Danger from my stepmother."

He shifted his head. "She's not the only danger you're in.".

There was something in his voice that made me pause.

"You're at risk for all of it... and even yourself," he went on.

I scowled. "What's that even to say?"

Keto paused. I saw the weight in his eyes, the clenching of his jaw before going on.

"I regret—" He paused, turned aside as if the words would not come. "I regret not going away with you when you asked me to."

My breath caught.

We had discussed it once, when things had been more tumultuous, more quiet. When it had still been a dream, to leave all this behind, the war, the pack, the pain. Just us, somewhere else.

"It's not too late," he breathed.

I looked at him.

Then I stepped away.

"I don't want to hear it," I said, the tone sharper than I meant.

I skirted past him, my heart pounding faster than my feet.

Because I could not possibly feel anything else right now, not confusion, not guilt, not wanting.

I climbed up to the hall and opened the door. I entered, closed the door behind me, and locked it, the soft click echoing in the silence of the hall. I didn't want to be disturbed. Not now.

Orion, where I'd expected him to be, still, silent, a statue carved of ice and darkness. But his eyes. His eyes were on me. Waiting. Watching. As though trying to peer into my brain before I'd even had time to cast my thoughts into words.

He said nothing.

He never did.

I walked towards him, not rushing. I wanted him to know that I was here for a purpose.

"Why are you so quiet all the time?" I demanded.

His brow lifted by a fraction. "Is that a problem?"

I hesitated to answer. I was thinking of Keto, the way he always spoke, the way his words never hung in the emptiness.

The way his love found its way into everything, his voice, his eyes, his presence. And then Orion. Cold. Guarded. And yet somehow, still. compelling.

"Yes," I finally said. "It is a problem."

His lips twisted, not a smile, just a cryptic look. "You should be making preparations for the burial."

"I'm not going," I replied, crossing my arms. "And neither are you."

His eyes narrowed a bit. "And what exactly do you imagine you can do to stop me?"

"If you don't tell me what's going on, I'll not let you out of this hall."

He guffawed. A deep, low, chuckling rumble like I'd just told him I could lift mountains barehanded.

"What's to prevent you," he rose slowly from his chair, "from keeping me here when I wish to go out?"

"I dare you to attempt it," I said, chin out.

He didn't laugh this time. He didn't tease, either. He simply glared at me with that heavy, soul-searing gaze that stretched the air between us and ignited it.

I disliked how it made my heart beat faster.

"You're not leaving," I repeated, "until you tell me what Ruth wanted."
"She's your stepmother," he said coolly. "Why don't you go ask her yourself?"
"We don't exactly see eye to eye."

Then perhaps, he said to me, voice now firm, "I shouldn't be drawn into your family business."

"I'm not drawing you into anything. I'm asking why she was at your meeting. What does she want? What did she say?"

He didn't answer right away.

And I could sense, he did not want to.

But he also didn't move back.

"I see," I said slowly. "You don't want to leave this hall.".

Orion's eyes closed. "On the contrary," he answered, "I am very curious to know how you are going to stop it."

And then he stepped.

He was tall and large and looming, and so close I had to crane my head up to see him. And he came towards me in slow, measured strides.

I didn't back away.

Chapter 89

Lyra's POV

His eyes locked on mine like they had something to say, dark, intense, like they were cutting through my skin to what I didn't even want to admit I felt. Orion just had this irresistible aura around him. He had a way of turning me on even without trying.

He came at me, slow, steady.

I took a step back, catching my breath. "Yeah, Orion, stop," I said, shaking, "I'm serious." But even that didn't sound real, coming from me.

He didn't obey, though, until we collided, me shoving against him, my hands on his chest. But it was like pushing a mountain that cannot be shifted.

Instead, his arm curved around mine, firm, heated fingers closing over my wrist as if I were something he wasn't letting go of again.

"Orion," I panted, but I didn't step back.

He drew me nearer, and I staggered into him. My body collided with his as if I belonged there. I stiffened. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't move.

His chest was firm, warm. His breath tickled my lips. I felt it all, his heartbeat, the space between us, tension creeping beneath my skin.

We didn't budge.

We simply looked at one another.

He said nothing.

Neither did I.

Then he moved closer and his lips touched mine, gentle at first. Feeling me out to see if I'd stop him.

But I didn't stop him. I couldn't stop him. I'd wanted it just as much as he had.

I kissed him back, fingers twisting in his hair, drawing him in like I'd waited forever to do this. Like I was starving.

He groaned, and it did something to me, untangled me.

"You're going to destroy me, Orion," I whispered against his mouth.

He didn't answer. He kissed me harder.

Urgent. Brutal. Raw.

My fingers traced his shirt, dragging it loose. He pulled it off over his head and dropped it.

I traced my fingers down his chest, slow and bold. He wrapped my wrists in his hands, took them to his mouth, kissed them once and let go.

He caressed for my top, paused for a split second as if he was asking permission. I nodded unsteadily.

It struck me hard. Flashing to the ground with all the rest that I was not ready to talk.

He kissed me again, though, this time flame, his lips burning down my jaw, then my throat. I tossed my head back, winded in a gasp.

"Orion..." I panted.

He did not stop.

His fingers tightened around my waist, hefted me up as if I weighed nothing. He sat me on the edge of the hallway table. Wood creaked beneath me but I didn't care.

I fumbled with his belt, trembling fingers. "This is not smart," I grumbled.

"Nothing involving us ever is," he murmured, low voice, burning eyes.

The belt came undone. He straddled my legs. I pulled him in with them, hard. His hand brushed against my thigh, my back arched of its own will. The kiss deepened. Everything did.

I wasn't thinking.

I didn't want to think.

I wanted to feel him, all of him.

He slid his huge dick into me slowly, agonizingly, and I took a shuddering breath, fingers digging into his shoulders.

I enveloped him in my arms, my body constricting to meet every penetration. It wasn't sex. It was war. A struggle. A surrender.

And I was not going to lose.

We were moving together, wild, insane, as though we were trying to burn the silence between us away. Pressure built so fast, I was already gasping, already shaking.

"Harder," I said, throat scraping.

He complied. God, he complied, and thrust harder and faster.

He handed it to me like he had something to prove.

And perhaps he did.

His hand wrapped around the back of my neck, holding me as my head dipped forward against his shoulder. I moaned, long and ravenous. He didn't remind me to be quiet this time. He allowed me to scream.

I clutched at him more tightly, nails biting into his skin.

He growled, his beat relentless. The table groaned beneath us. Already sliding, already leaning over the edge. His warm breath on my ear.

"Say my name," he snarled.

"Orion," I moaned incessantly.

"louder," he commanded, as though we were in a war parade.

"Orion," I shouted louder like he commanded.

He pulled me off the table, didn't lose momentum. My legs around him again.

He walked the few steps to the wall and steadied me there, plunged deep. I cursed, the shock of cold on my spine and heat between us breaking in waves.

He clutched his hands around my hips, hammered into me again. I didn't hold back. I didn't care who was listening. My cries echoed in the hall like truth I could no longer hide.

I shuddered, coming apart.

"I'm close," I gritted out, fighting to form the words.

He laid his forehead against mine, eyes locked. "Let go."

I did.

I shattered.

My body clamped around him, wave after wave washing over me. I screamed his name as the ecstasy ripped me in two.

He came a heartbeat later, his grip bruising, his moan against my shoulder.

He stayed there, both of us buried deep, shaking, trying to remember how to breathe.

We didn't talk.

There was no need to.

Minutes passed and he slowly pulled out, his hand tracing down my side, gentle now, like he was afraid to break me.

I laid my head on his chest, our skin slick with sweat, our hearts beating in sync.

His finger traced along my chin, lifted my face. He gazed at me like he was seeing me for the first time… or for the last.

"I won't apologize," he said.

"I won't ask you to," I whispered.

He finally stepped back, readjusting his pants, never once glancing away.

I cleaned myself up in silence, still dazed, still aching everywhere.

When he finally stood in front of the door, I was sure this moment would stay with me longer than I liked.

Because something had shifted.

And I wasn't sure what the hell we were anymore.

Chapter 90

Lyra's POV

I stepped out of the hall, still catching my breath. My legs felt like they didn't belong to me, and my heart was thudding like I'd just finished a fight instead of whatever that was with Orion.

The air on the other side of the hall was different, but it was not much assistance.

Keto was nowhere to be seen.

Thank the gods.

I lacked the strength to lie, or to explain why I had the appearance of a naked man just crawling out of a battlefield. If he pressed too many questions, I did not know if I could pretend, particularly not with the guilt biting at my chest.

I took the long way, ducking behind a pillar and then slipping quietly into the corridor going upstairs.

But I reached the stairs and hesitated.

Kate.

She stood at the bottom of the stairs, arms folded as if she had been waiting there for a while. Her eyes caught mine.

"There you are," she said, walking up to me. "Where have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you."

I blinked. My mind struggled to come up with something that wouldn't make me sound like I was confessing.

"I don't want to talk about it," I growled, shouldering past her.

She wheeled around after me and caught up with two strides. "You're a mess," she said, gazing at my hair, my smudged lipstick, the heat still on my skin. "What have you done?"

"I know," I panted, rubbing my temple. "Can't we?"

She didn't insist, thank goodness. She just walked along with me while we climbed back up to my room.

We didn't say anything more until I pushed the door open and went inside.

"Are you ready for the burial?" I asked to break the silence.

"Yeah," she said.

"And Kira? Where is she?" I asked,
"Kira's already getting dressed," she said.

I nodded, already making my way towards the bathroom.

"I'll be quick," I told her over my shoulder. "I need to clean up. everything."

Kate chuckled. "Yeah. You do need it."

I didn't say anything.

Because she was right.

But what I really wanted to do was get into bed, close my eyes, and make this day never have happened.

I locked the bathroom door behind me and turned on the shower, allowing water to drown out the noise in my head.

Too many secrets.

Too many lies.

And I was right in the middle of them all.

I emerged from the bathroom, towel drying my hair and attempting not to think. My skin was warm, newly cleaned, but my mind was in ruins.

The bed is what caught my eye. Gods, it looked so soft, so inviting. I grabbed a light top and soft pants, something plain, and quickly changed.

Kate raised an eyebrow from her seated position beside the bed. "You're not seriously going to go to the funeral wearing that, are you?"

I did not answer immediately. I just walked over to the bed and slowly sat down, feeling my body more heavy than ever before.

"I'm ready," I slurred, crawling onto the bed.

"Ready for the burial?" Kate opened and closed her eyes at me.

I nodded weakly, stretching out on the sheets. "Yeah. I'm ready."

Kate's eyebrow arched. "You're lying on the bed."

"I don't feel so well," I muttered, rolling onto my side, my voice barely above a whisper. "Just need to rest. That's all."

"An alpha doesn't not feel so well?" she questioned, watching me intently. "Strange."

I said nothing. I couldn't even meet her eyes.

Kate stood up, clearly not believing me. "I'll go call Kira."

I didn't attempt to stop her. I didn't even flinch. My eyes are already half-shut.

Sleep was calling me, heavy and slow, like the waves trying to pull me under.

I didn't care about appearances. I didn't care about the funeral.

I just needed to close my eyes and forget, for a little while, that my whole world was falling apart.

I did not know how long I had been sleeping before hearing the door open a second time. I blinked up, only able to raise my head a little way and saw Kira enter with Kate right behind her.

Kira quickly came over to my bedside. "What is wrong with you?" she asked, stooping beside the bed. Her voice wasn't unkind, but there was an air of emergency about it.

I'm only weak," I muttered. "I don't wish to go anywhere. I just want to rest."

Kira looked at me for a moment, as if she were trying to read between the lines. "But other people would like to see you at the burial. You're the hero of the battle, Ravenna.".

"They can suck a dick," I growled, my voice barely above a whisper. "I said I'd be late. I never told you I was going to stay away."

Kira breathed in deeply and rose from her seat. "Kate, watch her. I'll go get something for the weakness. But maybe it would be best if we just let her sleep."

"Don't you find it strange that an alpha is weak?" Kate asked.

"She's an alpha, but she's a young one. And yes alphas do get tired sometimes, just not all that often. And for Ravenna, this is the first time we're seeing her like this."

Kate nodded and Kira left the room.

Kate sat beside me and placed the back of her hand against my forehead. "Hmm... no fever." She gave me a sideway glance. "Maybe you do need rest after all."

I shut my eyes. Good. None of them were on the right track. Not Kate. Not Kira.

A few minutes passed before Kira returned, holding a small glass filled with a cloudy-looking substance. "Drink this," she said, passing it over. "It'll make you sleep right."

I didn't argue. I simply took it and swallowed the whole thing. It tasted bitter, but not awful.

"Alright," Kira whispered, smoothing my hair back. "Rest now. I'll tell Keto you're not feeling well. Maybe he can have a driver pick you up later."

I nodded feebly. "Thanks."

They both left quietly. The room fell silent again.

Within minutes, my body became heavier than ever before. My limbs sank into the sheets. The voices in my head finally died out.

And then... I slept.

Chapter 91

Orion's POV

The water hit my skin in steady streams, hot enough to chase the chill from my bones, but not hot enough to burn away the thoughts circling in my head.

Ravenna.

She crept into my mind without permission, like always.

It wasn't just the way she looked at me when she thought I wasn't watching. Or the way she trembled under my touch like she wasn't supposed to enjoy it. No, it was something more dangerous than that.

My obsession for her had grown too silent… too strong.

I hadn't planned it. When Ruth handed her over like she was nothing but a bargaining chip, I took her because I saw potential. Power, even if raw and undisciplined. And yes, a little defiance, something to sharpen into strength.

I didn't expect her to become this.

Not someone who gets under my skin. Not someone whose scent I could recognize in a storm. Not someone who could silence a room just by walking into it.

She was supposed to be leverage.

Now… she's a liability.

The water continued to rush over me, but it did nothing to cleanse the truth. My enemies were watching. Waiting. Packs that once bowed in silence now whispered behind closed doors, and it all stemmed from one thing: her.

They'd seen what she did in battle.

They'd seen her power.

And now they were afraid.

Ruth most of all.

I leaned my hands against the cold wall of the shower, water dripping from my jaw, eyes locked on nothing. Ruth played the concerned leader in the meeting, but I know her better than most. That woman never speaks unless she has something to gain.

She'd discarded Ravenna like garbage when she thought the girl had no use. Gave her to me like a pawn to earn peace.

And now? She's demanding answers, painting herself as concerned for my pack's future.

Bullshit.

Ruth only cares about power, hers. And Ravenna's sudden rise in strength terrifies her, because it throws off everything she had planned.

She fears Ravenna will rise too far, and when that happens, Ruth will no longer be needed or respected. She won't have a grip on the council. Or me.

But Ruth doesn't understand something... I fear Ravenna too.

Not in the way she does. Not politically.

No, mine is more personal. More raw. Because the more I try to push her away, the more I want her. The more I tell myself to stay cold, the more I burn.

And when I touch her… gods help me. There's nothing strategic about it. I lose myself every damn time.

I closed my eyes, dragging a hand down my face.

This… is dangerous.

Ravenna was never supposed to matter this much.

But now, if the other packs come for her, and they will, they won't just be challenging my authority.

They'll be challenging my restraint.

And I don't know what will break first, my crown, or my control.

Either way… something is going to burn.

I stepped out of the shower, water still trailing down my back as I reached for the towel. I tied it low around my waist, my skin still humming from the heat.

The mirror was fogged, my reflection nothing but a vague silhouette, but I didn't need clarity to know the war inside me wouldn't vanish with steam.

A knock came at the door.

"Come in," I said without turning.

The door opened, and one of my men stepped in, eyes respectfully lowered. "Boss, they're about to move Ben's body to the burial site."

I gave a small nod. "I'll join shortly. Summon Keto. Tell him I need him now."

"Yes, boss," he replied and left swiftly.

I dried off and pulled on my usual black jeans first, then the sleeveless black singlet. No frills. No colors. I wasn't dressing for the council or the burial. I was dressing for control. Black meant focus. Discipline.

It was how I kept myself from breaking apart.

I picked up my cologne, sprayed once, twice. Sharp, clean, efficient. No lingering sweetness. Nothing soft.

Another knock.

This time, Keto entered without waiting.

His eyes briefly scanned me, always observant, but he didn't speak.

"I need you prepared," I said, turning to face him. "There's a covert mission you're going to take care of for me. After the burial. Not today. Possibly tomorrow or the day after."

Keto straightened slightly, nodding once. "Understood."

"You're not to tell anyone. Not Ravenna. Not Kira. Not even the accountant until it's time." I paused, letting that settle before continuing. "When the moment comes, you'll meet the accountant. You'll collect fifty million dollars. In cash."

Keto didn't blink. "Cash?"

"Yes. I want it clean, untraceable. Packed and sealed, not wired. When you have it, contact me directly."

"May I ask what it's for?"

"You may not," I replied coolly, eyes locking with his.

He nodded again, no hesitation this time. “Understood, boss.”

“Good,” I said. “Leave now. Go prepare. But blend in with the burial today. No suspicion. No change in behavior.”

He turned to leave, but I called after him, voice quieter this time. “Keto.”

He paused, hand on the door.

“Keep your instincts sharp. You might be asked to choose between loyalty and power. And when that moment comes, make sure you don’t mistake one for the other.”

He looked back, something unreadable in his eyes. Then he nodded once more and left without a word.

I sat down slowly, pulling on my boots, tying them tight.

This burial wasn’t just for Ben.

It was the beginning of something else.

And if my instincts were right, I’d need that fifty million for more than just survival. I’d need it for strategy.

My phone began to vibrate on the dresser. I stared at it for a moment, jaw tightening.

I didn’t need to check the name. I already knew who it was.

Alira.

For a second, I considered ignoring it, just letting it ring. But silence never solved anything. So I picked it up.

“Alira,” I said, my voice calm, flat.

She didn’t waste time.

“I’m hearing things,” she said sharply, her voice silk wrapped around a blade. “That Ravenna won the war. That she’s the hero now. You and I both know that’s a lie. I had her, Orion. She was mine to kill, and I let her go. And now she’s being paraded like some kind of goddess.”

I pressed two fingers against my temple, sighing. “You shouldn’t have let her go, then.”

“Don’t patronize me,” she snapped.

I leaned against the dresser, staring blankly at the wall. “It’s better this way, Alira. If word spreads that a witch won the war for my pack, I’ll have packs across all regions at my throat. They’ll say I broke the ancient laws. But if Ravenna gets the glory, she becomes the story. Not the witch.”

“She becomes the target,” Alira said quietly.

“Yes,” I replied. “Exactly. She becomes the distraction. The admiration. The headlines. And that gives me time to prepare for what’s really coming.”

She was quiet for a moment, then exhaled. “I’ve heard enough.”

“Good.”

“I’m tired of hiding,” she added suddenly. “I’m coming to the mansion.”

My eyes narrowed. “What?”

“I’m done staying in the shadows. I’m not just coming to visit, Orion. I’m coming to stay.”

I didn't say anything.

My throat tightened, and I swallowed hard. My breath caught in my chest, but I forced myself to stay calm.

"Alira, this isn't the right time."

"I wasn't asking for permission," she cut in. "I gave you time. I gave you space. And all you've done with it is let that little girl shine in the sun while I rot in the dark."

My grip on the phone tightened.

"I'll see you soon," she said. Then the line went dead.

I lowered the phone slowly, the air suddenly too heavy around me.

Alira was coming.

And nothing would be the same again once she arrived.

Chapter 92

Lyra's POV

I stirred, my body still heavy with sleep. The room was quiet, dimly lit by the soft glow of the afternoon sun filtering through the curtains.

Then I saw Keto.

Sitting by my bedside, knees bent, elbows resting on them, looking at me as though he'd been there for some time.

I opened and shut my eyes, and then sat up from my reclining position. "Keto?"

He looked at me, a small smile on the edge of his mouth. "How are you feeling?"

My voice was labored. "I'm okay. Why're you here?"

He raised an eyebrow, not surprised but in that gentle, impenetrable way he used to do. "Do I need to seek your permission to watch out for you now?"

I shook my head from side to side. "That is not what I am saying. I was saying. why did you not go to the funeral?"

He looked away for a moment, and then back at me. "Kira explained to me that you must rest. That you would have a driver take you when you awoke."

"And?"

He drew a deep breath. "Given all that has transpired, the kidnapping, the attacks, the war media coverage, I'm not entrusting your security to a driver. I'm not risking your life again, Ravenna. Not now."

I pushed the hump back down my throat. A strange heat in the middle of my chest, heat I was not used to, started to churn. "That's nice of you."

His eyes came back to me for a half a second longer and then he stood. "If you're going to be okay, I can get you some food."

I swallowed at the concept of food and my stomach betrayed me by rumbling.

I groaned, hands over my head. "Yes, please. I'm starving to death."

He grinned, his voice low, muffled, near. "I'll be right back."

And he was gone, leaving the door open behind him.

I lay back against the pillow, releasing a sigh.

My step mom's memory tried to creep into my head, but I pushed it back.

For that instant. Keto alone was all there was. And I didn't know if I was thankful he was standing there, or afraid of what it was.

Because every lovely thing made it increasingly difficult to attempt to bury the secret in the earth.

I arched, yawned, then my eyes caught something on my lampstand a small scrap of paper, spidery script on it:

"Call me when you wake up."
Kira.

I grinned to myself, cocking my head to one side. Of course, she is. Always pushing ahead of me, always prodding and poking like a big sister I never so much as requested to be part of my life but so urgently required.

I rang her phone, and before I even wondered if she'd answer, she did after one ring.

"Ravenna?" she talked too quickly, as if she'd been expecting an answer.

"I'm fine," I replied, trying to sound more alert than I actually was. "Fresh and set to go over for the funeral."

"Sure?" Her voice dropped, serious. "Because if it's true, you know I'll have to leave this place in two seconds and run a full scan on you myself."

I breathed a sigh, a laugh softening from my lips. "Stop it, Kira. I'm not dying. I was sleeping. Don't worry about it."

She hesitated, clearly still uncertain. but trying to trust me. "I had Keto leave one of the drivers behind for you."

I straightened up, bristling. "Yeah, uhmm. About that, Keto just remained behind and did it by himself as the driver."

There was stunned silence, then Kira softly laughed. "That's sweet. Typical Keto. Well, I'll wait for you two. Don't be too long, okay?"

"I won't," I replied to him, and the line was quiet after a goodbye.

I banged the phone onto the bed next to me and took a deep breath. "What in the world would I do without a sweetheart like you, Kira?" I muttered to myself.

The door opened and Keto entered, tray of food in hand. "Hey," he whispered, taking in the look on my face.

My stomach churning, not with guilt, yeah right, maybe a little guilt, but with hunger.

"Food," he said firmly, placing the tray on the bed like a knight serving a queen a feast from the royal kitchen.

I stared and gazed at him. "You cooked?"

"No. But I fixed it up the way you like it."

I grinned, sitting up. "You're bad, you know that?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Only to your appetite."

I smiled, opening the spoon's bowl, recalling suddenly that even as the world around us had been burning, Keto still had the power to keep me safe.

Keto placed the tray between my knees carefully, but rather than placing the spoon into my fingers, he grasped it himself.

"I can feed myself," I said, an eyebrow rising.

He smiled, the gentle, cajoling one he used when he was set on his own terms.

"I know," he said to me. "But I want to."

I'd gotten slower. "Why?"

"Because you're tired. Let me do it for you… this time."

His voice was a low, gentle hum, and before I could try to protest once more, he took some soup and shoved it into my mouth.

I blew out, eyes stinging with fury at him. "You're impossible."

"I hear that a lot."

I leaned forward slowly and let him feed me. He grinned like a kid who'd made a bet and won it.

Bite by bite, the quiet between us grew and charged up, became relaxed. There was something soft in seeing him look at me eat, in the touch of his fingers against mine as he prodded the tray forward toward me. It was quiet.

And he leaned forward to brush something away from the corner of my mouth with his thumb. I winced a little, but his touch stays.

"You're always so stubborn," he breathed. "Like you're fighting so hard not to feel."

I rolled over, but his hand on my jaw turned me back into him.

"Keto."

"Shh," he breathed, leaning in before I could go on.

His lips brushed against mine, his mouth moving across mine slowly and gently, as if he was waiting for me to push him away. But I didn't. I kissed him back once. Twice. Again.

The tray continued to lie abandoned for minutes. His arms held me, holding me in position, my fists balled in his shirt.

The kiss became heavy and hungry and crazier, like something we both been trying too hard to swallow.

My heart pounding in my chest, but not out of fear, but out of the thrill of sensation. Need. Comfort. Confusion. They were all intertwined.

And so, I didn't restrain myself.

I couldn't.

Chapter 93

Lyra's POV

There was something about Keto's kisses. Something comforting. Familiar. Like falling into a memory I didn't know I needed.

Keto was everything Jacob was not, and Jacob was the opposite of Orion as well. Keto is dependable, you always know he's thinking of you, always know he's got your back, and won't leave you. That was peace, that was security, but I'd become accustomed to war, been traumatized so much by toxic men that I adore poison, and I just can't help myself.

But when we were kissing, everything in me wished it was Keto. My fantasy man, but it was too late. Some other guy had already screwed around with my head. And he screwed it so severely I didn't desire anything but him.

Keto's fingers moved slowly at first, tracing across my arms, skimming along the edges of my waist as he intensified the kiss.

His fingers hovered at the waistband of my clothes, fingers running underneath. I sensed him fighting with the edge, ready to rip it away.

"No," I panted, pulling away.

He was stunned, frozen, staring at me as if I'd stabbed him through the chest.

I didn't let him speak. I rose up from the bed, still gasping for breath, and went straight to the mirror in the room. My back was facing him, but I could feel his eyes on me.

What was I doing? What was I becoming?

I couldn't do it. No matter how hard I tried, no matter how much I hoped that it would succeed.

It had succeeded the first time, but not this time.

Not with him.

Not when Orion's scent still clung to my skin like adhesive, still stuck in my hair, still echoed in the back of my head like a question left unanswered.

I wasn't like that. I never was like that, two men together. One man, that was what I could commit myself to. And now, in Ravenna's flesh... I didn't want to lose what was left of what I once was.

Once my heart belongs to one man, so does my body, too. And my heart can't belong to two men.

Keto's voice came behind me, holding back. "What's the matter? Did I press too hard?" he asked, his voice stern.

"Nothing is wrong," I lied, "I'm okay."

"Don't do that," he said to me. I could feel the bed shift, his naked feet coming towards me. "Don't shut me out like you've been doing lately. Something is definitely not right. First, you've been avoiding me, not having any real conversations, and now, now you're keeping me from touching you?"

I remained silent and just wished he would leave it alone.

His tone shifted. "Do you not love me any longer?" he urged, moving forward.

My fingers gripped the side of the dresser.

"It's not that, Keto," I said quietly. "You will never understand."

"Then tell me about it," he snapped. "Let me in, Ravenna."

"You know what," I cut in sharply as I spun slowly towards him. "What happened to you, Keto?"

He blinked, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

What became of the old you? The Keto who wouldn't even look at me for too long because he was afraid he'd betray Orion. The loyal Beta who would always put the Alpha first, who longed only to serve and protect.

He said nothing. I went on.

That was the Keto I loved. But ever since Orion found out about that video of us and did nothing, said nothing, you've changed. You've become selfish. Entitled. Like you're entitled to my body just because I loved you."

He looked at me like I'd slapped him.

"Ravenna, I'm your mate. Do you recall? We're destined to be together," he said, shoving his hands into his pockets.

I smiled quietly. I figured he was obviously going to do this. "You call me your mate," I started, "But so does Orion. And last I knew, it's Orion that the world sees as mine. He's the one I'm married to. So what do you think is going to happen when people in this pack, people outside of this pack, discover that Orion's trusted Beta is screwing his bride behind the scenes?

My voice had risen. I didn't want to lash out, but I needed him to see what I did. What this had turned into.

He gazed down, his face pale, as if the truth was a weight against his chest.

Then, at last, he raised his eyes to mine, and there was something exposed in his face, something raw.

"Maybe you are right," he said. "Maybe I have changed. But I cannot help it. I love you, Ravenna. I will always love you, and that will never change."

He moved another step forward, slow, measured.

"Earlier... if you asked me to make a choice between you and Orion, I would not have blinked an eye. I'd pick Orion. Every single time. Because my loyalty to him was everything. But now... it is different. Now, if I had to make a choice, I'd pick you."

I couldn't breathe.

"As much as I want to stay loyal to him, I can't help but love you," he said, his voice shattering. "But if this, this thing that we're doing, if it's something that you don't want anymore... all you have to do is tell me with one word."

He stepped back.

"I'll leave you alone, Ravenna. I'll give you space. I won't touch you again, I won't attempt to kiss you. I'd even act like you're not there. Just say the word."

There was silence between us that hung like a heavy curtain.

He looked at me, waiting for an answer.

Just say the word.

It sounded so simple.

But the lump in my throat refused to let me speak.

I glared at him, at the man I used to dream of, the man I believed would save me from all this craziness. And now? Now he regarded me as if I were the one ruining his life.

I swallowed.

I wanted to tell him.

I needed to tell him.

But I couldn't.

Because even if I did not want to be this version of Ravenna, the one who had two men fighting over her, I did not want to lose him either.

Not like this.

Chapter 94

Lyra's POV

His voice lingered in the air.

“Say the word,” Keto said again, softer this time, like he was bracing himself for a blade to the chest.

I did not speak. I could not. My mouth was arid, my throat tight with something I did not know how to put into words. The air between us thickened, grew heavy, and I felt his gaze on me, burning along my spine like a red-hot brand.

Keto looked at me, begging, questioning. But I could only think about how ridiculous everything was. My body was no longer my own. And at the heart of all the craziness, he was looking to me to make a decision.

"Keto," I whispered, and as soon as my voice broke, I saw something inside him break.

I never wanted this," I told him, "to be this woman between two men. One love, one heart, that's what I've always believed. But things are different. Things are changing. I don't even know who I am anymore, and you want me to choose?"

"I'm not asking you to choose," he said softly, coming closer to me, "I'm asking, do you feel anything for me at all?".

I glared at him, actually looked at him. Keto, the same one who had comforted and eased my heart with only a smile. The same one who'd put his hand in mine as if he were hiding some grand secret. But now his eyes were not the same. Dark. Tired. Unhappy.

"I do," I said softly, "I still owe you something."

His breathing caught.

"But." I swallowed. "I'm afraid of what it does now. What it's doing to me. To you."

"You don't have to be afraid of me," he took a step closer, "I'm still me, Ravenna."

"I saw you nearly die once," he continued, his voice shaking, "and I've got you back. Perhaps not as the woman I once knew who loved me, loved us... but I don't matter. I see you still. And if this is the one thing I can love you for, in secret, from a distance, then I'll do it."

I could feel my chest close up, the pain spreading out through the back. He was telling me it was true. Awfully, brutally true. And I was angry because I knew he wasn't lying.

I edged in closer to him, inches from his face, going slowly and cautiously. When I hovered over his face inches away, I stared up into his eyes.

"I don't want to hurt you," I whispered.

"Then don't lie to me," he said.

I nodded slowly.

"Then here's the truth." I gasped for air. "You're not the only one who has changed. I've changed, too. This life, it's all new to me, but what I feel for you? It's still there. Just... different."

His jaw clenched, and I knew I'd struck a chord.

"I need to get this straightened out," I continued, "but I need room. I need time. And as it stands, Orion is getting something out of me that I don't even know how to describe. Something uninhibited. Something insane. And it's not something that you want to see."

"So what are you saying?" Keto whispered.

"I'm saying don't wait for me."

It was done.

It hung between us like a death warrant.

Keto's jaw fell open, but he remained mute. His shoulders sagged, and he nodded once. "Okay."

The room was silent.

He turned, moved toward the door, and stopped.

"For what it's worth," he said, not looking back, "I never thought I was worthy of your body. I asked for nothing more than your heart."

And he walked away.

I stood there, the air still thick with the gravity of what had happened. I ought to have been lighter. I ought to have felt relieved. I didn't. I was empty.

I went to the window, swept aside the curtain, and looked out at the dark clouds. The skies, too, seemed to grieve.

I pressed my hand against the glass, fogging it with my own breath. The boom of my own heartbeat against my eardrums. And from the boom of it, the distant call of drums.

Burial drums.

The rest of the world continued on, mourning and pleading with me for that which I was not ready to provide.

Behind me, the bed was still unrumpled. Keto's dinner was cold. And the pain inside of me? That still existed. Hanging there like a ghost that I could never escape.

I turned away from the window and sat against the wall with my eyes closed.

I remembered Orion.

The way he pulled me into his arms as though he meant to engrave the shape of my soul into memory.

The manner in which his silence had shouted louder than Keto's words ever might have.

Two men. Two worlds. And I? Maybe three men. That fool, the moron I'd still be able to kill.

But with the two men, I was torn in between, bled by wounds that I hadn't even realized I had suffered.

There was a slight knock on the door. I did not move.

Then Keto's voice.

"Ravenna... We have to attend the funeral."

Time to attend the funeral.

For yet another installment.

To pretend again for an extra day that I was not coming apart at the seams.

I raised my eyes, rolled off the commode, and breathed to myself: "Get a grip."

And I found a black dress on my dresser, battle-ready, walked to the door, and opened it.

I left the room and closed the door, my hand still reeling from the combat.

There was no sign of Keto in the room, but I could hear him moving downstairs, deliberately taking slow steps as if he was trying to recover. Great. So he was still bringing me to the funeral.

I already knew this was going to be the most uncomfortable, quiet ride of my life.

It was already dark. The sun had started setting low, its light creating long shadows on the walls of the hallway as I descended the stairs.

There was a soft breeze blowing in through the open windows, tickling my skin like a cold whisper.

I screamed at the two maids at the foot of the stairs. They curtsied and spat hellos in my direction, eyes straying a fraction too long. Maybe they had known.

Maybe they were just scowling. Whatever, I was not curious enough to stop and question them.

Outside on the driveway, the car was already parked in front of the house. Keto stood beside it, arms crossed, face a complete blank.

"Get in front," he commanded when he spotted me.

I didn't argue. I rose from my sitting position and sat down again, buckling the seatbelt across my chest, already anticipating the silence. Keto entered the car, turned on the engine, and drove away.

Silence hung over the car like wet fog. It pressed on my lungs, clogged in my throat.

I rested my head against the window, trees merging into black drapery racing past the darkness.

It was a minute, two. We said nothing. I thought it was gone, till he spoke at last.

"How did your stepmother's thing go?"

The question surprised me. I squinted, but didn't take my eyes off the road whizzing past.

"Why?" I asked.

He shrugged and kept his eyes fixed on the window. "Just for talking."

Right.

I thought about brushing the question aside with a gesture, but I wasn't up to playing games.

"She's a tiger," I growled. "She stalks her prey, toys with it on, thinks it's safe, as if she's playing with it. and then she gobbles it up the moment it drops its guard."

Keto's brows drew down over his eyes, his eyes flicking fleetingly in my direction before he returned them to the road.

"She doesn't like you at all?"

"Not at all.".

There was nothing. And then said something that whirled my head around.

"She told me to guard you."

I blinked. "What?"

"Ruth," he continued. "She told me to guard you. And specifically from Orion."

I laughed, a harsh, humourless sound out of my mouth. "Ruth said that? That's strange."

"I am not joking," he said, his voice steady but firm.

"Then she's playing you," I laughed, ruffling my hair. "That's what she does, Keto. She plays games. She doesn't warn people. She doesn't care enough to keep anyone safe but herself."

He didn't say anything for a while before he spoke, "She said you'd have to be guarded by Orion because... she thinks he'll use you as bait to negotiate peace with the other packs."

I whirled on him in anger, my voice low. "What do you mean?"

"That's what she said," he replied. "That if it gets too hot, Orion will sell you out. Use you as a firebreaker."

My chest constricted, not because I actually believed it, but because the words had power.

Chapter 95

Lyra's POV

“You believe that?” I asked, my voice soft but demanding.

“I don’t know,” Keto said. “You asked me to be honest. You still want that?”

“Yes,” I said. “I want your opinion. Not Ruth’s.”

He sighed, eyes fixed on the road ahead.

“I’ve known Orion longer than anyone,” he began. “Loyalty has always meant everything to him. The pack comes first. Always has. Always will. And when he gives his word, he keeps it.”

I nodded slowly, but my chest felt heavier by the second.

But, he went on, and the one word burned me like a slap of cold, "Orion isn't invincible. He's weaker than ever. The other pack leaders, the elders, they're all converging on him like wolves, and he's weakening. He's already weak, Ravenna. He's treading a thin line. When the time comes, when it's you or the pack."

He let the sentence dangle.

I already knew what he had to say.

My lip puckered into a shaving-thin smile, my fingers wrapped over the edge of the seat. I kept my eyes fixed straight ahead, my lids not opening once.

"He'll go with the pack," I whispered.

Keto didn't say anything, but his silence was more powerful than any words could have been.

"Maybe Ruth's lying," I muttered to myself more than to him. "Maybe she's stringing us along. Maybe she's playing games."

"She's dangerous," Keto agreed. "But that doesn't mean that she is wrong."

The rest of the drive was quiet again. But it wasn't the kind of silence you run from.

It was the kind you're swept up in.

As we rode up over the graveyard, I could already see torches in the distance illuminating it, a scent of ash and dry herbs on the wind.

They were standing in small groups, all in black, serious faces, some with interest.

I was on the verge of pushing the door open, but Keto restrained my hand.

"I'll never harm you," he said to me, "I swear."

I just nodded and kept quiet. Because at that moment, I had no idea who I could still trust.

Orion.

Keto.

Or Ruth.

All I was sure about was that I was witnessing a funeral ritual for a dead man with a dozen secrets alive.

And if I wasn't careful, I'd become the next body they bury.

The wind howled across the field in thick silence as I stepped out of the car and onto the reluctant, slow pace to the cemetery, and I felt it again, the weight of this land.

This was where we had buried Nikki.

The exact same field.

I was still able to remember the scent of blood in the breeze that day, the gentle hum of betrayal within my ears as I lay at the gates of death.

It was the same earth beneath my feet. The same trees towering as stone witnesses. The same individuals taking on a somber atmosphere, when all I wanted to do was vanish out of mid-air and away from it.

I breathed. I was not that girl anymore.

The sound ahead became more defined with each step. There were several people standing, in a half-circle around the grave that had just been dug. And there he was, Ben. Cold, dead, finally at peace.

They had just laid his corpse in the ground.

Ruth's voice carried over the air, flat, calm, and, as always, planned.

“Ben was a good warrior. Bright and bold. I watched him come up. I saw in him a great leader. I believed in him. And then something changed. He was motivated by something else besides what he used to be. Betrayal. Ambition. I don't know. I wish I did.”

Her words were so eloquently said, I kept telling myself she was the same woman who'd had a hand in every sneaky thing that'd led us to where we stood.

If her heart ached, it was because she'd been thwarted in her schemes, and not because she'd lost someone precious.

I swept the throng over with my gaze, seeking out the fuzzy faces until they sharpened on the most identifiable.

Orion.

He was not staring at Ruth. He was not even staring at the funeral.

He was staring at me.

His eyes found mine in the sea of faces, their blackness as dark as coal, their impenetrability unsettling, their sharpness aching to behold. I could not look away. His eyes darted away, and I could sense it, like a stroke from me to Keto, standing half an inch behind me.

The gods alone knew what was in Orion's head.

Kate's voice cracked the moment. "It took you long enough."

I blinked and rolled half-over. "What?"

"I said, it took you long enough to arrive," she spoke softly. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," I said with a forced smile. "What did I miss?"

Kate shrugged. "Not much. Honestly, it's been totally boring. A couple of elders spoke to us. Ruth's speaking now, but you didn't miss anything that will change the world."

I nodded, trying to ground myself in her voice, in something ordinary.

"Where's Kira?" I said.

Kate pointed over to the right, where Kira stood with hands clasped in front of her, focused, serious face.

I raised my hand a fraction to wave.

Kira's eyes darted to me, and she snapped her head up quickly, waving as a greeting. That burst of warmth at recognition should have soothed me, but it didn't.

Because something else was pulling at my attention now.

Someone else.

From the far end of the field, partially hidden among the mourners, stood a young woman.

She was dressed in simple black, her dark brown hair pulled back, and her expression unreadable. But her eyes…

Her eyes were fixed on me like an eagle.

Like she'd been waiting.

I knew that gaze. I'd seen it before. Somewhere.

It wasn't the glance she exchanged with me. It was the way my body reacted to it, the knot in my gut, the clammy sweat trickling down the back of my head.

She didn't flinch. She didn't twitch. She did nothing but stand there, pinned on me like I was her prey.

Then the connection snapped. The eyes. Those eyes. I knew those eyes.

I had seen them in the forest, on the battlefield, dimly glimmering in the blackness, surrounded by magic.

She was the witch.

I swallowed hard, breath stuck halfway down my throat. I wished to turn, to look away, to act as if I hadn't seen her, but I couldn't.

She tilted her head to one side.

As if she could hear what I was thinking.

As if she already knew that I did.

Chapter 96

Lyra's POV

I tried to keep my expression blank. Calm. Disinterested.

Kate leaned closer again. “You okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I blinked. “No. I’m fine. Just tired.”

But my heart was hammering. Loud. Violent.

Why was she here?

Was this some kind of message?

Had Orion invited her?

Or had she come on her own, like some shadow following me through every turn?

The whispers of the elders grew faint in my ears. Ruth had stopped speaking. Someone else had taken over.

But I wasn’t listening anymore.

All I could see was the witch.

The one who let me live.

The one who claimed not to want anything.

Yet here she was… watching me like I owed her something.

Like this wasn’t over.

Then a priest took over, and for the next few minutes, his voice rang in the background as he said the final prayers over Ben's body. But my mind wasn't on the prayers or even on Ben or whatever is left of him six feet deep.

It was on the witch.

Her brown eyes were locked on me, unblinking. Sharp. Like a blade pressed against my skin.

And then she smiled. A slow, cruel smile.

The kind that said she knew something I didn’t. The kind that made the hairs on my neck rise. I blinked, just once, and she was gone.

Gone. Just like that.

I scanned the space where she’d been standing, but there was nothing. No shadow. No scent. No trace.

Had I imagined her?

Was she ever really there?

I held my breath, chest tight with confusion, paranoia wrapping its fingers around my throat. I turned slowly, watching the others.

They were walking away from the burial site, chatting softly in clusters, murmuring the usual pointless phrases, such a waste, such promise, he was too young, he was brave.

None of them looked shaken. None of them looked like they had just seen a witch with eyes that cut through souls. They weren’t whispering about her.

They were whispering about me.

“Ravenna.”
“She’s the one who won the war.”
“An omega becoming an alpha… shocking.”
“She’s dangerous. Strong.”

My skin prickled.

They were all looking at me like I was the miracle. But I wasn’t. I wasn’t the one who turned the tide of that battle. She was. The witch. And yet… she wasn’t the one getting the attention. I was.

Which meant one of two things: either someone was protecting her, or someone was using me to distract from her.

My eyes snapped to Orion.

He was a few meters away, speaking to one of the older betas from another pack, but his eyes… his eyes had been on me the moment Keto and I arrived. Watching me. Studying.

It made my skin crawl.

Could he be the one? Was he turning all the focus on me to keep the witch’s involvement a secret? Was he buying her silence… with my life?

Kate’s voice yanked me back.
“Let’s go, Ravenna. I think we’re done here.”

I blinked again. “Wait… Did you see her?”

Kate looked at me, confused. “Who?”

“The dark-haired girl… the one standing by Kira just a few minutes ago. Brown eyes. Tall. Quiet.”

Kate frowned. “No. I didn’t see anyone.”

I nodded slowly. “Maybe… I was seeing things.”

Kate didn’t push. She turned and began walking toward the car.

I followed, my feet heavy, my breath shallow. My heart was still somewhere back in the field, buried with my suspicion, tangled up in confusion.

Then I saw Kevin.

Strutting toward me like a fly buzzing around a corpse. His smirk smug, his eyes gleaming with something slimy. I muttered a curse under my breath.

“Not today,” I hissed to myself.

“Ravenna,” he called, like we were old friends catching up over coffee.

I kept walking.

He quickened his steps and cut into my path. “You weren’t planning to leave without saying hi, were you?”

“Kevin, I swear to the goddess, move.”

He raised his hands in mock surrender. “Relax. Just wanted to say you looked… powerful out there. Really stole the show.”

I clenched my jaw. “Is that what this is about? You want to bask in what doesn’t belong to you again?”

“I’m just saying,” he shrugged, “the pack seems to worship you now. Even Orion’s looking at you like you’re his crown jewel.”

I stepped closer, so close he had to lean back. “Careful, Kevin. The last time you underestimated me, you left with a broken jaw and a bruised ego. Don’t tempt me to finish the job.”

His eyes darkened, but he forced a smirk. “You’re so feisty now.”

“And you’re still pathetic.”

Kate grabbed my arm. “Ravenna. He’s not worth it.”

She was right. Goddess, she was right.

I pushed past him, leaving his smirk behind like the trash he was. We reached the car. Keto stood at the driver’s side, watching us quietly, his face unreadable. For a moment, I wondered if he’d seen the witch too.

But he didn’t ask.

Nobody did.

Nobody saw her but me.

Or maybe that’s the point.

Maybe she’s not meant to be seen until it’s too late.

I glanced one last time at the burial site. The grave was closed now. The priest was gone. So were the whispers, the smiles, the fake condolences.

But the witch’s smile still burned in my mind.

And I knew, deep down, this was the beginning of something darker.

And I was standing right in the middle of it.

"Who the hell is he?" Kate asked, her eyes darting to the back.

"Someone you obviously are going to wish you never knew the minute you know him," I answered, my tone firm as though irritated.

"Is he that bad?" she asked, eyes narrowing.

"He's worse, Kate," I said, "Trust me on this, you don't want to know who he is."

"I trust you," she replied, then turned to face Keto, who was quiet.

"What's up with you, you look pale?" she asked him.

Keto's eyes darted to me before returning to hers, "I'm fine," he muttered.

"No, you're not," she said and turned to face me before facing him again, "You look like someone whose heart is broken."

"Did Ravenna break your heart?" she asked, as though she figured the truth that fast.

I swallowed hard, and I could see Keto's jaw clenching.

Chapter 97

Lyra's POV

He let out a deep breath as if he were attempting to release the tension in his heart. "Ravenna didn't shatter my heart," he replied tersely.

But Kate was not going to let it go; she was going to say something more when Kira called out behind us, "Are you guys going without me?"

"Of course not," Kate replied, turning to her.

I half turned because I heard her say my name. "Ravenna," she murmured, her voice low but gentle, "how are you feeling now?"

I could only nod a little, even though I still felt disturbed within. "I'm fine."

She looked at me for a beat longer as if she didn't think I was telling the truth, but didn't insist.

"Fine. Did you see that woman beside you some time ago?" I asked.

Kira blinked. "What woman?"

"She had black hair... brown eyes... sharp, hawk-like. She was standing right beside you when the priest was praying."

Kira shook her head slowly. "I saw nobody."

I stared at her, my mouth open. My heart pounded against my ribs.

So it was just an illusion, then.

I took a nervous breath and muttered to myself, "I must be dreaming."

But something in the woman's smile at me, so sure, so lethal, wasn't a dream. It was real.

Keto strode toward us. "Let's go," he said, his voice even, uninterpretable.

I watched him move and looked toward the car, expecting Orion to already be waiting in it.

But I couldn't take a step before Kira placed her hand on my arm. "You're not coming with us," she stated.

I tensed. "Why not?"

She waved towards the side of the road. "Because Orion said he wants you to ride with him."

That made no sense.

"Why?" I asked, furrowing my brows.

Kira shrugged with a light shrug. "I don't know. You'll have to ask him yourself."

Kate gave me a quick, slightly awkward hug. "Later," she whispered.

Kira winked. "Later, baby," she continued with a smirk, and she turned back to the car.

Keto didn't utter a word. He just got into the car, started the engine, and drove away with both of them in it, leaving me standing there all alone like a bewildered bride left at her own wedding.

I slowly turned, and there he was.

Orion.

Slouching against the hood of his black car like he was taking some dark, macabre photo shoot. His arms crossed, head tilted back just slightly, but his eyes. Those eyes pinned me like he'd been following my every breath.

I stood there for a moment, unsure if I was getting myself into something I didn't understand.

When I moved closer, he uncrossed his arms.

"Sit up front," he told me in a flat tone.

I was about to protest when I caught a glimpse of someone in the backseat.

Ruth.

Her arms folded, her eyes narrowed and uninterested, like she was half-present for this moment but with total focus on everything else.

I swallowed my questions and sat in the front. I did not want to be in the same air as Ruth, not after all the things she's been whispering behind closed doors.

Orion got in without a word and started the engine.

Silence enveloped the car, thick and honeyed. I refused to look back over my shoulder, did not want Ruth to see anything on my face.

I hated being so aware of Orion beside me.

I hated that even more; I could not help thinking about him.

The smell of his cologne remained attached to the air, and I cursed my own body for the response.

My thighs clenched, and I glanced to the road ahead of us, even though we hadn't moved an inch.

He drew away slowly, as though the three bodies in the car weren't heavy but something else, some crawling thing under the surface of our silence.

I should have asked why all of this was happening. Why did I get to ride with him and Ruth? Why not with Keto or anyone else? But I didn't want to ask in front of her. That would be bestowing too much on her.

It was cold in the car, although the outside weather was warm.

And colder still when Ruth leaned in, talking softly and too saccharine. "I must say, Ravenna, you look good. Though you didn't stay very long at the funeral."

I stayed silent.

She cackled as if that amused her.

I tried not to look at her and instead focused on the road in front of me, counting down the seconds until I could get out of this car.

Orion said nothing either. His jaw was clenched, fists around the steering as if to crush it into metal powder.

Was he upset? Tired? Scheming something?

I had no clue.

His whole face was impassive again.

The remainder of the drive continued with that same thick silence stuck between us like a loaded gun. My heart never slowed down.

I resented being left alone with them. I resented not knowing whether I was being brought somewhere to be safe... or to be sacrificed.

And I resented even more that a stupid part of me still wanted to feel and sense Orion's hand on my leg, his fingers on my wrist, his breath on the back of my neck.

God, what the hell is wrong with me?

I couldn't take it anymore. I moved a bit, just enough so Orion could hear me clearly.

"Where are we going?" I asked, my voice calm... too calm even for me.

He didn't answer right away, but someone else did.

"Oh dear," Ruth said, slumping forward, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "you sound like you don't trust him."

I didn't even let her finish her little game. "I wasn't talking to you," I snapped, not looking around.

The silence that followed wasn't quiet; it was stiff, bitter.

Ruth didn't know how to be shut down like that. Not by me. I felt her cold glare burning into the back of my head before her voice pierced the air once again.

"I see," she said, with a soft scoff. "So this is what power does. You give a little girl an alpha title and suddenly she's barking at anyone she pleases." She stopped talking, then continued with venom, "You'll kill him one day, you know. Just like Ben tried to."

My hands clenched in my lap.

Orion chuckled approximately, but it wasn't a laugh. It was a kind of laugh that came after a sigh. Like he was so used to this kind of madness.

I finally turned to her. "Why do you always do this?"

She cocked an eyebrow like she didn't understand.

"Manipulate people. Twist words. Plant seeds. You did it with me. You're doing it with Keto. And now this whole 'Ravenna is dangerous' speech, like I haven't already heard it from your lips before."

She folded her arms but remained silent. I could tell she didn't like being caught out.

“And since we're all speaking the truth," I said, turning all the way around back to Orion now, my chest rising and falling with every word, "Keto said something. Something Ruth said."

Orion clamped his fists tighter on the wheel, but he still didn't speak. Not yet.
"He told Ruth that you said... you were going to offer me up as a sacrifice to save the pack.” I took a sharp breath. “That you would swap me out if it got too hot.”

That was it.

Orion's foot slammed the brake so hard that the tires squealed on the road.

The car skidded to a rough stop, jolting me forward slightly in my seat. I braced myself against the dash and instinctively spun to him.

His jaw hardened, his mouth clenched so tightly it was going to shatter. His eyes, now no longer passive, no longer serene, had narrowed with unmistakable fury.

Chapter 98

Lyra's POV

He slowly turned, first to Ruth, then to me. His voice was low and smooth.

"I'm going to act like I didn't hear any of that which was said," he said. "And I'll warn both of you not to continue arguing."

He didn't wait to see. He slouched back in the keys for the second time, obviously done with the conversation.

But of course, Ruth wasn't.

"Orion," she said, the strain in her voice overflowing into his, "listen to me. You can't believe one word that girl has to say."

His hand stopped on the key.

He didn't look at her right away. He took a breath, like someone trying to hold back a scream.

Then he faced her, eyes blazing red.

Get out of my car," he ordered.

Silence.

Glistening, icy silence.

I blinked. I didn't believe I'd heard. Ruth didn't appear certain that she'd heard either. She stood frozen, mouth agape, looking shocked, as if the words hadn't registered.

Orion's expression didn't change. His eyes blazed, burning with cold anger.

"I won't repeat myself," he said to her. "The second time is mercy. There will be no third.".

I glanced at Ruth. I had never seen her so angry. She stormed out without a word and closed the door behind her.

And like that, we left her.

Orion shifted gears and drove away without looking back.

I didn't know what to say. I said nothing because, for a moment there, I really had no idea what he was going to do next.

He was too unpredictable, too quiet, too mysterious. And I didn't want to be the next one he told to get out of the car.

But my curiosity prevailed.

"You're not going back for her?" I asked.

"No," he snapped.

I blinked. "But you brought her along for a reason."

"She'll find her way," he replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

I frowned. "She's my stepmother.".

He stared at me for a moment, then down the road. "Want to go with her?"

I looked, unsure if he was being deadpan or joking. His tone was too even to tell.

I raised an eyebrow. "You're going to seriously tell me to get out of the car like you did to her?"

He said nothing.

He just kept driving.

That quiet, it was a noose that caught me. Crushing, heavy, and unbearable.

I exhaled slowly. "Where are we going exactly?"

"You'll see."

I changed position in the car to be able to look at him properly. "I'd far prefer to know now."

He did not glance at me. "I heard you were too ill to come early for the funeral."

I blinked. "I was, yes, but what does that have to do with where we're going?"

He finally looked at me, for only a heartbeat. "It has everything to do with where we're going."

That was all he said.

And the silence returned. even more loudly than before.

I didn't know when the trees began to close in or when the river's sound crept into the silence.

All I knew was that Orion braked the car and took the turn onto a small, hidden road that traveled deeper into the woods.

The tires crunched over leaves and twigs, and then the engine fell silent.

He stopped.

I blinked forward at the big river that sparkled in the distance behind the trees. The air was thick with wet moss.

"Come down," Orion said to me as he exited and opened his door.

I didn't stir.

All of this didn't feel right. The woods, the river, and not uttering a single word to me.

However, I pushed open the door and stepped out into the thick quiet of the forest.

The moment my boots touched the ground, something changed around me, like the air was observing.

Orion moved back toward the car and opened the trunk. I observed the click, the slight rustling of clothing.

He came out carrying a large bag, the kind only people who spent days in the wilderness used to carry. It was bulky and heavy-set, with wrinkles in it from use. He slung it easily over his shoulder.

We're crossing the river," he told me without looking at me.

My lips parted, but I said nothing. I just stared at the bag, then out at the river. I had no idea what to ask anymore. So I said nothing. Just followed behind.

Then he stopped and shoved a small bottle of black green liquid into my hands. "Drink this."

I stared at it. "What is it?

"It'll cover up your smell," he said to me in a calm voice. "So nobody can know you're a werewolf."

That stopped me. "What?"

"Drink this," he said again. "You'll want it."

The bottle was warm in my palm. I turned it slowly, examining the thick, strange liquid. "What's in this stuff?"

"Herbs. Nothing harmful."

"Herbs that do what, exactly? Cover up werewolf smell?" My brow furrowed.

"You heard me," he said to me.

Of course, I heard him.

I looked at him again. At his unreadable face. His unflinching eyes. And something coiled within me.

I'd learned to follow Orion into strange predicaments, but this wasn't one of those.

Still, I uncorked the bottle and downed the liquid in two quick gulps. It was bitter, astringent, and it seared all the way down my throat.

I flinched and handed the bottle back to him.

He took it, brought it to his lips, and swallowed the same mixture.

Then he tossed the bottle into the bag.

"Once we cross the river," he told me, "you do not change. You don't let them know you're an alpha. You don't even act like a werewolf."

My heart stuttered.

I looked at him.

"What if they find out?" I asked.

He looked straight into my eyes. "Then we might not be coming back alive."

I felt a cold, bone-deep shiver run down my spine.

"What in the devil is going on?" I breathed.

But he wasn't done.

He stepped towards me and grasped my hand. His fingers wrapped around mine, strong and earthy. "We're going into the witches' territory," he said.

My body went rigid.

"What?"

His eyes trapped mine. "Werewolves are banned there. Not even in close proximity."

The world swayed for a moment, and my heart thumped in my chest.

Chapter 99

Lyra's POV

I pulled my hand back, stumbling a step away. “Wait, are you insane? Witches? You’re taking me across enemy territory like I’m just, what, some piece of luggage?”

"That's why I asked you to drink that," he said, "So they won't be able to tell if we're werewolves."

"Why?" I demanded. "Why me? Why Kate? Why Keto? Why not go alone?"

"Because people are beginning to look up to you the way they look up to me, and you have to grasp that in order to be a leader, you have to learn how to put your life on the line."

I laughed in disbelief, "Alpha 101?" I asked.

I couldn't help but think he was taking me to a place of no return simply to learn how to be an alpha. No, there has to be more to it.

"It's not negotiable, Ravenna," he said with his stern tone, "We're already here."

I planted my feet firmly on the ground, crossing my arms. "I'm not crossing that river just to get killed."

He didn't flinch.

Orion just nodded once, like I’d said something trivial, something he’d already considered. “Alright,” he said simply. “You’re free to find your way home.”

And with that, he turned and walked off toward the river.

I blinked. “Seriously?”

I stood there, my hand on my waist, watching him walk away like this whole thing didn’t concern him.

No begging, no guilt trip, no panting wheedling. He didn't even try to say please or vow to protect me or whatever humans do in situations like these. He simply stood up and left.

What the heck?

I observed the trees, then the curving strip of water in front of me, wide and dark like something that consumed secrets and never gave them back.

What was I supposed to do? Cut through the woods alone? Where, home? If that was even possible now. I didn't even know what I was walking back to. Ruth? Her games? Keto and his injured eyes?

No.

There was more to it than he was telling me. I could feel it. Like there was something heavy hanging in the air, just out of reach.

Orion pushed a wooden boat against the riverbank. It was old, but it was sturdy. Its weathered wood groaned in the mud as he shoved it into the water. I worried my lip and sighed.

I did not like the idea of being left out any more than I was afraid of what was ahead.

So I walked.

He swung around halfway as he heard me coming, with one hand braced on the edge of the boat. "Changed your mind?" he said.

I didn't answer. I kept walking until I was near enough for him to see the frown on my face.

"It's for your own good," he said, getting one foot into the boat. "Whether you admit it or not."

I still didn't answer.

He got on board fully and stretched out, hard and certain.

I took it and got in.

We sat facing one another, the boat rocking gently beneath us.

The air was thick with the smell of wet wood and decaying water. He took hold of the oars and began paddling slowly, steadily.

We did not speak at first.

Just the breaking of the water.

Just his eyes locked on mine, and mine on his.

After a moment or two, I couldn't resist. "Did you mean to bring Ruth along with you previously?"

His brow quivered slightly upwards. "Exactly."

I blinked. "Wait, what?"

"I was intending to take her with you. Though she had no idea where I was headed."

I almost choked. "So what occurred?"

"She's trouble," he stated flatly.

That was understating it, but I wasn't arguing.

Another silence.

I looked around. The river just went on and on, bending like a snoring snake into thicker forests that I didn't know.

The other side seemed dimmer, older, as if time had gone past it in that place.

"How many hours to get there?" I finally asked.

He wasn't speaking to me. "Three to four hours. Maybe five if it slows us down on the tide."

"Seriously?"

He nodded.

"Where are we going?"

"I told you already."

"No, you didn't," I bit out. "You said witches. That doesn't count."

There was a shadow of a smirk playing around his lips. "Then consider this my confession."

I glared at him.

"I'm taking you with me," he said, too smoothly casual, "most likely to sacrifice you."

He said it like it was a joke.

But it did not sound like one. My stomach dropped.

The oar splashed back into the water, gently taunting me.

"You're not funny," I growled.

"I wasn't trying to be," he said.

I examined his face. He was at peace. As if he didn't dread what we were moving on into, or paddling into. As if he'd already come to terms with it.

And yet, there was something else.

Tension in the line of his jaw. The way his fingers closed a little tighter on the oar after he'd spoken. He wasn't as calm as he seemed to be.

I leaned back a bit. "So you're just going to turn me over to a coven of witches and hope they'll enjoy the gift?"

He looked at me then. "Would you believe me if I said they specifically requested you?"

"Then let's play along like I'm dragging you there under coercion against your will."

I snorted. "Little too late for play, don't you think?"

He did not smile. His jaw set.

"I don't get it," I whispered. "You're risking your life too... Why?"

He paused. Then spoke, "You ask too many questions, Ravenna, and talking isn't my strong point."

I studied him. "Yeah, I did.".

Orion had always been that kind of thing. Say nothing, do everything. Talk like nothing ever mattered, then carry the weight of everything in silence.

"I hate that you never tell me things."

"I hate that you need everything spelled out," he reproved, never missing a stroke.

I looked away, biting the acid reply burning on my lips.

Truth was, I was scared.

Not of him.

Not even of the witches.

But of the fact that something inside me was beginning to alter. To stretch. To remember.

And I didn't know which version of myself I'd wake up as on the other side of the river.

Chapter 100

Keto's POV

Ravenna had retreated from me. And this time, it was as if she meant it.

I couldn't stop replaying the way she looked at me, distant, confused, torn. I couldn't stop wondering what had happened. When did we start falling apart?

Maybe I should have taken her up on that offer to run away when I had the chance.

But no. I didn't. I chose duty. I chose Orion. And now, I was here watching the only person I ever truly gave a damn about slip right through my fingers.

She said I'd changed. That I wasn't the same Keto she fell in love with.

Maybe she was right. But how could she imagine I would be the same after all this? After pretending for so long like I did not want her more than air?

Kate's voice drew me back to reality.

"So, when does training start?" she asked, a bit too cheerful for my current mood.

"Next week," I muttered.

She grinned. "Cool. Just don't bore me.".

Kira guffawed beside me. "Prepare to be bored to death."

I said nothing. The gates to Orion's mansion opened, and I drove the car into the mansion's driveway. I parked, turned off the engine, and got out.

Kira stretched her arms. "Pool time?"

Kate was already a step ahead. "Absolutely. I brought this beautiful bikini for a reason."

I nodded. "I'll get some wine."

The girls said they would go get dressed. I headed upstairs, ascending the stairs I knew like the back of my hand to my bedroom, the one that was directly across from Orion's. His door was closed. Quiet. As ever.

I paused outside his door, my hand rising as if I might knock. But what would I do? "Hey, you know that woman we're both in love with? I think she's going to pick you."

Uh, no.

I stepped into my room, undressed, and slipped into a pair of shorts. No shirt. No armor. Flesh and scars and questions I couldn't answer.

I scowled at myself in the mirror. My eyes were darker now, not from sleep deprivation, but from pain. I looked like a man who had lost something he didn't even know how to cling to.

I headed downstairs once more and into the wine room. I grabbed a red one of Orion's expensive ones. I did not care. I was already drunk with regret anyway.

"Three glasses to the pool," I told one of the maids.

"Yes, Beta."

The doors to the pool slid open when I stepped outside.

The evening wind rushed across my chest but failed to cool me down. Nothing could. Not with the memory of Ravenna's hands still pushing me away.

I set the bottle of wine down on the table and propped myself against one of the pillars, looking out at the water.

My mind kept wandering back to her. To the feel of my name in her mouth when she moaned it out, just as she was pushing me away. To the way she could not look at me when I asked her if she wanted me to stay away from her.

She did not say no.

But she did not say yes either.

That was the worst, the in-between. The hesitation.

My daydreaming was cut short by the sliding door. I turned around and saw Kate step out in orange, already looking at me.

"Not even pouring yet?" she said with a taunt.

Kira followed her out in dark green. "He's preoccupied."

Kate smirked up. "Love problems, huh?"

"Or rejection," Kira added with a shrug.

I forced a smile. "Neither. Tired."

They didn't buy it, but they put it out. The maid brought out the glasses, and I poured wine, one for each of them, and one for me.

Kate raised hers in a mock toast. "To boredom."

"To heartbreak," I said under my breath.

They didn't hear that.

I leaned back in the pool chair, swirling wine around in my hand, staring at the ripples in the pool.

I found myself wondering where Ravenna was at that moment. Whether she was laughing at a joke Orion told. Whether he was taking her hand. Whether she was finally selecting him in all the ways I'd been wishing she never would.

I could have had her. And now I might never have the opportunity again.
Kira plunged into the pool, and so did Kate. And as I was drowning in my sorrows, they were laughing, teasing, splashing their legs at the edge of the pool like two girls without a care in the world.

I envied them.

Kira raised her glass in my direction. "Keto, you always look like someone stole your dog."

"Maybe someone did," Kate said, winking. "Or maybe someone stole his heart."

I weakly smiled. "You two talk too much."

Kate leaned in, her arm brushing against mine. "It's because we're trying to get you to talk, stone man."

I took another sip, letting the wine rest on my tongue. "Well, you're wasting your time."

Kate pouted dramatically. "Oh, come on, you're always the serious one. Doesn't that get boring?"

Kira lounged back lazily. "It's why Ravenna's attracted to him, I guess. Brooding men give off the 'I'll kill anyone for you' vibe."

Kate snorted. "Yeah, but I think Ravenna's trying for the dark and brooding one now."

That was closer than I showed. I stared at the wine swirling in my glass and said nothing.

Kate must've noticed the shift, because her teasing became soft. "Do you know where Orion took her?" she asked suddenly.

I looked up, frowning. "No. He didn't tell me."

Kate tilted her head, eyes now intense. "He told you nothing?"

"Nothing," I said curtly. "He asked me to do a job for him. That's it."

"I might know where he took her," Kira's voice cut in.

Kate sat up straight. "What?"

Kira's mouth opened as though uncertain about whether to say anything or not. She lowered her voice. "I wasn't entirely honest with Ravenna some time back."

My jaw tightened. "What do you mean, Kira?"

Kira looked from one of us to the other, then back to me. "I lied when I told her I didn't know where Orion was going to take her; in reality, I was the one who proposed it to Orion."

Kate's eyes narrowed. "What did you propose?

Kira moved in close, a whisper breaking from her lips, "The witches."

A shiver crept down my spine. "So you're saying Orion took Ravenna across the river?"

"Yes, that's where he took her."

"Kira!" I snapped. "Do you know what will happen if she's discovered in that territory?"

Her eyes dropped. "I didn't think he'd actually take her there."

I turned away, pulling both hands through my hair. What was Orion thinking? That place wasn't only forbidden, it was a death sentence. For any wolf.

"She'll die," I muttered, half to myself, half to them. "If they have even a suspicion of what she is, she'll be dead before she gets a chance to shift."

Kate stood up as well. "Why would Orion take her there? Why now?"

Kate stopped. "Because she's dying. Her alpha power is devouring her from the inside out. That's why she was weak. I just didn't want to get her upset by saying anything."

My heart thudded loudly in my chest, and my breath caught. Ravenna dying?

Chapter 101

Ruth's POV

I stood there like a statue, watching the car disappear down the long, dusty road.

Orion didn’t even look back or stop.

He left me on the side of the road like I was nothing. And drove off with Ravenna like I was an obstacle to their love life.

I clenched my fists in anger, nails digging into my palm. The humiliation burned hot in my chest. He dared to do that in front of her? My own stepdaughter?

I have never been humiliated like this before, the man that tried it didn't live beyond 7 days. And that was many years ago, when I killed Ravenna's father for humiliating me because of Ravenna.

And now, Orion had just entered my death list.

Although I had always wanted to kill Orion.

But he wasn't a top priority 'wanted dead' in my head. Never! With this kind of rage that burned in my throat after he told me to leave his car.

I always wanted to kill Ravenna, too; she had always been in the way. But now?

Now they both had to die.

Same level of determination. Same level of hate.

I reached into my bag and brought out my phone. My hands were shaking, but not from fear. From fury.

My eyes darted back to the road, perhaps he was coming back, but I saw nothing.

Then I dialed Kevin's number. He picked on the second ring.

“Get your ass here,” I barked into the phone. “I’ll send you the location now.”

“Wait, what?” He asked, like what I just said was Chinese.

"Do you want me to repeat myself?" I asked, my eyes narrowing.

He cleared his throat, "No ma'am, I heard you the first time. Just send your location and I'll be there."

Good, he knew the consequence of allowing me to repeat myself.

I hung up and sent the location to him. I was no longer expecting Orion to show up, and even if he did, I wouldn't get into his car.

In fact, I'd rather not set my eyes on him until he's dead.

Fifteen minutes later, Kevin's car pulled up. He rolled down the window, eyes wide.

“Ruth? What the hell happened? I thought you left with Orion.”

I opened the door and got in without a word. Slammed it shut.

“Drive,” I snapped. “Take me to Orion’s mansion.”

Kevin glanced at me as he started driving. "What happened with Orion?"

"He didn't want me to tag along anymore with him. That was what happened," I explained, my brows furrowed in anger.

"He dropped you off? Just like that?" Kevin asked, eyes widening, "That's disrespectful."

I gave a bitter laugh. “He didn’t drop me off. He kicked me out. Because of that fool."

His eyes widened. “Ravenna?”

“Yes. Ravenna, she has somehow managed to win his heart."

“Damn. I didn’t think he’d actually fall for her,” Kevin muttered.

I stared out the window, jaw tight.

“I didn’t think she’d fall for him either,” he added.

“It doesn’t matter who fell for who,” I hissed. “What matters is they both fall into the grave. And stay there. Buried. Forgotten.”

Kevin swallowed.

I turned to him. “What’s going on with your plan to kill Orion?”

He hesitated. “I gave Ravenna the alpha poison.”

“And?” I asked, my eyes narrowing.

“She didn’t use it," he said, his voice low.

“What?” I snapped. “Why not?”

“She refused to use it. If she had, Orion would've been dead by now, and then we would've gotten rid of her. Worse, she even tried to kill me for trying to tell her what to do."

I sat back, stunned. “She tried to kill you?”

Kevin nodded. “They are both in love with each other, which wasn't part of the original picture, and it's bad for business."

I was quiet for a moment, trying to think. “Then we need a new plan.”

“There’s more,” he said, his voice suddenly low. “A bigger problem.”

I frowned. “What now?”

“If Ravenna talks, it might land me in a big problem. I might even have to run away," he said, and I could feel the tension in his voice. He was afraid.

I turned sharply to face him. “Talks? About what?”

Kevin gripped the steering wheel tightly. “She knows the name Jacob.”

I stared at him, stunned. “What did you just say?” I asked.

“She said the name,” he replied. “Jacob.”

My whole body went cold.

“That’s not possible,” I whispered.

“Apparently it is.”

“No one knows that name. No one alive,” I muttered. “Only one person ever knew your real name.”

Kevin glanced at me. “Lyra.”

I nodded slowly as the realization hit me. “And Lyra is dead.”

“Exactly.”

“Then someone told her,” I said. “Someone who knows things they shouldn't.”

Kevin was quiet.

I gritted my teeth. “If Ravenna speaks about your previous identity to the wrong person, we’re all finished.”

“I know,” Kevin said. “That’s why we need to get rid of her faster."

My mind went in different directions, trying to connect the dots. How did Ravenna know about Jacob? But more importantly, why is she quiet about it?

“I don’t understand how she found out,” I whispered, more to myself. “Who would dare?”

Kevin looked over. “Maybe Lyra didn’t die the way we thought. Maybe she told someone before she died.”

“She died in that accident!” I snapped. “I made sure of it!”

“Maybe she somehow survived it,” he said softly. “Her body wasn't found, even to this day. They still can't find her dead body.”

I leaned back against the seat, heart pounding. For the first time in years, fear began to creep into my chest.

“She might not know everything,” Kevin cut in. “Maybe all she knows is just the name.”

“Don't be foolish, the name is enough," I blurted out.

We drove in silence for a few minutes, both of us deep in thought.

I thought of all the possible ways I could get rid of both of them faster. My eyes lit up when an idea struck me. I knew where they were headed.

The witch's territory, although I didn't know the reason, but their whereabouts was enough.

A small smile spread across my lips. All I had to do was let the witches know two alphas are in their territory, and they would do the job for me, without breaking a sweat.

Chapter 102

Ruth's POV

By the time we pulled up at Orion's mansion, I was boiling inside. The security guards opened the gate, and we drove in.

I didn't even wait for Kevin to park properly. I swung the door open and marched into the house. "Keto!" I yelled as soon as I got inside. "Where's Keto?"

One of the maids looked startled. "He's not in, ma'am."

"Where is he?" I asked, my tone urgent.

"At the pool, ma'am," she responded quickly.

I spun around, and Kevin was already catching up to me.

"Come on," I snapped, "he is at the pool," and we stormed toward the back of the mansion.

As we rounded the corner, I saw Keto, but he wasn't alone.

Keto was shirtless, lounging by the pool with a glass in his hand.

While Kira was beside him, smiling like everything was perfect.

And then Kate.

That one. The bitch who once dared to challenge me in front of Ravenna. Now sitting there like a queen, sipping wine.

I seemed to have forgotten about how she disrespected me. I didn't know how to deal with her yet, I wanted to know more about her first.

Then I'd show her what I do to people who disrespect me.

“Hello,” Kira greeted politely, standing up. “Ruth, we didn't know you'd be coming back.”

Keto nodded. “Good evening, Ruth, I hope there's no problem?"

"There's no problem at all, Keto," I said, then turned to Kira, "You guys seem to be having a nice evening."

My eyes landed on Kate, but she didn’t even flinch.

Didn’t greet me. Didn’t acknowledge me. Just acted like I didn't exist.

Kevin greeted them, “Hi, guys,” his voice awkward.

They all ignored him like he was invisible.

I didn’t care. My eyes were locked on Kate. She stared straight back, her chin lifted.

So that was it. I folded my arms, walking up to her. “Do you know who I am, young woman?”

Kate gave a slow smirk. “I think I do, but I don’t give a fuck who you are.”

My brows raised.

She added, “As long as you’re not my alpha, I don’t owe you anything.”

I scoffed, “I’m Ravenna’s stepmother.”

Kate shrugged. “Not for long.”

My eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

That was a threat. A clear one. She said it as though they had a plan for me that I wasn't aware of. Maybe Ravenna had told them about Kevin being Jacob, and they had placed all the pieces together.

But I don't think they knew; if they did, I wouldn't be standing here at all.

So why did this bitch disrespect me? Even Keto respects me. Who the hell did this girl think she was?

Keto noticed the tension and quickly stood. “Let’s all relax, please. Ruth, I assume you wanted to speak with me?”

“I did,” I said tightly. “But it seems there’s more important business here. Like threats.”

“I didn’t threaten you,” Kate said, coolly. “I promised justice. There’s a difference.”

I took a step forward. “Be careful what you promise, little girl.”

Kate tilted her head. “Be careful what you’ve done. Because we know. And when the time comes, we’re coming for you.”

Then she turned to Kevin and said loud enough for all of us to hear, “Take your boss away before I finish what Ravenna should have finished a long time ago.”

Kira stood, reaching out to Kate’s arm. “Kate, chill.”

Kevin clenched his jaw. “Don’t talk to her like that.”

Kate turned to him, lifted her cup, and poured her wine straight onto his chest.

The red wine soaked his shirt instantly.

Kevin jerked. “What the fuck is wrong with you?!”

He started forward, fists clenched, but I stepped in his way.

“Stop it!” I barked, "Don't start a fight. We don't need one."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kate’s hand glide to her clothes on the ground close to the pool where her gun was clipped.

I raised my hand fast. “It hasn’t gotten to this. Let's not allow our misunderstanding lead to blood."

I wondered why a werewolf was holding a gun, but I assumed it had silver bullets. The last thing I wanted was Kevin's death.

Keto was already on his feet, looking uncertain.

I straightened my dress and sighed. “We’ll be on our way.” I turned and began walking off.

“Ruth,” Keto called.

“Never mind,” I said without looking back.

Kevin followed behind me, still fuming. His shirt was wet, and he smelled like fermented grapes.

“Are you just going to let that slide?” he asked once we were out of earshot.

“Yes, for now," I muttered. “We have bigger problems.”

He opened the car door for me and got into the driver’s seat.

“What happened back there?” he asked. “You were going to manipulate Keto, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” I said plainly.

I didn’t bother lying. What was the point?

“I was going to make him believe that Orion plans to offer Ravenna to the witches.”

Kevin frowned. “So he’d go rogue on Orion?”

“Yes,” I muttered. “So if Orion somehow survives, Keto would still be there to finish the job.”

“And now?” he asked, his eyes widening.

I stared out the window. “It’s clear the game’s changed. The kids are starting to suspect. They’re no longer afraid.”

“You think Kate knows?”

“She’s too bold not to. She knows something. And if she’s talking to Ravenna… it’s only a matter of time before everything comes crashing down.”

Kevin drummed his fingers on the wheel. “We need another approach.”

“I know,” I said coldly.

I rested my head back, thinking. I had spent so much time pulling the strings. Manipulating everyone like pawns on a board.

But now? Now they weren’t playing by my rules anymore.

If I wanted to win, I had to come up with something else.

"Now, we need to think beyond just Orion and Ravenna to include Keto, Kate, and Kira," I said, my voice low.

I could feel Kevin's jaw tightening as he drove out of the gate.

"I know someone who has a strong link with the witches. I'd call him and inform him about Orion and Ravenna, then we'd travel to the east, and then the south," I blurted out my plans.

Kevin nodded, "Sounds like a brilliant plan."

If I can't manipulate Orion's pack from within, and make them fight with one another. Then I'd manipulate his enemies and rattle them to come for him and his pack.

Chapter 103

Kate's POV

I watched as Ruth walked away with that shady-looking guy she came with.

My jaw tightened. I hated everything about her. The way she walked like the world owed her something, the way her eyes judged everyone like we were beneath her.

If Kevin had tried anything stupid, I was ready to blow his head off, and hers without thinking. I'd do it for Ravenna since she didn't have the heart for it.

Kira sat back in her chair beside me, sighing softly. “You didn’t have to pour wine on him, Kate.”

I raised a brow, not even hiding my irritation. “Yes, I did. He deserved it and even more. He was lucky he didn't get a silver bullet in his skull."

“She’ll know we’re onto her now,” Kira said, glancing at Keto like she was hoping he’d back her up.

“Good,” I said flatly. “Let her know we know. Let her lose sleep for once.”

Kira shook her head, clearly not seeing it the way I did. “That’s how you push someone into doing something reckless. She’ll be cornered now. And what happens when a snake is cornered? They bite harder."

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees, my voice low and sharp. “She was already planning something reckless, Kira. That woman doesn’t wait to be provoked.”

Keto finally spoke, his tone cautious. “What exactly are we accusing Ruth of?”

I looked at him. Right. He hadn’t heard.

"You don't know? Ravenna didn't tell you?" I asked.

He nodded his head dismissively, "No, Ravenna didn't tell me anything."

Kira beat me to it. “Ravenna said Ruth is the one who killed her mother.”

Keto’s eyes widened. “What?” He didn’t try to hide the shock. His whole face twisted like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

I nodded slowly. “Yeah. She told us recently, though, not like we knew about it weeks ago. She said Ruth was behind it. Not just suspected it, she knew it.”

“But… why keep that a secret for so long?” Keto asked, still confused.

“Maybe she didn’t trust anyone,” I said. “Or maybe she was waiting for the right time. You don’t drop that kind of truth when you have no one on your side.”

“Orion,” Keto muttered. “We need to tell Orion. Now.”

I tilted my head and let out a half-laugh. “You think he doesn’t already suspect Ruth? Orion isn’t blind.”

“He’s not a mind reader either,” Keto replied. “If Ruth really did kill Ravenna’s mom, he deserves to hear it clearly from someone close.”

“She already told him,” I said. “I’m sure she has. And if she hasn’t yet, she will soon.”

There was a moment of silence. I could feel the tension in the air shift.

“I don’t like how Ruth looked at me,” I added, more to myself than to them. “Like she knew something. Like she was planning to kill me. And I regret not killing her here."

“She probably is,” Kira said, "and we can't kill her just like that without concrete evidence," she paused as though thinking of something. "Well, we could, though, after all, Ravenna is legally tied to Orion, so he has every right to end her if he smells something foul."

“I don’t trust Kevin either,” Keto added, "That dude has always been stalking Ravenna."

I rolled my eyes. “You’re just realizing that now? That guy has ‘traitor’ written all over him.”

“No, it’s more than that,” Keto said. “Something about him feels… familiar. Like I’ve seen him before, but I can’t place it.”

“That’s even worse,” I said. “If he’s been hiding in plain sight this whole time, that means Ruth’s got more pieces on the board than we thought.”

Kira looked at me, concern written all over her face. “Do you think Ravenna is safe with Orion?”

I paused.

That question hit differently.

I stared out at the water for a moment, watching the moon reflect across the surface. “Honestly?” I said. “I don’t know. Orion is a mystery. One moment he’s cold, the next he’s soft. But whatever he’s doing with her… I just hope she comes back whole.”

The pool water rippled as a soft breeze passed. My chest tightened.

“If Ruth finds out where they went,” I said, “she won’t just try to stop them. She’ll try to make sure they never come back.”

Keto looked serious now. “Then we can’t let her find out.”

“Exactly,” I said. “But the way she stormed in here today, she’s getting desperate."

Kira looked between us. “I think she already knows where they were headed. Orion initially asked her to follow him across the river in front of me."

I swallowed hard, and Keto's eyes narrowed.

"Well, let's hope she doesn't have any witch around that she can report to," Keto said, as though he didn't want to think about what would happen if she knew someone from the witches' territory.

"Let's not hope, let's act," I cut in, "We assume the worst of our enemies and take measures to counter it just in case."

"So what are you suggesting?" Kira asked, her gaze piercing.

"We go after them, just to make sure they come back safe."

Keto chuckled in disbelief, "That's reckless, Kate. What if we all die there? I don't think we should do that."

Kira didn't say a word; she just kept processing what I had just suggested.

"Well, our lives are already endangered the moment Orion went ahead with Ravenna. If they die, our pack is vulnerable, and chances are, we would die a different death," I explained.

"It's better to die with them than to die after them," Kira added.

Keto sighed, "Yeah, you're both right. We go after them and be their cover just in case anything happens."

Good. I liked where the conversation was headed.

"So when do we leave?" I asked, my tone light.

"We leave at first light, and we would be going with a team that are not werewolves," Keto announced, already formulating a plan.

I smiled, "I know some Delta Rogues we can use for this mission, very effective and stealth."

"Reach out to them tonight, let them know we need their services tomorrow morning," Keto ordered.

And right away, I went for my phone.

Chapter 104

Lyra's POV

By the time we reached the other side of the river, the moon had shifted to its peak.

Orion dragged the boat onto the bank and helped me step out. The earth felt soft under my boots, damp with river mist.

We sat there, just breathing. The air here beside the river was thicker, quieter, more conspiratorial, as though it contained secrets.

"It's almost 11," Orion said, looking up at the sky as though he could read the time on his palm more accurately than a watch. "We camp here tonight. Leave early at dawn."

I furrowed my brow. "Camp where? We don't even have a tent to sleep. And don't you think it's not safe, especially after the no-element-agreement. I think we have to go a bit deeper into the forest, maybe we can see an abandoned building or motel somewhere. That would be safer than sleeping in some crazy wild forest with weird creatures."

He didn't say a word; he just acted as though he hadn't heard a word out of anything I'd uttered. And then he unfolded a rolled-up tent out of the big bag that he'd pulled out of the car and spread it out with one sweeping motion.

Indeed. He had come prepared, but he didn't feel it was appropriate to tell me that he had a tent with him.

But rather than having two tents, he set up only one.

"I don't see the second tent," I said, folding my arms.

"Because there isn't one," he replied matter-of-factly without looking at me.

"You don't sleep?" I asked, assuming that he would be up all night.

"Yes. With you. We both are going to sleep in one tent," he replied, his tone deep but firm.

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

Orion crouched and began driving tent stakes into the ground as if he'd never done anything else. "It's no good putting up two. Don't worry, I'll not bite you in your sleep."

I scoffed. "You should worry about me stabbing you in your sleep, bite does have a certain romance about it."

"In that case," he said softly, with a quick glance up before looking down again. "Then we'll sleep back to back.".

I didn't utter a word. I kept watching him until the tent was finally up straight. Simple, black, sturdy. Like him.

I entered the tent to organize other items like the camp bed and pillows.

As soon as I came out of the tent, I noticed that he was looking towards the edge of the forest while I tried to sit on a fallen tree, not even paying attention to any unusual activity in the forest.

We barely spoke a word, and the only thing I knew was that he vanished from my sight to who knows where.

It wasn't until much later on that afternoon when he appeared out of nowhere, slung a dead deer over his shoulder like it was nothing.

I raised an eyebrow. "You took that out?" And my stomach rumbled to it. I was hungry, sure.

"I saw it. Caught it, and it was easy," he said as he let it fall.

"And you did all that without employing any of your elemental abilities?" I questioned, raising my brow in disbelief.

"Actually, Ravenna," he replied, "I caught it without employing claws and fangs. Are you satisfied now, or do you need a video shoot?"

"Do you have a video to support your tale?" I asked, tossing him the knife I had taken out of the bag.

"Yeah, I do, in my head. If you could walk inside my head, you could see exactly how I killed the deer."

"Bullshit."

I picked up another knife and proceeded with him to cut the meat.

We began to prepare the animal together. I didn't even ask him where he got firewood. He possessed a means of owning whatever he needed.

We cleaned the meat, put it on sticks, and put it to roast slowly over the flames.

As the fire spat and the smell of roasting venison drifted through the woods, I sat beside him in the brush-clear area.

Silence between us again, but this time the silence was different. Less awkward. More. real.

I hadn't even realized how close we were until his hand was on my waist.

"Cold?" he breathed in my ear.

"A little," I lied. I wasn't cold at all. I was burning.

And then his arms surrounded me, firm and strong, and I tensed.

His chin scraped against my shoulder, lips inches from my throat. "Tell me to stop," he whispered.

I said nothing.

He crept closer, room for me to back away. I didn't. His mouth tickled my neck, then my jaw.

I spun around, breath stuck in my throat, and then our lips collided.

It was slow at first. A test.

But we were done testing each other.

I wriggled in his arms, sitting astride his lap, palms cupping his face as his lips dropped onto mine.

The kiss became sloppy, ravenous. Like we'd waited long enough to do this again. His hands slid under my shirt, rasping palms dragging fire across my skin. I breathed into his lips.

"You've been driving me crazy," he whispered, pulling my lower lip between his.

"Likewise," I breathed.

His grip on me tightened, as if he was attempting to remember the contours of me. My hands were full of his hair as I kissed him more hungrily. It was starving, wild, lustful. No posing, no holding back. Just hunger.

Then, "Shit!" it came out at that instant, as he stepped back.

I gasped and exclaimed, "What?"

He turned away from the fire. "The meat's on fire."

Smoke curled around us, thick and acrid. The deer was burning.

We both sprang up, and he sprang first, swearing as he yanked the skewer from the flames.

I stood up, gasping and scratching my scraped lips with the back of my hand.

The tension snapped.

Orion laid the meat on the ground and inspected the edges. "Still safe," he snarled. "Mostly."

I sat again, attempting to soothe the storm still raging within me. My lips were dry. My skin hummed with electricity.

He looked at me. "Sorry about that."

"Sorry about what?"

"Burning the meat."

I breathed nervously. "Don't be."

He was extremely skilled at burning things to ash. First, he burned my body to ash, then my heart, now the meat.

We didn't even share a kiss again after that. We ate in silence, both of us pretending our mouths hadn't just been on each other and that we hadn't eaten in weeks.

The tension between us still held that heavy, breath-holding quality and weighed heavily.

When we finally curled into the tent, the silence moved in again, this time charged with all the words we weren't saying.

He was lying next to me, shoulders inches apart. Neither of us stirred. I rolled over onto my side, away from him. I could feel the weight at my back, his breathing, slow and deep.

Sleep was not forthcoming.

For even in the dark, I could sense the pressure of his breath.

We lay there like that until his hand began to slide up my thigh.

My eyes opened wide with excitement.

Chapter 105

Lyra's POV

His fingers didn’t move away. They curled around my thigh.

And neither of us said anything.

The silence was louder than anything either of us could have spoken.

And then his thumb stroked the inside of my thighs, slow, almost somnolent, but it ignited a fire in my chest. I knew that touch. Knew what it meant. Knew where it could lead.

And I didn't do anything to stop him.

I wanted it and more.

His fingers slipped free of my thighs, rode up, stroking along the length of my arm, brushing against my shoulder. Prickles radiated under his touch. I leaned my head, eyes meeting his in the gloom of the lantern.

His did not move. Neither mine did.

There was a hunger in his eyes, something caged and desperate. And inside me… there was something uncontrolled. Something giving way.

He touched me again, this time with both hands. His palms framed my face as he leaned towards me. His breath caught against my cheek, warm and rough.

"I shouldn't," he said.

"Then don't," I said.

Neither of us was honest.

His mouth found mine, gentle to begin with, then harder, as though he couldn't help himself anymore. I melted into it, my hands tracing over his chest, grasping the front of his shirt. He helped me push it off. I needed to feel his skin, all of it, warm, alive, against me.

As his mouth moved down my throat, I leaned into him.

Heat bloomed in my chest, my belly, lower. He knew what he was doing, his touch slow and deliberate and torturous.

When his hand went under my shirt, I sucked in a breath. His thumb printed on my skin like a vow.

I let him undress me. Slowly, piece by piece.

And when I lay naked beneath him, he looked at me as though he'd never laid eyes on anything so painfully beautiful and impossible to reach all in one.

He kissed along my belly, drawing the kiss lower, deeper. His mouth left a trail of fire I couldn't contain.

And again he came back up, eyes black, jaw clenched.

I wrapped my arms about his neck and pulled him down.

He buried his face between my tits, one hand covering one and his mouth on the other one.

"Fuck," I gasped as a soft moan escaped my mouth.

I pressed him closer to my chest, as if he were not already close enough, and I could feel the heat travel to my coochie as he latched onto my nipples like his life depended on it.

Then I released it, louder this time, "Orion," I whispered, more of a moan than a call.

Then he relaxed his grip on one of my boobs, and his hand moved to my coochie, gliding along my clitoris.

"Fuck!" I groaned harder as his fingers began rubbing around it.

My hands around his neck tightened, and I bit his neck, a soft bite.

He grunted with pleasure, and that was getting me hotter and more.

"You're going to kill me, Orion," I panted while one hand teased my clit and his tongue licked my nipples.

I couldn't hold back anymore, I started moaning in his ears, but my coochie craved something else, something long and thick.

So I went for his dick, already rock hard, I started stroking it, and tried to push it into me, but he held me back.

"Please, Orion," I pleaded in shock, "Fuck me, I need it hard and fast."

He stared at me straight into the eyes, and kissed me again. I soaked up his hot kiss, but my hand was still on his dick.

I loved the kisses, the sucking, the love play, but now more than ever, I needed his dick in me.

But he was being slow, as a punishment.

I bit his chest again as he pulled his lips from mine, this time harder, and he grunted, his voice echoing off the tent.

Then he sat back, his hand on his huge dick, and then just started to slowly slide it into my too-wet pussy.

When he slid inside, I moaned, my whole body clenching around him. It was slow, deep. Like we were both memorizing the way this felt, the way we fit.

His forehead against mine. We were breathing each other in.

I moved my hips to make room for him.

He growled low in his throat, the sound that always sent a shiver down my spine. My hands caressed his back, along his vertebrae, pulling him closer, wanting more.

I circled my legs around him, and my grip on his back was a clenched fist, as if I wished to flay his skin from his bones.

"Faster, Orion," I screamed as I arched back in pleasure.

He obliged. Harder. Deeper. Faster.

My breath hung up in my throat, the ecstasy was too much, I could not hold back the screams as he thrust in and out of my pussy like he was battling an enemy.

The tent groaned under our movements. The air grew hot, warm, slippery with the sounds of skin on skin, breath on breath, his name escaping my lips in broken whispers.

His hand was around my thigh, holding me up higher, opening me further.

I swallowed all of him, and it was still not enough yet. I wanted to crawl inside him, completely lose myself.

It was insane. Desperate. Wild.

His lips on my shoulder, my collarbone, my breast. I was arched. I bit my lip to hold a scream in, but he noticed me do it, kissed the escape from my mouth, and told me not to hold back.

So I didn't.

I screamed his name as my release came together, fast and blinding.

He sped up, slamming his own, gritting his teeth, fighting himself until I shattered apart under him, my body convulsing, shuddering, clenching around him. I saw stars. Felt as though I was out of my body for a second.

Then he came.

His body went rigid, each muscle strung tight, each gasp ragged. He growled so low it shook my chest, and slammed deep into me, his whole body shuddering.

And then, he collapsed beside me, hugging me, the two of us drenched in sweat, gasping for breath.

Chapter 106

Lyra's POV

I woke up with a soft start as the morning light slipped through the seam. I reached beside me for Orion, the spot still faintly warm, but empty.

Again.

The last time we slept in a tent like this, after that night by the river, I woke up to an empty bed as well.

I should be used to it by now, and yet still, there was something about waking up alone after a night such as this that always strained my chest.

This time, however, I knew he must have been close by.

I ripped the blanket away, stretched a little, and sat up. The cold wind touched my skin as I stepped out of the tent barefoot, the forest surrounding us all still under morning sleep. But no Orion.

"Orion?" I called softly. Nothing. The only sound was the creaking of trees.

My eyes darted left and right, and I took another step forward. And then I heard a quick, intent shift behind me, and my heart skipped, and I turned around out of reflex.

And halted.

It wasn't Orion.

It was her.

The woman at Ben's funeral. The same witch I'd seen in the war. The one who had still, brown eyes and that disquieting calm.

She tilted her head, dark hair flying like smoke around the tops of her shoulders. My body went stiff.

She'd struck before I could move, her arm swooping out to wrap around the hilt of a silver knife, then the agony.

She drove the blade into my chest.

I gasped as it burned through skin, flesh, bone. My knees buckled. My blood was flame. I strove to seize her wrist, but the strength had departed. Blood rose to my lips and spilled out in a slow trickle.

She leaned forward and breathed frost against my cheek.
"It's time for you to die, Ravenna."

And then, all was darkness.

I gasped for breath, my whole body starting up. My hands flew to my chest. No blood. No knife.

I was inside the tent once more.

My heart pounded. I was covered in a sheen of sweat. My chest was laboring as if I'd sprinted through flames.

It was a dream. No, a nightmare.

I blinked hard and rolled over again.

He was still there.

Orion slept beside me, his breathing soft, his body heat under the thin blanket. I took a shaking breath, reminding myself of where I was.

I had to get up.

Sneaking out of the tent again, I emerged into the light.

The trees were still there. The wind said no secrets. But I felt as if someone had been standing there, watching me. As if she had lived.

Maybe it was a warning.

I took deep breaths and glanced across the clearing. Still nothing. Nothing at all.

Then, more movement.

I spun around with my throat constricted.

It was Orion. I let out a breath that I didn't realize I had been holding.

"You scared me," I told him, trying to keep my voice even.

His brows furrowed slightly. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I nodded, gritting out a smile. "I just wasn't thinking you'd be here."

"Didn't mean to sneak up," he answered, pushing a lock of hair from my face. "Clean up. We can leave in a bit. There's a bridge that goes to the village, we'll get there before dark if we go now."

I glanced back at the tent. "Have you ever been there?"

His eyes diverted. "Yeah. Twice."

I waited for more, but he didn't provide. His voice had clipped on at the end. A wall.

I didn't push.
Then he said to me, "Beware ravens."

I looked at him, furrowed brows. "Ravens?"

"Witches employ them as spies," he said to me, his voice lower. "If you come across one... don't speak. Don't role-play it. Just wait. Understand?"

I nodded. "Remember.".

Without delay, I returned to the tent and grabbed a bit of cloth, soap herbs, and a water flask.

I glanced around my shoulder. "You're off to the river too, aren't you?"

He grinned mirthfully. "Nah. I'll go somewhere else. Don't want to get sidetracked."

I snorted softly. "I think I understand you."

He winked, and I rolled my eyes in a friendly manner, making my way to the river.

His words were brief, but I knew that he understood what I was getting at.

But while I walked, my hand lay on the spot on my chest where the knife had entered in the dream. I could not help it. That woman was following me; it was no fantasy, it was magic. She probably knew that we had come into their nation.

The river was glassy, still, pure, and inviting. A luxury on the scarce side, especially after yesterday's long traveling day.

I walked to the edge, toes tracing the cold surface before I stripped and stepped in completely.

Water wrapped around me like silk. Cold at first, but growing warmer against my skin as time passed. I plunged deeper in, letting the current stroke my shoulders as I submerged my body.

Quiet here. No Orion. No witches. Just the quiet of nature. For a moment, it felt like peace.

I leaned back and floated for a while, eyes closed, arms outstretched as the sun filtered in through the leaves above. The silence was peaceful. until it wasn't.

A sound cut the air.

A croak. Then another.

I opened my eyes slowly.

Above me, through the leafy cover of the trees, a few black shapes flew overhead. And then they returned.

Birds. But not birds.

Ravens.

Three.
Then five.
Then dozens.

They didn't fly aimlessly. They flew directly over me, their shrieking croaks booming in the trees as if saying words of tongues that only they understood.

I froze, the water at breast level, stiff.
The air grew heavy, a strange tension condensing in my ears like thunder rumbling beneath the ground.

They were observing me.

Not as beasts. As spies. Witches, certainly.

My heart began to thud. I thought of what Orion had said. I thought of his warning. These were not ordinary birds. These were their eyes. Their messengers. Their warriors.

Despite that, I forced myself to take my time, moving out to the edge of the riverbank.

One of the ravens released a more piercing shriek than the rest of them.

Then chaos.

As if they shared one mind, all of them fell from the air upon me.

I gasped and stumbled backward, the water slowing me down. Their wings beat wildly, the air full of dark feathers and shrieking calls.

Chapter 107

Lyra's POV

I raised an arm to protect my face, slipping underwater for a second as one of the birds swooped so close I could feel its claws graze my shoulder.

They were attacking.

The witches knew I was here.

I burst through the surface, gagging, hair clung to my face as I landed on the riverbank, searching for my clothing with shaking hands.

One raven dove again, talons for my throat. I screamed and ducked, then grabbed a piece of nearby wood and swung it in a wild arc, hitting one of them in mid-air.

It let out a resounding, furious screech and fell to the ground dead.

Another dove. Then another.

Where is Orion?

I sprinted to a large tree for cover, pulling the shirt over my wet skin, feet slushing across wet grass. Shallow breaths, and chest rising and falling in a rush.

The ravens did not back off. They flew overhead again, slower this time, but nearer.

One landed on a branch above me, head tilted to one side at me. Red glowing eyes.

I backed away, step by step, until at last the creature let out a final croak and fled, vanishing among the leaves.

The others in rapid succession.
Thus, they were gone.

Silence came back, but it was not so serene anymore.

I stood there, dripping, shivering, my clothes plastered to me. My chest throbbed with still-ongoing panic.

I didn't have to wait long. I grabbed the remaining clothes, held them with trembling hands, and sprinted back towards the tent.

I reached the clearing where we had been camping, and found that the tent remained fixed, but no sign of Orion.

He had warned me about the ravens, but I didn't think they would appear so soon.

Where the bloody hell is he?

I scanned behind the trees, half in hope of seeing more ravens, or worse, witches hiding behind the trees.

My heart racing, I burst through the tent, throwing the flap open to check if he was inside, only to meet it empty.

He must be somewhere nearby.

I was buttoning up my last button on my shirt when I heard something behind me.

My stomach constricted. I turned, fists curled, ready to fight, but it was Orion.

He wasn't putting on any shirt, just short.

"Where did you go?" I demanded.

His gaze swept over me, noting how shaken I was. "River. What's wrong with you?"

"You saw them?" I pressed in a panting voice, ignoring his question.

He nodded. "The birds? Yeah."

"They attacked me," I told him, still breathing hard. "They weren't just flying around me. They were after me."

Orion's face hardened. "They were testing you."

"Testing me?"

"To see if you're a werewolf," he said. "To see if your scent was actually covered or not. I told you, witches use ravens to gauge power. If you'd stayed silent and motionless, they would've left."

I blinked. "I didn't know that! I defended myself! One bird dived at my head, and I hit it with a stick!"

Orion's face went white. "You what?"

"I just struck it," I repeated. "It was coming at me, I freaked out."

"Ravenna," he growled, voice hard and evil. "Killing a raven is the same as killing a witch."

His words cut like a slap.

I stood frozen. "What?"

He ruffled his hand through his hair, stepping back for a second, pacing in a small circle. "You don't understand. They're not birds. They're spirit-bound vessels. Every

raven they send out is attached to a real witch. Kill one, and it kills too. You just killed one of them."

My face lost color. "I didn't mean to."

"But you did," he answered. "And now they're going to be searching for you."

"Orion," I took a step in closer, "I didn't use any abilities. Just a stick."

"It doesn't matter how you killed it, Ravenna," he spoke, facing me again. "You've killed a witch and made yourself a target now."

I wagged my head, struggling to understand the seriousness of what he told me. "And then what?"

Orion's eyes were unreadable, his voice husky. "They'll come for you. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow."

I couldn't catch my breath. The image of the raven's red glowing eyes came into my mind.

I thought I was merely defending myself. I didn't realize I killed it.".

"But why would they kill me?" I panted. "Wouldn't they listen, let me explain?"

He shook his head. "It doesn't work that way. Some witches might try to recruit you. Turn you. But most of them? They'll want to level the score with blood."

I fell onto a log next to the fire ring, trying to fight off panic. "This journey was supposed to be training or whatever the hell you called it," I said.

Orion knelt down in front of me and placed a hand on my knee. "This is training," he said softly. "Learning how to keep going when everything is working against you."

I gazed into his eyes. They were not angry anymore. Just resigned.

"Can't we just turn around?" I asked, almost pleading.

He shook his head again. "It's too late. They know you're here. If we run now, they'll chase us. The only thing we can do now is see the plan through. Go to the village. Infiltrate with the people. Then escape."

I nodded slowly, though fear still wriggled in my stomach.

"Fine," he said, "I'll dress and we can go."

He passed by me into the tent and I faced his back.

"I'm not going with you," I growled, and he stopped.

"I won't go anywhere with you unless you tell me why you brought me here. And don't fucking tell me the training bullshit excuse."

He placed his hand on the tent, as if weighing his words, and then he looked towards me.

"I brought you here because you're dying, Ravenna," he said gently.

I gulped hard, and I could feel my chest constricting.

Chapter 108

Kate's POV

My fingers were pulling up the encrypted line I used for black ops calls. I didn't hesitate, not even for a second.

I took a walk away from the pool, heading for a quiet spot to make the call.

The Delta Rogues were not just a strike team. They were banished soldiers, sniper specialists, ex-pack best who were cast out or dissolved by their areas and pounded themselves into mercenary gun-for-hire.

I punched the phone and held on. One ring. Two.

"Speak." A gruff voice answered. The tone immediately told me it was Captain Zack.

"It's Kate. I have an op that must be launched tomorrow morning. 08:00 hours, coordinates will be disclosed en route."

There was silence. I could hear crackling in the distance, like he was already on some far-off path with his men. "Brief me."

I paced back and forth, thinking about how to deceive him without appearing deceitful.

"We're going behind enemy lines. I need your best and then, guns, snipers. Anything new and illegal you've been waiting to test out. Bring it."

"You're paying this time?" His voice was flat.

I took a breath. "Yes."

"How much?" he asked.

"Name your price," I replied, rolling my eyes. I did not haggle over money with Keto.

Another silence. Then, "Thirty million."

I did not blink. "Done."

Another silence. I guessed he was surprised that I did not haggle, but I was short on time.

"Fine. We'll be ready."

"I'm not giving you the specifics now," I said. "Just you remember, if you see something that doesn't appear to belong there, shoot first, question later. You got it?"

"You bring me the good ones, Kate. We're rolling at dawn."

I hung up and leaned against the wall, releasing a breath I hadn't even realized I'd been holding.

Thirty million. For men who had no clue what they were getting themselves into.

I walked back outside to the pool, where Kira sat with her feet dangling in the water, and Keto was standing bare-chested, mixing wine in a glass like he was pretending.

"You called them?" Kira immediately asked when she saw me.

"They'll be ready tomorrow morning at 8. We'll pick them up along the way."

"How much?" Keto asked.

"Thirty million," I said.

They both froze.

Kira almost spat her drink out. "What?

Keto scowled. "Did you even try to negotiate?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Do I look as though I have time to negotiate? We need people who will not hesitate to shoot witches in the face and not flinch when wolves shift around them."

Kira's eyes went wide. "Did you tell them they'd be battling against witches?"

"Of course, I did not tell them about that part. I thought it wasn't necessary."

Keto was silent for a moment. Then he nodded. "I'll pay for it."

Kira shook her head. "Thirty million to gun-carrying humans."

"They're not gun-carrying humans. These are the Delta Rogues," I informed her. "These have been in genuine war. Some have assassinated high-level terrorists. I think it's cheap, considering the fact that we might have to save the life of an alpha and his mate."

Keto looked impressed but said nothing. Kira remained unconvinced, though.

"So we're really going to attack witches?" Kira asked. "Just like that?"

"We're not attacking them," Keto replied. "We're going to stand behind Orion and Ravenna. Especially Ravenna."

"I don't know what I think about this," Kira complained. "But I suppose it's better than sitting around with our thumbs.".

I looked up at the sky with a moon. There was something about this night that reminded me of the eye of the storm.

"We'll all get some rest," I told them, arching my arms back. "We'll be on our toes when we see them. No one's fighting wolf strength, so if it gets nasty. It'll be magic vs. gun."

"I hate guns," Kira muttered to herself.

Keto manipulated his neck. "I hate witches more."

We just stood there for a moment, letting that reality sink in. Then Keto nodded and walked away.

"See you two in the morning," he growled.

"Goodnight," I whispered.

Kira spun to me, "I suppose this is where we go to bed."

I nodded, and we went directly inside the mansion to our rooms.

My head was pounding by the time I got to my room.

I shut the door and let my body lean against it for a second.

This was not the life I expected. Once, I was a cop. Gun, badge, all-nighters with paperwork, and thieves who had no claws or glowy eyes. Now I was a werewolf, entangled in politics, betrayal, secrets, and I did not want to be an officer again.

Isn't that strange?

I dropped my clothes and slipped into a huge T-shirt, then got into bed. I was exhausted, but my brain would not turn off.

If something happened to Ravenna, I would kill for her. I was serious. Ruth could spout all she pleased, but I wasn't afraid of her.

I must have slept because the next thing I heard was the phone ringing. Deafeningly loud, right beside my ear.

I groaned, reached for it, eyes half-lidded. Unknown Number.

Could be spam. Could be one of Orion's men. I came close to not picking up.

But some force compelled me to answer.

"Hello?" I said.

A voice I recognized said, "Kate..."

I leaned up straight.

"It's me," he answered, his voice low.

I blinked repeatedly. "Mark?"

The sound of his voice after all these years caught me in the chest.

Where on earth have you been?" I spat, anger and relief knotted together in my throat.

"I messed up. I messed up big. These men, they're after me, Kate. Please, I need your help."

My heart missed a beat. "Then report to the police."

"You are the police," he interrupted, voice cracking.

I attempted to speak, but the line switched. A new voice answered. Male. Smooth and evil.

"Ah, ah, Officer Kate. Or should we say, Mark's sister?"

I locked up every muscle in my body.

"Who the hell are you?" I spat, my heart racing.

"No shouting necessary. We have your sweet brother. He's alive... at least for the moment."

"If you touch him-"

"Relax. We're businessmen, right? You want him back? You bring fifteen million dollars. Cash. You've got three days. On the third day, we'll provide you with a drop site. And if we catch a whiff of a setup, we'll start sending you pieces of him."

My hand tightened around the phone.

Then the call dropped.

Like that.

I scowled at the screen for a few seconds. My heart thudded in my ears.

Chapter 109

Ruth's POV

I woke up this morning feeling very happy. It has been quite a while since I felt this good.

The universe was finally evening itself out for me. Orion and Ravenna had marched into the lion's den, and I was going to see that they never marched back out.

I leaned back in my bed, enjoying the peace in my room. Then someone knocked on the door. I pushed my feet into my fuzzy slippers and said, "Come in.".

One of the young maids interrupted, bowing her head as was her custom. "Ma'am, there's a gentleman here to see you. He says his name is Gregg."

The corner of my mouth curled into a smile. "Tell him I'll be with him shortly."

She did so and left. My heart thudded just that little bit more in anticipation.

Gregg was the very one I had been waiting for. A piece I needed on the board in order to checkmate my opponent.

I did not lose any time. I swiftly bathed and put on one of my white robes.

As I descended the stairs into the living room, Gregg was already in the middle. His extended arms were folded over his chest.

"I don't know why you insisted on me coming here," he said at once, speaking low. "You know, witches do not go with wolves. It is risky."

I smiled innocently and walked over to the couch, plopping down in it like I was at home.

"Relax, Gregg. What I'm going to tell you is worth your time, and possibly your loyalty."

He was still standing. "Then tell me."
I locked one leg across the other. "Do you know anything about Orion?

He raised an eyebrow. "You mean the west's alpha? I've heard of him, naturally. His name carries strength even with the witches."

I crept a little nearer, voice lowering. "He's in the land of the witches now."

His head jerked slightly, eyes narrowing. "What?"

"You heard that," I said to him, my grin growing. "And he did not come alone. He brought Ravenna with him, the self-proclaimed new alpha of his pack.".

Gregg's lip curved into a half-smile. "So they're breaking in."

"Right." I opened the drawer beside the couch and pulled out two printed photos.

I pushed them along the table towards him. "This is what they look like. Make sure your people recognize them."

He picked up the photos, looking at them, and I could see the excitement in his eyes; the sort that already saw blood being spilled.

"You want us to kill them?

"If you want to," I shrugged. "I'm not here to order the witches around. I'm giving you a gift. The king of the werewolves himself, presenting himself on a silver platter within forbidden lands."

Even if I wanted them to slay Ravenna and him, but I knew showing up that way might make him think that I was desperate.

He regarded me, serious now. Suspicion laced his tone when he spoke, "What's in it for you? Money?"

I had almost laughed. "Gregg, come on. Do I seem like I need your coins?"

He remained silent. So I went on, my tone sharper now.

"I don't want money. I want a promise and probably something magical."

Gregg's expression changed. He was already calculating it out in his mind. "You're sure they're there?"

"I wouldn't be calling you if I wasn't sure," I replied.

He nodded, spreading the photos and inserting them into his jacket. "I'll need to speak to the others."

"Do that and hurry along, they won't stick around. You have to get your men onto them before they leave."

He got up off the sofa, and I called out after him, "And Gregg.".

He wheeled and looked at me. "Kill Ravenna first."

He didn't grin. But his silence spoke louder than any words.

"And Gregg," I shouted again.

He half-turned, not quite looking at me this time.
"Like I said, I don't want money," I said, "but there's still one thing I do want."

He half-turned now, a flicker of suspicion in his eyes. "You told me you didn't want anything. So what is it that you do want, Ruth?"

"I need help tracking someone," I said brusquely.

"Tracking?" His brow furrowed in question. "That's all?"

I nodded. "Just that."

He narrowed his eyes and came into the living room. "Who do you need to track?"

I took out the small envelope I had secretly kept stashed under the coffee table drawer.

I pulled one out of it, a creased old photograph. I stood up and handed it to him. He examined the face of the woman in it.

"Her name's Lyra," I told him.

He regarded the photograph for a few seconds, expression on his face blank.

"Never saw her before," he snarled, and turned back to me. "Who is she?"

"She was supposed to be dead. But we never found her body. We assumed she'd been dead ages ago. Now there are rumors."

Gregg scowled. "Rumors?"

"Someone's been talking. And it's someone who shouldn't even know that name."

He turned the photo over, but there was nothing on the back. "So this Lyra, what is she to you?"

I glared at him. "That's not important. What I need to know is whether or not she's breathing or buried. And I want to hear the one."

Gregg stowed the photo in his pocket. "Fine. I'll do it. I'll get word sent within a day."

"If she's alive, I want to know where she is," I went on. "And if she's dead-"

"I'll get you proof," he finished.

I nodded once. "I don't want any errors, Gregg."

"You'll get what you requested."

He did a spin and left without speaking.

As the door shut, I returned to my seat, my heart racing, not of fear, but excitement.

If Lyra were alive, then she was a headache. And I was ready to mend her by making sure she dies for good this time.

Then there are Orion and Ravenna; they have no clue what is waiting for them. Everything would soon come crashing down for them.

And I would wait in the light.

Smiling.

Chapter 110

Lyra's POV

I stared at Orion, trying to understand what he just said. Dying? I took a step back.

“What do you mean I’m dying?” I asked slowly, my voice trembling.

Orion looked at me, his own face calm but unyielding. "The fact that you're an alpha. It's killing you, Ravenna. Even if you've not realized it yourself."

I felt like the earth had shifted from under my feet. "That doesn't make sense."

"Every time you change," he interrupted gently, "the symptoms will get worse. You'll lose strength. Your strength will drop rapidly. Your body will start to fail you. It's not your fault, but it's happening."

My lips shut themselves.
"So what, you brought me here to die?"

"No," he said. "I brought you here because the witches can help you."

I stared at him as if I didn't know him. "A witch?" I laughed. "Why didn't you inform me of this earlier, before we even crossed the river? Before I gulped down that potion to mask my scent?"

"I did not want you to be afraid," he said quietly. "And then you weren't ready to hear it. The reason I am telling you now is because you insisted on it. You insisted on asking."

I folded my arms, attempting to hold myself together. "I still don't understand, Orion. How are the witches going to assist me if we're not even going to tell them that I'm a werewolf? You said in case they do know, then it might cause a war."

Orion's eyes were fixed on the trees that surrounded us, then on me. "We'll work out something when we get there."

I frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Means," he said, "we don't go about announcing ourselves to everyone. We wait for the proper time, and then for the proper witch, all of them can't share the same personality."

"And what do we do if we don't find the proper witch?" I asked.

He didn't answer. He just stared down the road.

That was all that silence had to convey.

I looked away. The fear of death, the realization that I was being consumed from the inside out, sent a shiver down my spine. I thought I was strong. I thought it was a blessing that I turned alpha.

Now it is a curse.

"We have to be certain of what we're getting ourselves into, Orion. Do you even know if they'll do it for me?" I whispered.

"I don't know, but I'm not going to give up trying, and if they can't, I'll find someone who will," he said forcefully.

I was touched by his words, something that Orion never uttered. This is the first time I have had to listen to something almost nice from Orion. These are words I thought only Keto could speak, and he would say them a lot.

"So why can't we just look for that witch again?" I asked, quickening my pace so I could walk beside him. "The one that assisted us in the fight against Ben."

He didn't look at me. "She's young. We need someone older for something like this."

He spoke about her like he was acquainted with her, and the fact that he avoided my gaze when I said it made things worse.

I raised a brow, something tangling in my chest. "You said that like you actually know her."

He paused for a second before glancing forward. "Enough talk, Ravenna. Let's go out from under the bushes. Time's ticking away."

I gritted my bottom lip but said nothing. He didn't even try to fight it, just waved it off as though it didn't matter.

I followed him in silence along the narrow path, overhanging trees on either side of us. My boots sensed a twig break beneath them as I walked, but Orion moved like a resident of the woods, light, noiseless, focused.

Finally, the path opened up and led to a village. My eyes widened.

Regular houses. Coated roads. Folks walking about like this was just some regular little village somewhere in the middle of nowhere.

I looked over at Orion. "I thought you said the residents here were witches."

He looked around indolently, his tone gentle. "There are humans too. Witches are also humans, but with supernatural powers, Ravenna. The problem is telling who's who."

My gaze swept the village. Laughing men in front of a small shop, children running past a grocery stall, a woman drying clothes. Not one of them cried 'witch', only normal villagers.

"So we may run into a witch down the street and never know?" I swallowed hard.

Orion nodded. "Right. They don't want to be known. You won't know who holds power until they want you to."

That sent a shiver running down my spine. I imagined some person brushing past me and smiling kindly, only to then later realize that they could kill me with a careless flick of their wrist.

We walked for a while longer until Orion stopped in front of a small but neat hotel. "Let's get a room," he said. "Have a decent meal. Sleep."

I shook my head slowly. I was exhausted. And hungry. But mostly, I wanted a moment to process everything he just said to me.

The inside of the hotel was quiet and spotless. Wooden floors, brown curtains, the faint aroma of herbs in the air.

There was a man behind the front desk, and Orion spoke to him for a minute in a language I couldn't understand. The man handed him a key and motioned toward the stairs.

"One room?" I asked, trailing him up the stairs.

He glanced at me. "You can barely keep your eyes open, Ravenna. You're not sleeping in another room. I need to stay with you."

"You sound like I'm a patient," I complained.

"Probably," he replied.

I did not complain.

The room was small but cozy. There was a bed, a window seat, and a bookshelf with lots of dusty books. Orion let go of the bag and went to sit on the edge of the bed.

"I need to shower," I said, brushing my dress.

Orion nodded. "I'll get us food."

He spun and exited the hotel room, closing it behind him.

I went into the bathroom, taking off my clothes slowly, then turned on the shower.

It was warm, steaming a little into the air. I took deep breaths as it hit my skin, letting my fingers run through my hair.

Then I heard a noise.

The bathroom door creaked open.

I did not close it. But Orion had just headed out for food.

Who is this, then?

Footsteps entered the bathroom.

My heart stood still.

I slowly turned, water still cascading down my body, and my eyes widened.

Chapter 111

Kate's POV

I didn't get a wink of sleep the whole night through.

Every time I attempted to close my eyes, I was stuck thinking about the face of my brother, and then that voice of that son of a gun on the phone kept replaying inside my head. It was like a broken cassette.

Fifteen million dollars in three days.

I didn't have that kind of money. And I couldn't tell anyone, not yet. We had a mission to contemplate. If I broke down or lost focus, all could be for naught. Ravenna and Orion needed help. If anything did happen to them because of my distraction, I couldn't live with myself.

So I got up, put on a black top and jeans, pulled my hair back, and left my room.

I had only opened the door when Kira stood there, held-up hand suspended to knock. She blinked in surprise and smiled weakly. "Oh, good. You're awake."

"Yep," I said.

"Good morning."

"Morning," I replied back, trying to sound normal.

But Kira didn't miss anything. Her eyes cut across my face, and the faint tension in my shoulders. "Kate, are you okay?"

I smiled at her. "I'm fine."

She raised an eyebrow, clearly not buying it, but she let it go. "Okay. I haven't heard from Orion," she said, "but I was thinking we should speak to Keto. I don't want to go into his room alone."

I nodded. "Yeah. Let's go in there together."

We started down the hall in silence. I was getting small glimpses of Kira looking over at me every now and then, but she didn't say a single word. Thank God. If she pushed, I wasn't sure if I could keep up the act.

My brother, I shoved his idea out of my head. I had to focus. I save Ravenna and Orion first. Then I deal with the rest.

When we arrived at Keto's door, Kira knocked softly. No answer.

She knocked again. "Keto?"

In a matter of seconds, the door swung open from within. Keto stood in the opening, clad only in his underwear, his hair still dripping wet as if he had just bathed.

"What's up?" he asked, stepping aside to let us in.

Kira went in first, and I followed. Keto closed the door behind us.

"I got nothing out of Orion last night," Kira said, sitting on the edge of his bed couch.

"Neither did I," Keto said. "But Delta Rogues said they would come. They'll be ready to move at eight, like Kate had arranged."

"Did they mention anything else?" I asked, trying to get back on task.

"They want their cash first before we meet," Keto responded. "But don't worry, I've already paid the first half. The second half, when the work's done."

Kira relaxed back. "Good. Let's hope we won't have to call on them at all, but you just never know with witches."

That "witches" gave me a strange shiver. I don't know why. Maybe because something inside me was saying that this was only the beginning of a whole lot more trouble.

I scraped my hand against my jeans, trying to get my head together.

Keto stared at me. "You okay?"

I blinked. "Yeah. Just didn't sleep well."

"Same here," Kira said with a sigh. "Let's just get our heads down and get this day over."

"Agreed," I said.

"We're leaving in ten," Keto said, closing a black duffel bag. "And it's going to be just the three of us."

I raised an eyebrow. "Just three? Shouldn't we take more people?"

"No," he said sharply. "Too many wolves on the move at once will draw attention. We need to keep this quiet."

Kira agreed. "He's right. If someone is watching the mansion, they'll never suspect a thing if the house looks like business as usual."

"Alright," I answered, taking my jacket. "Let's move."

We dressed in a rush and then moved down to the car park, where several vehicles were being loaded.

We got into a black Range Rover. Keto was driving, with Kira and me in the back. The sun was barely up, yet my chest felt like it was going to collapse.

I still stared out the window, attempting to clear my head with the chill air, but it was useless.

My brain was in turmoil, my brother, the kidnappers, the bloody fifteen million I didn't possess.

And then Kira's voice broke the silence. "You're sure you're okay, Kate?"

I smiled weakly and looked at her. "I said so. I'm okay."

But Keto gave me a glance in the rearview mirror. "No way, I don't think so. You've been silent all morning, and Kira said something, too. That means something's bothering you."

I said nothing.

“Kate," Kira said, leaning over to rest her hand on my arm lightly. "You know we're family now, don't you? Us, the pack. We've got your back. If something's off, you have to tell us."

I swallowed again. My mouth was dry.

"I just." I let out a sigh. "It's not something I want to talk about right now.".

Keto's grip on the wheel tightened. "If it's bad, we'd know. Particularly if it could affect what we're going into."

"I'll be fine," I repeated for the second time, but even I didn't sound convinced.

Kira sat back against the vehicle, looking disappointed, but didn't push.

I knew I owed them the truth, at least sometime. But not now. Not until we made it through this op. Not until Ravenna and Orion were out of harm's way.

One thing at a time.

Keto suddenly pulled the car over to the side of the road and turned off the engine. His jaw was tight as he looked at me through the rearview mirror.

“If you’re not going to talk,” he said, “then I’m not going to drive.”

I blinked, surprised. “What?”

"You've been behaving strange since morning," he continued. "Something's obviously wrong, and I'm not moving an inch further until you explain what it is."

I looked over at Kira beside me, and she gave me that gentle urging push. "Come on, Kate," she said. "Tell us. We're your people."

I breathed in, resting my head for an instant. Then I spoke it at last. "My brother was abducted."

Kira gasped. "What?"

"They're asking for fifteen million," I added. "And I've only got three days."

Kira's eyes widened. "Fifteen million?"

Keto was quiet for a moment before he spoke. "When did this occur?"

"Last night," I growled. "They called me, threatened him... said to wait until the third day to receive a location."

Kira turned completely around in her seat to face me. "Why didn't you say something?"

"I didn't want to sabotage the mission," I admitted. "Ravenna and Orion's case is already a risk. I didn't want to be the weak link."

Kira shook her head, taking my hand in hers. "Kate, who needs to pay to deal with kidnappers when you're on Orion's pack?"

Keto nodded in the front. "We'll work it out when we return."

Something in my chest relaxed. Just hearing that made the weight lighter.

Keto revved the vehicle up once more, the motor purring to life. "Come on. We have more than one battle to fight. And we're not losing any of ours."

Chapter 112

Lyra's POV

There was a man in the bathroom. I did not recognize him. He just stood there, staring at me, not uttering a word. My eyes widened in horror, and I used my hands to cover my body.

"What the hell," I began to say.

But he was gone in a flash.

He just vanished.

I swallowed hard. I looked at the spot where he was just a moment before, and then no one was around.

I blinked a few times, trying to understand what just happened. Was I losing my mind? Was he a witch?

I stepped back and shut the bathroom door behind me, this time firmly locked.

My heart was also racing too fast, and I was starting to sweat all over my forehead.

I tried to calm myself down and think logically that it was all in my mind, that I was just stressed out and maybe a little weird because of everything. And then I heard something.

Footsteps.

Soft but distinct, just outside the bathroom door.

And then the turning of the door handle. The person was trying to come in again.

"No, no, no," I breathed, backing away from the door. "Orion?" I screamed at the top of my lungs.

There was nothing.

I belted a towel around my waist and drew it tight. My gaze was on the doorknob, which creaked for an instant before vanishing.

"Who the bloody hell is there?" I thundered.

Silence.

Then the footsteps walked away.

I remained glued for what seemed like an eternity, not even trying to move, barely breathing.

Not until it seemed like centuries had gone by did I quickly shower, dress as fast as possible, and fly out of the bathroom, looking around everywhere.

The room was empty until the door creaked open and Orion entered with two plates of food held precariously in his arms.

He flinched at my face. I had to have been terrible.

"Something wrong?" he asked, setting down the food and running over to me. "You look as if you've seen a ghost."

"I think I did," I said, trembling still in my voice.

Orion's brow shot up. "What?"

I told him everything. Everything. About the man I had seen, how he'd disappeared, how someone had tried to open the door again, and about how I'd then locked it.

He didn't interrupt me, though, and listened; I could see seriousness cross his face.

"Was it a hallucination?" he asked.

I scowled at him. "Do I seem like I am hallucinating?"

He held up his hands. "Okay. I believe you."

I leaned against the bed, taking a breath.

Orion sat down beside me, his expression serious. "The hotel's haunted," he said finally. "Or cursed."

I glared at him. "Seriously?"

He nodded. "It could be the witches, too."

"What witches?" I blustered.

"The one you killed, technically, the raven," he told me, looking at me. "Witches come in coven. You killed one, and the others would notice and would strike back, as I have explained. They could be involved too, I do not know."

I swallowed once again. My hands were shaking again, too.

What do we do?"

He took a deep breath. "Eat. Rest for a moment. Then we leave. We don't stay in one spot for long, not here. And next time, if you notice anything, anything at all, no matter how small, just tell me. Right away."

I nodded.

He got up from the chair and stretched. "Now eat. I'll go shower."

But I walked too. "I'll wait for you," I said.

He spun around to glance at me once more. "Why?"

"I don't want to be here alone."

He smiled at me, then removed his shirt over his head, exposing his chest. "Fair enough," he said, as he disappeared into the bathroom.

I sat on the bed's edge, still anxious, still attempting to come to terms with what had happened.

As Orion emerged from the bathroom later, a mist of steam floating behind him, I rapidly averted my eyes.

His body was moist, water droplets still clinging to his skin. He had wrapped a towel around his waist, and I couldn't muster the courage to look longer than one second.

Tension rippled between us. I had to say something, anything, to break the manner in which he stood before me.

"So," I began, still not quite looking in his direction, "how do we even begin searching for a witch if they just look like ordinary people?"

He did not immediately answer, and I ventured a cautious look in his direction. He was there drying his hair off with still another towel, one excruciatingly slow, excruciatingly languid stroke at a time.

"Getting a witch is no bother at all to me," he said matter-of-factly. "It is locating one who is suitable that is the problem. Don't bother yourself, though. I will attend to it."

I nodded, pursing my lips. I did not argue with him.

I was to look at him, so I turned to face him, and much to my astonishment, he was already sitting next to me on the bed.

"WHEN did you," I started, but I glared before going on. "What do you think you're doing?"

He moved in a bit closer to look at me, his empty face still fixed.

"I'm not doing anything yet," he breathed, his eyes locked on mine. "But I'm going to."

He leaned and kissed me gently, slowly, on my lips.

I took in air. His lips were warm, and the rest of the universe just dissolved. My body shifted before my head had time to catch up, and I was kissing him back.

It wasn't desperate.

It was just soft and quiet and soooo deep, I momentarily forgot about witches and curses or near-death experiences in the can.

When he reclined a little, our foreheads bumped together. My eyes popped open to bump into his.

"You're impossible," I panted.

He smiled. "And yet you're still here."

"Unfortunately," I taunted.

He smiled gently, and the gloomy atmosphere of earlier began to dissipate slowly. He leaned in and brushed a strand of hair out of my ear.

"We have to eat," he whispered. "We've got a long day ahead of us."

I nodded, finally relaxing my body against his.

Chapter 113

Kate's POV

The sun was already rising by the time we arrived in the clearing where the Captain had told us he would be waiting.

Keto slowed down as we spotted the black bus parked under a cluster of trees. It was silent there, the wind blowing leaves across the parched track. I spotted him almost immediately, their captain.

He was standing straight, arms folded, dark shades hiding his eyes, and chewing gum like he was the boss of the world. I stepped out first, and after spotting me, he smiled.

"Well, well," he said, opening his arms. "If it isn't my favorite troublemaker."

I laughed and went to hug him. His hug was warm and firm, as always.

"Good to see you," I said.

"Likewise, Kate." He stepped back, eyeing the two coming down from the jeep. "So, these are your people?"

I half-turned. "Yeah. This is Keto, he's the one running the op. And that's Kira."

Banks threw a casual salute. "Pleasure. I've heard the name Keto get tossed around. Heard individuals with that name get things done."

Keto nodded once, his expression stoic. "Likewise."

"And Kira," captain said, turning to her, "I take it you're the brains behind the beauty?"

Kira rolled her eyes and grinned. "You wish."

I cut in. "Alright, alright, enough flirting. Cap, how many did you bring with you?"

He tilted his head towards the bus. "Just five. My best hands. I figured quality over quantity." He paused, chomping on the gum with the same smile on his face. "But if that's a problem, I can have more in. Have two more vans on standby."

Keto shook his head. "No, five is perfect. Fewer people, fewer eyes. We don't need to draw suspicion."

"Smart man," Cap said, cracking his neck. "So what's the mission, exactly?"

Keto folded his arms. "We're going across the river. There are two people, valuable people, already across. We need you and your men to watch their backs from a distance. If something goes sideways, you move in and extract them. If not, you stay quiet."

Cap's eyebrow rose. "So we're just backup."

"Precisely," Keto said. "But whether or not you take part, you'll get the full fee."

Cap whistled low. "That's a good offer. Easy money, I hope."

Kira leaned forward a little. "You're not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, are you?"

He laughed. "Not me."

Then his voice dropped somewhat, interest aroused. "Anything else I should know? Terrain? Natives? Heat level?"

Keto and I glanced at each other. I could tell he didn't want to say anything more.

"Nope," Keto said flatly. "That's it."

Cap shrugged. "Okay, then. After you."

We turned around and walked back to the jeep. I glanced at Keto as I climbed into the back seat beside Kira.

"You trust him?" Keto asked, starting the car.

"I trust him not to ask too many questions," I said. "That's all that matters."

Kira nodded beside me, looking out the window. "Let's just hope Ravenna and Orion aren't in trouble already."

In the back, I noticed the Delta Rogues getting back into their bus, saddling up. Cap caught my eye in the rearview mirror and nodded slightly.

I nodded in return, then looked away. I just hoped we weren't riding into something we couldn't walk out of.

Just minutes into the ride, I shifted uncomfortably in the backseat, unable to disregard the worry building in my chest.

"I think we might have a little problem," I finally said, breaking the silence.

Keto caught my eye in the rearview mirror. "What kind of problem?

I sat forward. "How are we even going to locate Ravenna and Orion when we get there? What if they're not where we expect them to be? What if they're already in trouble and we're just sitting there, doing nothing?"

Kira laughed softly next to me. "Relax, Kate."

She rummaged through her bag and pulled out a white singlet, folding it neatly over her lap.

I scowled. "What's that?"

She lifted it. "Orion's singlet. I've got one of Ravenna's dresses in here as well."

I blinked, confused. "Okay, and?"

"We're going to use their scent to track them," she said with a confident smile.

My eyes grew wide. "How exactly?"

Keto answered from the front seat, eyes still on the road. "Through a witch.".

I exhaled, relaxing into my chair. "Witches again? These people have too much power. Being able to track someone's location with a piece of fabric? That's not safe."

Kira nodded. "It is. That's why most people fear them. Witches don't always fool around with herbs and potions. Some can communicate with the spirit realm, some read minds, and a chosen few, well, they can find anyone, anywhere."

I gazed out the window, absorbing all of that. "So we're hiring a witch to find two people who are in a witches' territory hiding?"

Keto gave a small smile. "Isn't it ironic?"

"Ironic and risky," I muttered. "I just hope we're not being tracked, too."

"Relax," Kira said again. "After we masked our scents, it'd be easy. Trust me."

I nodded slowly, though I wasn't so certain. Trust was not something any of us could afford these days.

We finally pulled up to the river's edge. Kira leaned forward, pointing.

"There," she said, her finger towards the trees. "That's Orion's car."

Keto stopped the car and parked quietly right behind it.

The Delta Rogues' bus drew up behind us. It was quiet, just the birds chirping and the distant rumble of water.

I was the first to get off. As soon as I saw Orion's car, I dashed towards it, hoping that maybe we'd find something in it.

But it was closed.

Keto stepped out behind me and chuckled. "Did you think it would be open?"

I ignored the sarcasm and stepped away from the vehicle. "It was worth a shot."

Just then, Cap, the captain of the Delta Rogues, called out to us. "Hey! Over here!"

We headed in the direction where he and his crew were. Along the way, I glanced in the direction of the river.

"How do we plan on crossing that, precisely?" I asked.

Keto didn't seem bothered. "I already took care of that."

Typical Keto. Always thinking one step ahead.

As we reached Cap and his men, they all nodded tersely at us, rough-looking men in black gear and combat equipment.

One of the men then unzipped a big black duffle bag and held it open. "Choose your poison."
The bag was filled with weapons, sniper rifles, handguns, knives, and some items I couldn't even recognize.

Chapter 114

Kate's POV

We all picked our weapons from the duffel bag the Captain's men laid open. Guns, silver blades, smoke bombs, and even strange grenades I couldn't name.

I picked a compact pistol and a blade small enough to hide on my thigh. Kira went for a lightweight rifle, and Keto took two handguns like the overachiever he was.

The Captain clapped his hands. "Alright, party's packed. Let's move."

I adjusted my jacket and followed behind Keto as we approached the river. The boat was waiting, an old, rugged thing with a driver who looked like he hadn't smiled in years.

"All aboard," the boatman grunted.

"Is this thing safe?" I asked, eyeing the water.

"Safer than walking," he muttered.

We all climbed in. Kira sat beside me, quiet, fiddling with the edge of her sleeves. I knew she was nervous. So was I.

We were halfway across the river when we noticed the ravens.

Black shapes in the sky. One, two, then more. Circling, weaving patterns like a warning written in shadows.

"Creepy birds," one of the Captain's men said, chewing gum loudly.

Another aimed his rifle. "Bet I can take one down."

"Don’t," Kira said sharply.

Too late. A bang rang out. One of the ravens dropped into the water with a splash.

The other rogues laughed.

"Got 'em!" the shooter said proudly.

But Keto wasn’t laughing. He glanced at me, jaw tight. I gave a small shake of my head. We said nothing.

The ravens scattered, but not before a few let out those eerie croaks. It made my skin crawl. I glanced at Kira. Her knuckles were white on her rifle.

We made it to the other side. The boat rocked as we climbed out, boots landing on muddy earth. The forest was thick, the air dense.

Captain turned around, stretching. "So what now?"

Keto scanned the area. "We camp here. This is where Orion and Ravenna last stayed."

"No sign of them," I said, eyes sweeping over the remains of a tent.

Kira dropped her bag and pulled out a bundle of clothes. I recognized Orion’s singlet.

"I'm going to scout ahead," Keto said, taking the shirt from her. "Backtrack their scent."

"You sure you wanna go alone?" I asked.

He nodded. "Better if I do. We don’t draw attention as a group."

Captain raised a brow. "You're tracking with scent now, brother? What are you, part bloodhound?"

Keto smirked. "Something like that."

"Y'all are a strange bunch," one of the rogues muttered.

As Keto disappeared into the trees, Kira and I got to work setting up a small base. Just a few tents, enough for shade and cover.

The rogues lounged around, cleaning weapons and joking. I kept one hand near my holster the whole time.

Kira leaned in, voice low. "That shot at the raven, it wasn't good."

"I know," I said. "But we can't tell them anything. They wouldn't understand."

She nodded. "Still, I've got a bad feeling."

"Me too."

Above us, the sky darkened, though it was barely past midday. And somewhere deep in the woods, I could swear I heard a whisper, but couldn't tell where it was coming from.

We waited. And prayed Keto came back fast.

Kira suddenly went stiff beside me.

She stepped closer, her eyes narrowing. "Wait a sec."

Then, she sniffed right in my face. I frowned. "Kira, what are you doing?"

Her eyes widened. "Shit."

“What? What is it?” I asked, heart skipping.

But she didn’t answer me. Instead, she spun on her heels, ran to her bag, and rummaged through it like a madwoman. A second later, she came back with a tiny bottle filled with dark green liquid and herbs floating inside.

“Here,” she said, pushing it into my hand. “Drink.”

I stared at it. “Why?”

Kira glanced around, then leaned in and whispered, “We forgot to mask your scent.”

“My scent?”

“Yes, your werewolf scent,” she hissed. “The witches will be able to smell it from miles away. Drink it now.”

“Oh!” I gasped, quickly unscrewing the bottle and gulping it down without question. The liquid was bitter, thick, and tasted like grass soaked in vinegar.

I gagged. “Ugh. That’s disgusting.”

“Better disgusting than dead,” Kira muttered.

Just then, Captain Zack walked up behind us, chewing his gum as usual, his sunglasses still on despite the shadows under the trees.

“What’s that you’re drinking?” he asked, looking from me to Kira.

I glanced at Kira, unsure what to say.

Kira was quick. “Good luck, voodoo herbs.”

I gave a stiff nod. “Yeah, you know, just to keep the bad spirits away.”

Zack's brow lifted. “No shit?”

Then, to my absolute horror, he snatched the bottle from my hand, sniffed it, shrugged, and downed some of it.

“Not bad,” he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Tastes like leaf soup with a kick.”

He turned around and called out, “Hey boys! Come drink this voodoo stuff. Might give you some jungle luck.”

I looked at Kira, eyes wide. “Will it affect them?”

Kira grimaced. “Unfortunately, yes.”

Zack handed the bottle to one of his men, who didn’t even hesitate. Within minutes, all five of them had taken a swig.

“They’re going to sleep hard soon,” Kira muttered under her breath.

“What?” I hissed. “Why didn’t you tell them?”

“Because they’d freak out or worse, start asking more questions. Besides, we’re not moving again until tomorrow, right?”

I rubbed my forehead. “Great. We’ve accidentally drugged our backup army.”

“Relax. It just knocks out werewolf scent; it wasn’t meant for humans, but it’ll just make them sleepy. Drowsy maybe. Not dead.”

“Comforting.”

Zack came back over and gave me back the empty bottle.

“You got more of that stuff?” he asked, smiling.

“No,” I lied with a nervous smile. “That was the last of it.”

He chuckled and popped his gum. “Shame. That was the smoothest ‘bad spirit’ drink I’ve ever had.”

He walked away, laughing with his guys, who were already beginning to settle around the tent spot Keto had mentioned earlier.

I turned to Kira. “What if they fall asleep in the middle of a witch ambush?”

“They’ll be fine by nightfall,” she said with a confident shrug. “Just a few hours of sluggishness. But it bought us more time.”

I sighed, sitting on a fallen log and watching them. One of the rogues yawned so hard his jaw cracked.

Kira sat beside me. “We’ll have to stay alert while they snooze. Just in case.”

“You think Keto’s okay?” I asked.

“Yeah. He’ll be back soon. The tracking spell doesn’t take long.”

I leaned back against a tree, eyes drifting toward the woods. “This mission’s already feeling cursed.”

Kira nodded. “We’re knee-deep in witch territory, Kate. It was cursed before we even got here, coupled with the fact that we forgot to mask your scent before crossing the river. I fear all hell is about to break loose."
I swallowed hard. She wasn't being sarcastic.

Chapter 115

Lyra's POV

Slowly, I gave in, the heat of his body offering a strange safety, though my thoughts were drifting back to that man, whatever he might have been.

Orion began nudging the plate of food toward me. "Eat before it gets cold."

I picked up my fork and ate very slowly. Somehow, my appetite was gone now. But he was right. We had to build up strength. I needed to think straight.

He watched me silently for a while, then grabbed his own plate and began eating again.

"We'll leave in an hour or so," he said between bites. “We’ll blend into the community until I can figure out who to talk to.”

I paused mid-chew. “What if they recognize us?”

“They won’t,” he said calmly. “We’ve masked our scents. As long as we don’t do anything stupid, we’ll be fine.”

I set my fork down. “You make it sound so easy.”

Orion glanced at me, his eyes steady. “It’s not. But panicking will only make it worse.”

I sighed and nodded. “Got it.”

After we ate, he stood and began putting the dishes back into the bag. I stood to help, but he shook his head.

“Rest,” he said. “You barely slept.”

I didn’t argue. I lay down on the bed and let my eyes drift shut for a few seconds. Orion moved around the room quietly, organizing things. The room began to feel heavier with silence again.

But I couldn't sleep, I just watched as he kept watching through the window and keeping his eyes on the door as though he was expecting someone to just come in.

"Are you expecting someone?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied sharply, "I paid a hotel worker some money to link us up with a witch, like a form of intermediary. I'm waiting to see if she'd work in our favor or against us."

I swallowed a lump. "I hope she doesn't sell us out."

"I hope so too," he said and then turned towards the door. "Someone is coming."

“Get your boots on,” he said.

I blinked awake. “Now?”

“Yeah. We’re heading out.”

He walked toward the door and opened it. He then went out and closed the door behind him.

I jumped up hurriedly and shoved on my boots. I was set in minutes.

A few minutes later, he opened the door. "All right; let's go."

I remained silent and just went behind him out of the hotel room and beyond the hotel until finally out in the street.

The sun was now high up, washing all with a virtually fake aura of peace.

"She didn't sell us out?" My chest was tight with tension.

"We're about to find out," he answered flatly.

The villagers carried on with their activities like nothing was happening, some hanging clothes, others sweeping, while some just stood or placed their hands in their pockets, thinking.

I leaned close to Orion. “Which ones do you think are witches?”

“Most of them,” he muttered. “But we’re not asking.”

We walked slowly, blending in as best we could. I kept my gaze straight ahead, though I could feel the eyes watching us from windows, from behind open doors.

“We’ll meet someone soon,” Orion said quietly. “And then, if all goes well, we get you the help you need.”

I was about to respond when something caught my eye.

A girl, no more than six or seven, stood in the corner of a narrow alley, watching us. Her eyes were a pale, eerie gray. She didn’t blink; she just stared.

I turned my head quickly and whispered, “Did you see her?”

“Don’t stop walking,” Orion said through clenched teeth.

“But-” He cut me off.

“She’s a watcher.”

“A what?”

He kept his eyes forward. “A witch child. They use them to track the movements of strangers. The moment you make eye contact or speak to them, they know everything about you.”

My skin prickled.

“I didn’t speak,” I whispered. “I just saw her.”

“That’s good. Don’t look back.”

We kept moving, my legs shaky beneath me. Each step suddenly felt like it could trigger something.

I wanted to believe Orion had a solid plan, but the deeper we walked into this place, the more uncertain I felt.

Eventually, we reached an old bakery. Orion pushed the door open and guided me inside. The smell of herbs and wood, and something spicy filled the air.

“Why are we here?” I asked in a whisper.

“Because this is where the hotel worker said to go,” he said, "We're supposed to meet the witch here."

I frowned. “You’re just going to wait for her to show up?”

He gave a small smile. “She already knows we’re here. She’s probably watching us right now.”

I scanned the empty tables and dusty counters.

No one.

“Sit,” Orion said, pulling a chair out.

I sat. Minutes ticked by. Then the door creaked.

I looked up, expecting someone old, someone terrifying. But the woman who walked in was young. Barely older than me. Long dark hair, pale skin, and silver eyes.

She walked straight to our table.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she said calmly, her gaze resting on me.

“We need your help,” Orion replied. "We'll pay."

She tilted her head, studying me. “You killed one of us.”

I froze.

“She didn’t know,” Orion said quickly. “It was a raven. It attacked her, and she acted in self-defense.”

The woman kept staring at me. “Ignorance does not erase consequences.”

“Then give her a chance to make it right,” Orion said.

The witch’s eyes narrowed. “And why should I help her? Or you?”

"Because I know you want money, and I can give you that, a whole lot of money, just name your price," he said.

She chuckled lightly, "There are certain things money can't buy."

I could see Orion's fist clenching. I guess he wasn't used to negotiating.

"I'd give you anything you want," he responded, voice tight, "just fix her."

She turned to me again. “Do you even know what you are?”

I swallowed. “A werewolf.”

She shook her head slowly. “You’re something more. Something new. Your blood carries a different energy.”

My stomach twisted. “What do you mean?”

She leaned closer, her silver eyes piercing into mine. “You turned into an alpha too quickly. Your transition was forced. And now, your body is rejecting parts of it. The more you shift, the more your soul begins to split.”

I shivered. “So, can it be fixed?”

She stood. “Maybe. But the cure comes with a price.”

“What price?” I asked, standing too.

She didn’t answer.

She just smiled, "You guys wait here, I'll be right back." And then, she walked out of the bakery.

Chapter 116

Lyra's POV

“I thought you said a young woman cannot handle the spell,” I said, folding my arms and nodding toward the door.

“She’s not going to handle it,” Orion replied calmly. “She’s another intermediary.”

I frowned. That didn’t make me feel any better. “I don’t trust her.”

"I don't either," Orion admitted. "But we have no choice."

Before I'd even had a chance to react, the door again creaked open and the young woman stepped out again.

Her eyes glinted with a look that was almost exciting. "We're in luck," she said, stepping forward. "I just spoke with one of the elders. She'll assist us, but there are two conditions."

"What conditions?" Orion asked bluntly.

"First," she said, her voice growing sinister, "both of you must stand before the coven and plead for the murdered witch."

I knew the rolling in my stomach. I did not even require her to say the name of the witch. I already knew what she was talking about.

"Then if the coven forgives you," the girl went on, "the elder may help to lift the curse."

My teeth clenched together. "It's not the alpha dominance that's killing me, is it?" I hissed.

She shook her head. "No. It's not. You were cursed. By a very powerful witch."

The witch that Orion sent during the battle. I knew she must be the one responsible.

"What is the second requirement?" Orion asked.

The girl glared at him. "The elder said she would personally inform her of the second requirement only after you had finished the first."

I sighed and leaned back against the wall, rubbing my arm. It was only getting more complicated by the minute.

"And how in the world do we end up dealing with the coven?" I demanded of her.

She smiled faintly. "I will bring you there myself. Tonight. Midnight. In the forest."

Why did it have to be midnight? I wondered.

She stopped for a moment before continuing. "Also, I would suggest that you don't return to the hotel where you stayed. It is haunted."

I raised an eyebrow. "Haunted?"

She nodded. "It's not somewhere you'd want to be right now. There's another hotel that isn't far from here. It is safer."

I looked over at Orion, and he shrugged as if all of this was not surprising to him. Me? I was exhausted. My body ached, and the gravity of it all was already a weight for me to carry. But at least now we had direction. A next step.

"What is the name of this new hotel?" I inquired.

She recited it for us, and Orion wrote it down. I didn't even bother memorizing it. I just wanted to find a spot where I could lie down and not have to focus on anything for a few hours.

Sleep would have to wait, though. Midnight was close at hand, and we had a coven to plead with.

Orion dug into his coat pocket and drew out a thick wad of money, tightly rolled and wrapped in a black band. He handed it over to the girl without flinching.

"There's more where that came from," he said. "Just get us to the hotel."

She looked at the money for an instant, then stuffed it into her pocket like nothing was amiss. No smile. No thank you. Just a curt nod. "This way."

I didn't care for her. There was something about the way she walked that put the hairs on the back of my arms on end.

Maybe it was the way she carried herself, so poised, but with the coldness. She never quite looked at you, always looking ahead three moves.

She led us down a twisting road behind the shop. It was raining, and buildings decreased, set around with knotted, thick woods, the farther we traveled.

And then I saw a colossal statue in the clearing. A colossal pentagram, carved from obsidian stone, stood upright like an obelisk.

It was surrounded by five bare statues of women, each one of them with long, curly hair that was crafted from woven vines. They had their heads tossed back towards the heavens, their hands stretched upwards in a gesture of star worship.

I stopped. "What the devil is this?"

The girl turned to face me, an eyebrow raised as if already expecting the question. "It's the emblem of witchcraft," she answered dryly.

I gulped hard, eyes still locked on the pentagram. "And what about those women?"

"They are the five elements. The core of our power. Fire, water, air, earth, and spirit."

She said it differently when she spoke. Soft, almost reverent. I glanced over at Orion, but he wasn't fazed.

He probably knew more about witches than he was admitting. But something about those statues just didn't seem right to me. They were too lifelike.

We continued on.

At last, the path was clear again, and the trees parted to let through a hotel sitting still in the distance.

It was an unadorned but tidy three-story hotel, the walls a cold white paint. No hint of people going about their business around it, but a scattering of faint lights from within the windows.

The girl stopped a few feet away from the entrance and turned to Orion. She pulled a small black phone from her pocket and handed it to him.

“I’ll call this line once it’s time,” she said. “When it rings, come outside and follow the call. The coven doesn’t wait.”

“Got it,” Orion replied, pocketing the phone.

Then, without another word, she turned and disappeared back into the trees.

We remained there for a moment, alone again.

"I don't like this," I complained.

Orion gave me a side-eye glance. "You've said that three times today."

"Because I really mean it."

He did not argue. He opened the door to the hotel room instead, and we entered a dark lobby.

A man at the counter glanced up from behind a magazine, not even bothering to notice us.

He desired no questions. Simply quoted a price, accepted the cash, and handed over a brass key with a numeral inscribed on it: Room 202.

Upon discovering the room, Orion opened the door wide and stepped aside to allow me to precede him in.

It was sparse. A solitary bed, a tiny table near the window, and a battered armchair in the corner.

I sat on the side of the bed and smoothed out my hair. "What if we can't be forgiven by the coven?"

He did not answer right away. He walked over to the window and leaned there, looking out. "Then we run."

"Run where?" I gasped.

He still didn't answer that.

Chapter 117

Lyra's POV

"We're gonna find a way out of it if things go red," he finally said.

"Why don't you use that phone she gave you to call Keto or anyone for backup?"

"She's smart, the phone can only receive calls, it can't make calls."

I breathed out a sigh to release the anger rising within me. I sat up, feeling a soreness in my back.

"Are you all right?" Orion's voice was gruff but troubled.

I paused, then released the truth. "My back aches."

He was quiet for a moment. I didn't turn to look, but I could feel the change in the air as he leaned in closer to me. The bed sagged as he sat next to me.

Take off your top," he whispered. "I'll massage it out for you."

I saw him out of the corner of my eye, attempting to play dumb.

His expression was blank, stubborn. I had no idea whether this was yet another ruse to infiltrate me, or if he spoke the truth, but then again, did he ever tell a truth as far as I was concerned?

But the aching in my body was real. And the flush that went through me when he touched me was also real.

I slowly stood up and turned my back on him. "Just the back," I whispered, pulling my top over my head and dropping it to the floor at the side of the bed.

He still didn't speak. I heard his hands rubbing together palms to palms, then the warmth of his hands against the bare skin at the base of my neck.

I breathed fast for a moment.

His fingers were firm, his thumbs tracing over knotted muscle.

My body stiffened slightly, not due to pain, but due to the way he was so careful. The way he touched me without breaching.

"Your muscles are tight," he whispered.

I breathed out. "I don't know why."

His laughter was low, but short. "Try to relax."

I closed my eyes, hearing the rhythm of his hands.

They edged forward slowly, warily, tracing the lines of tension, the ridges of my backbone, the slant of my shoulders. His fingertips brushed the back of my neck and trailed downward.

"You carry everything here," he breathed.

I opened my eyes and scowled at the wall opposite. "You think you know me so well."

"I don't," he admitted. "But I'm trying."

The sincerity in his tone made something inside of me shift.

I swallowed, unsure of what to say. My skin tingled where he touched me, warmth spreading under my rib cage.

As his hands descended farther, above the waistband of my jeans, I shivered to the sensation that ran through me.

"Still hurts?" he asked, his voice a little gruffer now.

"Yes," I whispered.

"Then lie down," he said.

I slowed a little before I obeyed. His sheets were cold against my skin. He was on my stomach, my arms dropping to the sides.

He sat on the bed, sitting across the hips. His weight did not bear on me, but I could feel the warmth of his body hovering above me.

His hands upon my back again, slower now, almost gentle.

Every touch made my heart race. Every contact of his fingers ignited something that had been dormant in me for a long time.

"You're shaking," he breathed.

"I know," I replied in a whisper.

"Is it the pain?"

"No." I moved my head, our eyes meeting. "It's you."

He did not look away. His eyes burned into mine with an unseen fire.

"I'm not going to pressure you," he said. "But I'm not going to let this tension between us go either."

I swallowed. "It frightens me."

He said again, "I know. But you never have to be afraid with me."

His fingers trailed up my spine, slow, until he reached the nape of my neck.

He leaned in then, his breath warm on my shoulder. I could sense his lips touching, soft, barely there.

My heart stuttered. "You're dangerous," I whispered, a thin breath.

"So are you," he whispered, lips still pressed to mine.

I pushed my head back, my heart racing, fighting to have a level thought, but his hands, his touch, his warmth, all of him were making it hard.

He spelled a little, his heart on the edge of my ribcage now. My flesh seethed in his wake. I turned once more, looking at him.

And then he kissed me.

Not hungry or desperate, but slow and deep, as if he was unveiling the taste of me one second at a time.

My hand sneaked up onto his chest, fingers scrambling for grip on his shirt. I did not want to crave him. But gods, I did.

We broke apart, both gasping for air, and he leaned his forehead on mine.

He sat beside me then, his arms around me. My back against him, his arm around my waist.

I turned halfway, my eyes locked with his over my breast.

"I want you," I gasped.

He did not hesitate. He leaned forward, his lips following the curve of my neck, slow and worshipful.

I shivered, rigid against him. My body was already aflame, trembling with the intensity of hunger I'd tried to keep in check.

Orion shifted, his lips tracing down the length of my spine as his hands moved beneath me, cupping my breasts in soft possession.

His fingers wandered, nipping for a moment before I whimpered, pushing against the heat of his lap. I felt his cock hard, beneath his jeans, and knowing that I'd caused it sent my thighs clenching tight with expectation.

"You're so lovely," he said to me, his voice thick with restraint. "Every inch of you."

His hands bracketed everything at once, my waist, my thighs, my breasts, tracing invisible sigils of love on my skin.

When I tugged on his shirt, he let me remove it. I kissed him once more, my lips wandering freely in the dip of his throat, the flat of his shoulder, the rise of his stomach.

He growled, low and roughly, when I licked his skin.

I crept a bit nearer to his ear and whispered, "I want all of you inside me, Orion. I want you to fuck me like no man's business."

Chapter 118

Lyra's POV

He rose just enough to unbuckle his belt, shedding the last barrier between us.

I followed suit, shedding the remainder of what I wore until there was nothing between us but skin.

The moment our bodies made contact, heat exploded between us.

He kissed me down to my navel, opening my legs with a worshipful hand. I gasped sharply as his mouth followed the lines his hands had inscribed.

All the world dropped away, all but his tongue. My fists gripped the sheets, then tangled in his hair.

I cried out in the open as the first wave broke over me, I breathed a whispered name. "Orion."

He stood up again, kissing me fiercely once more, savoring my screams as I pulsed against him.

Then he came into me, slowly, filling me inch by inch until he was deep inside me. I encircled his waist with my legs, pulling him deeper.

He pushed gently at first, each movement sending shivers up my back. Then harder, his control falling apart as I screamed, arching beneath him.

We strained against one another as if we were built for each other. As if all the world's madness had converged for this one, impossible moment.

He held my face as he slid into me, his gaze captured mine. "Ravenna..."

My name on his lips was a prayer.

I came back again, shivering under him, screaming out his name as if it was all that my mind contained. He followed quickly, twisting with a rough cry as he spilled inside me, burying his face in the crook of my neck.

We were tangled together, our breathing interlaced, the heat between us unraveling into passion.

"I needed that," I panted, fingertips tracing lazy patterns on his shoulder.

"So did I," he gasped, his mouth on my forehead.

I had no idea what the night would bring. I had no idea if the coven would listen to us, if I would survive the curse. But here, in this moment, I was loved.

And maybe that was all that mattered to keep living.

I went on to gaze at nothing, my fingers outlining meaningless circles on his skin, my ears listening for the stillness between us. I needed to confess to him. I needed to reveal to him who I am really, what I've done. But whenever I tried to look for the words, my mouth went dry and a lump set in hard in my chest.

What if the witches tell him?

What if they tell him all, and worse, what if they spin it? What if someone else tells him, someone who wishes to ruin me in his mind? Would that be the moment when all between us disintegrates?

I couldn't bear it. That danger terrified me more than any battle, more than curse, more than the coven itself.

"Orion?" I breathed, my voice husky as I rested my head a little more comfortably against him.

His hand caressed along my arm. "Mm?"

I swallowed, hesitated. Tell him, Lyra. Just tell him. But the words knotted in my mouth. Instead, I said something else, something other, but just as intimidating.

"Do you love me?" I turned my head to the side, regarding him where he looked down at me.

Nothing came out of his mouth for a while. His hand went still, anchored to the small of my back. His chest hung still, as if he wasn't breathing.

The silence wore on and wrapped around me like a chill blanket.

Then he sighed. "I do," he said finally, his voice sounding low and creaky. "I hate how much I do."

My heart skipped.

He stared at the ceiling as if looking for a deeper answer. "I tried to hate you first. I said to myself I had to. For everything that had gone on, for what you'd been to me then. But the more I watched you, the nearer I got to you."

His jaw tight with effort, as if mere acknowledgment was painful.

"What was to be hate became this," he whispered, his gaze drifting back to mine. "Love. As inconvenient and infuriating as it is."

I hadn't realized I'd been holding my breath until it came out in a small, incredulous laugh.

Relief poured over me in golden, crashing waves. He loved me.

In spite of all the things not said between us, in spite of the war still looming over us, he loved me.

"I love you too," I said to him, my throat constricting with all the things I couldn't tell him. "I didn't think I'd. But I do."

His hands wandered to my face, nudging a strand of hair out from the curve of my cheek, and he leaned in to kiss me. Not greedily this time, but with some kind of worship that left me breathless.

We just remained there in silence once more, but this time it was different. It was not weighted with unspoken terror.

It was soft. But the weight of what I hadn't told him stayed in my chest like a boulder.

Would he love me if he knew it all?

I rolled some, my hands brushing along his ribs, then closing around his waist like I could hold tighter.

"I'm scared," I whispered.

He didn't reply right away, only went on stroking my back.

"Of what?" he asked, his eyes narrowing.

I closed my eyes. "Of losing this. Whatever is going on between us."

He exhaled, deep and slow. "You won't," he murmured. "Not unless you push me away yourself, or death gets in the way between us."

That stung.

Because I might have to. If the witches pushed my hand. If the truth got in the way.

He kissed my forehead and pulled me close. "Don't worry about what's ahead, Lyra. Just remember that we're here right now together."

I leaned up a little bit and exhaled, shoving some of my hair out of my face. "I'm going to go take a shower, I think. Then try to sleep some before midnight. No way of knowing how late the coven will keep us."

He chuckled deep in his throat, his thumb running across my shoulder. "No complaints here."

I stooped to brush a kiss on his cheek, then straightened, still nude, and walked toward the bathroom. The tiles were icy under my feet.

I stepped into the mirror and froze.

That was when I saw a streak of dark red running from my nose.

Blood.

I stood there, stunned.

Time stood still. I did not breathe, did not blink. The blood was nearly black against my fair skin.

Chapter 119

Lyra's POV

I reached up with trembling fingers and wiped it away, but more followed, thick and slow.

My chest constricted. Panic surged like a tidal wave. No. Not now. Not here.

The curse. It had to be the curse.

I held onto the sink, struggling to remain upright. My face was ashen. Not the tough Ravenna everyone had witnessed.

"Ravenna?" I heard Orion's voice from the bed.

I chopped my nose quickly with the back of my hand and switched on the faucet, letting water splash loudly into the sink.

"Yea?" I yelled out, trying to put calm into my voice.

"You all right?" he inquired.

"Sure," I said to him, trying to sound as normal as possible. "Just waiting for a minute. Hot water's taking forever."

"Okay," he replied, not entirely trusting me but courteous.

I settled in closer toward the mirror and studied my own eyes. The whites of my eyes had a very slight bloodshot appearance.

There was a calming throb behind my temples now, the beat of a warning drum.

Whatever spell that witch laid upon me, it was strengthening.

I climbed into the shower, letting the hot water soothe me, but it didn't do anything to wash away the fear.

When I crawled out of bed once more, wrapped in a towel, Orion sat up.

"My turn," he said, moving towards the bathroom. But he paused, breathing the air lightly.

His eyebrows furrowed into a frown. "Do you smell something?" he asked, turning halfway around.

I was still stunned. "Smell what?"

"Blood. Are you bleeding?"

I shook my head slowly. "No, I'm not bleeding."

He looked at me for another second, then nodded. "Alright."

But after he went into the bathroom, I could hear him stall again, the shower still off.

"Stronger in here," he yelled. "Since it's not you, or somebody used this room."

"Someone who had bled a lot."

I did not reply.

I dressed, praying this was the start of nothing worse. Praying it wouldn't happen again. Praying, praying, always praying.

I lay in bed once more, gazing at the ceiling, but sleep eluded me. My thoughts were stalked by invisible monsters.

The shower finished at last. A minute or so later, Orion stood there, towel-drying his hair.

He looked at me, his worry easing in his eyes. "Want to have something to eat? I can go downstairs and get something."

I hesitated. "Do you think we ought to have anything on this island infested with witches?"

He smiled weakly. "You don't have to worry about it."

I let out a sigh. "Okay, whatever you're having is fine."

As he pulled on his shirt, I asked, "By the way, did you tell Keto where we were going with you?"

"No." He shifted his position, then seemed to consider it. "But Kira knows. She might tell him. It'll keep their hearts at peace."

I frowned. "I don't think any of them would be easy if they knew we're in the witch lands."

He strode to the door and stopped, turning to me.

"Let them mind their own," he whispered. "At the doctor, we only care about getting you healthy."

Then he opened the door. "I'll be out one minute," he told me, and went out, shutting it.

Later, Orion returned with a paper bag under his arm and a carton of juice in the other hand. The smell found me first, warm and greasy and comforting.

"A burger?" I gazed at the spectacle, an eyebrow wiggling as he placed everything on the nightstand.

He smiled, a slow, pleased one curling around his mouth. "And some juice. I didn't think you'd want to try too much of anything too extreme right now."

I sat up and pulled the sheets around me. "You brought off burgers from a witch island?" I asked, half-laughing at the sheer absurdity.

"There's more to it than you know," he told him as he unwrapped his and bit into it. "We're still in the countryside of the island. The city half of the island has diners, grocery stores, even a bookstore. You'd be amazed that this island isn't as cut off from civilization as you'd have thought they'd be."

I opened it and ate a bite. It was cheesy and warm and somehow comforting. "You're full of surprises," I said softly with my mouth still open.

He smiled softly, chewing beside me.

Then his smile vanished.

I watched the way his eyes narrowed, the way his body tensed awkwardly, ready and tight.

"What?" I stammered, swallowing. I couldn't help but wonder if perhaps I'd said something to annoy him, or remembered something incorrectly that annoyed him.

He didn't answer right away. He pushed forward instead and scraped under my nose with his thumb.

When he pulled back, there was a small dot of blood on it. "You're bleeding," he whispered.

I attempted to open my mouth, but nothing would exit for a second. "It must've just started."

His expression didn't change significantly, but I could see the concern tightening his jaw.

"That means I was right; you were bleeding previously, but why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"I didn't want you to freak out," I said, folding the napkin on my hand and blotting at my nose.

He took a slow breath and leaned back against the headboard. "Irrespective. You should have told me."

"I did not want to make it worse. I am fine now," I breathed.

He grumbled not at all. He inched forward, pushing some of my hair back out of my face.

"Don't speak a lot," he said quietly. "Sleep. When the time comes, I will wake you up. I will personally take you down if necessary. You won't have to exert yourself."

I looked at him, my chest heating up with his gentleness. "Thank you," I panted.

He didn't reply at once. He just chewed on another part of his burger and looked blankly straight ahead, but the mere fact that he sat closer to me, guardedly, silently, steadily, spoke volumes.

And as I gripped the pillows and struggled to nudge the sleep back, I couldn't help but ask myself, for how much longer I would be able to stay alive in this body if the curse was never to be lifted.

Chapter 120

Kate's POV

I was almost amused by some of the snoring soldiers. I was half-willing to take my phone out to snap a few pictures, but Kira's voice pulled me from that thought.

"Let's go back to the tent; we have to eat. I don't think we have eaten since we embarked on this journey," she said, looking at me.

"Yes, you are correct," I agreed with what she had said.

I trailed her to one of the tents, and both of us sat on temporary chairs she had taken out.

She unpacked the food she had prepared. I wished I could help, but could not, so I merely commented on how good it smelled. I was glad for the food after we had gone almost a day without anything.

I took a bite of the food, then commented, "If we hadn't been on a rescue mission, this would have been a good place to camp."

Kira gave me a sidelong look while she chewed. "Sure you'd want to camp in witches' territory?"

I grinned. "You see, that very danger makes it exciting and an adventure. The only thing is, there isn't really any waterfall to cap the adventure."

Kira snorted once more, tossing her head. "You're something else, Kate. But you might change your mind when you see how wicked witches can be."

I shrugged. "I'd be safer in witches' territory than in the same building with Ravenna's stepmother, Ruth."

That made Kira laugh. She leaned back in her chair, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "That's a good one. But I do have to agree, Ruth is a demon."

I nodded. "I'm surprised Orion hasn't tried to kill her yet."

Kira's expression altered, her voice becoming solemn. "Orion doesn't kill blindly. He considers what he's doing. And for the record, Ruth has been relatively careful not to tangle with him."

I paused for a moment, considering that. "Well, she'd do best to continue being careful, then."

Kira merely smiled. "No doubt about it."

I chewed on my food for a moment, then looked up to meet Kira's eyes. "I kinda feel sorry for Keto."

She raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

I let out a sigh. "He's in love with Ravenna. Like, totally in love. And she's obviously screwing Orion, but it's like Keto doesn't even notice what's going on between them."

Kira frowned a bit, whispering. "That's not fair. Poor Keto."

"Yeah?" I rocked back in my chair, folding my arms. "And Ravenna can't even say anything. She just keeps acting like nothing is going on."

Kira let out a soft sigh. "That's gonna hurt him. If he finds out the wrong way."

"That's what I'm worried about," I nodded. "Do you think we should tell him?"

She turned to me. "You mean us?"

"Yeah. I mean, we can't just sit here and allow him to keep thinking that he has a chance if it's a lost cause already."

Kira didn't say anything for a second. "If you're gonna tell him, go ahead."

I raised an eyebrow. "Seriously? You know Keto better than I. He'd hear you out more."

"I'm not gonna," she said, shaking her head. "This isn't a breakup text. You wanna drop a bomb like that, we do it together."

I smiled. "Okay. We'll tell him together."

"Good," Kira grumbled. "Just remind me to bring a shield in case he freaks out."

I grinned. "He won't. He's Keto. He'll just disappear with that sad, broken expression like the world had come to an end."

Kira rolled her eyes. "Don't remind me." Then frowned at me. "And what about you, huh? How's your love life?"

I smiled wryly. "Me? I actually had a thing for Orion at first. I mean, who wouldn't? But the second I knew he was mated to Ravenna, I gave up. "

Kira moved in, smiling. "So you had a thing for him when the mate bond wasn't clear?"

"Right," I replied. "But the mate thing? I don't understand. It's like this compulsion that you can't fight, right?"

"Pretty much," she whispered. And then she smiled, slow, across her face. "Wait, don't tell me you're into Keto now. That's why you want him to know Ravenna's off-limits, so he can go look somewhere else? At you, maybe."

I laughed, actually. "What? No! I mean, Keto's sweet, yeah, but I've never really thought of him that way."

Kira tilted her head. "Well, maybe you should."

I stared at her as if she'd sprouted two heads. "Kira, no way. The guy's still in love with Ravenna. I'm not getting mixed up in that."

She shrugged. "He'll get over her someday."

"Right," I replied, sparing food onto my plate. "And perhaps then I'll think about it. But not now for certain."

Kira whistled low. "Still, it's gonna be rough on him."

I nodded slowly. "I know. But he has to get over it, for his own good. And for the good of the pack."

We were both quiet for a moment, the devastating truth between us.

And then, suddenly, we heard a growling, shouted oath from outside the tent.

"Fuck me!" one of the soldiers bellowed.

"What the hell is that?!" another one yelled, his voice hoarse with fear.

Kira and I stopped dead in our tracks. We stared at each other in horror.

I didn't waste a moment kneeling down to unzip the tent, but Kira was already on her feet. She reached for her gun, cocked it, and took off into the night without hesitation.

I did the same, my heart racing in my chest.

The cool night air hit my skin, but it wasn't the cold that had me paralyzed.

It was what we saw.

I took a sharp breath. "Oh my God," I whispered.

Nearby, close to the sleeping circle of troops, only two of them still awake and crawling back slowly, was a massive, monstrous snake.

No. Not a snake.

A monster, a snake the color of obsidian, as broad as a truck, with three enormous heads, each dotted with repulsive brown blotches that writhed like squirming shadows. Each of its heads turned independently, searching the camp, tongues in and out as though it could scent our fear.

One head spat at the soldiers.

Another struck at us.

The third merely stared.

My jaw hung open. So did Kira's.

We didn't budge. We were staring at a nightmare brought to life.

Chapter 121

Kate's POV

“That’s not an ordinary snake,” Kira muttered, her voice low but firm. “It’s a witch.”

A witch?

I didn’t wait to process that.

I grabbed the shotgun leaning against the tent post, cocked it, and aimed straight at one of the serpent’s heads.

Boom!

The blast echoed through the camp. One of the heads shattered in a burst of blackened scales and wet, gooey flesh.

The other soldiers, startled at first, immediately joined in, opening fire from every direction.

Chaos exploded in the night. The camp came alive with the sound of gunfire and shouting.

Sleeping men jerked awake, grabbing their weapons. Even Captain Zack emerged from his slumber, eyes bloodshot, fury blazing on his face.

“Back off!” he roared over the gunfire.

At once, the soldiers stopped shooting, stepping back and reloading quickly. That’s when we all saw another wonder.

The serpent’s broken head was regrowing.

“What the fuck,” someone muttered behind me.

I froze, shotgun still in hand. The entire squad stared, stunned, as the jagged stump of the destroyed head began to pulse and stretch, sinew rebuilding, flesh knitting together in a grotesque display of magic.

The snake was whole again.

It started circling us slowly, its massive body dragging along the ground like a coiling shadow.

The three heads moved in unison now, eyes gleaming with ferociousness.

Kira inched closer and whispered, “Kate. You must not shift. No matter what, that would only make it worse.”

I nodded stiffly, but my heart thundered so loud I swore the serpent could hear it.

Some of the soldiers were visibly trembling. One of them, oh God, pissed himself, and another dropped his magazine, fingers shaking too much to reload.

Captain Zack didn’t flinch.

He’d taken position behind the sniper and tracked the creature’s movements through the scope, eyes narrowed. The tension was razor-sharp.

Then suddenly, the snake reared back, all three heads high above us.

And it spoke. Its voice wasn’t one; it was many.

Thousands, maybe more. All women chanting all at once. “You dare trespass on sacred ground,” it hissed. “You dare kill our kin unprovoked?”

The sound rattled through my bones. Captain Zack didn't hesitate. "What do you mean your kin? And what the fuck are you?"

There was silence. One head turned sharply toward Kira and me, eyes narrowing like it had been watching us all along.

It moved closer. I held my breath.

Then the head bent, curling toward the others. And in a strange, guttural tongue, it began to whisper into their ears.

A language none of us understood. A language that felt like it wasn't meant for human ears.

My grip on the shotgun tightened as the serpent's heads rose, its body coiling like a mountain of scales.

Then it spoke, not in one voice, but many. A chorus of sharp, feminine tones that echoed through my bones. "Drop your weapons."

The air around us shifted. It wasn't a request. It was a command.

Beside me, Kira dropped her gun without hesitation. The clatter it made as it hit the ground jolted me.

I hesitated for a second too long, but then I let mine go too. The cold metal hit the forest floor.

Captain Zack didn't. "No," he growled. His voice was steady, angry. "We don't take orders from monsters."

The snake's mouth curled into something like a smile. It was horrifying. "Then you will die," it replied calmly.

Zack didn't even blink. "Guns up!" he shouted.

Before anyone could follow through, the trees exploded in black as ravens, hundreds of them.

They came out of nowhere, swirling around the snake like a living storm. Wings beat against my ears. "What the hell is this?" I whispered, shielding my face.

Kira was as still as a statue. "I, I don't know," she breathed.

Then, just as suddenly as they'd appeared, the ravens vanished, melted back into the forest like they'd never been there.

A cold silence followed. Then what followed was the hissing.

Not from one mouth, from all three. A low, vibrating hiss that drilled into my skull and made my vision tilt.

I clenched my jaw, trying to stay grounded. Around me, the others weren't so lucky.

The soldiers began to sway. Their bodies locked mid-movement. One dropped. Then another. Then all of them, collapsing to the ground like broken puppets.

Except me and Kira.

We were the only ones still standing.

The serpent's eyes narrowed as it looked between us, glowing with eerie light.

"Only three kinds of beings can resist that spell," it murmured. "A vampire, a witch, or a werewolf."

My blood turned cold. The snake leaned slightly toward me. "So, which one are you?"

I didn't answer. Neither did Kira.

"Werewolves," it said. The word was drawn out, slow, soaked in meaning. Its eyes gleamed gold.

Kira stepped forward, lifting her hands. "We mean no harm," she said. Her voice was steady, but I could hear the strain in it. "We didn't know this was your territory."

For a moment, the creature said nothing. Then it sighed, a sound that seemed to rustle every tree around us.

"Perhaps I will let you live," it said slowly. Then its gaze fixed entirely on me. "Because one of you," it paused, as if savoring the moment, "is not entirely a werewolf."

I froze. What? Kira turned to me so fast I could feel the air shift beside my face.

"There is witch's blood in your veins," the serpent continued.

My breath caught in my throat.

The serpent began to slither around again, circling us. Its voice dropped to a darker tone. "And why waste our strength on betas," it hissed, "when word has reached us that two powerful alphas have entered this town?"

My stomach turned. I knew who it meant. Orion and Ravenna.

The serpent's heads tilted in perfect unison. "We haven't tasted alpha blood in a long, long time," it said, tongue flicking. "And now, the gods have blessed us."

A wicked grin stretched across its mouth. "It's time to feast."

Chapter 122

Kate's POV

The giant serpent coiled away from us, its massive form sliding back through the forest the same way it had come.

I could hear the crunch of its scales over the dead leaves and damp earth, and I didn't dare move until the last flick of its tail disappeared between the trees.

Only then did I exhale.

A shaky breath escaped me, and I realized I'd been holding it this whole time. My lungs burned.

"Are they dead?" I asked, turning to Kira, my voice a whisper like I was afraid the serpent would return if I spoke too loudly.

Kira didn't answer immediately. She stared down at the nearest soldier, her brow furrowed.

Then she slowly knelt and placed two fingers on his neck. "No," she said finally. "I don't think so. His pulse is strong."

Relief flooded through me.

We moved quickly, checking each man, one by one. Some had shallow breathing, others just lay still like they were under some kind of deep sleep spell.

But soon enough, I saw movement. Eyelids fluttered. Fingers twitched.

Then. "Ugh..." one groaned, rubbing his eyes.

I turned to see Private Nelson blinking up at us, groggy and dazed. “What, what happened?”

“You’re okay,” I said softly, helping him sit up.

More soldiers started to wake. One by one, as if some invisible switch had been flipped. Some coughed, others looked around wildly like they weren’t sure what reality they were waking into.

And then there was Captain Zack.

He sat up slowly, his back rigid and his eyes wide. “Is it over?” he asked. His voice was low and hoarse. “Was that real?”

I knelt beside him. “It was real.”

He shook his head, like he was trying to clear fog from his brain. “That snake. The heads. The voice. I… I thought I was dreaming.” He looked around at the others, his mouth slightly open. “You all saw that, right?”

“We did,” Kira said, brushing dirt off her knees as she stood. “Every part of it.”

Captain Zack dragged a hand down his face. “Jesus Christ,” he muttered. “What the hell was that thing?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, pushing back the strands of hair that had clung to my face during the chaos. “But it knew things about us.”

He turned to me sharply. “What do you mean?”

I hesitated. My fingers fidgeted at the hem of my shirt.

“It said we killed one of them,” I admitted.

Silence fell around us again. The soldiers who had been murmuring quietly now turned to listen.

Zack's eyes narrowed. "You, you never said anything about confronting talking serpents."

"I didn't know it existed," I added quickly.

Kira stepped in beside me. "That thing was pissed because you guys killed those ravens flying earlier."

"That's not true. They were just birds. I have killed several birds and no giant serpent confronted me for it," Zack replied with a scowl.

She ignored him.

"But it could have killed us. It knew we were completely defenseless," she continued, scanning the treetops as if still expecting ravens to descend again.

"That paralyzing sound it made, the hissing," one of them murmured. "It paralyzed all of us. But not You, and Kira, why?"

Zack nodded slowly, like the pieces were starting to click into place for him. "Which means it's either there's something you know that you didn't tell us."

"Like I said before, I have never seen a snake like that before," I lied smoothly. "And I guess the snake left me and Kira so we can watch it leave."

Zack stood up slowly, stretching his back with a wince. "Well, we're clearly not in safe territory. If that thing stays in this forest, then we need to be ten times more careful."

"It said you guys should drop your weapons, but it was only me and Kate that obeyed," Kira reminded him.

Zack looked at her sharply. “I'm a soldier; surrendering or taking orders from snakes isn't something I'm used to."

“Well, I hope you have any weapon that can neutralize that serpent permanently,” she said. “Because the guys we're going to rescue, I think the serpent is after them."

That made Zack freeze. His jaw tightened. “Of course it’s them,” he muttered bitterly. “Why wouldn’t they be the target? Everything comes back to those mysterious guys.”

I stepped forward. “If that creature is planning to kill them, then we need to find them before it does.”

Zack raised an eyebrow. “Any idea where they might be?”

I folded my arms. “Keto is working on it, and I believe he will be back soon.”

“We have big problems, Kate,” he said. “Let's say we somehow come up with a way to kill that thing. What assurance do we have if there are no more of that thing?"

I hated that he was right. They could be more massive beasts at the witch's disposal.

Kira walked away from the conversation, heading to check on the last group of soldiers. I noticed she moved slower now, thoughtful, maybe shaken.

“What do we do next?” I asked quietly.

Zack looked at me. Really looked at me. “First, we don’t talk about this to anyone outside the unit. Not yet. Not until we understand what we’re dealing with.”

“And second?”

He glanced at the dark path the serpent had slithered through.

“Since we don't know where the assets are, and according to you, the serpent is going after them. How about we track it, from a distance. We find out where it’s going. And we find out if it’s telling the truth about going after those assets.”

“Sounds like a solid plan." I agreed.

Kira's eyes darkened. “Then what about Keto? How is he going to find us?"

As if on cue, we heard rustling through the trees. I stiffened immediately, my hand twitching toward my waist, even though I’d dropped my weapon earlier. Kira’s hand brushed my arm, calming me just as Keto stepped into view.

His eyes swept over the camp like a hawk surveying a battlefield. “What the hell happened here?” he asked, his voice sharp.

Relief bloomed in my chest at the sight of him. “Keto,” I said, walking over to meet him halfway. “You just missed it.”

He frowned. “Missed what?”

“A serpent. A massive, three-headed snake,” I said, not even trying to sugarcoat it. “It came out of nowhere and attacked us, or, well, threatened us. It spoke. It paralyzed the soldiers."

His brow furrowed deeply, his eyes narrowing. “A three-headed snake? That speaks?”

I nodded. “And regenerates. We shot at it. Blew its head off. It grew back like it was nothing.”

“It said it would’ve killed us,” I continued, “and then it mentioned Orion and Ravenna.”

Keto tensed. “What did it say about them?”

Chapter 123

Kate's POV

I swallowed. “It said it was going to kill them. I don't know, but it seems they have been able to find out that Orion and Ravenna are around."

Keto's fists were clenched at his waist. His eyes burned with some passion I could not identify, anger and fear combined. "Damn it," he muttered beneath his breath. "We have to track them down. Now."

Captain Zack stepped forward, his face pale but still carrying that rough crevice of his. "What the devil is going on here? I believe it is time someone told me the truth."

Kira folded her arms, her voice firm but icy. "The less you know, the better it will be for you."

"The hell it is," Zack growled. "My men were frozen and nearly killed by some creature out of a horror novel. We're putting our lives at risk here, so don't tell me I don't need to know.".

Keto turned to him, his voice deadly calm and low. "You need to understand one thing: remain alive and follow my instructions. That is not your fight."

Zack snorted. "Not my fight? Inform the men who were just unconscious a few minutes ago."

I stepped between them before it turned into an all-out argument. "Stop," I said bluntly. "Listen, currently, we have one mission: get to Orion and Ravenna ahead of that thing. Arguing is not going to save anyone."

Kira nodded. "Kate's right. We can talk about everything else later."

Keto glared at me for a moment, and I could sense the tension in his jaw ease slightly. "Fine. We'll tail them. I already know where they are, based on their uniforms, we just need to arrive before they move. Next."

Zack frowned. "Wait, you mean you can track them with those? What are you people?

Kira glared at him. "Do you want questions, or do you want your men to return home alive? Because we do not have time for twenty questions."

Zack's mouth set into a hard line, but he let the matter drop. He turned to his men, who were standing up, still dazed but alert. "Pack up," he ordered. "We're leaving."

As they packed up their equipment and gear, I went over to Keto, talking in a low tone. "We should be cautious. If that snake spoke the truth, it's coming straight for Orion and Ravenna. What if we're already too late?"

"We won't," he answered with firm determination. "We can't."

Kira glanced at Zack and then went to whispering level, "Come on, guys," she gestured to Keto and to me. "There is something that we need to talk about."

We got it and moved stealthily with her into the tent, away from hearing the soldiers and Zack, who remained busy with their own whispering and preparations.

As soon as the flap closed behind us, Kira's face was tight, serious.

We have to speak," she whispered, voice low, eyes darting between us. "There is no way whatsoever that the witches would have known that Orion and Ravenna were here unless someone betrayed us."

I glanced at Keto, his face expressionless, but his jaw tightly clenched. "That is not possible," he said, shaking his head. "Aside from us, no one knows where they are.".

Kira's lips were pressed into a thin line. "There's one person who knows," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

I felt a shiver run down my back. "Who?"

"Ruth," Kira said, "She was with Orion when they took off."

The name laid me flat on my back. Ruth. That fucker. Of course. She was the only one who had access to leak the information.

Her poisonous presence, always lurking in the background, had been nothing short of a plague.

I was coming to regard her as the cause of all our woes, her manipulation, and her utter lack of moral leadership.

"Son of a bitch," I muttered under my breath. The rage burned hot, simmering beneath my surface, but I kept it in check. This was not the time to lose my temper.

Keto was silent, but I could feel the same rage building within him.

Finally, he spoke up, his tone low but firm. "We'll deal with Ruth in time. Now, we must make sure Ravenna and Orion are safe. We need to reach them first before those witches do."

He was right. The delay was pointless. Ruth could be dealt with later. The witches wouldn't. I nodded, a determination building within me.

"Agreed," I said. "Let's go, then."

We exited the tent, and Zack stood waiting, his eyes cold, his men prepared to go. He wasted no words on small talk.

"Kate, Keto, Kira," he stated, his voice slicing through the air, "my men are prepared to move. We're going after the snake and identifying our targets."

I nodded brusquely, my thoughts alert. There wasn't time for hesitation, no room for doubt.

The only thing that mattered was getting to Orion and Ravenna, checking on them to make sure they were alive and unharmed before the witches performed whatever atrocities they had planned to unleash upon them.

"We're with you," Keto said, stepping forward, and I did the same. "Proceed, Zack."

Zack spoke to his men, then to us. "Alright. Let's go. Sneaky and keep your heads. We move slowly and quietly."

And with that, we moved into the dense, deepening woods, our boots creaking stifled by the soft earth underfoot.

I looked at Keto, my mind reeling with the same stuff: Ruth. The witches. Orion. Ravenna. What in the world had we gotten ourselves into?

"We still have to find a way to kill that snake," I whispered as we trailed behind, keeping up with Keto's slow pace.

Kira gave me a stern look. "I don't know. But we'll get it done. We can attempt to use fire, or an explosive that shatters body parts to pieces."

Keto nodded in agreement, "I hope we get to kill it before it kills us."

I nodded, my fists clenched.

We just arrived at the town, where we saw people of different sizes and shapes walking around the place like it was not infested with witches.

The moon was already out, and so was the fear that we were going to walk into a death trap.

Chapter 124

Lyra's POV

I was stirring from slumber when I felt an unusual cold sensation circling my leg.

My eyes lazily opened with hardly a sight of the dim light seeping through the curtains.

The very first thing my eyes settled upon in the room was Orion, still sleeping beside me, breathing slowly and steadily.

I turned away again; I just could not bear the rising chill feeling as it climbed up my leg. With my eyes shifting towards my legs, I almost felt my heart stop.

There upon the ground was an enormous serpent coiled around my leg, the likes of which I had never even seen in my life.

The three-headed eyes opened wide and glowed an unearthly golden hue! I froze in terror, unwilling to even move or utter a sound, as the voices clamoring inside my head erupted in an ugly chorus from the worm.

"First, you. Then, him." And it hissed under its breath.

I shuddered to see one of the heads open its gaping mouth, ready to swallow me whole.

My body tightened up, my heart picking speed with fear; I barely breathed as the serpent crept closer, its hot breath against my skin.

Then the sharp change.

My eyes shot open.

Orion was no longer lying beside me. I blinked rapidly; my heart was still racing. I was breathing quite fast, the remnants of the nightmare clinging to my thoughts, very much like an oppressive mist.

By the window now, he caught sight of me as I stirred and looked on with a mix of worry and puzzlement. "What is it?" he asked quietly while struggling to shake out of a lazy half-slumber.

I was involuntarily drawn to glance down at my leg. My eyes searched over the sheets to find a sign of the serpent.

There was nothing. No freezing sensation, screaming from an enormous creature's presence. Only the soft comfort of a bed beneath me.

I took a shaky breath with a slight release of built-up inside of me. "Nothing," I said, forcing a smile, although the little bits of fear and uneasiness still nibbled on my consciousness. "Just a nightmare."

Orion was still skeptical. His brows furrowed when he took one step nearer to me, searching for something I did not tell him in my face.

"Nightmare?" he repeated, still not convinced. "But you looked terrified."

I nodded and sat up a little more, drawing the blanket tighter around me. "I am okay; it just seemed real, that's all." I stopped and tried to force myself to finish.

For a moment longer, it seemed that Orion would contemplate more as his gaze still held on my face; after a few seconds, however, he nodded.

"Alright," he said, though I could see that he was not completely sold on the matter; nonetheless, he refrained from arguing. "Try and get some more rest. I'll keep watch."

I could have said something that made me feel better, but I did not. The tinges of the nightmare were still set in me; I could feel the weariness pounding down on me.

So, I thought it better not to argue, and I started relaxing, slipping deeper into the pillows.

Orion sat on a chair by the window, his face directed outside. I shut my eyes and tried to calm down, but the serpent's cold and clammy coils still felt vivid as a phantom.

I definitely wanted to calm down and take my mind off things, Orion's breathing and the stillness of the room soothed me as well.

A nightmare in itself is a bad experience, but I could feel a strange sense in my gut – the suspicion that it was not a random nightmare. The uneasiness settled knowing something was after us, but was well beyond the description of everything I had sensed until now.

I tried reeling my head, but still have to resort to these "acts."

Orion looked at me as if to get something off his chest. "You sure you're okay?" His voice was light and soft.

I gazed back at him, trying to give a smile while the tight knot of anxiety inside me only grew tighter. "I'm fine, really. Just a bad dream."

It was clear in his eyes that he thought the contrary; yet, he didn't press me anymore. He turned away to the window seat, staring outside.

Orion was still tense; even from here, a blade of grass swaying could be threatening. It was just that for me, the worst part was knowing that something horrible was going to occur.

That was probably too premature for me to analyze, but the absence of analysis was equally ominous. My mind was pretty much on that damn serpent.

Orion turned a little, as if sensing something was off. “You sure you’re okay?” He asked, this time his voice gentler.

“It’s nothing, just a dream, is all,” I assured him, offering a smile, though I was still battling anxiety.

He looked back out the window, perhaps surrendering the conversation, but something still seemed off.

I found comfort knowing his alertness to possible threats. I despised the sense of foreboding I felt about an impending terrible event.

That nagging notion was still there; the serpent had set things in motion.

Resting was the last thing on my mind. Something beyond my consciousness felt unsettling, as if I were being surveilled by something incomprehensible.

Shaking my head, I reoriented my gaze. Orion sat there, a gentle outline illuminated by the light.

But I could see the tension in his posture, the way his fingers twitched slightly as if he was preparing for something, even though he hadn’t spoken a word.

"Orion," I said, breaking into a faint whisper.

For a moment, the eyes that looked at me held something soft in their depths.

I hesitated. Should I really voice it for him? I did want to trust him and share this dread that was taking root in me deep down, but something was holding me back.

I did not want to drag him into my paranoia over fears that we might not make it out of this one alive.

So I just shook my head, muttered, "Nothing. Just be careful."

For some reason, my heart was feeling bittersweet. His face softened; his eyes betrayed vulnerability for but an instant, but he nodded slowly. "I will."

I wanted more, said the voice in my chest.

There was something out there that had just awakened in the murk and announced its intent of carrying us off.

And suddenly, the witch's phone, handed over to Orion, rang, and my heart threatened to jump into my throat.

"It's time," said Orion as he strode toward wherever the phone was.

Chapter 125

Lyra's POV

I got out of the bed slowly, pushing the blanket aside and letting the chill of the room wrap around me.

My legs were tight and weighted, but I pushed them aside. That nightmare still lingered, the aftertaste bitter, cold, and hard to shake off. Orion edged away a bit from the window seat, his gaze on me.

I put my clothes on silently and began dressing. "Do we head back to the hotel?" I asked, without turning to him.

Orion's voice was stubborn and gruff. "No. We're not heading back. It's too dangerous."

I hesitated for a second, pulling my sweater down over my head. "Too dangerous? Why?"

He stood himself up and approached me. "Witches can locate people, and just in case they decide to locate us, always moving around prevents them from being able to do that."

He bent to scoop me up into his arms, but I avoided him. "I can walk, Orion. I'm not fragile."

His eyes flashed with something indistinguishable, maybe concern. He nodded at last. "Okay. But stay close to me. Whatever happens."

We exited the hotel subtly, avoiding detection. The evening air was chill, carrying the scent of wet earth and burnt electricity.

The streets were pretty quiet. Each footstep I took sensitized me, my skin feeling as though the darkness itself observed me.

We'd barely walked a block or two before the phone rang again.

Orion pulled it out of his pocket and picked up. "Yeah?"

He set it on speaker.

The witch's voice glided across the phone, cold and direct. "Go to the forest to your left. Do not take the main road. Make certain you're not followed. No torches, no lights. Just go."

Then the call was over.

I gulped. "Did she tell us not to use lights?"

"That's what she told us," Orion said, already heading in the direction she indicated.

We went left, cutting down a dark alley between two structures.

I continued to glance back over my shoulder, looking for signs of movement, shadows, alleys. The structures became fewer and fewer and eventually turned into ruined paths and broken fences.

The trees loomed ahead of us like an open maw, dark, gnarled trees twisting together to form a canopy that swallowed even moonlight.

We stood on the woods' border. My ears scanned for sounds, footfalls, rustling, breathing, but only the distant mumble of nature.

Then I saw black specks swirling in the sky. "Orion," I breathed, pointing. "Look."

A group of crows swooped toward us, quickly, intent. My heart was pounding as I edged near him.

The birds hovered above us once, then dived. During the time it took for one breath, their wings folded in the air, unraveling into tentacles of black smoke, and in our very sight, the group of birds coalesced into the form of a woman.

She came down from it on foot, her hair tousled, her eyes glowing pale violet. She was dressed in black, and she had an eerie calm about her.

The witch.

"We have a far distance to travel," she said without welcome. Her voice was as coarse and ancient as the wind through dry branches. "You will have to walk."

Orion stepped forward between us, protective. "Why? Where are we going?"

She didn't answer. She turned instead to a bush alongside her and swept away the leaves, revealing three miniature wood-and-glass lamps, teardrop-shaped.

A quick wave of her fingers and an odd fire blazed into life within them. She handed one to Orion and one to me, and retained the third for herself.

"These will lead you," she said. "But not to others."

I held mine in my palm. The light in the lamp was alien, a dancing flame that whispered in a gentle voice.

The witch turned and began into the woods, her path illuminated by the strange blue flame. Orion and I exchanged a glance, and quietly, we followed her.

The trees closed around us in a few moments. The forest smelled of damp moss.

Every branch that cracked under our feet was like a shriek in the silence. My fist gripped the lamp more tightly, and I stayed close to Orion.

The witch moved in silence. So did we. I didn't even know how long we'd been walking; it could've been minutes or hours.

Time didn't appear to be functioning properly here. The lower we went, the heavier the air grew, like we were passing through a dream that could be taken from us at any second.

A gust of wind buffeted me, and I caught something, far-off voices, nonsense. I looked over at Orion. He nodded barely perceptibly. He heard it too.

I faced the witch again. She moved forward. "Are we safe here?" I finally asked.

She didn't hesitate. "No."

That was all she said.

My chest tightened. The air between us iced. My breath fogged in front of me despite the fact that it wasn't winter. The blue light from the lamp began to throb.

"What is this place?" I asked again.

"A threshold," she said, her voice distant. "Between worlds."

Orion's jaw tensed. "You should have told us more."

She stood stock-still, half-turned. "Telling doesn't work. You need to feel it. You need to look."

Something cracked sharply to our right. I turned, waving the lamp. There was nothing, only a row of thorny trees.

Orion took hold of my wrist. "Keep your wits about you. Don't get lost."

I nodded, even though my heart pounded in my chest. My nerves were frayed thin.

We continued.

Finally, the trees became thin and branched apart to reveal a small clearing lit only by our three lanterns. The witch halted.

"We stop here. Only for a moment."

She sat cross-legged on the grass as if she were a part of the ground.

Orion and I sat side by side. I leaned against him stupidly. He did not push me away.

"This place, it's like a graveyard," I whispered.

"It is," the witch replied casually, as if she were talking about the weather.

I wanted to scream, or cry, or demand answers. But something in me, maybe instinct, knew that none of that would help. Not here.

Orion gently brushed my arm. "We'll get through this, just have faith."

His words warmed me more than the fire in the lamp.

The witch slowly lifted her head. Her gaze crossed my own. "Do you know why the serpent visited you in your dream?"

I leaped, startled that she had heard about the nightmare. "No, do you?"

Orion's glare pierced into mine, confused. "What serpent?"

I gulped, "The dream I told you. It contained a serpent, an enormous one, as enormous as one of these ancient trees."

"What about it?" I questioned, pivoting toward the witch.

She didn't answer at first. Then, hesitantly, she spoke, "Not all bad witches are evil, or rather, not all bad witches despise werewolves. But in some way, your disguise has been stripped from you, and some bad, evil witches tried to kill you when you were asleep. If you had died during your dream, you would have died on Earth."

My throat parched. "I didn't die, it didn't get to kill me. I woke up before it could strike."
Orion breathed a sigh of relief, "Do we have to not sleep now?"
She stood. "Sleep is done. We travel."
The lamps flared once and stabilized.
And we trailed after her into the unknown.
The forest engulfed the silence once more.
And the journey resumed.

Chapter 126

Kate's POV

"Are you sure this is the place?" I asked Keto, and I watched the dense fog crawl sluggishly along the roadside.

He had not looked at me; he was still gazing at the map on his tablet and nodded to my question. "Yes, according to the map, the hotel should be just right around here. That's where Ravenna and Orion last stopped."

I tightened my coat. The atmosphere felt wrong. It was chilling and instilled a horrid form of terror within me.

Captain Zack made a deep whistle as the old building curved into view, carefully lit dimly by a bulb overhead the door.

"Set up a perimeter," he ordered his men, raising a hand.

They moved out, quick and silent like shadows.

He turned to me. "Something's creepy about this place. Gives me the chills."

Kira, who had been mostly quiet the whole ride, gave a dry laugh. "You saw a giant serpent a few hours ago, and now you think something's creepy?"

I chuckled. "Looks like the stuff you drank from me earlier is just wearing off."

Kira laughed again, and Keto smirked.

"Wait," Keto said, raising a brow, amused. "What exactly did you drink, Zack?"

Zack narrowed his eyes at me. "Do I want to know?"

"Nope," Kira said before I could answer. "You really don't."

We reached the hotel steps. The air smelled of moss and mildew.

Keto turned to the others. "Kira, Zack, hold this position. Sweep around, see if you notice anything strange. Kate and I will check inside."

The others nodded and fanned out.

Keto pushed the creaky door open. The lobby was dim, lit only by a few dusty chandeliers. A woman sat behind the reception desk, tapping on a cracked phone screen.

"Excuse me," I said, approaching. "Did a man and woman check in here recently? The man would've looked like a soldier. Strong build."

She looked up slowly, eyes flickering with recognition.

"Yeah, they were here," she said. "Checked in last night. Left in a hurry, though, maybe two hours ago. I went out to give them their balance and saw them heading toward the forest, south path."

My chest tightened. "They were running?"

She shrugged. "Didn't look calm. Didn't look like tourists either."

Keto and I exchanged a glance. "Can we see the room they stayed in?" I asked.

The girl nodded, took the old rusty key, and marched up the narrow stairway that gave way under their steps.

The room was musty, and it still had rumpled sheets on the bed. Keto was the first to set foot inside, while he inspected all corners.

"Doesn’t look like they stayed long," he muttered.

I walked toward the window with my eyes set on the darkened forest beyond.

"Looks like they left in a hurry," I whispered. "They were scared."

Keto was looking under the dresser, inside the closet, and under the beds. Shake. "No sign. No clue."

I spun around and regarded him. "So, what do you think made them run away in the middle of the night?"

He frowned. "I’m not sure. But if they’re heading into the forest, they’re probably looking for help for Ravenna. We need to catch up before the serpent finds them."

We went back down, carrying an uneasy silence with us. The receptionist barely spared a glance at us as we made for the exit. Outside, Kira and Zack were crouched, examining the dirt.

"Tracks," Zack said. "Two sets leading into the forest."

I bent beside them, brushing away fallen leaves. The boot prints were clear.

"Orion and Ravenna, probably," I said.

Keto crouched too, pointing further ahead. "Wait here. There’s a third set. Lighter. Smaller."

Kira raised a brow. "They picked up someone?"

"Or someone joined them," I said.

Zack sighed. "This place keeps getting weirder."

Keto stood. "Doesn't matter. We have to follow them."

No one argued. We all turned and followed the trail into the forest, weapons ready.

The forest swallowed us quickly, the dense canopy blotting out the moonlight. Shadows danced across the path.

I stayed close to Keto. We didn't speak much. There was no need to. Every one of us could feel it, that hum in the air, the way every twig snapping sounded like thunder.

Hours passed.

The footsteps veered left, crossed a shallow stream, and continued deeper into the woods. The third set of prints started staggering. Whoever it was, they were slowing down.

"Think they were injured?" Zack asked quietly.

"Possibly," Keto said.

"Maybe whoever it was wasn't used to walking this much," I added. "Could be Ravenna, if she were conscious."

Kira stopped suddenly. She raised a hand.

We all froze.

"You hear that?" She whispered.

I strained to listen. Faint rustling. Something heavy. Something close.

Zack raised his gun.

A shadow darted across the trees ahead.

"Hold," Keto said, his voice low. "Don’t shoot unless it attacks."

We moved slower now, stepping around thick roots and low branches. The trail of footprints continued, but something was wrong.

They were fading.

"They ran," Kira said. "Look here. These are running prints."

I bent closer. "They were running from something."

A cold breeze blew past us, carrying with it a smell, metallic and foul.

Blood.

Keto turned to me. "Stay close."

I nodded. "Always."

We pressed on.

Just as the forest began to thicken even more, we reached a clearing. A shallow puddle of blood stained the center, smeared as if someone had been dragged.

The footsteps vanished.

"This doesn’t make sense," Zack muttered. "Where the hell did they go?"

"No body," Kira said, eyes scanning. "So maybe they escaped."

"Or something took them," I added.

Keto walked in a slow circle around the clearing. "Keep your weapons ready. The serpent may not be far."

I glanced toward the trees, heart pounding. "You think the serpent did this?" I asked, my voice laced with fear.

"Looks like his signature, plus I can see its footprints," Zack cut in. "Check here."

I squinted, my eyes widening in terror. "This is not good, you're right."

"But the blood is not them," Keto said, sighing in relief, "I know how Orion and Ravenna smell like, and this blood ain't them. So let's fan out."

Chapter 127

Lyra's POV

I felt a chill crawl up my spine the moment we arrived at the cave.

It stood there like a severe cut in the side of the hill, the air around it heavy and humming with unseen energy.

I hugged myself instinctively, but not for cold. Something else caused the hairs on the back of my neck to want to rise.

The witch was about yards from the door. She did not look our way. "This is it," she said to us, her own voice even crisper than usual. "The witches are all indoors. Take off your shoes, you don't want to enhance your offense by entering with shoes."

I caught a glimpse of Orion. He was already getting down to remove his boots himself. I did the same, ignoring the fact that the grass was wet and clung to my feet.

"You're not going to remove your own shoes," I said to her. "Or is there some exception for witches?"

"No, everyone is treated equally under the law," she snarled.

"Why don't you take off your shoes?" I retorted, my eyes narrowing.

"Because I will not go in with you," continued the witch. "This is not my coven. You are on your own from here. If you seek forgiveness for what you have done, for killing one of them, you will have to do it on your own. If I go in with you, the witches would make a mistake, and you will not like the consequences."

Wait, I said, frowning. "You know them better. Do the talking for us, like some sort of lawyer. I don't think they'd listen to us if we just ran on at the mouth."

"I'm sorry, I can't do it." She shook her head. "That would be suicide, for me. Although the odds against you aren't that high. The witches don't know you're both werewolves yet. It's safer this way.". Do your part, then, humans, and I'm sure everything will be all right, just humble yourselves and throw yourselves on their mercy. But if they discover what you are before you can get in a word, they may just kill you first.

I swallowed hard. This is going to be more difficult than I anticipated.

"Written down," Orion growled. "Is there anything else we need to know?"

Yes, there is," she faced us full-face. Her dark eyes were warning hard. "On no account take anything they give you to eat or drink. Not even water. It's a trick. It's a test. If you fail, you're theirs, forever."

I swallowed. "And if we pass?"

"Then perhaps, just perhaps, you walk out alive."

I looked at her for a long time. "Thank you for everything.".

"Don't thank me," she interrupted harshly. "You haven't yet succeeded."

And with that, she disappeared into the trees, leaving us there alone in front of the open mouth of the cave.

My heart was pounding in my chest. "This is a really bad idea," I panted.

"Likely," Orion replied, reholstering the tiny knife at his thigh. "But we're here now."

He grasped my hand, and we stepped together into the dark.

The temperature dropped abruptly, and the light was swallowed by the cave. It was damp and musty, and each step was a drumbeat that sounded in our ears.

We moved deeper into the darkness, our hands tracing along the walls to guide us further into the black.

And then the voices.

They started as whispers, quiet and close to being too quiet to be heard. They grew louder, though, laughing and talking, like a coven of old hags gossiping around a fire. But only their laughter was wicked. Wicked. As if each laugh held something bad.

I clutched at Orion's hand. He did not flinch, but gave my fingers a hard squeeze of reassurance.

We continued on further. The cave opened into a larger cave that was filled with a pale blue light that seemed to come from the rocks themselves. And that is where I saw the witches.

They were seated on rock thrones in a wide semicircle. Twelve women. They were all elderly.

Their skin was draped in folds and wrinkles like parched paper, their hair slithering in thick matted locks, their eyes hollow. But their eyes, God, their eyes, blazed with dagger fury, focused on us with wordless fury.

The instant they saw us, the laughter stopped.

It was perfectly still.

And one of them rose. Her arms stretched long behind her like vines, black hooked nails like talons. "Strangers in our sacred space?" she croaked, voice as harsh as the scrape of stone.

I edged closer, struggling to keep my voice level. "We beg forgiveness."

"Forgiveness?" a second witch echoed, wrinkled brow. "For what?

"We, we killed one of yours," I admitted. "Not out of hate or disrespect. We were desperate. It was an accident."

The room grew heavier with air. Some of the witches crept forward.

Orion went on, "We acted stupidly, we didn't know the birds were, uhm, sacred. We didn't know she was one of yours until too late."

"Many lies begin with 'we didn't know,'" another cawed.

I clenched my teeth and met their stare. "We're not lying."

There was nothing. Then the first witch, the one with talon fingers, rose from her chair and began walking in circles around us.

"What are you?" she breathed.

"Travelers," I spat out.

She halted in front of me, advancing. Her breath was rot and wet earth. "What else are you?"

I stood tall and regarded her. "Nothing else."

She opened her eyes and then turned to Orion. He did not blink. Just looked off into space.

Finally, she turned to the others. "Let the trial begin."

The witches all nodded.

Trial? I did not have any approval of that at all.

"Come," one of them said. A door, one I had not even seen, creaked open behind them, to another hallway lit by unwholesome, flickering red flames.

Orion and I strolled side by side deeper into what was before us.

I had no idea what test they were referring to, but I knew it in my bones; this was some sort of voodoo crap.

And we might not make it out alive to tell it.

Chapter 128

Lyra's POV

The corridor that lay behind the red-lit door was narrow, the walls throbbing faintly as though they were alive.

I didn't dare touch them. The heavy warmth getting heavier with each step we took penetrated my lungs with the smell of something akin to blood.

Neither one uttered a word. There just wasn't the need for any.

The narrow corridor finally widened to the size of a circular chamber, not nearly as large as the throne room but far more intimidating.

The walls were marked with symbols that glowed faintly. At the center was a stone platform.

Behind us came the witches, who did not fully enter. They remained on the threshold, as shadows in tattered cloaks, their voices joining as one to say,

"This is your trial. You spilled sacred blood, and blood must answer for blood."

I stiffened, my fingers clenching at my sides almost instinctively. "We came for forgiveness. We didn't come to shed any more blood."

Then one stepped forward-most definitely taller than the others-her face completely veiled, her voice unnervingly calm: "Then you will prove your worth, through sacrifice."

“What kind of sacrifice?” Orion asked, eyes flicking from the witches to the bowl on the stone.

“Each of you must take from the other what cannot be replaced,” she said.

That sent a chill through me. “What does that mean?”

The tallest witch didn’t answer. Instead, she gestured toward the pedestal.

Orion stepped closer, peering into the bowl. He frowned. “It’s not just blood.”

“It’s a binding. A mirror,” one witch whispered from the shadows. “It takes what you offer and returns nothing. Your truth, your soul. Depends on what you give.”

I swallowed hard. “So we choose what we give?”

“You choose what you take,” another voice answered. “You must ask something of each other that wounds. That means something. You each must consent. And then it is done.”

My pulse quickened.

Orion looked at me, eyes steady but conflicted. “We can refuse.”

I shook my head. “And then what? They kill us?”

“They might kill us anyway,” he muttered.

But I could see the resignation in his eyes. He knew, just like I did, that this was the only way forward.

I stepped closer to the pedestal, the liquid in the bowl swirling slowly now, like it was listening.

“We ask something from each other,” I said, voice steadier than I felt. “But it has to cost.”

The witches didn't reply. They just watched.

I looked at Orion. "Alright. Ask something of me."

He stared at me for a long moment. The lines on his face were drawn tight, his jaw clenched. Finally, he spoke. "Your memory of Ben."

My heart stopped. "What?"

He stepped closer. "That night, the night he kidnapped you. Give me that."

I stumbled back a step, cold creeping into my fingers. "You want me to forget him?"

"Yes," he said quickly, "Everything he did to you. I want it all."

"Why?"

"Because if they're right, if this bowl truly takes what matters, then the only way we show we're not just pleading for forgiveness is by giving up something we value. That memory made you who you are. It was in that moment you discovered yourself as an alpha."

I stared into the bowl. The liquid shimmered faintly.

"Fine," I whispered. "But then I get to ask something from you."

He nodded. "Anything."

I hesitated. My chest was tight. "I want your fear."

His brow furrowed. "Fear?"

"The moment you realized you might lose me," I said, voice barely above a whisper. "The moment you knew it would break you. I want that fear."

His lips parted slightly, and I saw the flicker of vulnerability in his eyes. “That’s cruel.”

“So is yours.”

A long silence stretched between us.

Then Orion stepped forward. “I accept.”

“So do I,” I said.

The witches began to chant, low and droning, a sound that made the walls vibrate. The bowl responded, its surface rippling like disturbed water.

Orion took a blade from the stone and offered it to me.

I took it and pressed it gently to his palm. A single cut. Blood dripped into the bowl. The liquid hissed and absorbed it instantly.

He took the blade and did the same to me. Another hiss. Another ripple.

Then a flash of light burst from the bowl, white, like lightning without sound.

I gasped, stumbling backward as my chest clenched. Something was being pulled from me.

Not physically. Not even mentally. But deeper than that. Emotionally.

A hole formed in my chest where that memory used to be. The day I’d fought with Ben, the night he kidnapped me. It was there a second ago. And then it wasn’t.

I remembered his name. His face. I even remembered his voice. But the moment, the spark that lit the fire? Gone.

And Orion… he was breathing hard, like he'd been punched in the gut. His eyes were wet, but not from pain. From absence.

"We passed," he whispered.

The witches stepped forward. The tallest one approached us. Her fingers gently brushed the side of my face, not affectionately. More like an inspection.

"Some truths are heavier than lies," she said. "You have shed yours."

Another witch stepped forward and held out a gnarled hand. In it was a bone-carved pendant.

"You may carry this," she said. "It is not protection. But it will show the others that judgment was passed."

Orion took it silently. "You may leave," the tallest witch said.

I didn't wait to ask again.

We turned, shoes still off, and walked out of the chamber. My legs trembled, not from pain, but from a strange, haunting emptiness.

The cave seemed shorter on the way out. The whispers had stopped. Even the walls no longer pulsed.

Outside, the cold night air hit me like a wave.

The witch, the one who brought us here, was waiting.

"Well?" she asked.

"They let us go," Orion said.

She looked at us both, squinting. “They forgave you guys?"

“Yes,” I said.

She nodded. “Then maybe you’re ready for the next step.”

Chapter 129

Lyra's POV

She tilted her head at us. "So," she said slowly, her eyes flicking between Orion and me. "What did the trial demand of you?"

I glanced at Orion before I spoke. "They forced me to give up a memory. A precious one. And Orion gave up his emotions. That's what they desired, isn't it? That was the test."

The witch let out a soft, almost pitiful laugh. "That's what you believe?"

My eyebrows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

She stood, dusting dust from her cloak. "They tricked you. What you two just did was not a trial in the way that you understand. You made an oath."

Orion furrowed his brow. "What kind of oath?"

"A blood oath, made on emotional sacrifice," she said to me. "The coven compelled you to swear that you'd never harm a witch again. And if either of you ever does, by mistake or by design, the other will be required to kill them."

My throat closed up. "What? No, they didn't use those words."

"Witches do not speak in the plainest of terms," she told me curtly. "They speak in riddles and metaphors. They request things veiled in illusions. You thought it was a sacrifice, but what you offered them tied both of you together."

I took a step back, stunned. "But, Orion requested that I offer something. I don't even recall what. It's gone."

She shook her head slowly. "It's only temporary. The memory will return shortly. They have to time it so that they seal it off properly. When they're done, it'll return to you."

Orion balled up his fists. "You mean we were manipulated?"

The witch didn't answer that. She glared at me. "You'll have to go with me now. Alone."

Orion stepped forward right away. "No. That's not going to happen."

The witch didn’t flinch. "It’s the request of the Elder. Only the cursed must proceed."

"Then she can wait," he snapped. "I’m not letting Ravenna out of my sight."

I placed a hand on his chest, gently but firmly. "Orion, I’ll be fine."

He looked at me, uncertain. "You don’t even know where she’s taking you."

"Further south," the witch said calmly. "Close to the river. We’ll be gone for two hours at most."

He turned his scowl on her. "And what's there?"

"The next step. You want her saved, don't you? That's where she gets it."

His jaw was working, his eyes darting between us.

I went up onto my toes and kissed him. He pulled me in close, the kiss hard and possessive, as if he were going to memorize the feel of me. I pulled away with a soft sigh.

"I'll be back with you," I whispered. "Always."

Gently, Orion let me go. I wheeled around to confront the witch, who did not wait for more goodbyes before vanishing into the woods. I followed her.

The farther we went, the thicker the trees grew.

The sky turned shadowy, not from the hour, but from mist curling among the branches. I kept looking back over my shoulder, but Orion was already gone.

"They actually deceived us," I whispered.

"Witches have a tendency to do that," said the witch. "But not always cruelty. Sometimes it is protection."

"How is binding us from ever harming a witch protection?"

"Because you are both explosive. And the coven is aware of it. They required assurance."

We walked on, silence between us. The woods changed as we moved, colder, wetter, as if the trees themselves had breath and were watching us.

We reached an opening where the ground dipped downward, forming a shallow valley covered in heavy vines.

The witch halted just before the entrance. "Beyond this point," she said, looking at me, "you will find her. She is not like the others. She cuts through all deceptions. Lie not. Flatter not. Say only what you mean."

I nodded slowly. "Is there some of great importance tied to pestering this elder?"

"Yes, there is, and it's only one. You won't come out."

I stared at her. "You mean I'll die?"

"Or worse."

My stomach roiled.

She didn't pat me down, didn't try to comfort me with lies. She just pointed down the path. I breathed, lifted my chin, and walked.

The vines fell back behind me as I passed through them, and I saw a stone path.

In the middle of the clearing, sat a woman, covered in black lace. Her skin was greyish, but her eyes glowed like embers beneath the cloak.

"Lyra, I see you, trapped in another's shape." she sang, voice a thousand soft ones. "Come."

I walked towards her, though not too close.

"I have waited for you, child."

"You're the Elder?"

She nodded her head.

"Why did you steal me away from Orion?"

"Because you are the source of the curse. You must view your fate alone."

My mouth was dry. "So go on, then. Say it."

She held out a hand. One of the orbs drifted closer to me, hovering just in front of my chest. I felt it throb, as though it was imitating the rhythm of my heartbeat.

"You are trapped in a love triangle with three dots connected in blood."

There it is, again, witches and riddles. They never speak straight. I scowled. "I don't get it."

"You will, with time, child, but time is not in your favor, and you have a few more deaths ahead of you. You have to make the right decision. Keep on living as Ravenna or head down your path as Lyra. I cannot say what is right and what is wrong."

"What if I do it wrong?"

"Then you will bring ruin to all the people that you love."

I gazed at the orb. "And what if I do it correctly?"

"Then you will change the world."

The orb sank into my chest, disappearing. I gasped for air.

A jolt of pain flashed along my spine, a sudden burning one, and it was gone.

She nodded once more. "The choice will not be easy. But it is yours. I have lifted your opponent's curse, but as I said to you, this is merely the start."

I tried to ask her more, but the forest began to distort, blur, the world whirl.

And when I opened my eyes, I was back in the clearing with the witch, breathing hard.

She looked at me. "You saw her."

I nodded. "I think I did."

"Then our time is done. Let's go back."

We started the walk back to Orion.

My head spun with the Elder's words, I was really more confused after talking with her than I was before I met her.

We haven't made more than 15 steps when I hear a massive rustling in the trees.

The witch stopped, her eyes flying open in horror, like the unthinkable had appeared.

She turned to face me, "Sorry, I can't continue with you anymore. You're on your own." I was taken aback, what's going on? Before I could even utter a word, she turned into a murder of crows and flew away.

She appeared so scared, but I don't know why. Why is she scared?

The commotion through the trees interrupted me again, then I heard my name.

It seemed like a thousand women of yore were all talking at the same time in unison.

"Ravenna, you are the flesh the gods chose to fill our empty bellies."

My own breath was caught in my throat. I stood frozen.

Chapter 130

Kate's POV

“At this point,” Zack muttered, dragging a hand through his dirty blond hair, “it’ll be best if we get some rest and start again in the morning.”

I snorted. "You know as well as I do that we can't quit now. Not when we don't even know if Orion and Ravenna will survive the night."

Zack breathed a heavy sigh, as if the burden of the entire cursed island had fallen on his shoulders. "Assuming we do find them, what next? How are we going to kill that thing? What if none of the bombs kills it?"

"Then we run for our lives," said Kira as if stating the obvious.

Zack laughed harshly. "Run for our lives? You see how fast that snake moved? There's no running from it. Not from something so fast and so large."

"But when we recorded it," I completed, tightening my hold on my weapon, "it healed within a few seconds, perhaps even a minute. That is our window. This time, we injured it worse than that. We hit it with something enormous, something that rends it in twain, and within the time that it takes to regrow, we get the fuck out of this cursed island."

Zack blinked at me, and slowly a smile crept onto his face. "That actually sounds like a plan. A desperate plan, but a plan. Hopefully it'll work."

Kira folded her arms over her chest. "And what if it follows us all the way back to the city? Leads us back to our apartment?"

"That's not a possibility," Keto responded peacefully, his tone filled with the type of quiet confidence that makes you wish you could believe him.

I opened my lips to ask him why he was so sure, but Keto just lifted his hand.

"Don't talk. Don't breathe," he whispered.

We stood perfectly still. The only sounds now were the distant chirps of night insects and the soft creaking of trees swaying softly in the breeze.

Keto narrowed his eyes and took a careful step forward, listening. His hand hovered near his holster, eyes scanning the dense woods.

There was silence. Just nothing. And then a crunch.

A noise. Behind us.

Zack spun around immediately, gun raised, finger resting on the trigger. But before he could fire, a deep voice barked from behind the trees.

“One more move, and I’ll blow the head off the soldier by your right."

Zack stopped, half-way across the room. My gut sank.

That voice.

Kira's eyes widened. "Orion?" she whispered.

There was a moment of silence.

Then a figure stepped out of the shadows, gun held in his hand but now relaxed, recognition spreading across his face.

Orion.

He looked different, though. Tired, bloody, exhausted, but still him.

His eyes swept across each of us, landing on Kira, then Keto, and then me.

He smiled weakly, dropping his gun altogether.

“You guys always do dramatic entrances?" He inquired, voice raspy but tinged with relief.

I stepped closer. "Orion, what the hell is wrong with you?"

He massaged the base of his neck. "Long story. But I'm glad to be alive."

Zack let out a loud breath. "You scared the hell out of us, man."

"Sure, sorry about that. Reflex."

"Where's Ravenna?" Kira asked, peering beyond him.

That wiped the smile off Orion's face. His jaw tightened. "She's not here. She stayed back with the witch."

"What witch?" I edged in.

He shook his head. "It's complicated. We went to the coven. They had a trial."

"A trial? A witch? a coven? What the fuck?" Zack was replaying.

“Yeah," Orion sneered with a laugh. "They said it like it was some sort of cleansing ritual, but it was worse. But I'm not shut to fixing her up. The witches are disgusting."

"What the actual fuck?" Zack repeated.

"Listen, Zack," I growled. "There's a lot we don't know, there's a lot you don't know, but just pretend like you didn't hear that."

Orion looked at Zack, and then at me, his eyes narrowing. He could see for certain they weren't werewolves, but he kept quiet. How Zack reacted to the word witches was proof that they had no idea about werewolves.

"Ravenna is going to return at any minute now. The guide would not let me join them. Said only the afflicted could move forward.".

"I thought it was some sort of sickness?" Keto asked.

"I guess not. It was a curse."

I folded my arms, attempting to process it all. "And you're okay?"

"No. Not really. But I'll live."

"Well, thank the gods for that," Kira said, her voice taut. "We were starting to think we lost you."

"Why are you guys here, anyway, and how did you find me?" Orion asked, eye-rolling each of us suspiciously.

Kira said, "We were worried you guys might not have made it out alive, so we brought reinforcements."

He nodded his head, "Ooh, I see. That's nice of you. But there's no need to worry."

"Far from it, boss," Keto cut in, "We fear you and Ravenna are in serious danger. And now that we stumbled upon you, we believe Ravenna may be the first victim, since she is weaker than you."

Orion furrowed his eyes, "What are you talking about?"

I coughed and, "Ravenna's step mother, Ruth, had information that you guys were headed to this island, and she had sold you out. We know for a fact that the witches know you're here with Ravenna."

"It's hard to explain, but we saw a giant. three-headed serpent who declared he was going to kill you and Ravenna," I went on.

Orion's eyes widened in shock, "Why the fuck didn't you kill the fucking snake?"

"We attempted to," Zack interjected, "But the freaky thing wouldn't perish, it just healed."

Orion paused for a moment, as if weighing his options.

"If the snake kills Ravenna, then we must kill it, and then consume it."

Zack chuckled in amusement, "That's what I'm saying."

But I wasn't impressed. "How do we find Ravenna?"

"I know where she is," Orion said, his voice thick. "I know the path she took."

Chapter 131

Lyra's POV

The serpent lifted its huge head, the motion so slow it seemed almost deliberate.

Its three heads towered above me, hissing with venomous expectation. My heart was racing wildly in my chest, yet I did not move, refusing to give them the satisfaction of seeing me cower in fear.

"Where is the other alpha?" The serpent-like voice wrapped itself around me. "There are supposed to be two of you."

I clenched my teeth. I was not going to give in. I did not even blink.

"Very well," the middle head spoke higher. "Spend your last moments in prayer."

I said nothing. Rather, I shifted into my wolf form.

My bones cracked and groaned, fur sprouted from my flesh like a blaze, and the agony was lost in adrenaline and reflex.

I was on all fours in an instant. My fangs jutted out. My claws sank into mossy earth.

The serpent smirked. "Oh? You'd like to fight?"

And then it struck.

Ferocity was terrifying. One moment it lay still; the next, its jaws clamped down around my throat.

But I responded.

I leapt into the air, somersaulting forward. Time ticked to a standstill for a moment as I fought my way through the leaves and branches, its fangs an inch from my belly.

I sensed the warmth of its breath. A second, and I crashed to the ground, dirt spraying up from under my paws. I didn't pause, I ran.

Combat with such a creature would be madness, especially as it has three heads.

Trees went along as I ran. My feet pounded the ground, muscles burning in every bound.

The serpent roared in fury behind me and pursued. Its massive coils hurled through the forest, pulling up trees, coiling about trunks, and encircling boulders in pursuit.

I dodged roots. I leaped over downed logs. But the snake was faster.

With a devastating blow, it swept over me. Trees splintered like matchsticks as it blocked my path, its gaze lifted to loom over me.

"No more running," it sneered.

I hardened myself, fangs bared, to die on my feet, when a thunderous blast crackled through the air.

The serpent jerked back, spitting with fury.

It was a shot.

I looked in the direction the shot had been fired, and saw Kate.

She was standing in the background, with her rifle at the ready. My heart twisted on seeing her; she was crazed-eyed, like a damn fighter. And she had an entourage.

I looked and saw Keto, Kira, and other soldiers that I don't think I knew, closing in on Kate. They all had their weapons on the snake.

I was shocked to see them, but delighted. How did they find us? I was expecting that with their help, we could deal with the monster.

The heads of the snake twisted in rage. "You dare interfere? I will kill all of you!"

It struck, but then seemingly out of nowhere, a sound ripped through the air.

It was the sound of a tiger's roar.

It was low and frightening. It growled through the trees, sending birds exploding from the treetops in terror. Even the snake stopped.

My blood turned icy.

I knew the sound. It was none other than my boyfriend, Orion.

The soldiers instinctively stepped aside as he walked into view, like a figure from legend, broad shoulders, piercing eyes burning with coals.

He cracked his knuckles. "Finally," the snake sneered. "The alpha I've been waiting for."

Orion grinned. "You waited for the wrong one," he growled, his voice low. "I am not a run-of-the-mill alpha."

He tore off his white shirt with a wave of one hand. His muscles bulged. Then his eyes turned blood red.

I gawked, amazed, as his body transformed.

He grew larger and enormous, I thought he was the Hulk, except for the hue.

He was four times bigger than my werewolf form. Fur as dark as panther burst out of his body, his back curved forward into a monstrous form.

When he landed on all fours, the earth trembled. I had never seen a werewolf such as him.

But as formidable and frightening as he was, I still didn't think he stood a chance against the serpent.

The snake attacked again, but Orion sprang forward and somehow spun in mid-air, landing right in front of me.

His growl rattled the earth.

The snake turned to attack. "Is that all you've got, alpha?"

Orion grinned wolf-like. "Not even close."

He produced a small black box from behind his back.

A detonator. My mouth dropped open in horror.

I didn't have time to react before he activated it.

BOOM!

The explosion tore through the air. The serpent's body convulsed violently, then blasted outward, flesh and scales shattering like eggs.

A scream of not agony but rage tore from their throats.

"RUN!" Orion yelled.

They all turned to flee.

We ran through the forest, the ground trembling behind as the serpent's death throes convulsed and lashed.

I ran with Orion and the others, muscles crying out, lungs aflame, metal tang of blood heavy on my tongue.

Finally, we reached the river.

Boats waited, softly rocking in the stream. Sailors stood, eyes wide at our arrival.

Keto didn't pause. He pulled a wad of money from his coat, shoved it into one of the sailors' hands. "Take us over. Now."

They didn't argue.

We crawled on the boats, all of us jumping on in silence.

Soldiers helped other soldiers onto the boats. Kira dropped down next to me, clutching her side. Kate inspected over her gun, and Keto bellowed orders between ragged breaths.

I looked back.

The forest was afire behind us. Fire shot into the black sky. We'd wounded the serpent, but I wasn't sure if it was dead.

Orion braced his arm against the side of the boat. His red eyes softened back into human form as the adrenaline left him.

And when the boats began to drift across the river, silence fell.

We'd survived.

But how long would that last?

"Do you think the serpent is dead?" I asked the air, but Kira answered.

"I don't think so, it was injured no doubt, but it could heal with time."

Orion got up to us, "And once it has healed, it'll come for us. We must be ready when it does."

Chapter 132

Lyra's POV

The boat came to a slow stop as it brushed against the edge of the bank.

I led the way, stepping off the bar smoothly onto the muddy shore. My legs still trembled a bit with the rush of the chase. I returned to help the others disembark.

Kate addressed Orion. "I'll stay behind with Keto and take care of the soldiers getting settled in. We still owe them more than thanks."

Orion nodded, lightly brushing her shoulder with appreciation. "See you later. Watch yourself."

A man I hadn't noticed entered stood up at that moment.

He was a tall man, with a scar just underneath his left eyebrow, having an aura of overconfidence.

"Name's Zack; I came here with Keto. You're lucky we got here when we did," he said, giving Orion a handshake.

Orion gripped the hand. "I tell you, I am very grateful; you saved someone dear to me."

Zack barely gave me a glance and offered a faint nod in return. I kind of nodded back, unsure what to say.

Orion almost without hesitation walked in the direction of the cars. He came to a stop next to a black SUV, and I followed behind him, with Kira ahead of me.

Once I was finally seated in the car, I sighed. The leather cushion was so cold against my back.

Turning on the engine, its almost silent hum seemed to resonate through the silence.

"How was the meeting with the witch?" said Orion as he glanced at me in the rearview mirror.

I hesitated. Her words had reverberated in my head like a mist I could not shake off. I did not even fully understand it myself.

I told him the basics. "She lifted the curse," I panted. "I'm free now."

He nodded brusquely, very satisfied. "Good. That is all that is required for the moment."

Kira swiveled around in her seat, her face shining with a smile. "I'm so relieved everything worked out. You can't imagine how anxious we were."

The dawn was only just breaking. Golden strands of light began to filter through the trees.

"Once we're home," Orion said, "everyone needs to rest. Then we'll all sit down and figure out what to do next."

I nodded, leaning my head on the window. But the one thing that had been bothering me could not be kept quiet anymore.

"How did you become so huge back there?" I asked him, glancing around. "You were enormous, Orion. That was not a normal alpha size."

He didn't respond immediately. I could see his jaw squeezing a fraction.

"I'm not in the right position to talk about that right now," he gritted, looking forward.

That response roused something in me that didn't feel right. But I suppressed it. For now.

Kira coughed. "Seriously, though, the snake kind of backed off when it heard you roar."

I chuckled softly. "It paralyzed. Like, for real. You should've seen its eyes."

We all laughed. The laughter was brittle, as if we were trying to rub away the terror of the last few hours.

But even laughing, my fingers held tight to the seat.

Kira edged forward from the backseat a little, her voice carrying over the stillness. "How are we going to handle Ruth?"

Orion, sitting next to me in the driver's seat, did not glance at me. "What about her?"

Kira snorted. "She was the one who betrayed us. If not for Ruth, the whole plan would've worked. We never would've had to go through that horrid snake abomination."

I blinked in shock. "Wait, Ruth? My stepmother?"

Kira nodded. "Yes. She gave it away. Spilled Orion's coordinates."

My heart fell. Not even the initial time Ruth had appalled me, but this, this was a line drawn. She hadn't only schemed and manipulated behind the scenes. This time, she tried to kill us.

She wanted us dead.

I ground my jaw, staring out the window, but no longer seeing the highway. The weight of betrayal weighed on my chest.

Orion finally spoke, his voice weaker than angry. "I'll handle Ruth and how to treat her afterwards. I just need to sit for a minute. And have a good meal. Then I can think."

He wasn't sweeping it under the rug. I knew that. His voice had been kind, but I knew Orion. He was angry.

"Eat something too," Kira added, resting a hand on my shoulder. "So do we. Then we can decide what we do next."

"Before that," Orion interrupted, glancing in the rearview mirror at Kira, "I want you to start working on that snake. Identify it. Learn how to kill it. Just in case it sticks its head out again."

Kira nodded. "I'll start working on it when we return."

I swallowed hard. "If Ruth realizes we returned, she'll know we survived and freak."

"Let her freak," Orion shrugged. "She's intelligent. She'll come up with some other way to try killing us."

That twisted my stomach. "What are you saying?"

He stared at me for a moment before allowing his eyes to focus again on the street. "I'm not trying to say something. I'm saying Ruth has already attempted to destroy your life. Mine, too. That is not going to happen without payback."

I did not inquire of him what he was taking payback over. I wasn't certain that I wanted to hear. But I did know this: if Ruth attempted again, she would not receive a third attempt.

"She'll do something different," Orion continued. "She always does. But I am not going to let it throw me off. Not until I've had some rest."

Kira shifted her position. "That reminds me. Kate's brother was kidnapped."

I turned to look at her, my heart aching. "What?"

She nodded. "We just found out about it before we had to rescue them."

I sat back, stunned. Kate had been so composed. How did she manage that?

"That's awful," I grumbled to myself.

Orion, on the other hand, laughed. "Werewolves?"

"No," Kira replied. "Human. I think."

He brushed his hand aside. "Then that is not a problem."

I glared at him. "What do you mean it's not a problem?"

Chapter 133

Lyra's POV

"It means," he said, turning into the driveway of our estate, "if humans have him, we can get him back. Simple."

Kira leaned back. "Unless it's a trap."

"Everything's a trap," Orion muttered, pulling the car to a stop. "Doesn't mean we can't spring it first."

The gate swung open on its own, and we entered the courtyard. As the car came to a screeching stop, I took a deep breath, centering myself.

We all got out of the car. Early morning dawn had wrapped the sky in golden silk.

The household staff were up and about, cleaning and cooking. Orion ordered one of the guards to make sure the rest of the soldiers who came in via the river were taken care of.

Within, the scent of freshly baked bread wafted from the kitchen. My belly growled.

"You should eat," said Orion, pushing a firm hand into the small of my back. "Then you rest."

Kira ran to her room with a determined look on her face, probably to start investigating the snake. I knew she wouldn't hold anything back.

I lingered at the stairs and looked at Orion. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"Not giving up. For endangering your life to save mine."

His eyes turned slightly cold. "I'll never let anyone hurt you, Ravenna."

I nodded and went up the stairs.

I climbed the stairs step by step. Every step was heavier than the last one. I was tired out of my legs, my chest ached.

I had only entered the room when I closed it and leaned against it.

And then went straight to the bathroom and opened the shower.

The water boiled up fast, and I got in, letting the soothing torrent flow down my body, cleansing away the whole near-death ordeal.

As I came out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, the sky outside had already brightened. I rummaged through my drawer and picked a red spaghetti top and my best bum shorts.

I had just gotten dressed at last when there was a knock at the door. "It's me," Kira's voice outside.

I went over to the door and opened it. She stood there, hair dripping with having taken her own bath, wearing a baggy shirt and leggings. She smiled at me gently.

"I thought you wouldn't mind alone time."

I nodded. "Yeah. Thanks for coming by."

She came in, and I hadn't time to close the door behind her before one of the maids entered, trolley in hand.

"Your dinner, ma'am."

She rolled the trolley in and lifted the lid. Chicken. Platefuls of chicken. My stomach growled angrily before I could force it down, and Kira laughed.

"Well, someone's hungry."

I glared at her. "Don't make fun. I almost died last night."

"Understandable."

The maid arranged it all out on the table before me, then bowed and left.

I fell into the chair and did not refrain from proprieties. I took a drumstick and bit down with all my might on it, wincing at the explosion of flavor in my mouth.

"God, that's wonderful."

Kira sat across from me and picked one up as well. "I'll give it to you, this house knows how to cook."

We dined in silence at first, and the food spoke volumes. My body was singing my praises with each bite.

She spoke up at last. "So, what did the witch tell you?

I gulped hard and sat back in the chair, drying my palms on the napkin. "It was weird. She said I'd die. That there would be more mad attacks coming for me. That I could walk in Ravenna's footsteps or make my own way, and that would mean if I live or die."

Kira raised an eyebrow. "That's a lot of doom prophecy."

I nodded. “She said the island was just the beginning. And there’s more to come. But she didn’t explain what exactly.”

Kira exhaled. “Of course she didn’t. Witches and their riddles.”

I gave her a small smile. “She also said I’d have to make a choice soon. A choice that would cost me everything.”

Kira blinked at that. “Everything?”

“Yeah.”

She sat for a moment, looking at me, then reached across and covered my hand on the table. "We'll do it. Whatever it is. You won't have to face this alone."

Her words touched me, something I hadn't realized I'd been so miserably in need of today.

I nodded slowly.

"Thanks."

We sat for a moment, our fingers brushing together, the silence between us a warm blanket.

When we finished eating, I set the plates aside and leaned on the bed. Kira joined me alongside on the second pillow.

"You know," she started, speaking softly. "When I saw that snake, I actually thought we weren't going to make it."

"Same."

There was a hush, and then she said, "But when Orion bellowed like that, I don't know what happened, but it was like the whole island slowed down rolling."

I guffawed. "The snake, too."

She laughed too. "You heard that?"

"Yeah. I think it peed a little bit."

We both burst out into suppressed guffaws like little girls at a slumber party.

I have no idea what Ruth will do when she discovers we did it," I said at last, the smile faltering somewhat.

"She's going to lose it," Kira said.

"She ought to," I snarled.

Kira looked at me. "She crossed a line this time. You could've been killed, Ravenna."

"I know."

My throat tightened a little. Regardless of how many times Ruth had caused me pain, though, I never got used to it. Never forget it. Still left a wound somewhere deeper than I cared to admit.

I leaned back against Kira. "Thanks for coming to see me this morning."

"I don't need to be thanked. I didn't want to be alone either."

There was a silence that fell between us. The fatigue at last reached me, and my eyelashes felt heavier with each blink.

Kira pushed the window blind wide open, and we settled into the blanket. She was lying with her back to me, and I slung my arm over her waist.

"I must sleep now, Kira."

"Sleep tight, Lyra."

The last I knew prior to falling asleep was the rhythmic beat of her breathing and the soothing hum of security the moment provided.

Chapter 134

Lyra's POV

Gently, I stirred from sleep at the faint sound of a page turning. I allowed my eyes to flutter open and view Kira seated beside me on the bed, legs crossed, a thick book lying on her lap.

She looked serene and engrossed. "You're up," she said, shooting me a slight smile.

I stretched, yawning softly. "Yeah, how long have I been out?"

"Six hours," she said. "It's a hot afternoon now."

"Seriously?" I sat up and ran my hand through my hair. "How long did you sleep?"

"Two hours. I couldn't really stay still for long. My mind kept wandering." She tilted the book a bit, keeping her place with her thumb.

"Have Kate and Keto made it back yet?"

Kira nodded. "About an hour ago. I think they're asleep by now. Orion said we're going to have a meeting later on this evening."

I heaved a sigh, leaning back against the headboard. "Right. The meeting."

There was a short pause between the two of us until I turned to her again. "So, do you have any idea how we will save Kate's brother?"

Kira fixed her gaze on me. Her expression was unreadable. "Orion will probably lay everything out in the meeting. For now, just try not to worry."

With a slow breath out, I forced a nod.

There was a knock at the door. Kira got up and opened it.

A maid entered, pushing a cart with trays of steaming food, seafood drenched in spicy sauce, surrounded by vibrant vegetables and slices of exotic fish that looked like they'd just been caught.

"Lunch is served," the maid said softly, setting the dishes on the small table beside the window.

"Thank you," Kira said, and the maid quietly exited.

The scent hit my nose, and my stomach growled audibly. I blushed, and Kira chuckled.

"Go on, eat. You're probably starving."

"I am."

We sat at the table together. I picked at a golden slice of fish, savoring the rich, tangy taste before looking over at the book still sitting beside Kira's seat.

"What are you reading?"

"Something on mystical creatures forged with witchcraft," she said between bites. "I'm hoping it might help us identify the giant serpent, but so far, there's no mention of it."

I chewed slowly, my gaze falling to the intricate cover of the book. "Nothing about a snake that kills everything in its path?"

"Not yet. Just banshees, shadow beasts, some hybrid ghouls, and this weird chapter about moon-cursed wolves."

I raised an eyebrow. "Sounds delightful."

Kira smiled faintly. "We might be fighting some of these, too, who knows?"

I shook my head and took another bite. "Great. Just what I needed to hear."

Kira's eyes were glued to the page, her brows slowly knitting into a frown.

“What is it?” I asked, picking a shrimp from the seafood platter.

She didn’t answer at first. Her fingers gripped the book tightly.

I sat up. “Kira?”

She finally spoke, her voice quiet but grave. “I think I found something. About the serpent.”

That made my heart skip.

She turned the book to face me. The image on the page was a sketch, ugly and terrifying. A massive python-like creature coiled around trees.

“Ladon,” Kira said, sounding the name like it was a curse. “The serpent’s real name is Ladon.”

“Ladon?” I echoed.

She nodded. “It’s a creature forged through dark witchcraft. The book says rebel witches were sacrificed to feed it. Their magic gets absorbed into the serpent’s flesh until it begins to evolve.”

I swallowed hard, suddenly losing my appetite. “What does it mean to evolve?”

Kira traced the next lines with her finger and read aloud. “Once its original head is cut off, two new heads grow in its place. When those two are severed, three grow to replace them. Then seven. Each time you cut off a set, more return, and stronger.”

My stomach twisted.

“By the time it grows seven heads,” she continued, “it gains the ability to fly.”

I stared at the book. The image hadn’t changed, but suddenly it looked far more real. Too real.

“That’s what attacked us?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

Kira gave a small nod. “I didn’t think it was this serious. But if this is truly Ladon, then we barely survived its first form.”

I leaned closer to the page, rereading the terrifying progression. One to two. Two to three. Three to seven. A flying serpent. My brain fought to imagine what kind of madness we’d unleashed by surviving that island.

“No wonder it wanted to kill us,” I murmured. “Pure evil, and what we saw wasn't even in its best form.”

Kira snapped the book shut. “We need to tell Orion.”

“Wait,” I said quickly.

She looked at me. “What? You can’t seriously think we should keep this quiet.”

“No,” I said. “But let’s be smart. There might be more information in that book, like how to stop it for good. What if we just run to Orion with panic and half the details?”

Kira hesitated, her mouth opening and closing again. “You’re right.”

I nodded. “Let’s look again. There has to be something. A weakness. Or a ritual. Something.”

We reopened the book. The chapter was long, and the ink had faded in parts.

I reached for a pen and a notebook from the nightstand and began writing the key things down as Kira translated the old language.

It wasn't modern English, more like a mix of Latin and ancient symbols. But she was good at it.

"This part says Ladon was created by a witch called Selphira. She was banished from the High Coven for crimes against nature."

"Crimes like creating monsters?"

Kira nodded. "Exactly. It says Ladon was meant to guard a hidden gate. A portal that connects this world to something worse. Something that even witches feared."

"Great," I muttered. "So we're not just dealing with a monster. We're dealing with a key."

Kira's face darkened. "It says Ladon cannot be destroyed by conventional means. Its blood is toxic. It regenerates in seconds. And if it tastes the blood of its slayer, the heads multiply faster."

"What the hell?" I whispered.

Kira ran her hand through her hair. "I've read about dangerous creatures, but this one is different."

I could feel my heart racing in my chest. Ruth knew. She must have.

"I still can't believe my stepmother did this," I whispered, looking away.

Chapter 135

Lyra's POV

Kira sighed. “We’ve both been betrayed more times than we can count.”

I turned back to her. “Why did she want me dead so badly? What did I ever do to her?”

“You existed,” Kira said simply. “And that was enough.”

Silence settled in the room. Heavy and sharp.

After a long pause, Kira found another line and gasped.

“What is it?” I asked.

“There’s a mention of something.”

My heart leapt. “A way to kill it?”

Kira nodded slowly. “Sort of. It says Ladon can be tamed.”

“tamed?”

She pointed at the text. “Not killed, tamed. After it has been successfully tamed, then it can be killed."

I nodded, confusion brewing in my mind. "How can someone tame something like that?"

"It’s called the Ride of Death. A ritual performed with three powerful artifacts: the blood of a virgin, the moonstone, and the head of an alpha.”

My eyes widened in shock, "The head of an alpha? You mean like a dead alpha?"

Kira nodded her head, "Yes, an alpha that is killed specifically for this or beheaded."

"That's impossible, we can't get an alpha for this. Not if we sacrifice Orion or me."

"They're many other alphas we can use, our pack has rivals. Orion would figure it out, but this is a lead and we have to follow it. You need to understand that Ladon is our greatest enemy right now."

"Okay," I nodded, “but do we have the other two on the list?”

Kira shook her head. “Not yet. But now we know what to look for.”

We both leaned back on the bed, our heads swimming with the weight of what we’d just learned.

“I don’t know if we’re strong enough for this,” I whispered.

“I don't know either, but we have to try,” Kira replied.

A knock came on the door.

Kira quickly tucked the book under the pillow just as the door opened and a maid stepped in with a jug of water and two glasses.

“Master Orion says the meeting will begin in one hour,” she said.

Kira and I exchanged glances.

“Thank you,” Kira replied, and the maid left.

I stood up and stretched. “Then we tell him everything.”

Kira gave a nod of agreement, but I could still see the fear in her eyes. I didn't blame her. It was the same fear in mine.

As I walked toward the window and looked out at the estate, my thoughts returned to Ruth. If she knew we survived, I wondered what her next move would be this time around.

"If we keep quiet, we might be able to move first. To find the artifacts before she even realizes what we're after," I said, turning to face Kira.

"You want to play smart."

"No," I said, turning around. "I want to win."

Kira smirked. "Same thing."

We got dressed quickly. I pulled on jeans and a long-sleeved top, while Kira kept her combat boots and vest. Her dagger was tucked in the side like always.

"You don't trust the house?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I trust no one," she responded, "I have been paranoid since we got kidnapped and Orion's own brother turned on us, and now your step mother is after our lives. Hopefully we get to hers first."

Fair enough.

Kira and I left my room, our minds still heavy with the disturbing details about Ladon.

We walked quietly through the hallway, the marble floor cool beneath our feet.

The evening sunlight streamed lazily through the high windows, casting long shadows along the walls.

“I wonder if Kate's still sleeping,” Kira said.

“We should check on her,” I nodded.

We stopped in front of her door, and I raised my hand to knock, but Kira caught my wrist, a mischievous grin spreading across her face.

“Wait,” she whispered. “Let’s see if she’s helping herself out.”

My eyes widened. “What?”

Kira winked and turned the knob. The door wasn’t locked.

“Kira!” I hissed, but it was too late. She pushed it open slowly, and we slipped inside like detectives sneaking in on a criminal.

But instead of catching Kate in some embarrassing act, we found her sitting cross-legged on her bed, dragging a giant chicken lap into her mouth like it was her last meal on earth. She froze mid-bite, her mouth full, eyes locked on us.

I burst out laughing. “She’s not guilty.”

Kira folded her arms, trying to look serious but failing. “For now, yes.”

Kate blinked, then slowly lowered the chicken, still chewing. "What am I guilty of exactly?"

“Nothing you need to worry about,” Kira said, flopping onto the bed beside her.

Kate grinned, chewing with satisfaction. “I was told you two were still asleep when I came in.”

“Well, we were,” I said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “I guess we needed it more than we realized.”

Kate nodded. “You guys have been through hell and back. I’m glad you got some rest.”

Her voice was somewhat softer, and I could know more behind it.

I looked toward the tray of food next to her. "Nice feast you are having there."

Kate chuckled. "The maids brought this a few minutes ago. I didn't even wait for a drink. I was starving."

"In your place, I would have been the same." Kira chimed, "Late after the whole island thing, I don't think any of us would want to lay any more leaves or roots for the next meal!"

That gave us a chuckle. It did feel good to laugh, even if it did not last.

Kate put down the chicken bone and wiped her hands clean. "Keto told me that my brother's case is going to be handled."

I nodded, folding my legs underneath me. "That's what I was going to ask you. Are you alright?"

Kate paused. "No, not really. But I'm trying to keep it together. Knowing that Keto and Orion are working on it makes me feel a little better. But until I see my brother again, I won't be okay."

I said softly, "I understand."

Kira said with emphasis, "You will get him back. We're not going to let anything happen to him, not after everything we've survived."

Kate smiled weakly. "Thanks. That means a lot."

Chapter 136

Lyra's POV

We stayed in Kate’s room while she finished eating, sprawled across her bed and talked about nothing in particular, waiting for her to finish her mountain of food. Her appetite was impressive.

"I don't know how you do it," Kira said, watching Kate tear into the last piece of chicken like her life depended on it. "You eat like you've been starved for a week."

"I was almost eaten by a three-headed snake. I deserve this," Kate replied through a mouthful.

I chuckled. "Fair argument."

Kira leaned back against the headboard, tapping her fingers against her cup. “You know,” she started, grinning like she was about to confess a deep, dark secret, “there was a time Keto and I tried to hunt wild boar, after you guys left. We thought we were being clever, tracking prints, moving low through the brush, whispering like spies.”

Kate’s brows rose. “Did you catch it?”

Kira snorted. “Catch it? That thing chased us up a tree. And stayed there. We were stranded for hours.”

I burst out laughing. “No way!”

“I’m serious,” she said, her face solemn but her eyes dancing. “We didn’t even bring proper rations. We thought we’d feast like savages. You know what we ended up eating?”

Kate shook her head, already giggling. “Don’t tell me.”

Kira looked at me and pointed. “Dried nuts.”

I laughed until my stomach hurt. “That sounds miserable.”

“It was!” she cried. “I was ready to stab Keto and roast him instead. He didn't want to use his wolf skills, and I had trouble shifting."

“Please,” Kate said, holding up her hand. “Don't kill him, he's already got enough death on his plate.”

We all laughed again.

“Okay,” I said, catching my breath, “you want to hear something worse?”

“Always,” Kate said.

“There was a time, back when I first started trying to cook on my own,” I began, grinning sheepishly, “I thought I was following this really simple stew recipe. Onion, garlic, oil, throw everything into a pot…”

Kira narrowed her eyes. “Let me guess, you threw in the whole onion?”

“No, worse,” I said, biting back a laugh. “I didn’t realize oil heats up that fast. I turned the heat to the highest setting, walked away for like two minutes, and, poof! Fire. Actual flames.”

Kate’s jaw dropped. “You’re joking.”

“I had to throw the whole thing out the window,” I said. “The smoke was so bad I had to sleep with my windows open for days.”

Kira wheezed. “Roasted disappointment!”

Kate was laughing too hard to speak for a moment. She wiped a tear from her cheek and pointed at me. “You’re banned from the kitchen. Permanently.”

“I’ve accepted that,” I said with a dramatic nod. “Some people are meant to lead, some to fight, I am not meant to cook.”

Kira grinned, shaking her head. “It’s crazy how food holds memories like that, huh?”

“Yeah,” Kate said quietly.

And that’s when we noticed it. The shift. It was subtle, but her voice was softer now. Less playful. Like something heavy had slipped into her thoughts.

I turned my gaze to her, and even Kira’s smile faded as she picked up on it too.

Kate was staring at her empty plate, her fingers absentmindedly tracing the rim.

“You okay?” I asked.

She looked up and forced a smile. “Yeah. Just remembering things.”

I tilted my head slightly. "Want to talk about it?"

Kate shrugged. Still, unwilling to make eye contact, she said, "Honestly, it's nothing. My brother would just burn rice every single time he cooked it for me. No matter how many times I told him not to, he'd just turn up the flame so that it would cook faster. It never did."

There was silence between us. Her words hovered ominously, like a nasty fog.

"He will be fine," I whispered," We will get him back."

Kate said no more but gave a slight nod: One that said she really hoped I was right; one that said she was not sure if she believed in it yet.

And just like that, it was over, strangled by sharp reality.

"You know," she said slowly, dabbing her lips again with the napkin, "Orion and Lyra make a rather quiet pair."

My heart skipped.

Kira raised a brow. "Quiet?"

"Yes. As in, quiet about their relationship. Keto's still in the dark, you know."

I stiffened. "I haven't had the time to tell him yet."

Kate looked between Kira and me. "Funny. Because Kira and I already agreed that if you keep dragging your feet, we're going to tell him ourselves."

I turned toward Kira. "You agreed to that?"

Kira raised both hands. "Don't look at me like that. It's not like I wanted to. But he deserves to know, Lyra. He's been risking his neck for us. For you."

"I know that," I said firmly. "And I will tell him. Soon."

Kate narrowed her eyes. "Soon as in?"

"Give me three days," I said. "I swear I'll tell him myself. Keto should hear it from me, not from someone else. That's only fair."

Kira studied me for a long moment. Then she nodded. "Three days. That's the deadline. If you don't, we will."

"Deal," I said.

Kate smirked. "Can’t wait to see his face."

I rolled my eyes but didn’t argue.

The truth was, I hadn’t told Keto not because I wanted to keep it secret, but because I didn’t know how. Keto had always been protective, and I knew he felt something for me.

Kira stood up from the bed and stretched. "We should head to the meeting. Orion doesn't like waiting."

Kate stood as well, grabbing a piece of bread from her plate. "Then let’s not keep our lovely alpha waiting."

I laughed, but my stomach tightened with nerves.

We headed out of the room together. For now, the air was light, our laughter soft. But we knew we were in the middle of a war.

"I don't think we're late, this is just approximately one hour," I said as we headed downstairs.

Chapter 137

Lyra's POV

The hall in Orion's mansion had always struck me as a little too formal for our wild kind.

High ceilings, golden chandeliers, it gave it an air of ancient power. But today, it was more than just a room. It was a war chamber.

The round table had been polished to a shine. Orion sat at the head, his expression unreadable but sharp as always.

Keto was beside him, silent and alert. On Orion's other side were four werewolves I didn't recognize, strong, older, and clearly from high-ranking lines.

Kira, Kate, and I slipped into seats across from them. I could feel the shift in energy the moment we sat down. Eyes turned to us, especially me.

Orion didn't waste time.

"First," he began, voice steady, commanding, "I want to thank those who kept the pack intact while I was away. And those who took the initiative to come find and rescue Ravenna and me."

He glanced around the table, nodding slowly.

"But there will be no time for celebrations tonight," he continued. "No wine, no feast. We're at a critical season. Our enemies are moving faster than we anticipated. And as the Lead Alpha of the Western Region, it falls on me to respond quickly and decisively."

Silence fell. The kind that made your breath catch.

"Once again," he said, his eyes narrowing, "I have been betrayed."

I knew what was coming next, but hearing him say it still twisted something inside me.

"It was not my brother this time, we dealt with him. This betrayal came from a different angle. A quieter one. A woman we considered family."

My stomach clenched.

"Ruth," Orion said clearly. "Ravenna's stepmother."

A few murmurs rippled around the table. Keto didn't react. Kate, beside me, exhaled sharply.

Orion went on. "She sold us out. She gave our location to the enemy. She wanted us dead."

The words echoed.

My jaw tightened. I should've known Orion would address her case, but I couldn't help but feel the knots twisting in my chest as he talked about her.

"For that," Orion said, pushing forward in his chair, "she will pay."

He paused, letting the words land. "You all remember what happened to my brother. I didn't spare him. And I will not spare her either."

My heart pounded. This wasn't just about vengeance. This was about power, about order, about fear.

Orion turned to Keto. "We'll need eyes on her within the next twenty-four hours. I want her location. I want her allies. I want to know who's helping her, where she's sleeping, who she's speaking with."

Keto nodded once, pulling out a notepad.

"Consider it done."

Orion looked back at the table. "We will strike fast, and we will strike hard. No mercy. No delays."

I glanced at Kate, whose lips were pressed together. Her brother was still missing, and yet here we were, already caught in another storm.

Kira leaned close and whispered to me, "It's about to get bloody."

She wasn't wrong.

Orion's gaze swept across the room, sharp and calculating. "Keto," he said firmly, "send men out now. I don't care if they have to fly helicopters or swim in rivers, bring Ruth to me today."

Keto gave a short nod and stood immediately, already pulling out his phone as he left the room to coordinate the mission.

Kate leaned forward, her expression cold and sharp. "Include Kevin in that order. They're working together. Ruth isn't pulling the strings alone."

Orion didn't hesitate. He turned slightly to address the room. "Bring me Kevin's head," he said, voice like steel. "But bring Ruth to me alive. I want to question her myself before I end her life."

The room went quiet for a second. Even the four pack wolves, whose names I still didn't know, stiffened a little at the weight in Orion's tone.

Kira folded her arms. "And after Ruth is gone? What happens to her pack?"

Orion looked to her, then to me. "I have the right to it. But I won't be taking it."

I tilted my head slightly.

“She will,” Orion said, locking eyes with me. “Ravenna. It was your father’s pack. Your birthright. And it’s time you take it back.”

My heart jumped. I hadn’t expected that. “I’m not sure I’m ready for that,” I said slowly.

“You don’t have to be ready,” Orion said. “You just have to be willing. The rest will come. You’ve faced worse than ruling a pack.”

Kira smirked. “He’s right. You survived Ladon, Ben etc. You’ve already proven your strength.”

Kate gave me a supportive nod. “We’ll be right behind you.”

I looked around the table, at Orion, Kira, Kate, and even the silent wolves watching with unreadable expressions.

Keto walked out of the hall, probably to carry out Orion's orders.

My chest rose and fell with a deep breath. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to rule.

Orion turned his attention to me. "How are you feeling since we came back from the island?"

I shifted in my seat, thinking. "Stronger," I said truthfully. "The bleeding through my nose has completely stopped. Whatever curse they lifted, it’s like I’ve been unshackled. But there's something else."

He raised an eyebrow. "What else?"

I hesitated. "A strange kind of hunger. Not just physical. It's deeper. Hard to explain."

Orion nodded slowly. "If you feel hungry, physically or otherwise, don't hesitate to ask for anything you need. Food, blood, magic, whatever it is. You're to be taken care of. Anything you want, you'll have."

Kira looked over at me, concerned but curious. "Is it a craving kind of hunger? Or like something inside you wants to be fed?"

I thought for a moment, chewing on the question. "A bit of both. It's not painful or uncontrollable. Just there. Persistent."

Before anyone could respond, Keto re-entered the hall, looking calm but purposeful.

"It's done," he said. "I've made the call. Our men are moving, helicopters are being dispatched. Ruth will be in custody before the day ends."

Orion nodded in satisfaction. "Good." Then he leaned forward again. "Now, onto the next matter."

We all sat up straighter.

"There's an Alpha from the south. He's challenged me. It's a death match. One week or less. Winner takes all."

"What does that mean exactly?" Kate asked.

"It means," Orion said coolly, "whoever wins has a permanent claim on Ravenna."

I stiffened.

Chapter 138

Lyra's POV

He looked at me, his tone softer. "It's archaic. Old laws. South packs still practice them. He's using that loophole to try and force a union."

Kira leaned forward. "You're saying if he wins, Ravenna becomes his?"

Orion's jaw clenched. "If he wins, yes. But he won't."

I looked at him. "You don't sound worried."

"I'm not," he said. "But I don't trust him to play fair either. That's why I'll be in training every day until the fight. Rigorous. You may not see much of me."

The room went quiet again.

Keto looked up. "Where will the fight take place?"

"Neutral ground. The Steel Ring in the Gray Hills. Seven nights from now, unless he pushes for sooner."

Kate frowned. "And if he brings backup? Tries to cheat?"

Orion smirked. "Let him. I'll be ready for anything."

I stared at him, my chest tightening. I wanted to protest, to argue that I wasn't some prize in a fight to the death. But the fire in Orion's eyes said he wasn't doing this for dominance. He was doing it for me.

And I couldn't stop him.

Kira placed her hand over mine under the table, her touch grounding me.

Just as Orion finished speaking about the challenge with the southern alpha, the room fell quiet for a moment. I noticed how his fingers drummed slowly against the table, a rhythm filled with tension. Then he looked at Kate.

"Now," he said, voice sharper, more focused. "About your brother."

Kate's expression tensed immediately, her spine straightening in her seat.

Orion turned to Keto. "What do we know?"

Keto leaned forward, hands clasped. "Not much. From what Kate told us, her brother was taken some days ago. There's no note, just demand for ransom. No supernatural traces, at least none that we've picked up. Which means..."

"Humans," Orion finished for him.

Kate nodded. "Yes. They're regular humans. Or at least they appear to be. But these people were trained. They knew how to move without being tracked."

I leaned in slightly. "Was your brother involved in anything dangerous? Something that could explain why he'd be targeted?"

Kate shook her head. "I don't know really. We haven't talked in a long time apart from that call he made. But from the little I can tell, he seems to be into drugs, and maybe he got into trouble with some gangsters somewhere, or maybe he's just playing a prank on me to get money out of me. I honestly can't say for sure."

Orion exhaled through his nose. "Then he probably got abducted by someone related to gangs, human gangs."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Kate said softly, her voice catching just a bit. "That he dragged himself into something without meaning to."

"They knew who you were," Keto added. "Which means whoever took him knows about your occupation. Which makes them ten times more dangerous."

Kira chimed in. "Could it be Ruth again? Or Kevin? Maybe they're trying to split our focus. Hit us from multiple directions."

Orion ran a hand down his face. "It's possible. But we can't assume. If humans are involved, we tread differently."

I glanced at Kate, who had gone quiet, her hands folded tightly in her lap. She looked angry more than scared.

"We'll get him back," I said, hoping to offer something of comfort. "We have enough strength in this room to tear through the city if we have to."

"No," Orion said, surprising me. "We're not tearing through anything yet. Not until we know who we're dealing with. We make one wrong move, and her brother dies."

Kate swallowed. "So what do we do then? Sit back? Wait for them to contact me? That could take days."

"No. We investigate. Quietly," Orion said. "We start with the city cameras. Keto, I want you to talk to the people at Surveillance Bureau. We need any footage from the last seven days. Anything around the school. Around his apartment. Trace his last known location."

Keto nodded. "On it."

"Kira," Orion continued, "I want you to get in touch with your tech guy. What's his name again?"

"Max," she replied.

"Right. Tell Max to tap into phone records, GPS signals, anything that might give us a hint. I want every shadow, every whisper. And do it all under the radar. If humans took him, we don't want to scare them into doing something stupid."

Kira stood a bit straighter. "You got it."

Then Orion turned to Kate again. "Tell me everything about your brother. His daily routine, friends, students. Everything. No detail is too small. I want to know what kind of toothpaste he uses."

Kate managed a small smile. "Alright. I can do that."

"Good."

I was impressed. Orion had a way of snapping into leadership mode like flicking a switch.

It was easy to forget sometimes, with how casual he could be, that he wasn't just the lead alpha of the west, he was a tactician.

Kate rubbed her eyes and leaned back. "Thank you. All of you. I didn't think anyone would care this much."

"Of course we care," I said.

"You're one of us," Kira added. "Family, remember?"

Orion gave a firm nod. "No one gets left behind. Not on my watch."

There was a pause. A quiet one. Heavy with plans and unspoken threats.

Then Orion stood. "That concludes the meeting for now. Keto, start the investigation. Kira, find Max. The rest of you, get some food and rest. We might be leaving by dawn tomorrow if we find anything."

Everyone stood slowly, the scraping of chairs the only sound.

As we stepped out of the room, I looked at Kate again. Her eyes were steel, her mouth set in a firm line.

"Kate," Orion called for her again.

She turned to face him. "Yes?" she answered.

"Just in case those tech guys are unable to find him within 5hours, then we'd go for plan B."

"What's plan B?" I asked, my tone urgent.

"I'm going to need any clothes of his that you can get your hands on, and I'll have my trackers track his location."

Chapter 139

Lyra's POV

Orion leaned back in his seat and stretched slightly, the tension in the room finally beginning to fade.

“I’ll be in my study,” he said. “If anyone needs me.”

I blinked and turned to look at him. “You have a study?”

He arched an eyebrow, slightly entertained. "Yes. Not as you probably assume, I actually read."

I inclined my head. "I just never thought you were the type to study."

He regarded me with a knowing look. "Every great leader has to be a student of books. That's what my father used to say.

With that, he stood up and began to make his way toward the sweeping staircase which curved upward to the second floor. We all got up and watched as he ascended, his broad shoulders vanishing into the shadows of the hall.

There was quiet, until Kate let out a sigh and slumped back against the chair. "You have no concept of how it feels to have someone like Orion finally care about my brother. That alone is worth more than I can tell you."

"You should wait until we find him," I told her quietly. "And then we can celebrate.".

Kira, who was still bent over the table, gazed up. "If Orion's on the list, he'll be found. That's the sort of man he is."

Kate nodded, reluctantly, and her eyes filled with tears.

Kira continued, "Do you have something of your brother? Something like a shirt or something? Something with his scent on it?

Kate's expression became stern. "Yes, as a matter of fact. But not here. It's in my apartment, the one I was staying at before I went to Orion's mansion."

Kira's eyebrow went up. "We should go get it. In case the trackers might use it. Makes their job easier."

Kate frowned. "It's past eight. It'll take us two hours to get there."

I stood up and stretched. "Then we'd better rush.".

Kira rose from the table, grabbing her jacket off the chair back. "I'll go get the car keys from one of the standby drivers."

Kate pinched up her nose. "Make it the key only. I don't want any driver accompanying you."

Kira grinned mischievously. "Trust me. I've got this."

She disappeared down the corridor, and I turned to face the bar. The glint of wine bottles drew my eye, and something within me yearned for that burning, subtle warmth.

"Wine?" I asked.

Kate shrugged. "We might need it. Bring a bottle."

I required no urging. I picked up the dark red merlot, opened it slickly, and poured a glass.

"You're not waiting any longer than you have to," Kate laughed.

"Ready to fight," I answered, holding out the glass in mock salute before setting it down quickly. I then grasped the bottle and turned to her. "Ready."

Just then, Kira returned, spinning the keys around her finger. "Got it. No questions asked. Keto already tracked the group that ambushed Ruth, so it's just us girls on this one."

Kate grinned. "Girls' night out. Sort of."

I hesitated. "Wait, does Orion know we're going out?"

Kira leaned against the door, fingers on the handle. "Would you like to tell him?"

I hesitated for a moment. He'd definitely object. Maybe even try to send an escort or instruct us to stay behind.

"I don't think we should," I said finally. "He'd probably send a whole damn battalion."

"Right," Kira agreed. "In and out. Clean."

Kate pulled on her jacket. "Well, let's go."

We got it done quickly. By the time we came outside, the estate was darkened beneath the night sky.

A black SUV was already parked, one of their unmarked ones they used for covert operations.

Kira buckled into the driver's seat with confidence, Kate into the front seat, and I into the back seat beside the wine bottle.

The motor purred to life and we were underway soon, the tires rolling over gravel before we reached the open road.

No one said anything for a few moments. The hum of the car, the passing streetlights, and the dark forms of the trees blurring by creating an unsteady peace.

I leaned against the window and looked out into the night. I was lost in thought, thinking of Ruth. I could feel the ache of her betrayal still heavy in my chest. This woman had been Ravenna's people, or my people now. She is a cold one, no doubt, but even so, the thought of killing her did not sit right with me.

Kate spoke first, breaking the silence. "I haven't been back to my apartment in weeks."

"Did you leave it the way it was?" I asked, not looking away from the window.

"Pretty much. I didn't think I'd be here with Orion this long. Or that all of this would happen."

"Do you think your brother left anything behind there?" Kira asked.

Kate shook her head. "To be honest, I haven't talked to him in years. We talk sometimes, but that's as far as it goes."

My stomach knotted.

Did you report it to the police?" Kira asked.

Kate rolled her eyes. "Oh, of course I did. And you know what? They told me to wait forty-eight hours. Like all the other clichés."

"Humans," Kira muttered under her breath.

I picked up on the acid in her voice.

It took me a moment, then I asked, "What's your brother like?

Kate smiled faintly. "Smart. Too smart, sometimes. Always had an opinion. Enjoyed puzzles, games, those creepy detective shows. Had this annoying habit of solving them before the show was over."

"Sounds like Keto," I told her.

Kate chuckled. "I used to think they would get along. If they ever met."

"They still could," I murmured.

She didn't answer, but I could see the wish flash behind her eyes in the rearview mirror.

Kira glanced at her GPS. "As long as traffic stays this bad, we'll get there in an hour and forty minutes."

"Not bad," I said. "Have enough time to go get the shirt and be back before midnight."

"Let's just hope Ruth hasn't hired someone to tail us," Kira complained.

I tightened my grip on the wine bottle. "She wouldn't dare."

Kate wasn't so optimistic. "She's dared worse."

Chapter 140

Lyra's POV

We rode in silence for another hour.

Somewhere along the line, Kira turned on the radio, letting the soft hum of music bleed into the silence. It was some slow, haunting melody with otherworldly vocals. It suited the moment.

Do you really think we'll be able to stop Ladon?"
Kate gulped.

The simple mention of the name flipped my stomach. "We have to," I said.

Kira turned to look at me in the mirror. "We'll find the artifacts. And when we do, we perform the ritual. Harness the monster, then destroy it."

"Assuming that we're not digested first," Kate said harshly.

I didn't have a more constructive response to that.

My mind went back to the snake. To its huge heads, to the fact that it looked at me like I was lunch. To the manner in which it talked, like we were pals. Like I was a special pawn in a game and I did not even know that I was playing.

"We are not going to die," I said firmly. "We have come too far."

Kate agreed. "You're right."

Kira half-smiled. "Well, at least if we do die, we've got wine."

I passed the bottle on and watched as she took a quick swallow before handing it over to Kate.

"To not dying," Kate said, tilting the bottle slightly before she drank.

"To not dying," we repeated, close enough to being in harmony.

We were scarcely twenty minutes away from Kate's apartment when something unexpected occurred. On the road ahead of us, there were red and blue flashing lights of police cars.

It was a checkpoint.

Kira reduced speed in the car as soon as she spotted this. "What the heck?"

I leaned forward, my heart skipping a beat. Police officers were in full numbers, waving flashlights, opening car boots, and questioning drivers.

One of the officers had even yanked a man from his vehicle. Another signaled a couple through after checking their luggage.

Kate fidgeted uncomfortably in the passenger seat. "This is not right."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, moving my eyes from her to the string of vehicles in front of us.

"Police never patrol these kinds of areas. Ever. Something's off."

I frowned. "Should we turn back?"

Kate slowly shook her head. "No. Don't worry. I'll go find out what's happening."

"Don't, Kate, wait-" I said.

But she was already turning for the door and flinging it open before I could get the words together. She closed the door with a firm click, moving quickly and intentionally toward the next nearest officer.

Kira sat and observed her from the windshield. "She's just questioning, I'm sure."

I crossed my arms. "I have a feeling whatever we're about to hear won't be good."

The cars ahead of us moved slowly, and soon enough, it was our turn. One of the officers gestured for us to pull to the side. Kira complied, rolling the car to a smooth stop.

"Pop the trunk," the officer ordered.

Kira nodded courteously and did this. The trunk clicked softly open.

The officer moved back, flashlight poised, shining for an instant into our duffel bags. A pause.

Then he moved forward and nodded. "You're clear. You can go."

Kira thanked him as Kate reemerged at the car. She dove rapidly into the car and slammed the door shut.

"Drive," she said.

Kira didn't require encouragement twice. The SUV picked up speed and melted away from the checkpoint.

"What did you find out?" I asked, centering my attention on her.

Kate's face was clenched, jaw locked. "They are investigating multiple homicides. Multiple bodies were found, all of which were brutally murdered. No witnesses, no suspects."

My mouth became dry. "How many bodies?"

"Seven. All disposed of together in one place like a message."

A chill ran up my spine.

"They have no clue who did it yet," Kate continued. "They're taking tips."

Kira kept her eyes on the road. "That's terrible. But it is probably some human thing. Gang or serial killer or something. The police will take care of it."

Kate shook her head. "I just hope it's not werewolves or witches. The last thing we need is more suspicion."

I slowly exhaled, the fear settling upon me like weight. "I'm afraid that it might involve something like that."

They both stared at me.

"Ladon," I panted. "We figured it exploded. What if it didn't kill it? What if it survived the explosion and it's feeding again?"

Kira furrowed her face. "You think the corpses got eaten?"

"No," I shook my head. "But the coincidence... it's too good. What if it's someone who's in league with Ladon? A witch, perhaps. Or some evil force attempting to remove us from him while he heals."

Kate chewed on her lip. "That would explain the mutilation. The officer mentioned the bodies didn't seem to have been just killed. They were. torn up."

"Shit," Kira whispered.

The SUV fell silent once more. No one among us wished to say out loud the worst possibilities swirling in our minds.

I gazed out the window once more.

Kate broke the silence. "We'll steal the shirt, we'll get out, and we'll not do something stupid or crazy. Deal?"
"Deal," Kira and I said together.

But in the back of my mind was a horrible thought lurking in the shadows: whatever killed those corpses out there wasn't done.

There was little to be said for any of us once Kate told us the gruesome news of the corpse bodies.

The possibility that it might involve witches or werewolves would not let up.

It lingered in the back of my mind like a lodged splinter, digging further with every mile we drove.

Kate eventually spoke up. "My place is three blocks from here."

"Is someone home?" Kira asked, slowing down.

Kate shook her head. "No. I haven't been there in a long time. I just kept paying the rent for when I might need some place safe to hide. I guess today's the day."

When we got to her apartment complex, Kira pulled over a block down the street, just in case.

Kate led us up the stairs to the third floor.

She pulled a key out of her pocket and unlocked the door.

The apartment was cold and dark but otherwise tidy.

We entered cautiously. Kate flipped on the light, and a tastefully decorated living room with muted colors lit up.

Kira and I stood awkwardly at the door as Kate proceeded down the hall.

Kate returned a few minutes later with an armload of a box. She dumped it on the coffee table and opened it. It was filled with pieces of clothing, her brother's most of all. She dipped her hand in and pulled out a dark blue hoodie and handed it to Kira.

"This one," she said. "He used to wear it every day. If the trackers can use a scent, this is the strongest one."

Kira took it and smelled it for an instant before she nodded. "Yeah. This will do."

"Thank you," I breathed.

Kate smiled tiredly. "If this brings him back, it's worth it."

Chapter 141

Lyra's POV

Kira’s phone began ringing, its shrill sound slicing through the tense silence that had settled between us.

She glanced at the screen, and her expression tightened.

"It’s Orion," she muttered, then quickly raised a finger. "Keep quiet, both of you."

She answered and placed the call on loudspeaker. Orion's voice came through, clear and direct.

"Kira, I was just told you all left the house. Where did you go?"

Kira kept her tone calm. "Yes, Alpha, we came to pick up some of Kate’s brother’s clothes. The trackers might need them to get a proper scent trail."

There was a brief pause. Then Orion said, "That’s fine. But hurry up. I just got another report, there have been several killings across the outer districts."

Kira and I exchanged glances. "Yes," she said. "We passed a checkpoint. Police are already investigating."

"If anything strange happens," Orion said firmly, "if you see anything out of place, don’t hesitate to call me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, alpha," she replied.

The line went dead. Kira put the phone down and sighed.

"We need to leave soon," I said, standing, then I turned to Kate. "Grab more than just your brother's clothes. Pack anything else you think you'll need. For all we know, we might not be able to return here for a while."

Kate nodded without argument and disappeared into her bedroom.

Left alone in the living room, Kira turned to me. "You okay?"

I gave her a faint smile. "I'm fine."

She tilted her head, studying me. "How do you feel about the whole Ruth situation? Orion's order to capture Ruth."

I exhaled slowly, lowering myself onto the armrest of the sofa. "I'm trying really hard not to think about it."

Kira gave a dry laugh. "That makes two of us."

"Orion didn't flinch when Ben was executed," I said quietly. "I watched him. He didn't look away, didn't blink. It was like he had already made peace with it."

"That's what alphas do, Lyra, they don't have the luxury of flinching."

"Yeah. Well, neither do I anymore." I looked down at my hands, fingers twitching slightly. "I actually feel for Ravenna. That part of me, that history, but I'm Lyra. I don't feel it as much, just enough to understand the pain."

"Something else is bothering me," I added, my voice low.

Kira nodded slowly. "So what's bothering you more than Ruth's execution?"

I opened my mouth to answer her, but before the words could form, we heard footsteps returning.

Kate appeared from the hallway, dragging a small suitcase behind her. "Alright, I'm ready."

The moment passed. I shut my thoughts away, locked the doubt and fear in the back of my mind, and stood up.

"Let's get out of here."

Kira grabbed the car keys again. Kate followed behind, casting one last look over her shoulder as she locked the door to her apartment. We didn't speak much as we walked back to the vehicle. The streets were still eerily quiet, the earlier mention of killings hanging over our heads like an invisible cloud.

We piled into the car, and Kira pulled out of the driveway, tires crunching softly against the gravel.

I sat back, eyes flicking to the side mirror as the building disappeared into the distance.

As we drove, I kept glancing at Kate's bag. The contents inside it weren't just clothes or belongings. They were a lifeline, a way to find her brother and maybe, if the gods were merciful, a clue to stopping whatever darkness had begun to seep across the region.

Kira broke the silence. "You two mind if I stop for gas real quick?"

"Go ahead," I said. "We don't want to run out halfway back."

The nearest gas station was a few minutes away. We pulled in, and Kira immediately hopped out to attend the pump. I stayed back in the car with Kate.

Do you think they'll find him?" she whispered into my ear.

I turned to look at her. "Yes. Orion will not rest until he does."

"It's been days," she said; "I try not to think of the worst, but sometimes..."

I reached and gently took her hand in mine. "Don't go there, Kate. Just hang in there a little longer."

She nodded, trembling lips barely concealing her sorrow.

Back on the road, it was Kira driving, and she drove really fast.

Had we gone halfway back to the estate, Kira slammed her brakes on.

The whine of tires slashing the asphalt threw me forward against the seatbelt, and I, clutching at the dashboard, I blinked at the sight of whatever it was that had brought her to that sudden halt.

"Oh God," I whispered, heart slamming.

There, by the old bridge, three vehicles were crashing into each other like tin cans. One of them was still burning, thick smoke billowing into the sky.

Kate was already undoing her seatbelt. "Call an ambulance," she ordered, swinging open her door before I could stop her.

To Kira, I said, "Call 911, right now."

Kira had already pulled out her phone. "On it."

I hitched my way outside and chased after Kate, my boots rumbling on the gravel. The closer we got, the more my breathing seemed to hitch.

Going eyeball to eyeball with the wreckage was a sickening sight: twisted metal along with broken glass swirling around the ground.

Kate looked around, checking each vehicle as best she could, pale and tense. "What the hell happened here?"

"I don't know." I looked in through one of the car doors, cringing at the powerful stench. "Are there any survivors?"

She went on to examine the next vehicle. Then she slowly shook her head. "No signs of anyone. No bodies. No injuries. Nothing."

"That's strange," I grumbled. "Even if the fire burned them, we should still be able to see some bones or ashes."

"I don't think the fire got to them," said Kate.

The fire within the car crackled ominously, and the heat prickled against my skin; this atmosphere set that horrid chill crawling up my spine.

"Do you think they made it out?" Kate asked.

I shook my head. "I doubt it. But we should leave. Now. Whatever happened here doesn’t feel natural."

Chapter 142

Lyra's POV

She nodded, and we both turned and hurried back to the car.

Kira was still on the phone, her voice sharp but controlled. "Yes, three vehicles, I can't say much about the casualties, but yes. We're on the main road before the bridge..."

She ended the call just as we slid back into our seats. "They're sending emergency teams. Should be here in five."

"There's no one there," Kate said. "No dead, no injured, just nothing."

Kira blinked. "Are you serious?"

We both nodded.

"Shit," she muttered, then started the engine. This time, she didn't drive slowly.

We sped the rest of the way home in silence, each of us too shaken to talk.

When we arrived at Orion's estate, the helicopter Keto had taken earlier was already returning, its blades thudding loudly in the sky above the mansion.

We parked and rushed inside. The tension in my body hadn't eased. I still felt that same eerie chill I had at the crash site.

Inside the mansion, we found Orion in the living room with four werewolves. Their posture was military-sharp. Trackers. No doubt.

"You're back," Orion said, standing up. His gaze swept over us, lingering on Kate. "Give the trackers your brother's clothing."

Kate dug into the bag she had retrieved from her apartment and handed over a tightly sealed ziplock containing a shirt. The scent would help them track him.

"Find him," Orion ordered. "Don't rest until you do."

The trackers nodded in unison. "Yes, Alpha."

Then they turned and left without a word.

Orion exhaled. "None of the CCTV cameras have provided any useful footage. Whoever took him was smart."

Kate nodded. "Thank you for doing this."

He gave her a short nod, just as Keto walked in through the back entrance, dust on his boots and frustration on his face.

"What happened?" Orion asked, his tone urgent.

Keto wiped his brow. "We couldn't get her. There's no sign of Ruth. And I didn't want to press the pack with questions, didn't want to raise suspicions."

"You think they're hiding her?" he asked, eyes narrowing.

Keto shook his head. "No. She's not there. That much I'm sure of."

I frowned. "What about Kevin? Was he around? Did you see him?"

Keto glanced at me. "Also gone. Wherever Ruth went, she took him with her."

A cold realization settled into my stomach. "She's plotting something," I said softly.

Everyone turned to look at me.

"Ruth doesn't run unless she has a plan. If she's not at her estate, it means she's executing something. We need to figure out what it is before it's too late."

Orion nodded grimly. "And we will. But first, let's talk about something urgent. The trackers will find Kate's brother. Then we focus on Ruth."

We all sat down, open to listening to the urgent matter Orion wanted to talk about.

"There have been reports of several killings around the districts. I believe the Serpent might be responsible for the deaths," Orion said, his voice calm, but laced with that hard edge that meant he was thinking too fast.

The room stilled. Even the fire in the fireplace seemed to pause for breath.

Kira turned to him sharply, and Kate's eyes widened.

I swallowed. "Ladon? The name of the serpent is Ladon. You think it's behind the killings?"

Orion gave a short nod. "The kind of savagery reported, the number of dead with no clue left behind... it doesn't feel human. It doesn't feel natural."

Kate frowned. "But why would Ladon be killing random people? What does it gain from that?"

Orion leaned back in his chair. "Fear. Chaos. Distraction. Or maybe it feeds. I don't know."

Keto folded his arms. "Do you want us to start hunting it down?"

Orion looked up at him, and his expression darkened. "No. That serpent is the most sophisticated, calculating creature I've ever encountered. If we go after it, it learns about us. It learns how we move, how we strike, and how we think."

I shifted in my seat. "Then what do we do? Just wait?"

"We prepare," he said. "We figure out how to kill it. And when it comes to us, and it will, we'll be ready."

"But we can't just let it roam about killing innocent people," Kira protested. "We all know that serpent is here because of us."

"We have no choice, we have to stay low until we figure out a way to deal with it for good."

Kira raised her hand slightly, as if in a classroom. "Actually, we've found something. A lead on how to kill it."

All eyes turned to her. Even Keto seemed surprised.

Orion straightened, interest sparking in his eyes. "Go on."

Kira took a breath. "We found an old book on mystical creatures forged through witchcraft. There's a section on Ladon. It details a ritual called the Ride of Death. That's supposedly the only way to tame and eventually kill it."

"Tame it first?" Orion repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes. It can't be killed until it's tamed. That's how it's described in the book. And to tame it, you need three things: the blood of a virgin, a moonstone, and the head of an alpha."

Silence dropped like an iron weight.

"The head of an alpha?" Orion's voice was quiet.

Kira nodded. "Yes. But not just any head. It has to be one taken through a sacrifice, killed specifically for the ritual."

I cleared my throat. "We're not volunteering any of our alphas."

"Of course not," Kira said. "But we do have rivals. Alphas that have threatened our borders. Orion could claim it in combat, legally and cleanly."

Orion looked away, jaw tight. I could almost see the thoughts storming behind his eyes.

"What about the other two items?" Keto asked.

"We don't have them yet," Kira replied. "But we'll search. The moonstone might be easier. The blood, that's going to be delicate."

Orion turned back to Keto. "Start getting people on it. Quietly. Discreetly. No public movement. I want the moonstone found, and I want eyes on every rival pack's alpha. Especially those who've crossed me before."

Keto nodded. "I'll put together a team."

I couldn't stop thinking about what this meant. Killing a rival alpha was one thing. But using their head in a blood ritual?

It was madness. Dark, ancient madness.

And yet, it was our only way forward.

Orion looked at me, as if sensing my worry. "If there's another way, we'll find it. But we need to be ready. That thing, it's not done with us."

Kate shivered. "Let's just make sure we're done with it before it grows more heads."

"Or seven," Kira muttered.

I swallowed hard. "I'm afraid it already has seven heads."

I could see Orion's eyes widen in shock as he repeated the words, "Seven heads?"

Chapter 143

Lyra's POV

"Yes, it probably has seven heads now," I said quietly, letting the weight of my words settle over the room.

Keto and Kate stared at me like I had just announced the apocalypse.

Kira closed the book slowly and nodded, confirming it. "According to the text I read, when Ladon's heads are cut off, more grow in their place. One cut, two heads grow. Two cut, three grow. Three cuts, seven grow. If those explosives affected its heads, then we may be dealing with seven-headed Ladon now."

Kate sucked in a breath. "This is way more difficult than I imagined."

Keto's brow furrowed. "How the hell are we supposed to deal with seven heads? Three nearly killed us."

I shook my head, taking a deep breath. "That's not even the worst part."

Orion narrowed his eyes at me. "Then what's worse than a seven-headed snake?"

I hesitated a moment, then met his gaze. "When it grows seven heads, it also develops the ability to fly."

For a second, no one said a word.

Then Keto let out a stunned curse under his breath. "You're saying we're dealing with something close to a damn dragon now? Apart from the fire-breathing part?"

"Exactly."

Orion stared at me. "Are you sure about this?"

I nodded slowly. "Absolutely. Kira saw it in the book. It was clear as day."

Orion ran a hand through his hair and let out a long breath. "Then we're in more danger than we thought. Keto, double your efforts to retrieve those items. The artifacts. Whatever we need to kill this thing. Get it done."

"Understood," Keto said, already pulling out his phone.

Orion turned toward the rest of us. "That will be all for tonight. I'm retiring. I need to think."

He gestured for a nearby maid. "Bring my dinner to my room."

"Yes, sir," she replied and disappeared down the hall.

Without another word, Orion exited the hall, his heavy steps echoing behind him.

I waited until he was out of earshot before turning to Keto. "We need to talk."

Keto gave me an apologetic look, already dialing a number on his phone. "I'm really sorry, Ravenna. I have to make some calls and get a few things in motion. It can't wait. We'll talk tomorrow, I promise."

"Alright," I said, even though it stung a bit.

"Goodnight," Keto added, then strode off.

As soon as he was gone, Kate turned to me, her voice low. "To be honest, Ravenna, I don't think now is the right time to tell Keto about your thing with Orion. There's too much going on."

I sighed, running my fingers through my hair. "Then, when is the right time? After Ladon eats us all alive? After another war breaks out?"

Kira raised a brow and looked between us. "Forget the right timing. There's no such thing anymore. Right now, we need rest. Let's go upstairs to your room."

She waved at one of the maids. "Bring our dinner up, please. To Lyra's room."

"Yes, ma'am," the maid replied, giving a nod.

My legs felt heavy, weighed down by a multitude of problems.

My head felt stuffed to the brim, heavy with thoughts.

When Ben, Kira, and I walked into the hallway, I could see the mix of concern and confusion on Ben's face. It was the first time I met with the war room, and I walked out with a power-hungry witch and the ghost of a dragon.

"I can get out of this one; this is your mess to solve now," Kira replied.

My room felt a little worse than the open space in the cabin, and I recall slumping on the couch as the others collapsed on the floor.

In my small sanctuary, I felt nowhere near as bad as I did before. The slumping sensation was so tiring, yet the only comfortable position to sink into.

"How do you think this is all going to end?" I remember Kira asking.

"I don't think we have even reached the climax," I replied.

As we all lay on the couch, I began to rethink the story of all of this. The voices of my friends began to merge, slowly turning down into nothing.

Finally letting out one last to all my thoughts, I shut my eyes and, with it, my mind, began to feel.

“Now listen, I understand not all of them are the same, but this time, I do think we could just toss this one into the mix,” Kira interjected.

“Oh no, I’m out,” both of my friends began shouting at once.

In the end, every one of my ideas were blocked off, yet somehow the blend was worse than the alternative when I first dozed off.

Kate stole a look at me. “You don’t like the idea?”

I was about to speak, but a knock on the door interrupted me.

With all the trays of food they carried, the smell itself awakened our senses. Roast meat, vegetables, rice, and, finally, a bottle of wine mingled in the air.

“Dinner, ladies,” said one of the maids as they set the trays down on the table.

“Thank you,” Kira said, already on her feet to help set the table.

Kate smiled brightly as she pointed out, “Can you believe? With all we have been through, we still have an appetite for food!”

I gave a soft chuckle. “Maybe we've all gone insane.”

All of us gave in to our appetites, seizing the food as a distraction from the impending doom. Kate had just grabbed a chicken thigh between her teeth and was groaning in satisfaction.

“Oh, God, that's good.”

Kira said with a wicked grin. “It's the kind of dinner that you'd remember in the good times-well, at least until your flying serpent comes for your face.”

Kate took her fingers and cleaned them with a napkin before asking me again, “What were you about to say before dinner came crashing in?”

I hesitated. “That witch, I don't know if we should ever trust her again.”

“Why's that?” Kate asked.

“There was something strange about her. She didn't help us because she wanted to. She had her own reasons. If we call her again, we're probably walking right into another deal that'll cost us more than we’re willing to pay.”

Kira tapped her fork against her plate thoughtfully. “You’re not wrong. Witches don’t give without expecting something in return. And with the oath you and Orion unknowingly made.”

Kate nodded slowly. “You’re right. We’d have to be careful. Maybe we don’t bring her in unless it’s a last resort.”

“Exactly,” I said. “We don’t even know the full consequences of that oath yet. What if bringing another witch comes with another oath?"

We fell silent again, the clinking of cutlery the only sound in the room.

“You think Ruth is working with the witches?” Kira asked after a moment.

Kate glanced at her. “Possibly. If she was willing to sell us out, what’s stopping her from forming an alliance with them?”

“She’s dangerous,” I muttered. “Smart and cruel. She’ll keep playing this game until she wins or we stop her.”

“I say we stop her,” Kira said firmly. “Hard.”

Kate raised her glass. “To stopping Ruth.”

We all raised our glasses and clinked them together. “To stopping Ruth.”

The wine burned as it went down, but it also left a comforting warmth in my chest.

We sat back and continued eating, letting ourselves pretend for a few minutes that we weren’t part of a war with magical serpents and rogue witches.

Chapter 144

Ruth's POV

The gravel crunched under my heels as I stepped out of the car.

Kevin moved up to my side, eyeing the sprawling mansion as if it were some kind of lair, which was not entirely untrue.

"This place gives me the creeps," he muttered under his breath. "Are you sure the Alpha of the South will cooperate with us? He's known for killing any werewolf of the West on sight."

I didn't feel the need to slow down my pace. “It’s a risk worth taking,” I said, dryly and with certainty. Yet I never told him the truth: it was the only move left for us. Lucas, regardless of his reputation for brutality, was the one we needed if Orion's pack was going to fall.

At the gate, the security detail came forward, their stares sharp and evaluating.

One of them, tall, with a scar running from his temple down to his jaw, stopped us. “State your identity.”

“Ruth.” I let the name hang before going on, “Ruth Cole. And this is Kevin.”

They exchanged glances, muttered into their radios, and then one of them nodded.

“Wait in the security building while we confirm with the Alpha if he’ll see you.”

The room for waiting was small and smelled faintly of gun oil and leather.

Kevin and I sat across from each other in two stiff chairs, the hum of a fan the only sound.

His knee bounced restlessly. “I don’t feel good about this,” he said after a moment, his eyes meeting mine.

I gave him a cold smile. “Then try running away and see if you feel any better.”

His lips twisted. “It’s too late for me to run or turn back. And besides, I can’t leave you to handle this alone.”

I leaned back, watching him for a beat. Loyalty like that was useful, but dangerous if misplaced.

Before I could say anything, one of the security men returned. “The Alpha will see you now.”

We followed him to the front door of the mansion.

Inside, the scent of cigars mixed with an expensive scent of liquor would hit you right in the face.

A maid appeared silently with eyes cast downward and led us down a corridor lined with dark wood paneling, guiding us to the living room.

Alpha Lucas was sitting center stage in the room, shirtless, his broad chest covered in a mantle of snow-dark hair, white trousers hanging down his legs, the thick cigar almost falling from his loose hold between his fingers.

With fatefully sharp and calculating eyes, he had turned my way the moment I stepped in.

We sat on the opposite side, with not even the softest plush armchair to soften the tension weighing on my shoulders.

"Well, the only reason you're sitting in my home right now," Lucas said in a deep baritone voice bearing the very weight of unchallengeable authority, "is because my men told me you're Ravenna's stepmother."

"That's very true," I answered flatly.

His gaze dropped slighter as he asked, "How is Ravenna?"

I paused for about a brief moment. I didn't know his history with her; I certainly wasn't going to give away more than I actually had to. "She's fine."

He took as long a drag from his cigar as could be made, then slowly exhaled. "That's alright then." He leaned forward a bit, muscles twitching; "Why do you come to me?"

I would leave it hanging for a moment to let the phrase register correctly: "To have Orion's pack exterminated."

This did catch his attention, his brows raised; there was a slight tinge of delight for a fleeting moment: "Exterminated?" He murmured, tasting the word.

"Yes," I said. "Each and every one of them."

His glare, amber in color, never wavered as he weighed me in his mind, dissecting and trying to analyze every move. And with emphasis on every word, he slowly said, "And why," he asked, "would I help you with that?"

"Because you and I want the same thing," I replied. "Power. Territory. Freedom from the nuisance Orion's pack has become."

Lucas chuckled, low and dangerous. "Orion's pack doesn't concern me enough to go to war over. Unless." He trailed off, his gaze sharpening. "Unless there's something in it for me."

I leaned forward slightly. "Name it."

He stubbed out his cigar in the ashtray, his lips curling into something between a smirk and a threat. “Ravenna.”

The name hit like a whipcrack, but I didn’t flinch. My mind, however, was already racing.

“She’s not yours to give away,” I said carefully, my voice even.

“Then you can’t have my help,” he replied bluntly. “I don’t move my men for free. I don’t risk my territory without something worth the cost.” He leaned back, studying me with an infuriating calm. “Ravenna is worth the cost.”

Kevin shifted uncomfortably beside me, but I kept my focus on Lucas. “You want her alive, I presume.”

“Alive,” he confirmed, his smile widening, “and unbroken. She’s strong, dangerous. And she belongs here, with me.”

I didn’t respond immediately. I knew what kind of man Lucas was, the type who didn’t just take what he wanted, but made sure the taking left scars.

Handing Ravenna over to him would be delivering her into a cage she’d never escape. Not that I cared, though.

But Orion’s pack…

Lucas must have seen the calculation in my eyes because his smile turned sharper. “You’re thinking about it. That’s good. It means you understand how the world works. You give something, you get something.”

“What guarantee do I have,” I said slowly, “that you won’t just take her and leave me with nothing?”

“My word,” he said simply.

I gave a humorless laugh. “Your word doesn’t buy much.”

“Then you’ll have to decide how badly you want Orion’s pack destroyed,” he replied. “Because without me, you’ll be chipping away at a wall with a spoon. With me…” He gestured vaguely, as if the outcome was obvious. “With me, the wall comes down in a night.”

The silence stretched between us, heavy and suffocating.

Finally, I said, “I’ll consider your offer.”

Lucas inclined his head, a mockery of politeness. “Do that. But don’t take too long. Opportunities like this don’t wait forever.”

I stood, Kevin following suit. “We’ll be in touch,” I said.

Lucas’s smile lingered as he lit another cigar. “I’ll be waiting.”

As the maid led us back out toward the front doors, Kevin muttered under his breath, “You’re not actually going to give him Ravenna, are you?”

I didn’t answer. The truth was, I didn’t know yet.

If my plans for Ravenna and Orion went well, they both should be dead by now.

Chapter 145

Ruth's POV

As soon as Lucas's query regarding Ravenna escaped his mouth, I could feel my heart miss a beat. My throat constricted, and for an instant, I was about to betray myself.

How was I ever to tell him? That I had no idea where she was, that I'd last heard, she and Orion were overwhelmed by the devastation on that damned island I'd so carefully planned? That to my knowledge, they might already be dead?

No. I couldn't tell Lucas that, not when I still didn't know the extent of his relationship with her.

The chill of the morning air hit us as we emerged outside, and I finally let out the breath I'd been holding in my lungs.

We walked silently by the security hut and to the car. Kevin remained silent until we were in and the doors were shut behind us.

"Well?" he asked, the low tone sharpening just towards anger.

"He desires Ravenna, but I cannot give it to him," I explained bluntly, clasping the steering wheel though I hadn't even put the key in yet.

Kevin scowled. "That's a problem, Ruth. A big one."

"Oh, sure," I growled more rudely than I intended. I leaned back in my chair, rubbing my temples. "We don't even know that she's alive, and as far as Lucas is concerned, I've just promised to bring her to him."

"Why not just tell him that she's dead?"

"Because I don't know," I said to him, spinning to face his eyes. "And men like Lucas, they can detect a lie, Kevin. If I showed him a dead body when he'd been searching for a live one, he'd kill both our brains."

Kevin's face became tense. He turned away. "So what now?"

I took a deep breath. "Now we come up with another scheme to handle Lucas." I revved the engine, turning the key in the ignition. "We're heading out of this quadrant. We'll head east."

Kevin frowned. "East? Why?"

"To negotiate with Alpha Klaus."

Kevin's eyes sprang up. "The east Alpha? He's trouble. He's worse than Lucas.".

"Maybe," I said, backing the car off the curb. "But worst can happen, if it's directed in the right direction."

Kevin laughed sharply. "Or it'll kill us both."

"Everything about this is going to kill us," I snarled, staring out down the black road ahead of us. "But standing still is the quickest way to lose. If Lucas isn't playing without Ravenna, we'll find someone who is."

Kevin shook his head but grumbled no further. I could sense his unease radiating in the cramped space between us, but I didn't have the resources to soothe him, not when I was working on figuring out exactly how I was going to attack Klaus.

East was dangerous, yes. But only betrayal could a certain type of man speak. And now I needed an ally who would set a pack to flames without negotiating for a girl I couldn't provide.

My phone came to life, its blaring ring cutting through the air like a blade. I didn't even glance at the screen before picking it up.

"Hello?"

Luna Ruth," the voice of one of the members of my pack, slightly out of breath, as if he'd walked to reach me before phoning. "Keto came looking for you last night."

I held the wheel so tightly the leather groaned. Keto. "What for?"

He didn't say," the man replied.

"Did he come with Ravenna or Orion?" I sounded harsher than I'd intended to, but the question had to be asked. My heart tightened in that same old familiar way, half fright, half the tremor of something blacker.

"No, ma'am," he answered. "We picked up no sign of them."

I breathed slowly, tension creeping into my shoulders like lead. "Keep your eyes open," I instructed him. "If you see anything, anything at all, about them, you call me immediately."

"Yes, Luna."

I hung the phone back in the cup holder and started pacing things through in my mind.

Keto's appearance had not been an accident. He was fishing. And when someone like him was fishing, it was because they were looking for the kind of information that would cut you while you slept.

Kevin shifted in his seat, glancing at me sideways. "What was that about?"

I didn't answer right away. My eyes stayed on the road. I could feel him staring at me, anticipating.

And finally, I told him, "I'll be dropping you off in a minute."

He glared. "What? Why?"

"Because I need you to go home." My voice was dead, firm. "I have to be certain of something first."

He straightened further. ``Certain of what?"

"That Orion and Ravenna are dead."

Kevin's face twisted up. "You don't think they are?"

"I think," I said, my voice hardly audible, "that I don't do anything on faith. Not here. Not anymore. I need proof, Kevin. Proof I can see for myself."

He shook his head. "And you're going to expect me to just go into Orion's house? That's nuts. You remember how we got out of there."

"Not if you're smart." I met his stare, my eyes cold, measuring. "You know the terrain. You know the rhythms of his people. You go in, you take a look, you come out. Pure observation."

"And if they are alive?" His voice was softer now, filled with something not fear but close.

"Then we proceed with the plan," I told him bluntly. "But I'm not going to do anything to anybody until I have a definite notion of who is dead and who is alive."

He was silent for an instant, then made a sound of grim laughter. "You don't trust anybody at all, do you?"

"Trust," I said, "is a luxury for people who don't intend to live."

Kevin cleared his throat. "And then I check the mansion?"

You work for me," I told him. "All of it. Every whisper. Every shadow you see. If it sounds significant or not, if it concerns them, I want to hear about it."

He leaned back in his chair, drawing slow breaths. "You know, sometimes I think you don't even need me for this. You could send anyone.".

I smiled softly, but it wasn't sincere. "I could," I replied. "But someone else would do something foolish. And foolishness kills. You've demonstrated you can follow orders, Kevin. You know what's at stake."

He said nothing, but I could sense the impact of his glare.

Chapter 146

Lucas POV

I leaned back into the deep, leather couch in my study, the cigar between my fingers burning slowly.

My mind kept circling back to Ruth, the way she had walked into my mansion today, poised but calculated, every word dripping with caution.

She was the last person I expected to pay me a visit, but what was even more surprising than her visit was the fact that she wanted us to work together. She wanted me to attack her son-in-law's pack.

I didn't get where I am by missing what people try to hide.

"Cole," I called, my voice cutting through the stillness.

The door swung open, and my beta stepped in, his broad frame nearly blocking the light from the hallway.

Cole has been with me for years. Loyal. Efficient. Not easily rattled.

"Yes, Alpha? You called for me," he said, bowing his head slightly as a sign of respect.

I tapped ash into the crystal tray on the table beside me. "You're certain Ruth is Ravenna's stepmother? I still can't believe my eyes."

"Yes, Alpha. Without a doubt," Cole replied, his tone confident. "But, from what I've gathered, they're not exactly on good terms. I heard it was Ruth herself who handed Ravenna over to Orion."

I narrowed my eyes. “If she truly gave Ravenna away, then why is she hesitating to pledge her to me now? She knows the moment Orion is dead, Ravenna will be free to choose. What’s the point of stalling? I know she doesn't care one bit about Ravenna. In fact, to her, Ravenna is as good as dead."

Cole shifted his weight, his expression unreadable. “I can’t say for sure. Ruth sometimes is hard to understand from what I've gathered."

“She’s definitely hiding something,” I muttered, leaning forward, elbows on my knees, letting the weight of the thought sink in. “I could feel it. She was careful, too careful. Every time Orion’s name came close to her tongue, she pulled back. Did you notice that?”

Cole frowned slightly. “What do you mean, boss?”

“She never actually mentioned Orion,” I said, letting the words hang between us. “Not his name. Not him. She said ‘Orion’s pack’, like the pack was the real obstacle, not the Alpha himself.”

I sat back, replaying her voice in my head, every inflection, every deliberate pause. That’s something I’ve trained myself to do: take a person’s words apart until the truth crawls out from underneath.

Cole tilted his head. “What do you think it means? That she knows a way to handle Orion and remove him from the equation?"

“I'm not sure, but I think something’s going on that I’m not aware of,” I said slowly. “And it’s gnawing at me.”

Cole gave a humorless chuckle. “You sound like you care, Alpha.”

“I don’t give a damn about her schemes,” I replied sharply, cutting him off. “All I want is Ravenna. That’s the only reason I entertained Ruth at all.”

Cole smirked faintly. “Still obsessed with her?”

I turned my gaze to him, the kind of look that makes even my beta tread carefully. “Obsessed isn’t the word. Determined. She’s mine, Cole. Whether she knows it yet or not.”

“Right.” Cole straightened, folding his arms. “So where does Ruth fit into this?”

I tapped the end of my cigar against the tray again. “If she has a way to get Orion out of the picture before the tournament, I’m listening. But I don’t trust her. That woman reeks of ulterior motives.”

Cole didn’t look convinced. “I don’t think you should trust her at all. It could be a trap. If Ruth and Orion are on the same side…”

“Then they’re plotting something,” I finished for him. “Something big.”

The idea twisted in my mind, dark and sharp. It would explain her hesitation, her careful wording. It would explain why she came here at all instead of sending some pathetic messenger.

I rubbed my jaw thoughtfully. “If they’re working together, maybe they think they can lure me into some game. Maybe they believe they can control me.”

Cole gave a short laugh. “That’s a dangerous assumption for them to make.”

“Exactly,” I said, a grin tugging at the corner of my mouth. “Let them think they can outmaneuver me. I’ll play along, for now.”

Cole leaned in slightly. “So you’ll work with her?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. I’ll wait until after the tournament before I decide. That’ll tell me everything I need to know, where Orion stands, and where Ruth really belongs in all this.”

The thought of the tournament made my blood stir. The anticipation of a fight I'd been craving for years.

"Defeating Orion should be an easy task," I said with a confidence that wasn't for show. "He's strong, yes, but I've broken stronger."

Cole's brow furrowed. "Don't underestimate him, Alpha. Rumor is, he's got a witch assisting him."

I gave a deep, rumbling chuckle. "And? You think that scares me? Orion's not the only one with a witch by his side."

Cole's eyes narrowed slightly, but he didn't press the subject.

He knows better than to ask about the woman I keep in the shadows, the one whose magic has kept my enemies on the ground and my power intact.

I stood, stretching my shoulders, feeling the weight of command settle over me like armor.

"Keep an eye on Ruth. If she makes a move toward anyone apart from me, I want to know. If she speaks Orion's name, I want to know. And if she dares step foot in the south again without my invitation..." I let the sentence trail off, letting Cole fill in the rest.

"Yes, Alpha," Cole said, his tone as sharp as the order deserved.

"And lastly, I want you to send someone to remind Orion about the tournament. At least I can use that as an excuse to know what's going on with him."

"I'll do that, boss," Cole said.

I crushed the last ember of my cigar into the tray and turned toward the window.

Orion. Ruth. Ravenna.

They thought the tournament would decide the game. But I'm beginning to think of other ways.

Chapter 147

Lyra's POV

Morning sunlight slipped through the curtains, and my eyes fluttered open, my head still fuzzy from the long night.

Kate and Kira were curled up beside me, their breathing slow and even.

I smiled. They'd talked and talked throughout the whole previous night, sitting up, reminiscing about their childhoods and gossiping about the southern packs.

I'd thought they'd be gone by the time I'd slept, but by appearances, they hadn't. There was a pleasant thing about waking up and finding them still there.

I sat up slowly between them, not wanting to wake either of them. I snuck into the bathroom.

I went in and turned on the faucet, splashing cold water on my face to shock me out of sleep fog.

I brushed my teeth and showered hurriedly. I came out and discovered Kira waking, sitting up, and rubbing her eyes.

"Morning," she rasped, with the breath of one who has a sleep-dry throat.

"Morning," I smiled at her.

She blinked at me and tilted her head to the side. "Why did you not wake us when you woke up?"

"I did not know when you guys slept," I replied, shrugging. "You two were sleeping so soundly, and I did not want to wake you."

Kira smiled faintly. "We crashed about maybe an hour after you. Kate would not be quiet."

I found this amusing.

Kira stretched and swung her legs off the bed. “I’ll go freshen up in my room. Be right back.”

I nodded. She padded to the door, opened it, and disappeared into the hallway, the faint click of the latch closing behind her.

Almost immediately, Kate stirred. She blinked up at me, her hair messy but her eyes alert.

“You’re up early,” she said.

"No," I replied. "I woke up roughly half an hour ago." I was already dressed for the day. "Get cleaned up so we can go downstairs together. We might hear something."

Kate pouted her lip. She sucked in her bottom lip. "No need. Let's go downstairs first. I'll clean up afterwards."

Her voice was very loud, and it was no wonder. She'd been waiting for us to inform her of her brother.

"Alright," I told her. "Kira's in the process of getting dressed, would you like to wait for her?"

"No. Let's go." She withdrew her feet from the bed and put on her slippers.

We emerged from the room, the deserted corridor stretching on before us.

I wondered what Orion had been doing all morning.

I walked past one of the maids, and she greeted me. I inquired of her, "Is Orion awake?"

The maid nodded. "He has been up since three a.m., my lady. He is downstairs."

"Three?" I raised an eyebrow. That was early, even for him.

"What about Keto?" Kate asked.

The maid went on, "Master Keto just left like an hour ago."

Kate's eyes sparkled with curiosity, but she said nothing. I turned and looked at her, then waved for us to head downstairs.

When we were downstairs, what greeted us was. Well, so Orion.

He was there half-naked, sweat running down from his chest, muscles popping out as he pushed a set of weights onto his head.

His hair was wet, and the sound of his breathing pounded relentlessly through the air.

He caught sight of us when he turned and put down the last of the set, slamming the barbell onto the floor. He grabbed a bottle of water and leaned back to drink.

"Morning," he growled, looking at both of us.

"Morning," we replied.

"Sleep well?" he asked.

"Yes," we replied together.

He smiled faintly. "I have something to inform you, Kate."

Her entire body tensed, hope springing to her eyes. "My brother?"

Orion's lips twisted. "Yes. The trackers found him."

Kate gasped and moved a step forward.

"It seems that," Orion went on, "he'd gotten in with some drug Lords."

Kate covered her mouth with her hand.

"I've sent Keto to carry out the rescue mission," Orion replied, his voice level but not gentle. "And to ensure that there are no survivors remaining alive to speak of it."

Kate's eyes were brimming with tears of gratitude.

She didn't hesitate, but stepped in between them and flung her arms about him. "Thank you. Thank you ever so much."

Orion froze, and then his hand rose, resting on her back in fleeting contact. His gaze, however, said nothing.

I stood there rigid and watching them, a wondering tension in my chest.

I sensed Kate's desperation in the tight grip of her hold around Orion, arms around him as if she knew words were not enough to express her gratitude.

"Don't thank me yet," Orion replied. "Now we still have to get him home in one piece."

Kate nodded quickly. "I know... but thanks."

I simply stood there looking at them, smiling with my mouth. I didn't know Kate's brother, but the relief on her face was a joy to me.

Orion's gaze shifted to me. "And you, Ravenna? And you? Did you sleep well?"

"Yes," I replied. "We all did. Though you were awake at three?"

He gave a stiff nod. "Had work to do." He looked over his shoulder at Kate. "When Keto gets back, I'll explain everything to you. For now, you two eat and get some rest."

Kate and I had a look. My belly rumbled softly.

We emerged from the basement, upstairs.

As we entered the dining hall, Kira was already sitting at the table with her hands folded over a teacup. She smiled when she saw us.

"You went to Orion without me?" she teased.

Kate smiled. "We did not want to disturb you."

Kira raised an eyebrow but did not pursue further. "So? What did he say?"

Kate's smile became only broader. "They've located my brother."

Kira's cup gently rested on the saucer. "Wonderful! That's great news. When will he return?"

"This moment. Orion told me Keto's arranging it right now," replied Kate. "He should be back today."

Chapter 148

Lyra's POV

We sat down together, and the maids brought breakfast, warm bread, eggs, and slices of roasted meat. We didn't waste any time; we started eating.

We were halfway through breakfast when Kira spoke, her voice quiet but certain.

"I don't think Orion would want your brother to come here," she continued, staring over the rim of her teacup at Kate.

Kate's fork hesitated in mid-air. "Why not?"

Kira set down the cup. "He's not a werewolf. And Orion doesn't particularly like having human houseguests in his mansion."

Kate blinked and nodded slowly. "That's fine. I understand. My brother's safety is all I care about."

I tilted my head, intrigued. "Is he your brother?"

"Yes," Kate answered with a small smile. "Just me and him. I don't even know my dad. Our mom raised us by herself."

"Where is your mom now?" I asked softly.

Her smile faded. "She died three years ago."

There was a second of table quietness. I leaned over and squeezed her hand gently. She squeezed back, her look gentle but resolute.

I was halfway through my toast when Kira reached over.

"So, did you hear about Orion's fight?" she breathed, as if it were this massive secret.

Kate's eyes opened wide with surprise. "Fight? What fight?

Kira glared at me. "Against another alpha. His name is-

"Lucas," I replied offhand.

Her eyebrows shot up. "Wait, how did you know his name?"

I shrugged. "He came to Orion's birthday party. We talked a little, and he introduced himself."

Kira blinked, her face shocked. "You talked to him?"

"Yes," I replied, raising my eyebrow in surprise. "Why? Do you know him?

"Yeah, I recognize him," she replied slowly. "Everyone in the werewolf pack recognizes him. He's not a normal alpha. He's strong, very strong."

That interested me. "So, you believe Orion can defeat him?"

Kira looked down at her plate, then back at me. “To be honest. I’m not so sure. It’s going to be a tough fight. Lucas isn’t just powerful, he’s smart too. He doesn’t make reckless moves. If he’s challenging Orion.”

Kate frowned. “I hope nothing happens to our alpha.”

"Same here," Kira said, sighing. "The pack needs him. If something goes wrong." She left the sentence unfinished, but the threat hung between us like a cloud.

I leaned back in my chair, trying to picture Orion losing. It just didn't seem possible; he was so sure, so confident, but the way Kira said it made me nervous.

Kate pushed her plate aside a bit. "When is this fight?"

"Next full moon," Kira said. "That's when alphas would settle something like this. It's tradition. But it usually begins around the time of dusk."

Kate arched an eyebrow. "And what're they fighting about, some kind of personal grudge?"

Kira stopped. "Not exactly. To my knowledge, it is a question of dominance. Lucas has been at his game for long enough now. This was bound to happen sooner or later. He is merely using Ravenna as a pretext, but he wanted to test Orion all along."

Kate shook her head. "I still don't feel comfortable with it. I know that's the way they work, but it doesn't feel right to me. And if Lucas is as hard-nosed as you portray him to be"

"He is," Kira interrupted gently. "Trust me."

The discussion lapsed into silence again, the burden of what we'd just said hanging between us over the table.

I nudged the last mouthful of eggs, wondering if Orion was already toughening up to it.

"Do you think he's stressed?" I inquired.

Kira nodded. "Orion? He doesn't care. But that does not mean he isn't worried about it."

Kate rested her chin on her hand. "I wish we could help."

Kira smiled wanly. "Help? In an alpha challenge? That doesn't fly. It's one-on-one. No interference."

I frowned. "So, essentially a fight to the death?"

Kira looked at me. "Not always… but I think that this one is a fight to the death because you're involved. But sometimes the loser gives up and relinquishes power. Sometimes," her words lingered in the air, and she moved her head into a nod. "Sometimes it goes terribly wrong."

Kate looked across at the doorway. "I don't think Orion's even considering it at the moment. He was lifting weights as if nothing could ever touch."

Kira laughed. "That's him. Always thinking he's better than everyone."

She spoke as footsteps sounded from the hallway.

Orion arrived, obviously having washed, black hair still damp. But, rather than being topless, he was wearing a fitted black singlet that really highlighted his shoulders and arms.

He cast each of us a look before sitting at the head of the table.

"Morning," he said, with a lightness to his voice, as he picked up the water jug.

"Morning, Alpha," Kate and Kira said in unison. I simply nodded.

He topped his glass and took a sip of it before picking up a plate. "What are you three talking so somberly about?"

Kira shot me a quick glance before she replied, "Your battle with Lucas next week."

Orion's eyebrow shot up, but he did not stop filling his plate. "Ah. That."

Kate leaned in. "Ready for it?"

Orion tacked on a false smile. "I'm always ready."

"Lucas is powerful," Kira reminded him, watching his face.

"I know," Orion said brusquely, cutting into some meat. "But power doesn't matter."

I shook my head. "Do you actually believe you can defeat him?"

He glanced at me for a moment, then returned to eating. "I don't believe. I know."

Somehow, the tone in which he said it eased the knot in my stomach. There was no doubt, no uncertainty.

Kira sneered. "You're cocky."

"Confidence wins wars," Orion said, his tone level. "Fear loses them."

Kate gave me a look, then returned to him. "We only pray nothing happens to you."

Orion raised his head, his expression only slightly easing. "Nothing will happen to me."

For a moment, the room lightened.

I saw Kira look at him, as if she was searching for fissures in that wall of confidence.

Chapter 149

Lyra's POV

But I couldn't help but ask, "Do you know him well? Lucas?"

Orion's eyes flew towards me again, this time more harshly. "Well enough." He took a sip of water. "He likes to make a spectacle of it. Always has. But he seeks control. That's his weakness."

Kira tilted her head. "If you know his weakness, then maybe you do have an advantage."

"Maybe," Orion replied, but the intonation of his voice suggested that he was not actually going to answer anything else.

The room grew silent for a moment aside from the soft clinking of silverware.

I could see Kira glance between the two of us as if she felt some tension that had been left unspoken.

Kate cut across the silence. "Will you and Lucas be fighting on your own? Or will there be backup?

It will be one of the alphas," Orion said. "The tournament rules do not allow for interference. But that does not necessarily mean there won't be surprises."

"Surprises?" Kira echoed, furrowing her brow.

Orion looked down at his plate, cutting the meat on there. "There are alphas who do not obey the rules. That is all you need to know.".

I had understood that he was holding a great deal back. The manner in which he had spoken was in expectation of already believing something bad would happen.

Kira glanced at me, and I could see the consideration crossing her mind; this fight would be more dangerous than Orion was attempting to portray.

Kate took a bite of bread, then spoke softly, "What will happen to us if Lucas wins?"

The words tightened my stomach.

Orion looked at her, peacefully, not smiling. "He won't. But if he did, he'd get what I've got. That means my pack."

I hung up on that. My chest was tightening, though I had no reason for it to.

Kate's face grew grim. "And people."

Orion did not deny it. "Yes. People." His eyes locked with mine for a slight moment before returning to eating from the plate in front of him.

Kate wrapped her fingers around the mug. "Then all the harder to hope for you to win."

He nodded but, except that, his glance was drifting elsewhere, plotting some new plan that did not include us.

I felt the tension hanging there, so I decided to try to break through that. "Well, if you're so sure you're going to win, we should be celebrating."

Kira smiled faintly. "Good idea."

Orion raised one eyebrow. "Celebrate after victory, not before the battle."

His tone was level, but there was a subtle sharpness hidden therein, suggesting he believed tempting fate was foolish.

We returned to eating in a more subdued rhythm. Occasionally.

Kira had finally inquired, "When's the fight exactly? Next full moon?"

"Later," Orion had answered, his voice not allowing any further questions.

Orion took a call, glanced at the screen for a moment, and moved away from the table.

His usual calm, characteristic of him, was present, but I could feel the shift in his attitude as he stepped aside to attend to the call.

It was clear that whatever was on the other end of the call was important.

"Hmph, I don't understand," Kate complained, glancing over to see Orion walking back. "Orion is too cunning. If we really want to know anything about this battle or about Lucas, we can just go ask Keto. He would probably tell us everything without omitting even a single detail."

Kira glanced over at Kate, a faint smile on her lips. "That's true. Keto has no idea about restraint. He'd likely tell us the entire story, even things Orion's not ready to tell."

I smiled softly. "Yeah, Keto's the type of guy who wouldn't leave out a detail if you asked him to."

Kate's brow rose; she was clearly amused. "See? I knew you'd trust me."

We'll just wait for Orion to return," I said, glancing in the direction of the door he'd left from. "I'm sure he'll tell us whatever news there is. He's just not as forthcoming about himself as Keto is, that's all."

Kira nodded. "But Keto, he's an open book. Too much so sometimes."

The sound of the footsteps of Orion walking back to the table interrupted our conversation.

He returned to the table with a reassuring calm on his face.

I saw the fine tension in his jaw, as if whatever he'd been talking about on the phone had taken up all his concentration.

Orion came back to his chair, giving a second glance down the table. "Kate," he started, "Keto has successfully rescued your brother. He's safe and will wait to meet you."

Kate's face went red with the news, her hands clenching on her mug as if she couldn't believe it. "Really? He's okay?"

Orion nodded, his usual cool still present. "He's fine. I've had you see him in 30 minutes. I'll have a car pick you up."

The expression of relief on Kate's face was clear.

I had understood that she was trying her best to contain her happiness, but she could not help herself. I was also happy, and the weight was removed from both of our backs.

"That's terrific news!" I cried out, grinning with her. "Finally, your brother is safe."

Kira grinned too, though I could perceive that there was still worry in her eyes. "I'm happy for you, Kate. You've suffered much.".

Kate looked at us all, thanks in her eyes. "Thanks," she breathed, though her voice cracked a little. "I don't know what I'd have done without you all. Especially you, Orion."

Orion's expression softened for an instant, then hardened again into the cool, reserved commander he was always destined to be. "It's nothing. You're family, Kate. Nobody gets left behind."

Kate inhaled, her excitement at spilling. "When am I going to see him? I have to leave immediately."

Orion leaned in, his eyes unblinking. "In 30 minutes, you'll be on your way. I've had your brother evacuated from the country right after you visited him. He has to begin afresh, away from all this chaos. He'll be safe."

"Thanks," Kate said, tears of relief in her eyes. She hesitated and went on, "I don't know how to thank you."

"You don't need to," Orion said, his tone no-nonsense. "You're family. We do what needs to be done."

I hesitated a moment, then said, "I'd like to go with her."

"No, she goes alone," he spoke curtly.

Chapter 150

Lyra's POV

"Orion, I think it's a bit risky, though. With all that's been happening. I mean, Kate going by herself is one thing, but there are so many unexplained things lately. Who knows what might happen?"

Orion turned to me, his own face a mask. "She's not going alone," he answered curtly. "She'll be going alone to visit her brother, but she won't be going alone the way you're saying it."

Kate's eyes widened in bewilderment. "What are you even saying? If I'm not going with Kira or Lyra, then who am I going with?"

Orion leaned back in his chair, his gaze held steady upon her with quiet firmness. "I've had some of my men offer to ride with you, just to provide guard. You won't be alone, Kate. I'm just seeing to it that your brother isn't scared of any non-humans who may be out."

Kira's eyes widened in surprise, her initial concern eased somewhat. "So you're bringing people with her, but not someone who would frighten her brother?"

Orion nodded. "Right. He's human. We need to be cautious here."

Kate smiled, but replied a little cautiously.

“Thank you,” Kate said in return, “but I'm worried if this is safe. At least, it threatens me, correct? It's outside of my supernatural comfort zone. Far from being safe!”

Orion's expression softened a little. “You will be just fine, Kate; do not worry. We are prepared for this.”

I glanced over at Kira, and I could guess that she was interpreting Orion's attempts as keeping Kate and her brother safe.

“I'm just overly delighted that he is safe," Kate said.

“Everything is right under my control. So prepare. The rest is on me,” Orion said.

As expected, Kate nodded. That eagerness was simply captivating, and it stopped her from remembering her prior concerns at the moment.

Kate stood, posture straight. “I will go and get ready.”

As she departed from the dining room, Kira left as well.

Kira was unusually cheerful, and I was glad she was assured that everything went out smoothly.

Thus, Orion and I were left alone in the dining room, with a silence coming to settle over us.

Judging from the look on his face, it was obvious that he was thinking of something else entirely.

Eventually, he said, "I know you are concerned about Kate going alone."

I nodded. "It is just with everything that is going on, it is hard to feel completely comfortable."

He stared at me, his eyes narrowing. "I see. But you know I wouldn't do anything to her, or anyone in this house. We look out for our own."

"I know," I replied, but still there was a doubt that lingered in my heart. "I just want to walk her out, you know. She trusts me more than the men you sent to escort her."

Orion's lips curled into a thin smile that never came anywhere near his eyes. "It'll be too much of a risk if you go with her, and if Ladon comes along making an unscheduled visitation somewhere further down the road. It's simpler to sweep the mess under the carpet if you're not around."

I didn't say anything for a moment, not knowing what to say. So I nodded.

"You're joining me at my training sessions," he told me.

I raised an eyebrow. "Training sessions? Weightlifting or something?"

His lips curled into a shape, as if smiling. "Not that kind of training session. I mean the kind of training we train in the woods."

"In the woods?" I raised an eyebrow. "Why the woods?"

"It's more convenient," he replied without hesitation, as if that was all there was to it. "And Kate's going to be tagging along too."

I was taken aback. "Hold it, didn't you tell me Kate was going to be training with Keto?"

"Yes," Orion said, settling back into his chair. "But Keto's been busy the last few weeks. I don't want Kate stuck behind with these rough times. She'll train with us for a bit, and when Keto can spare the time, she'll train with him."

"Oh." I stared down the corridor where Kate had disappeared. "What about Kira? Isn't she training with us as well?"

Orion shook his head. "Kira is a healer. She already knows how to defend herself, and that's all she needs for her role. Her energy is better utilized for healing than for fighting."

"Fine," I snarled. "So... when do we get started?"

"Tomorrow morning," Orion replied. "After breakfast."

I hesitated, nipping the inside of my cheek. "Isn't it dangerous to be training in the woods? You know, with everything that's been going on lately?"

"We'll be training in the woods behind the estate," he said. "I own that land. Nobody gets on it without an invitation."

I nodded, but a part of me still felt uneasy.

Steps echoed down the corridor, and Kira and Kate came into the dining room. Kate was wearing new clothes, a simple blue shirt, and jeans, her hair drawn back into a ponytail.

"I'm ready to go," Kate said, gazing at Orion.

The car's waiting outside," Orion explained to her. His voice became slightly more serious. "But you have to promise not to talk to your brother for more than an hour. It's for your safety, and his."

Kate nodded vigorously. "I know."

I got up with Kira. "We'll walk you out to the car," I explained to her.

Orion remained behind when the three of us departed from the dining area.

The air was chilly in the morning, with a hint of coldness stroking my flesh. The black SUV occupied the front porch steps, engine already running.

We embraced Kate tightly. "Be careful," I told her.

"Don't worry, I will," she told me with a weak smile, but I could see the worry in her eyes.

Kira touched her arm. "Don't forget what Orion said, just an hour. The last thing we need is any of that nastiness from Ladon."

"And Ruth," I completed. "We don't even know where she is or what she's doing."

Kate nodded again before getting into the car. The driver shut the door behind her, and the SUV drove off down the long drive.

Chapter 151

Lyra's POV

We stood there for a moment, watching it go out through the gates. Then Kira sighed softly. "I hope everything goes okay."

"Me too," I said softly.

We returned inside, but my thoughts remained with Kate. Encountering her brother after all these years. I couldn't even start to think of what that would be like. A mix of excitement and terror, no doubt.

When we returned to the dining room, Orion remained seated there, his arms crossed over his chest in a lounging manner.

His dark eyes locked onto mine, not blinking. "Come with me," he said.

I got a brief glimpse of Kira as I followed Orion.

We entered into one of the side rooms, a spacious sitting room that was full of tall windows through which shafts of light streamed.

"You will have to be prepared for tomorrow," Orion said to me. "Working out with me is not going to be easy. I am not going to go easy on you just because you are..." He paused, searching for the right words.

"I did not think that you would," I said, folding my arms.

His lip quirked again, briefly. "Good. I dislike excuses."

I raised an eyebrow. "Me too."

That tickled him again. "You'll require proper equipment. Dress in something you can work in. And have a proper meal beforehand."

"Alright," I said. "So, just what are we doing? Running? Climbing? Wrestling with wild animals?"

His mouth curled again, but this time there was a sharpness to his eyes. "You'll see tomorrow."

I theatrically sighed. "Of course you won't tell."

"I like surprises," he told me, walking towards the door. "Be ready."

With that, he spun around and left me standing there, wondering, feeling curious and a bit nervous about what promised to be another day.

I let out a long breath, alone, making for the dining area. Kira was lounging in her chair at the table, her chin resting on one palm.

"Finished with him?" she smiled.

"Yeah," I said, plopping into the chair beside her.

"Good. Let's go," she said, already up.

The two of us walked out of the dining area and started for the stairs. The roof door groaned as Kira opened it.

The air felt cooler now, like rain was soon to come. The clouds above were suffocating the sun, settling the chill on my exposed skin as we stepped outside.

We settled on the waterproof couch by the railing. The view here went just a little farther beyond the treetops, with leaves fluttering gently in the gust.

"Looks like it'll pour any time," Kira said, throwing her head back.

I indicated agreement. "Yeah, the air has shifted now."

She shifted her head towards me. "So, what did you and Orion have to say?"

I hesitated before answering. "He was talking about 'Training'. It starts tomorrow morning."

"Training?" Her eyebrows shot up. "You? With Orion?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "Apparently. He said nothing else, just told me to prepare myself."

Kira's lips curled into a small smile. "Interesting. He does not normally go through the bother of training individuals. I suppose it's because you're an alpha now."

I shook my head. "I have no idea what to look forward to."

She gazed at the darkening horizon again. "Whatever it is, I hope it's not in weather like this."

I leaned over the railing. The wind was stronger, and the leaves crackled more angrily. "Me too."

"Oh, and Kate will be going through training too," I added.

Kira eased a little more on her face. "That's good. She needs all the training she can get as a werewolf."

I gazed at her and caught the fleeting pause in her voice. "But?"

Her eyes lingered out at the horizon for a heartbeat before she sighed. "But, I fear she might need more than werewolf training."

That brought me up short. "What are you talking about?"

Kira's eyes flashed to mine, all seriousness now. "I have something to share about Kate, something I haven't shared with anyone else yet."

I could feel my chest tighten by a fraction. "I'm listening."

She breathed deeply, as if she needed to find the strength to say it. "When we were still on the island, when Ladon first surfaced.

The mention of his name sent a shiver through me. "The serpent?"

"Yes," she nodded, her voice lowered. "When he arrived, he said something about Kate."

My attention was immediately caught. "What did he tell you?"

Kira's lips compressed, as if she were determining how much to say. Finally, she answered, "He said Kate carries witch blood in her veins."

For a moment, the wind's roar was louder than everything else. I blinked at her, trying to get it right. "Witch blood?"

Kira nodded again, her eyes still set on mine.

"Wait, you're telling me Kate's a witch?"

"I'm afraid so," Kira replied quietly. "I didn't want to believe it when I first heard it, but Ladon didn't lie. And, there have been little things that I've noticed since then. Strange things. Things she probably doesn't even realize she's doing."

My head was spinning. Pretty, fiery Kate as a witch hadn't even occurred to me. "We have to tell Orion," I said.

"I know," Kira replied. "I'll do it later today."

I frowned. "Is it good or bad? I mean, being a witch?"

Kira leaned back, her gaze traveling to the thick, darkening clouds above. "Depends," she said with measured slowness. "It can be either one or the other. It's just how we go about it."

I cocked my head. "Mean what?"

She regarded me once more, her face contemplative. "Witches can be very good friends, or very painful enemies. If Kate can learn to control whatever abilities she has and will use them for good, that would be a blessing. But if she doesn't know how, or if someone else uses her."

Her sentences faded away, but the implication was not difficult to understand.

The breeze blew through my hair, tangling the strands in a spiral against my cheek. I nudged them behind my ear, my mind still reeling. "Do you think she knows?"

Chapter 152

Lyra's POV

Kira shook her head. “No. At least, I don’t think so. If she does, she’s hiding it well. But she knew Ladon was referring to her, so I'm sure she has questions. I'm just surprised she hasn't started asking."

“What happens if Orion doesn’t take it well?” I asked quietly.

“Then we make him take it well,” Kira said, her voice firm, almost protective.

“Kate’s not the enemy. But Orion needs to know the whole truth before something happens, and he finds out the other way.”

There was a pause, through which passed the restless wind and the faint ticking of the couch frame under our weight.

The clouds dimmed into dark silvers, and away in the background, I could hear the faint rumble of thunder.

Kira leaned back, closing her eyes for a moment, as if she was listening to something beyond the storm. “You’re worried,” I said lowly.

She opened her eyes, gave a half smile that did not touch them, and said, “I always worry about the people I care about.”

That tugged at something in me. “You really care about her.”

“She’s like a little sister,” Kira admitted. “I’ve seen her struggle to fit in here. If she has magic, it’ll make things even harder for her.”

I thought about the training tomorrow, how Kate would be there with Orion and me.

Would magic show itself in the middle of training?

The idea made my stomach twist.

Another sound of thunder rolled across the sky, louder this time.

Then cold drops of rain splattered against my arm.

Kira looked up at the sky, then back at me. “We should head inside before it gets bad.”

But I didn’t move right away. “Kira, what if being a witch is the reason Kate’s even here? What if it’s connected to all of this?”

Her brows furrowed slightly. “That’s a possibility I’ve considered,” she admitted. “Which is why I can’t wait any longer to tell Orion.”

We finally stood, the wind blowing harder now, and made our way to the rooftop door.

“The problem with witch blood,” she said quietly, “is that it’s unpredictable. It could lie dormant for her entire life, or it could awaken under the wrong circumstances, and when it does,” She shook her head as we walked down the stairs. “She can become something else.”

A shiver crawled up my spine. “You mean, like evil?”

“Potentially,” Kira said. “It depends on her lineage, the strength of the magic, and whether she learns to control it. A werewolf with witch blood…” She trailed off, biting her lower lip. “Let’s just say, it’s rare. And when it happens, it draws attention from the wrong kinds of people.”

I thought about Kate’s gentle smile, her gratitude to Orion for saving her brother, and her almost shy way of speaking. She didn’t look like someone who could hurt anyone.

“She’s Kate. She’s kind. She’s loyal. I can’t picture her being some dangerous, magic-wielding threat.”

“Kindness doesn’t stop magic from manifesting,” Kira said softly. “It’s what’s in the blood. And once it surfaces, there’s no pretending it’s not there.”

“I suggest we tell Orion as soon as possible,” I finally said.

“I know,” Kira interrupted. “I’ll tell him today, I promise.”

“Why not now?” I asked. “He’s probably still in his study.”

She looked hesitant. “Because I need to choose the right words. Orion’s protective of his pack. If he hears ‘witch blood,’ his first thought might be to send her away.”

That struck me hard. “He wouldn’t do that, would he?”

Kira gave me a look that wasn’t exactly reassuring. “If he thinks she’s a danger, he might. He has to protect everyone else.”

I swallowed hard. “Then, we have to make sure he understands she’s not dangerous. That we can help her.”

“We’ll try,” she said, though her tone carried doubt.

We walked straight to Orion's study room, and when we reached the study, the heavy wooden door was slightly ajar.

Kira knocked lightly.

"Who's there?" Orion's thick voice asked.

"Kira and Ravenna, can we come in?” she responded.

“Come in,” his voice replied, calm but firm.

We stepped inside. He was seated behind his large desk, a few documents spread before him.

His gaze shifted from Kira to me, and I could see the subtle flicker of curiosity in his eyes. “What is it this time?”

Kira took a breath and glanced at me before speaking. “It’s about Kate.”

That got his attention. He set the pen down slowly. “Is something wrong?”

“Not wrong,” Kira said carefully, “but something important you should know. When we were on the island, before we came back, Ladon, the serpent, spoke to us. It said something about Kate.”

Orion’s eyes narrowed slightly. “What exactly did it say?”

Kira hesitated for just a moment. “It said she has witch blood running through her veins.”

The silence in the room thickened instantly. Orion leaned back in his chair, his gaze sharpening as he studied us.

“Witch blood,” he repeated, his tone unreadable. “You’re certain?”

“We both heard it, Kate was there," Kira said quickly. “It didn’t go into detail, but it was clear.”

His jaw tightened slightly, but his voice stayed calm. “Has Kate shown any signs? Spells? Unnatural strength beyond her wolf abilities? Changes in her aura?”

“Not that we’ve seen,” Kira answered. “She’s just Kate. Same as always.”

Orion steepled his fingers. “This is not something to take lightly. Witch blood is not common among wolves. It can be a blessing or a curse.”

“That’s what we thought too,” I said. “But it doesn’t have to be bad, right? If it’s true, maybe we can help her control it.”

“Perhaps,” he said. His gaze lingered on Kira. “You were right to tell me. I’ll speak to her after her brother is out of the country.”

I felt a small surge of relief that he didn’t seem immediately ready to exile her. “So, you’re not sending her away?”

His eyes flicked to me briefly, unreadable. “Not yet. But I’ll be watching her closely. If the blood stirs, I might have to send her, but we'll see.”

Chapter 153

Kate's POV

I sat in the back seat of the black SUV, staring out the tinted window as the city passed by in a blur.

My heart was heavy, but I set my face. The driver's hands were firm on the wheel, gaze fixed on the road ahead.

"How much longer before we get there?" I asked, ending the silence.

"Ten minutes, ma'am," he replied without glancing at me. His voice was polite but firm, the tone of a man who had mastered keeping his focus.

I nodded and settled back in my seat, releasing a slow exhale. Ten minutes. Just ten more minutes before I'd be standing in front of Mark once more.

A quick flash of movement in the side mirror caught me by surprise.

I looked over, and a black sedan was following quite close behind us. Its windows were dark-tinted.

The driver must have seen me look back because he told me, "That's one of our security vehicles, ma'am. They will stay behind you until you reach your destination."

I relaxed and focused on driving once again.

I pulled into my handbag for my phone, hoping to send a hasty text to Kira. But when I threw the screen open, I was able to see that the signal bar was empty. No network. No line.

"There is no network here," I grumbled, frowning.

"Unusual here," answered the driver. "Signal is weak. We are reaching your destination."

I disliked being cut off from it like this. My thumb tapped the phone before laying it in my lap. "Turn on the TV, would you?" I asked. "I want to hear the news."

"Yes, ma'am." He leaned forward and clicked a button, and a small flat-screen television to my left came on.

There was a reporter speaking on the TV screen, speaking rapidly.

"Officials are still baffled by the senseless killings that were committed overnight," the reporter declared, his voice perplexed. "There are a total of fifty deaths, all within the last three days. Victims have been turning up with no trace of what has killed them, and no suspect has been named."

"Having instilled fear, the government, today, declared a curfew in the whole city from today at 7 p.m.," the correspondent continued. "The authorities advise all persons to remain indoors after dusk until further notice. Offenders will be detained."

My heart curled. Fifty dead. No idea. I didn't need to be informed what possibly is the cause of them, my head already expecting the answer.

"That's it," I told the driver. "Shut it off."

He did so, and the screen turned black.

As we drove along, I noticed something I hadn't noticed before: police roadblocks. Lots of them. At major intersections everywhere.

Finally, the car slowed and took a tree-lined residential street.

In the back of the block stood a high, thin building with glass windows and a spick and span white front. It was a rented space. An Airbnb, maybe.

We're here, the driver said, stopping in front of the entrance. He glanced at me. "Orion's idea is to drop you off here and drive back to the mansion. He has arranged for another car for you on your return later."

I nodded slowly. "Alright. Thanks a lot."

The driver exited, opened my door, and I exited. As the SUV pulled away, I turned to look in the direction of the building and stopped.

Standing several feet away was a man whom I knew well. "Captain Zack," I said, smiling as my lips curled upwards.

He grinned and came running over to me, and we exchanged a swift hug.

"It's good to see you again," I said.

"You too," he said. "Didn't think you'd be here. But did you have a good trip, I hope?"

"Yeah, good. What brings you here?" I said.

"Keto brought me in on a job," Zack reported. "Then I heard it was because of your brother."

I skipped a beat. "Yeah, I was told that he was rescued."

He nodded. "It seems he was kidnapped. We did not have time for games, but we managed to bring him here. He is in there."

I widened my eyes. "Kidnapped by whom?"

"We are still investigating. But you do not have to worry. He is safe."

I looked beyond his shoulder towards the building, my heart pounding. "What about your men?"

"They're stationed in a building on the opposite side of the street," Zack had told me. "They're surrounding this building so no one gets near. Keto is with them now."

Having Zack's men around made me feel better. If there was any group of people I could rely on to watch my back, it was them.

"You've got an hour with your brother," Zack continued, his voice low. "That's all. As soon as the hour passes, we get him out."

"Get him where?" I insisted.

"To the airport. My people will escort him there. He'll fly out on a private plane to another country. They'll take care of him, get him there alive, keep him safe for three days, and return home. Don't you worry, he'll be fine."

I sat for a second, staring at him, trying to catch even the smallest spark of hesitation on his face. There wasn't any.

Captain Zack was stubborn, gruff, but never had he wavered on his promise to me.

"Alright," I whispered. "Let's go speak to him."

Zack's head jerked hard, and then he stepped aside, pointing toward the door.

As I walked past him to the door, my hands were strangely cold despite it being a hot day.

I didn't know what Mark would do if he saw me. He would be angry, would he? Or he would be relieved? Or he would just glance at me as another reminder of everything that hadn't worked in our lives?

I caught my breath and reached out to sweep the door handle, opening it.

I walked into the living room, but Mark was nowhere to be seen.

"Mark?" I spoke quietly.

No one replied.

"Mark?" I called once more, with a taut tension.

Had he even been there?

Chapter 154

Kate's POV

I called out for Mark once more, my voice shaking. "Mark!"

This time, I heard him answer, then he came out from the corner. Next thing I knew, he wrapped his arms around me in a warm hug.

"I'm sorry, Kate," he mumbled. "I was at the restroom. Didn't mean to scare you."

My eyes burned with tears. I embraced him, not quite ready to let him go. "Mark, after all these years. I never expected to see you again."

He pulled back slightly, his eyes soft although tired. "I know. I should've called you. I should've stayed out of trouble. I'm sorry for all of it."

I shook my head. "Don't say that. The fact that you're here, alive, is what matters. We don't have much time, so tell me, are you okay?"

"Yes," he nodded enthusiastically. "I'm okay." Then he smiled weakly. "But you, how did you even manage it? Getting men to come rescue me? They're even sending me abroad. Kate, how did you do it?"

I sighed, brushing at my damp cheeks. "It's a long story, Mark. One I don't particularly want to tell today."

He looked at me closely, then said, "There's something you need to know."

My heart skipped a beat. "What is it?"

"Our mother," he said, his words slow. "She's alive."

My breath stopped. I gazed at him. "What? That's impossible, how?"

I found her," Mark said. His hand went into his pocket, and he pulled out a folded paper. He thrust it into my hand. "Her address. It's there."

I held the paper as though it were the most fragile thing in the world. "You, you talked to her?"

He shook his head. "No. I couldn't. But I think you can. You're the one she'll listen to.".

I swallowed, my hands trembling. "Mark..."

I had not spoken more than that when Captain Zack re-entered, his voice firm. "Time's up. My men are here to take him."

I turned around quickly, panic overwhelming me. "So soon?"

Zack nodded. "Yes. They're already waiting outside."

Mark squeezed my hand one last time. "Goodbye, Kate."

I hugged him again, holding onto him. "Goodbye, brother. Be careful."

Then he left. I went to the window and watched him get into the car. My chest tightened as the car drove off, taking him along.

Zack stood beside me. "Keto will be here in five minutes to pick us up. But we have to keep our heads."

I frowned, turning to him. "Why all the procedures?"

He shrugged. "Keto insisted. He didn't say why. Maybe you can ask him when he arrives."

I sighed, squeezing the paper in my hand. "Okay."

A horn honked outside a few minutes later.

"That's him," said Zack.

We headed out, and sure enough, Keto was behind the wheel. Zack shifted to the front seat while I climbed in the back. Silently, Keto began to drive, the engine humming as the road stretched out in front of us.

I was silent in the backseat as Keto drove the vehicle. Captain Zack was in the front beside him, quiet, his eyes combing the road as if danger might show up at any moment.

Keto looked at me through the mirror. "You look pale."

I made myself smile. "I just saw my brother for the first time in years. It's a lot to take in."

He nodded slowly. "I see. You two were close."

"We were," I whispered. "Still are. In spite of life's efforts to cut that bond."

Keto didn't say anything right away. He drove harder, his eyes focused on the road. "Well, I'm glad you finally get to see him, safe and sound."

I looked away towards the window. "He was gone for so long. I thought I'd lost him forever. Then he goes and tells me something so unbelievable."

Keto's voice softened a bit. "What did he say to you?"

I hesitated. Zack tilted his head slightly, as if curious too, but I shook my head. "It's personal. For now, I'll keep it to myself."

"Fair enough," Keto said.

We drove in silence for a while, the engine humming, streetlights casting faint beams on the windshield.

Finally, I broke the silence and said, "Zack mentioned all these protocols. The constant watching, the changing cars, the hidden routes. Why? Who are we hiding from?"

Keto gave a short, humorless laugh. "That's the question, huh? He wasn't wrong; it was me who insisted on protocols. And the reason is simple."

I leaned forward a bit. "Tell me."

He looked at me in the mirror again, his eyes grave now. "Because you could be being watched. And I'm not referring to the enemy you already know."

I had a shiver run down my spine. "But I don't think I'm the target. Ladon seems to have a special appetite for alphas."

But it's been killing people lately." Keto replied. "So I don't think I'm going to take any chances. Besides, we still can't find Ruth."

"Wait, what's Ladon?" Zack asked, eyes narrowing.

"The giant snake that attacked us on that island," I replied shortly.

Zack's face scowled as he looked at Keto. "You should've told me earlier that the goddamn snake is in town."

"I did," Keto replied woodenly. "You just weren't listening."

The strain between them filled the car. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat.

"Did you manage to get the supplies Orion requested?" I asked.

"No," Keto replied curtly. "Not yet, but that will not be a problem; I already have people on it."

I clenched my fists in my lap. "We need to hurry, before the creature decides to get creative with who it kills."

Did your brother mention anything that's relevant to what we're dealing with?" Zack pressed.

I nibbled at my lip. I was not ready to inform them about the paper in my pocket. Mark gave me the address, the startling information regarding our mother. Not yet.

"Nothing," I muttered. "He did not say anything relevant to that."

Keto gave me a long stare in the mirror, as if he could see right through me. But he didn't push.

The car slowed down as we approached a checkpoint. Two men wearing black jackets stepped out of the shadows. Zack's hand went to his weapon, but Keto raised his hand.

"They're mine," Keto said.

The men peeked inside the car, then stepped aside. Keto continued driving without a word.

Chapter 155

Kate's POV

Zack pulled his phone from his pocket and tapped the screen quickly. “I’m calling my boys. We’re all going to Orion’s mansion,” he said with a firm voice, like he had already made up his mind.

Keto laughed as he kept his eyes on the road. The car was filled with the rich, happy sound of laughter.

Zack glared at him. "It's not funny, Keto."

I turned my attention, looking back and forth between the two of them. "What do you want to do at Orion's house?" I asked Zack.

His eyes met mine in the mirror, hard and piercing. "Because now that Ladon's arrived, no one really has any idea what that snake is going to do. And I am fairly sure it knows my face. The last thing I want is that beast rattling its ugly head on my doorstep. At least with Orion, there's a plan. And most of all."

He paused, tapping his fingers on his thigh. “Orion has a pack. Full of what’s it called again?”

I raised my brows. “Werewolves.”

His face lit up. “Exactly.”

I let out a slow breath. “Well, werewolves and humans don’t exactly pair well. I’m not sure Orion would agree to that arrangement.”

Zack leaned back, a grin playing on his lips. “Then I’m ready to become a vampire or a fucking werewolf if that’s what it takes.”

That made Keto chuckle again, shaking his head. “You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into, Zack. There are far worse things than Ladon out there.”

Zack stood up, his tone stubborn. "I don't care about the worst things. I can only think about Ladon now. This snake is my responsibility."

Keto gave him a sideways glance. "Then we need to go talk to Orion first. Ask him if he'll even hear out this crazy plan of yours."

The car was silent for a few minutes, the only noise was the engine rumbling.

I clenched my teeth. "You do understand what you're saying, don't you? If Orion agrees, your life will never be the same again."

Zack shrugged, the nonchalance faking him out. "Life's a disaster already, Kate. At least then I'll be standing with people who know how to fight back."

Keto snorted and muttered to himself, "Or standing among men who can drag you into a war that you ain't ready for."

I stood in front of Zack. His jaw was tightened, his eyes fixed straight ahead as if on something he alone could behold. Fear, anger, maybe both.

"Zack," I whispered, "it does not mean you're ready for what comes next because you never have to fight."

His eyes finally caught mine, and for the first time since we had started on this endeavor, his expression eased. "I'd rather take a shot at it than stand around waiting for that snake to kill me one more time."

Keto emitted a half-growl. "Then we'll hear what Orion has to say. If he's got sense, he won't like this plot. But if he's desperate." He checked himself, crinkling his eyes as the highway stretched out before him. "He might take you in just the same."

Keto coughed, his eyes in the rearview flicking my way.

"Kate," he gasped. "Lyra had to talk to me a little while ago. Do you by chance know what she wants to talk to me about?"

My heart skipped a beat. I knew. Lyra and I had talked it over, but she promised not to tell him. She was going to tell him herself.

So I sort of shrugged. "No idea," I whispered. "But from the way she sounded, it did sound pretty serious."

Keto let out a sigh, his fingers clenching the wheel. "She's been acting like that for a while now. And I have no clue what I did wrong."

Zack, who'd been silent up until that point, leaned forward between the seats. "Wait, you and Lyra are boyfriend and girlfriend now?

Keto laughed mockingly and shook his head. "It's. complicated."

I studied him, one eyebrow raised. "If Lyra's distancing herself from you, then something must be the reason."

Keto glared at me once more, his face screwed up into a frown. "What reason?" he growled, his voice nearing desperation as if he needed me to tell him an answer to cling to.

I looked down at my hands, my thoughts in an uproar. I could not betray Lyra's trust. "Maybe." I said slowly, "Maybe she just needs space. One pushes another away not due to something that they have done, but due to the issues that they have in themselves."

Keto sat there quietly for a moment, his jaw tightened. Then he growled, "If so, I wish she'd just say so. I hate not knowing."

Zack chuckled. "Trust me, dude. Women love secrets. You'll drive yourself crazy trying to extract it from her."

I glared at Zack. "That's not the truth."

He grinned at me, unimpressed. "Oh, sure? Well then, go ahead and tell us what you do know?"

My stomach twisted. He was too observant. I glared at him but didn't say a word.

Keto's eyes moved back and forth between us, his voice questioning. "Kate, do you know something?"

My mouth opened, then snapped shut. "If I did," I said guardedly, "it's not up to me to say. Lyra will talk to you when she's ready."

Keto cursed, sweeping a hand over his face. "She has no idea how hard it is for me to wait. Every time she looks at me and then looks away, it's like, like I've lost her without ever having a clue why."

His words hung in the car, and I felt a crack in his normally unshakeable demeanor. Keto wasn't interested; he hurt.

Zack curled back in on himself, grumbling under his breath, "You call that complicated? it's a complete mess to me."

I pushed him out of the way and placed my hand on Keto's arm. "She cares about you, Keto. That much I know. Whatever she has to say to you, it doesn't take that away."

He looked at me, hunting my face as if he was trying to gauge whether he could trust me. "You're sure?"

I nodded, but deep within me, I didn't have any idea.

Chapter 156

Kate's POV

Zack dipped his hand into his pocket and extracted his phone, punching in a number. The line clicked, and a deep voice answered, "Boss?"

Zack: "Yes, it's me. Listen, I'll be sending you an address afterwards. When you deliver the asset and it's your time to return, you all head straight to the address."

Voice: "Okay, Boss. How many of us should we bring?"

Zack: "Bring all of them. I don't want any mistakes this time."

Voice: "Okay. Anything else?"

Zack: "Nothing for now."

Voice: "Okay, Boss. We'll wait for the message."

Zack: "Good. Stay smart. I don't want to have to do it twice."

The man grunted a quick "Yes, Boss" before the line disconnected.

I couldn't help but speculate about what I would have done if I had been in Zack's position. Maybe I would have run away from the country to some remote place. But I think that it's not even possible to run away from Ladon.

Zack shoved the phone into his pocket and slumped on the seat, his face blank.

"Did you just refer to my brother as an asset?" I joked.

"Oooh, sorry, I assumed package would be the right term," he replied with a smirk.

"The journey to the mansion will take another three hours," Keto cut in, his voice cutting across playfulness in the car. "I am starving. We must go eat somewhere, then continue."

Zack rose immediately. "Food, count me in."

I smiled as well and slouched forward. "I could do with some snacks too."

Keto nodded and pulled the car into a roadside restaurant. It wasn't fancy, but it was at least managing, with people coming and going. He parked alongside it, and we all climbed out in good order.

My stomach rumbled even though I was not really hungry, and I wrapped myself around the biting wind as we stepped in.

Keto and Zack hurried to the counter and started scanning the menu board above the cashier.

Keto ordered a full plate of chicken and rice and a soda bottle, and Zack did the same, ordering something heavy.

I caught up with them. "I'll just have a snack and a milkshake, please," I told the lady at the counter. Something light was all I needed.

We received our orders and looked for an empty table by the window. Keto plopped into his seat and did not hesitate to dig in. Zack was not different.

I slowly unwrapped my snack and bit into it, sipping my milkshake as I watched them.

Zack finally spoke, his mouth full. "This is my kind of stop. Fast food, no rush."

Keto smiled and lifted his drink. "Yeah, but I'd rather be eating at home. Three hours still feels too long."

I sipped my milkshake and said nothing, though my thoughts were certainly not in the cafeteria.

But as we sat down to eat, I sensed that there was a sudden silence in the room. The clinking plates stopped. Faces turned to look in the direction of the door.

Two policemen had appeared. They looked around the room, solemn and alert. One of them shouted.

"Everyone, please! vacate the premises immediately. Now!

The cafeteria broke out in whispers, gasps, then frantic movement. Chairs scraped on the floor as customers grabbed their bags and hastened toward the doors.

I stood rooted to the spot, fork hovering over my plate. To my right, Keto's eyebrows were knit. "What the hell is going on?"

Zack had his eyebrows also knit, but he didn't say anything.

I pushed my chair back. "Wait here," I told them roughly. Then I walked right over to the officers, badge glinting in my mind automatically even before I reached for it.

"Kate Xander," I told them brusquely. "I'm with the force, too. What's happening?"

The taller of the two officers eased forward a bit, his voice in a whisper. "An unidentified creature was spotted not far from here. It has already killed over twenty people."

My stomach clamped down, but I forced myself to calm down. "And, it's coming here?"

He nodded gravely. "That's what we're told. We're trying to clear the area before it gets here."

I swallowed hard, my dry throat aching. "Thanks," I growled, and then spun on my heel and hastily retreated back to our table.

Zack was glaring at me, and Keto was already wound up, his hand resting on the table as if he would jump to his feet in a second.

"We need to go. Now," I ordered, my voice harsher than I intended.

We waited no more time. The three of us fell in with the crowd and rushed towards the car.

The moment we were in, Keto glared at me, his pale knuckles on the wheel. "What is it?"

I took a deep breath, soothing. "It's Ladon. He's here. Close."

That was all Keto needed. He shoved the key in, the engine roared to life, and we shot out of the lot, the chaos behind.

Zack whistled softly as Keto sped down the road. "This is getting out of hand," he exclaimed, raking his hair back with a hand. "It's killing people for real, like some sort of goddamn cyborg warrior."

Keto glanced at him in the rearview mirror. "Do you think we should chase after it?

"Hunt it?" Zack snorted, laughing so hard he almost choked. "Hell no. I don't even want to be in the same ten-foot square as that thing. But we gotta know how to kill it quickly. And this time, for real. No half-mans."

I gazed out the window, my chest tightening. The trees flew by, shadows curling like they were alive and waiting to jump on us.

My stomach tightened, and I forced myself to add, "Then you'd better hope it doesn't attack us on our way to Orion's house."

Keto's fist on the steering wheel tightened. "Don't say that, Kate."

"I'm just being realistic," I said, though more acridly than I intended.

Zack reclined, gritted teeth, eyes forward. "Permanent kill," he told himself, as if he needed to convince himself of that. "That's the only way we're going to make it out of this one alive."

Silence descended upon the car then. There was just the dull rumble of the engine as Keto drove us to Orion's mansion in the hope that we would not have any unpleasant surprises in store for us along the journey.

Chapter 157

Lyra's POV

Kira’s phone started ringing beside her. She muttered something about taking the call and slipped outside, leaving me alone with Orion.

The silence between us lingered for a moment, and his eyes were focused on some distant corner of the room, unapproachable, but I could feel the weight in them.

My heart was tight, and before I could stop myself, the question burst out. "How are you doing?" I breathed.

He didn't glance at me. "I'm doing all right."

I’m all but smiled, but it turned bitter in my brain instead. "You don't have to lie to me, Orion. You can be honest with me and tell me things the way they are."

His head jerked slowly, his eyes flaring onto mine, icy and firm. "You want me to say I'm not fine?"

I clenched my teeth. "I want you to tell me what is true to me."

He glared at me for a moment. Then his lips curled, but it wasn't a smile; it was a challenge.

"No. I think you're the one who needs to be honest with me, Ravenna. Don't put your own devils on me."

His words stung. They crawled beneath my skin and cut deeper than I had expected. I said nothing, staring at my hands.

Maybe he was right. Maybe I was dreaming. I swallowed hard, attempting to formulate the words that would not make me sound like a cradle-sniveler.

"I just can't fathom we're going to have to kill her," I whispered. My voice broke even as I attempted to keep an even keel. "Ruth, she's my stepmother."

He was faster on the draw with his answer. "Ruth is no longer your stepmother. You don't have any family."

My head jerked up abruptly. "What are you saying?"

"She was your stepmother," he said brusquely, as if a man reading aloud what is inscribed on stone. "But when your father died, she had no room among you. She gave him no child. She's nothing to you now."

I glared at him, fire burning in my heart. "So you do this to justify it to yourself to murder her?"

He looked into my eyes, he stepped closer, his voice low. "And what did you justify in murdering my brother?"

I gasped. I had no response.

Orion didn't blink. He looked at me as if he had me pinned to the wall. "I did not take it out on you when you killed him," he said, each word measured and slow. "So don't take it out on me now. Because I swear, Ravenna, on my own life, I'm going to personally see that Ruth dies."

The silence that followed was stifling.

I didn't know what to say. His words hung over me.

He wasn't wrong. I had killed his brother. I could still recall the blood on my hands, the glint in Orion's eyes when he saw me for the first time.

He had the right to demand to preserve his brother alive, he had the right to lose it. But he hadn't done anything. He had brought down that storm and buried it inside of himself.

And I was here now, trying to lecture him about Ruth.

Maybe I was a hypocrite.

My throat contracted and shut over as I tried to get something out. "I didn't want to kill him," I finally managed to whisper.

His expression altered, for one second only. And then he sat up, his expression shutting over once more.

"And I don't want to kill her. But wishing doesn't count. Sometimes what has to be done, has to be done. We most times have to put the pack first in our choices."

The words hurt me more than I expected. I ruffled my head, blinking rapidly so the tears won't shed. He was correct again. I hated it, but he was.

"I just," I stalled, searching for words that didn't sound like apology. "I just don't know if I can live with it."

He stood there for a moment that hung. Then, softly this time, he said to me, "You'll learn to. Or it won't be easy, but you'll be fine."

I looked at him again, my vision so blurred. For a moment, I could have sworn I saw the tiniest crack in his defenses, the tiniest flicker of sadness in his eyes, the kind he worked so diligently to keep hidden.

It vanished in an instant.

I wanted to go out and touch him, to say something that would nudge him from the edge where he stood.

But my voice betrayed me, shaking and barely above a whisper. "And what if it kills me?"

"Then I'll be here to catch you when you fall off," he said gruffly.

I bit my lips together, fighting the lump in my throat.

Kira's voice echoed back across the room as she hung up her call, sound of approaching footsteps.

Orion turned his face away, his mask falling into place with effortless ease.

Kira crept inside. She had a serious look on her face, but relief in her eyes.

"Keto just called me," she said, brushing stray hairs from her face. "They're at the mansion."

My heart leaped at that. Finally. They had fought their way through the pandemonium outside.

"Did he mention anything else? Any sign of the serpent?" Orion's tone was flat and even, readying for bad news.

Kira shook her head. "No. I didn't ask him, and he didn't say a lot. Just that it was smoothly and that they'll be arriving soon."

I scowled, folding my arms over my chest. That adverb, smoothly, was too convenient

Nothing had ever gone smoothly in our lives since Ladon came back. "So what now?" I asked Orion. "What do we do next?"

He leaned his elbows on the edge of the long table, his face scrunched in thought. "Honestly? I'm surprised Ladon hasn't taken action against the werewolves yet."

"Maybe it's not yet ready," I tried, though the sentence tasted skeptically on my lips.

Orion sat back, quietly laughing. "Or maybe it's waiting for something."

Waiting. The word chilled me. The snake was an animal of intellect, not passion. No, all its movements seemed calculated, as if there were some calculating cold mind behind the fiery eyes.

"Or," I said with a half-hearted attempt, "maybe it just hasn't seen us.".

It was when Kira's cunning laugh echoed throughout the room. "That is not true. Ladon has magical powers. It can find werewolves; that is how it found us on the island. You should have known that by now."

Chapter 158

Lyra's POV

I cringed, remembering the blood nightmare when the serpent tore through everything on that cursed beach.

"Then," I swallowed, the reality of her words hitting me. "If it can follow us, then we're not going to be safe here. Not in this mansion."

Orion raised a hand. "No. It cannot follow us here." His voice was firm.

I narrowed at him. "Why not? What's so unique about this place?"

He eyed me firmly. "Because the mansion is masked."

"Masked?" I said, an eyebrow rising. "How?"

Before Orion could respond, Kira proceeded, her voice soft yet precise, as if she were talking to a child.

"It means that a witch has put magical spells around this mansion to make it disappear to other magical creatures or witches. It's like a shield. To anything which follows by magic, this doesn't exist."

"So that's why you chose this location," I gasped, realizing.

Orion tilted his head. "Exactly." Then, holding back, his lips curled into a smile, almost, but not quite. "And the most wonderful thing is that our foes do not yet know about Ladon. We can use that in our favor."

My gut twisted. "How?"

He faced me, his eyes empty, as if weighing what he should tell me. At last, he said, "Leave it to me."

That answer didn't cut it for me. I hated not knowing, being kept in the dark like a fragile thing, unable to handle the truth. But I bit my tongue, knowing that pressuring him now would just shut him down tighter.

I said, "Do you think we can really kill it? For good this time?"

Kira's head snapped towards me, those eyes burning. "We have to. If we don't."
She didn't finish the sentence, but she didn't need to.

I already understood. If we failed, Ladon wouldn't leave us alone. It would just go on. Towns, cities, anything that would stand in its path would be reduced to ashes.

I nodded slowly, my dry lips. "Then we can't wait here."

Orion at last looked me in the eye, his face still serene but resolute. "Sometimes the wisest thing to do is wait. Charging in too soon can cost us everything."

I clenched my fists, anger burning inside me. He was right, yet the thought of standing idle while that monster crept ever closer was more than I could stand.

Orion's expression changed, then he sniffed the air, I knew something was amiss.

His sudden intake of air made me glance at him involuntarily. His eyes narrowed, golden sparks glinting in the centers.

"They're here," he stated flatly.

Kira's eyebrows furrowed, head cocked to the side. "Who's here?"

Orion rose from where he sat, his height suddenly filling the entire room. "Kate. Keto. And... a human."

A human? My heart skipped a beat. I looked to Kira, and she was as bewildered as I was. Orion didn't speak another word but headed for the living room in swift, deliberate steps. Kira and I exchanged a quick look before rushing after him.

The sound of opening front doors reached me as we reached the grand hall.

And then I saw them, Kate and Keto, walking in, leading a man who came in with the sort of confidence that marked him as no ordinary man. Captain Zack.

Orion's jaw clenched almost unconsciously, but I noticed it. His annoyance was not hidden, and the distance between them was almost tangible.

"Kate!" Relief washed over me and I rushed to her, holding her close. She smelled familiar. I took a step back and asked insistently, "How is your brother? Was everything all right?"

Kate smiled, her eyes kind. "He's fine. Out of the country now."

"Thanks to the moon," I exhaled, letting go of the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. But before I could go on, Zack's voice cut in, even-tempered but edged with something unidentifiable.

"Orion doesn't look too thrilled to see me," he stated, his eyes on the Alpha etched with a challenge that heavily weighted the air.

Orion's lips curled into a cold smile. "I think you did, prior to your arrival." His voice held no warmth, only truth.

Zack nodded slowly, once. "Yes. Keto told me that. But I had to come anyway. I wanted to see you in person, to speak to you."

Keto moved restlessly, glancing back and forth between them like a man caught between two hurricanes.

Kate remained silent, her fingers briefly on mine as if grounding me.

"Sit," Orion commanded. His voice did not leave room for argument.

They sat, moving toward the couches. Zack took his seat with the quiet deference of a seasoned man used to dealing with tension, and Kate and Keto sat next to him.

Orion pointed to a maid hovering at the end of the hallway. "Wine," he commanded. The maid curtsied and scooted off promptly.

Orion's entire attention was on Zack at that point, eyes intense, body leaning forward, hands folded. "Speak."

The rest of the room fell silent, as though even the walls were breathlessly waiting to hear.

Zack's eyes flashed to me for a split second before he turned to Orion.

That glance unsettled me; it felt purposeful, like he wanted me to hear what he was about to say, not just Orion. His voice was calm, but the weight in it made my heart beat harder.

“I’ll keep this short and simple,” he said. “I want to become a werewolf.”

The words struck me like a tidal wave. I blinked, certain I'd misheard. "What?" The whisper fled me before I could catch it.

The request was so mad, so reckless, I nearly laughed at the absurdity of it. But the look on Zack's face stifled any trace of humor. He was not kidding.

Orion didn't laugh. He chuckled, instead - low, incredulous, and not funny. It was the kind of laughter that made blood run cold, one that was born of incredulity, not humor.

"Unbelievable," he said, shaking his head. His eyes pierced Zack, a predator's eyes scanning prey who had wandered too close.

Chapter 159

Lyra's POV

I glanced at Kate, but she refused to meet my eyes, her jaw clenched. Keto was stiff as a board, his fists on his knees, obviously upset. Neither of them seemed surprised, so that meant something to me; this wasn't an impulsive reaction. They knew Zack had set this up.

I glanced over my shoulder at Zack, trying to read his face. There was no fear in his eyes. No fear. Just resolve.

But why?

The maid returned silently and set the tray of wine glasses on the table before disappearing again. No one touched them. The atmosphere was far too charged.

"Do you have any idea what you're asking?" I finally asked, my voice firmer than I had meant it to be.

My incredulity seeped into every word. "This isn't some deal. You can't wake up one morning and decide to be a werewolf."

His eyes shot to me again, hard and uninterpretable. "I know what I'm asking for."

Orion's laughter dissipated, lost in an icy silence. His lips curled back into a mixture of disgust and curiosity. "You're serious."

"Yes," Zack stated.

Why?" Orion snarled, his voice low but cutting. "Why do you want to be a werewolf?

Zack didn't blink. His gaze was steady, his tone authoritative. "Because humans have no chance against supernatural creatures. I've learned enough to realize that much. And I don't want a situation where the serpent somehow gets us or my men in its sights and we're completely helpless. If we're wolves, then at least we have a shot."

His words stirred something uneasy inside me. He wasn't wrong; humans were weak compared to us.

Orion tilted his head slightly, eyeing Zack as though weighing his soul. "And is it only you who wants this? Or do your men accompany you?"

Zack didn't bat an eyelid. "My men are included.".

Kira, recently returned from a journey, let out a small gasp on her breath, but Orion did not glance away from Zack.

His expression hardened. "Then you must know something," Orion said slowly. "When you are turned, you and your men will no longer be human. You will be part of the pack. And that means that you will take orders straight from me.".

The words hung there like a verdict.

But Zack shook his head, leaning forward slightly, his voice firm. "Can't I just buy the bite?"

I glared. Buy the bite? That sounded so tacky, so tacky, like our blood and curse could be purchased like coins.

Orion's face darkened with benevolent amusement, like he was explaining something to a child.

You can't buy an Alpha's bite. That's not available." His lips curled upward a little, but his eyes didn't soften. "But, you could buy a beta's bite. Maybe Keto would sell it. Or Kira. Or even Kate."

My left eye jerked in his direction at that. Kate? My gut roiled. Did Orion just put her out on the market like that?

Kate, to Keto's side, tensed plainly, her fists wrapping around her knees. Kira growled deeply but said nothing.

But Zack didn't flinch. His eyes narrowed infinitesimally, calculating. "What about Ravenna?"

The words left me gasping. I hadn't anticipated that. Fire ran through my body.

But Orion's response was instant, his tone harsh, possessive. "No." His gaze locked with Zack's, fire burning. "Ravenna is my Luna. Her bite is not for sale."

The room went silent. A silence so sharp it cut through my flesh.

My heart pounded in my chest. Had he said it? Luna. Out loud. Not in secret, not some secret whisper, but in public. He claimed me, no hesitation.

For a moment, I was unable to breathe. I did not know if it was pride, or fear, or the weight of obligation crushing me. Or perhaps all three.

Zack blinked, his expression growing cloudy with confusion. "What's a Luna?"

It was Keto who replied, his tone calm but firm. "Second in command after the Alpha. She rules alongside him."

Zack settled back slowly, the term curving in his mouth like something he had never savored before.

"Second in command..." His mouth clenched, then he nodded once. "I respect you, Alpha," he said, turning back to Orion, "but I do not want to be a member of your pack.

That is not why I have been sent here. I simply want to be strong enough to stand against monsters such as Ladon."

"That's why I'd prefer to buy the bite off a beta. That way at least I have a chance against other werewolves and supernatural threats without being bound to a pack."

I stared at him in amazement. He did not understand. He thought it was a sale, a contract he could walk away from. He did not understand the bond, the curse, the attachments that never really break.

Orion's teeth ground, but before he could speak, Zack turned to Keto himself. "Will you sell it to me?"

Keto's answer was quick, sharp, nearly frigid. "No."

That one word carried weight. Keto didn't even flinch. His loyalty to Orion was absolute, and I felt a small rush of relief at that.

Zack's eyes flashed then, shifting to Kira. But before he could even form the words, she shook her head violently, her eyes flashing with acrid denial. "Don't look at me. I'm a healer, not a peddler of curses."

And then, just as I was certain the subject was done, Kate's voice sliced through.

"I'll sell it."

The room froze.

I turned my head sharply, staring at her. My chest tightened painfully. “Kate…” My voice barely escaped as a whisper.

Keto’s head whipped toward her, his expression a mix of shock and anger. “Kate?”

But she lifted her chin, her eyes burning with a quiet defiance. “If it gives Zack and his men a chance to survive against that monster, then I’ll do it.”

We were again wrapped in silence. I could feel the rage of Orion seething under his calm exterior. My heart was pounding, my mind reeling.

Kate. Why would she? Why would she ever agree to something like this? Did she even know what it was?

And worse, what would Orion do now that one of his folk was willing to put herself at risk like this?

Chapter 160

Lyra's POV

Orion let out a slow sigh and leaned back in his chair. His voice was calm but heavy.

“In that case, Kate will bite Zack’s men. You’ll decide how much you want to charge them.”

Kate shook her head immediately. "No. I'm not selling it." Her tone was adamant, her gaze steadfast.

"I'm not doing it for the money. I'm doing it because I was responsible for having them brought into their world of the supernatural in the first place. If they're in trouble again, then I have no choice. This is the least I can do."

I blinked, taken aback by her assertiveness. For a moment, I had really thought she would do it for herself. I let my voice relax.

"That's a grand gesture," I admitted. "Honestly, I thought you were going to do it for the profit."

Kate gazed at me, her lips working into a small smile. "No, Ravenna. Not everything is about money. Sometimes it's about doing what is right."

Zack, who was sitting upright, leaned forward with gratitude written on his face.

"Thank you. You two. I don't say it often enough, I owe you more than I can ever repay you for," He said, looking at the two of us in turn. "I'll keep going until my men come back. I already told them to report to me directly once Kate's brother is settled abroad."

Orion, sitting quietly, nodded finally. "That's fine. We have room here." His gaze shifted to Kira. "Take him to one of the guest rooms downstairs."

"Alright," Kira said, rising to her feet. She indicated to Zack. "Come on."

Zack nodded respectfully to Orion and followed Kira out of the room.

Orion's gaze shifted back to Kate. He said nothing.

There's something I have to tell you," he said, his tone dropping lower.

Kate tensed. "What is it?"

Orion leaned slightly forward, his gaze intense. "I was told, when Ladon came initially, it spoke and told me you are a witch."

Kate's eyes widened. She swallowed hard, her expression tense. "I heard the same, but I didn't receive it, so I ignored it.".

Orion's jaw locked. "Pushed it aside? That's dangerous. You can't brush something like that off. You need to work on it. Perfect it.".

Her mouth opened as if to protest, and then she shook her head. "How? I don't even know how to properly shift like a wolf yet. I'm just getting by with training in the first place. And now add witchcraft to the mix, too?" She turned away, almost defeated. "It's too much. I don't think I'm ready."

"Don't worry," Orion said quietly. "I'll find you a witch to teach you."

My throat tightened. A witch? Training Kate? My mind raced.

I parted my lips to ask how he planned to do that, but before the words could leave my mouth, the door opened.

One of Orion’s men stepped inside and bowed his head. “Alpha. Kevin is at the gate.”

The sound of his name made my stomach drop. My heart thudded painfully against my ribs.

Orion's furrowed brow. His voice turned crisp. "What is he doing here?"

"He wants to visit Keto," the man replied.

Orion settled back slowly, his mind thinking. Then a snarl curled his lips, but there was cold in his eyes.

If he is here to see Keto, then Ruth doesn't even know that we arrived. She also doesn't know that we are aware of her plans to murder us." He nodded once, satisfied. "That is a good thing."

The guard stood there waiting for orders.

“Let him in,” Orion ordered. His voice was steady, controlled. “And Keto, your job is to seize him. We’ll torture him for Ruth’s whereabouts, then kill him after we’re done.”

The word kill rolled off his tongue with ease, like he was talking about the weather.

Keto bowed, and then followed the guard out of the living room.

I froze. My breath caught in my chest. The room shrank, closed up.

None of them knew, none of them but Kira, that Kevin was my former husband.

I forced myself to keep my expression neutral, show nothing. Inwardly, my heart pounded so hard I could barely hear anything else.

"Ravenna," Kate's voice pulled me out of the storm in my head. She smiled at me, trying to calm me down, though she hadn't the faintest idea why I was shaken. "You okay?"

I clenched a nod. "Yeah. Just… sorting everything out."

Kate laughed softly. "Sorting's okay. But once Kevin's in here, don't overthink it. He's Ruth's man. That makes him an enemy, no matter what."

Her words cut more deeply than she knew.

Enemy.

Kevin had once been my husband. Although once I had hoped that he would be dead, now it seemed hard to look at someone who had been part of my life to turn suddenly into an enemy.

Orion's voice cut across again, smooth and commanding. "Kate. After Kevin is secure, I want you to keep an eye on her."

"On Ravenna?" Kate scowled.

Orion's gaze shifted to me, narrowing slightly. "Yes. Ravenna has a tendency to feel too much. This isn't a time when feelings are required. It's a time where clarity is required."

A heat crept to my cheeks, anger and humiliation combined. "I don't need a babysitter, Orion."

His lips curled into a sneer/smirk. "No. But you do need to be reminded where you are. Don't let your emotions cloud your head."

I bit back a quick retort, lapsing instead into silence. If I said anything now, my voice would betray me.

The doors slid shut, and Kevin was dragged in by two guards, his hands bound.

His familiar eye,s they met mine the moment he was inside.

I stood, frozen in place.

His eyes widened, shock flashing before he hastily concealed it. But it was already too late. I had seen it.

I clenched my teeth, attempting to breathe a regular breath, to maintain an impassive face.

"Hi, Kevin," Orion started off, beaming. "I assume you're here to confirm if we died on that island."

Chapter 161

Lyra's POV

Kevin’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t answer Orion immediately. His eyes flicked toward Keto, then back to me, as if silently searching for something.

Orion rose from his chair with deliberate calm, his presence filling the room like a storm about to break.

"You thought Ruth's plan would pay off, didn't you?" His voice was menacing, low. "But we're here. Everyone. Alive."

Kevin taunted him, although I could see the nervous twitch in his hands where the ropes bound him.

"I didn't intend to come for you."

Keto stepped forward, his hand already itching to grasp a blade. "Then you were in the wrong place."

Orion chuckled darkly. "In fact, you got the right place. Because now you will provide us with what we want." He tilted his head to one side, his eyes warmly aglow. "Ruth's location."

Kevin's lips spread into a sarcastic smile. "You expect me to betray her like that?"

The room was quiet. Orion's men shifted against the walls of the room, waiting for him to give the word.

I pressed my hands tight down against my thighs, suppressing the shudder.

Every word, every step, pulled me further into a whirlpool of past and present colliding.

"Kevin," Orion said smoothly, "whether you speak now or after is immaterial. We have ways of extracting what we want from you. You'll save yourself pain if you start being cooperative now."

Kevin laughed, a desolate, searing sound. "Pain? Do you think I'm afraid of pain?"

His eyes locked onto mine again. They dangled there, and something unspoken passed between us, a memory, a history, a wound revived.

I had to swallow my dry mouth. My heart was thumping so loudly that I was certain Orion had heard it.

Orion picked up on the look. His eyes slanted to a narrow line, and his lips curved into a slow smile. "Why are you staring at her?"

My blood chilled.

Kevin never blinked, but he didn't deny it, either. His silence was deafening.

Orion came to attention, his expression as cold as steel. "Ravenna," he taunted, his voice full of sarcasm. "Would you care to explain to me why this man can't seem to look away from you?"

My neck burned. My palms were slick. I opened my mouth, but I couldn't talk.

My voice was trapped beneath the weight of fear and shame.

Kate's face obscured with puzzlement. "What's going on?"

Kira's eyes flashed to mine in a quick warning. She knew. She was the only one. And now, with Orion's acute senses, the secret teetered on the brink of revelation.

Kevin broke the hush with a bitter laugh. "So, you haven't told them?" His eyes were on me, but his words were to the room. "How convenient."

"Tell us what?" Orion snarled, his voice cracking harshly.

Kevin leaned forward, his voice venomous. "That she was supposed to kill you when she had the opportunity."

The words slammed into the room like a thunderclap.

Kate gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. Keto tensed. Even the guards looked momentarily shocked.

But Orion... Orion didn't respond. He just stood there, his face unreadable, the sort of face that was actually more terrifying than anger.

My own chest heaved as I fought to maintain his gaze. "It was a long time ago," I said, my voice trembling but distinct. "Before all of this. He was attacking me; he even offered me an alpha poison elixir."

Orion tilted his head, his eyes gleaming softly golden now. "And you didn't think it was worth saying something about?"

"I didn't think it mattered anymore," I whispered. My voice crumbled.

Kevin's laughter was brutal, vicious. "Past? Don't be dishonest with yourself, Ravenna. Part of you will always hate Orion."

"Be quiet!" The words ripped out of me before I could cover my mouth. My hands shook with fury, with fear, with shame.

Orion's sneer fell off, his face clenching into something far uglier. His voice dropped to a growl. "No. Let him speak. Let's see how far this entire thing goes.".

Kevin's lip curled. "You really think she belongs to you, Alpha?"

He spat out the word like poison. "You don't understand her like I do. You don't know what she'll do when she's in a corner. You don't-"

Orion's hand shot out faster than I could blink, his hand closing around Kevin's throat.

He hurled him into the air like he had no weight, his claws sinking into his flesh.

You forgot your station," Orion growled, his voice full of raw power. "She is mine now. And you," he hugged tighter, so that Kevin gulped, "you are nothing but a pawn who played his role too long."

The vision made my stomach twist agonizingly. Fear for Kevin clashed with the sour memory of what he had taken from me, what he had done to me.

He was not a stranger, nor was he innocent.

"Orion," I breathed, my voice shaking, "don't kill him yet."

His head spun about, his gold eyes fierce. "Why not?"

"Because," my voice quivered, but I gritted my teeth and drew on all the strength I had, "if Ruth sent him, then he must have something. Something we need."

Kevin gagged hard, Orion's hold easing just enough so he could draw breath.

He grinned at me through the pain. "Still taking care of me, huh?"

I closed my eyes for an instant, swallowing the storm burning inside me. "No, Kevin. I'm storing away what secrets you possess. That's it."

Orion placed him carefully down, though his claws didn't budge. His gaze never left mine, piercing, questioning, weighing every one of my words.

Finally, he pushed Kevin back into the guards' hold. "Tie him. We'll make him talk. And when he's told us everything," His eyes glinted darkly. "then I'll kill him myself."

Kevin's lips parted, but no words came. For the first time, real fear flickered in his eyes.

And I was frozen, torn between the man that I loved and the Alpha who now dominated all aspects of my world.

Orion turned to me. "Ravenna, I need you in my room; you and I have some things we need to talk about."

I swallowed hard. I knew what he needed to talk about.

Chapter 162

Lyra's POV

The walls of Orion’s mansion seemed to close in on me as I followed him down the hall.

I kept my head down, feeling every eye on me, the guards, Kate, even Kira’s quick, worried glance.

When I came to his room, he shoved the giant door open with a heavy shudder and crossed the threshold in silence. I hesitated for a heartbeat, my chest tightening, before I did follow.

The door slammed resolutely closed behind me, imprisoning me with the Alpha who had every reason to despise me now.

Orion stood looking away from me initially, hands tucked behind him, staring out the high windows into black space.

"Sit," he told me finally, his voice even, but with an undertone that sent a shiver down my spine.

I sat in the chair next to the room.

He spun around, eyes locking onto mine with a power that rooted me in position.

"How long," he asked softly, "did you plan on keeping this from me?"

I swallowed hard. "I didn't... I wasn't going to. It's just, it wasn't important anymore."

"Not important?" His voice snapped. He took his time to move closer. "A man informs me that you were instructed to kill me, and it doesn't seem important to you?"

"It was prior," I panted, despite my voice being on the verge of shattering. "Prior to you. Prior to when I met you. He made me, Orion. He simply handed me the poison and said if I didn't, he'd—" My throat cut off the rest of the memory.

Orion didn't flinch. He stared at me with unnerving calm, as if peeling back every layer of my words to determine whether I was lying to him or not. "And yet, you said nothing."

I curled my hands into fists in my lap. "Because it was done. I figured it didn't count anymore. I figured. I figured if I just left it alone, that it would stay buried."

His mouth curled into something unrelenting. "But secrets don't stay hidden, Ravenna. They come back. They always do."

My heart clamped shut, shame weighing down on my ribs like a rock. "I wasn't trying to betray you."

He lowered himself to the floor in front of me, closing in so his eyes burned into mine.

"So then, tell me the truth. When he told you that you were to kill me. Did you ever think about it?"

Aposuheld

I remained still. The recollection of that evening crept back from the darkness. The poison vial. Kevin's harassment.

My shaking hand as I looked at the man I had traveled so far to kill.

"Yes," I admitted in a broken whisper. "For an instant, I thought about it. But I didn't. I couldn't." A burning pressure filled my eyes as I forced myself to look at him. "And I never shall."

There was silence. He breathed normally.

"Do you have any idea what I detest most, Ravenna?" he finally said, his voice low, menacing. "Lies. And you," he leaned in, his face a breath from mine "you've been lying by omission."

I hastily acquiesced. "I didn't lie. I was scared. That's all."

His jaw clenched, but he didn't step away. The atmosphere between us was charged.

Yours, he snarled, his voice thick with threat. "My Luna. My mate. That means your secrets belong to me, too. Got it?"
I nodded quickly, unable to look at him. "Yes."

His gaze decreased somewhat in suspicion, but I could still feel it lurking there. He loomed over me again. "Good. So you share everything with me from now on. No more secrets."

I gritted my teeth, nodding again, even though my heart still hammered.

Orion rose and went toward the door, but he paused, his voice as icy as steel. "If Kevin's involved in this much, he's involved in more. And if I suspect for a moment you're covering for him, Ravenna." His threat tailed off, but the venom remained.

I swallowed hard. "I'm not covering for him."

He turned back to face me, his golden eyes searing my very being. "You'd better not be."

And with that, he had wrenched open the door and departed, leaving me to carry the load of his accusations.

I set a quivering hand over my heart as I tried to still my racing heart.

Kevin had torn open wounds I had believed healed long ago.

I had no idea how long it would be before I held on to the edge of the razor and fell.

I breathed a sigh of relief; at least the talk hadn't proceeded exactly as I'd pictured. I left his room but didn't get far before I caught sight of Kate standing propped against the wall, arms crossed, eyes sparkling.

She didn't speak a word at first—me, she only cocked her head ever so slightly, then gestured for me to follow.

My gut fell. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be nice.

Quietly, I trailed behind her down the corridor. The tension between us wasn't broken until we reached her door.

She opened it, and inside was Kira already stretched out on it, lying along the side of the bed as though waiting for me the entire time.

I furrowed my brow. My heart was pounding. The manner in which they both looked at me, almost circling, stood hairs up at the back of my neck.

I wrapped my arms around myself, standing taller. "What is it?" I finally spat, my voice rougher than I intended.

Kate exchanged a glance with Kira and stepped further into the room. "We told you," she said flatly, "to tell Keto about your affair with Orion. And now Orion's gone and announced it."

Her tone wasn't aggressive, but it had the self-assurance of a big sister scolding a little one for acting incautiously.

I resented. "I—"

Kate cut in with a sweep of her hand. "That leaves Keto piecing together the information, if he's smart enough to do it. And I can assure you, he is."

Kira breathed in short gasps, her own face not as stern as Kate's but no less serious. "Perhaps he'll ignore it," she warned quietly, "or perhaps.he'll come himself."

My stomach twisted itself into knots with her statement. To be standing before Keto, my constant shadow, a person whom I had considered to be invincible, provided me with a terror that I was unable to describe.

Chapter 163

Lyra's POV

I choked down a swallow, my throat parched. "I'll speak to him," I said at last, attempting to sound positive. "Today."

Kate raised an eyebrow, unmoved. "That's what you always say."
She strode to the door and flung it open, giving me icy eyes over her shoulder. "Words are cheap, Ravenna."

And she was gone, the door closing softly behind her.

The silence that she left in the room remained. I sat on the chair beside the window, my hands resting on my knees.

Kira gazed at me and then started talking. "I'd like to give you some advice," she whispered, her voice gentler than Kate's, nearly guardian-like.

I watched her warily. "Advice?"

She shook her head. "Kevin has made you feel a great deal of evil, first in your last life and now in your current one. You can't let him ruin what you've built here now, not with Orion. Whatever it is that Orion plans to do to Kevin, you have to keep out of it."

My heart tightened at the sound of his name. He was a ghost who could not remain silent, burrowing his way back into every shaky moment of peace I tried to maintain.

Kira's eyes narrowed, but her voice was calm. "If Orion finds you're Lyra, not Ravenna... and that Lyra was ever married to Kevin," she shook her head slowly, "it could break him. And none of us want to see that specific version of Orion."

Her words hurt, less because they were true, more because they confirmed the worst I already believed. I gazed down at my hands, reality pressing upon my chest like a rock.

She was right. All of her reserve was on point.

I wanted to complain, to let her know that I was not hiding behind Kevin, that I would not allow him to get in my way.

The truth was… I was afraid. Afraid of Kevin's hold on me, of the unknown past, of the chance that Orion might look at me not as his Luna but as his adversary.

My voice had been barely a whisper as I at last broke the silence, "I don't want to lose him."

Softness crept onto Kira's face. She knelt down so that we were eye to eye.

"Then don't. Be honest with him. Be strong. But don't let Kevin use your silence to push you away."

I blinked furiously, my throat constricting with emotion. Her words flung open scars that I was not prepared to bare.

Orion's ignorance had already shaken me to the core in the first place. Were he to find out from somebody else, not only would it hurt him but also destroy the fragile relationship that we had fought so hard to build.

Kira placed her fingers on my arm and then stood up. "You ought to rest. Tomorrow will see its own wars."

I nodded, even though I realized that this night's sleep would not be sweet.

When she finally left me alone, I collapsed back into the chair, staring out into the darkness through the window.

I put a trembling hand on my heart. "How much longer," I whispered softly to the vacant room, "before everything comes crashing down around me?"

I realized that I could no longer wait.
No, I had to start with informing Keto about the truth first, and only then would I have to decide what I am going to do with respect to finding a way to inform Orion about the truth regarding my identity.

I sat up suddenly, my legs shaking but determined. Every move in the direction of the west wing felt heavier than the last.

I'd never set foot in Keto's quarters before, never had to. He was always with me, always with Orion, always at every meeting, every mission.

The prospect of invading his personal space was more revolting than I'd expected.

I actually did locate the door. My thudding heart suspended in mid-air, I raised my hand and knocked softly.

No response.

I waited, knocked again. Nothing.

As I spun around, a voice cut across the quiet, even and deep, just at my back.

"Looking for something?"

I had spun around, startled. Keto was right behind me, arms folded, eyes cold as ever. His eyes locked onto me, piercing and unreadable.

"Yes," I faltered, pressing a hand against my chest in an attempt to slow the thudding of my heart. "I was looking for you."

His eyebrows rose, but he never spoke a word, only grabbing his key and opening the door. He went in quietly and proceeded into the apartment.

I lingered for a moment before going in.

The first thing I noticed was that the room itself was immaculate. Everything was tidy, neat made bed, shining boots standing by the wall, guns neatly placed on the rack as if having been sharpened this morning. So Keto, so disciplined, so regimental, almost sterile.

He sat without hesitation, back straight, face peaceful. I sat down in front of him on the couch, somehow feeling like an intruder.

His eyes locked on mine, level, un-read. "I don't think you've ever been in my room before."

I shook my head, my hands knotting together in my lap. "No. I haven't."

He leaned forward a little, elbows on knees. "So. Why did you come to see me?"

The harshness of his tone constricted my throat. He was giving me nowhere to dance around the subject.

I gritted out. "It's... what Orion said."

Keto's face was mask-like. "Orion said a lot of things." His tone was dead, but I caught the thin edge that lay just beneath. "Which one in particular?"

I crossed my hands between them, palms damp. "The one he said about me."

He cocked his head in the other direction by about a fraction of an inch, eyes squinting up, as if daring me. "I don't remember."

I stood there, my heart frozen. Was he serious? Did he not remember, or just pretend dumb?

I looked at him, trying to read him, but his face was the opposite of reading: stone.

He had always been like that, controlled, enigmatic, like nothing ever touched him.

But I had not been blind. I had seen the flash of his eyes when Orion had told him he called me his Luna. Keto was no fool.

That is to say, he was feigning.

Did he think I would tell him? To tell the words myself? Or was he presenting me with an exit strategy, a choice to pretend with him?

I licked my lips nervously. "Keto," I said. "You know what he meant."

His eyes slanted immediately. "Do I?

Chapter 164

Lyra's POV

The weight of his stare was unbearable. I dropped my eyes to the floor, my voice trembling. “Yes. You do.”

For a long time, he didn’t answer. The sound of the clock ticking on his wall was the only thing that filled the silence.

I sensed his eyes on me, burning and heavy, as if he was peeling away every layer of defenses layer by layer.

Finally, he spoke, the tone low and commanding. "Then say it. Don't beat about the bush. Don't make me pry it out of you. Say it."

My breath snagged. My throat tightened, but I forced the words through it. "That Orion proclaimed me as his Luna."

There it was. The truth. Out loud.

Keto's expression didn't alter, but his jaw snapped shut with a reflexive sound.

He leaned back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest. "And what do you think I'm going to do with that?"

I blinked at him, surprised by his question. "What do you mean?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You came all the way out here, into my bedroom, to tell me something I already knew. Why?"

I felt my face flush with embarrassment as it churned in my stomach. "Because I... because I didn't want you to know otherwise. I didn't want you to think that I was hiding it from you."

His expression relaxed ever so slightly, but not his tone. "But you were hiding it from me."

The words burned like a wound. I flinched, dropping my head again. "I know. I just, I didn't know how to tell you."

For the first time in my life, I saw a look cross his face, one of pain, and instantly covered over by his typical look of stoicism.

He breathed slowly, settling forward once more. "You may know, Raven-" He stopped himself, lips compressing into a practiced line before continuing more guardedly. "You may know, Ravenna, that ignorance is sometimes more polite than to discover the truth. But you decided to reveal it. So I shall question you in a moment: why? Why him?"

I was surprised by the question. Not by Keto.

The distance between us expanded, my heart pounding so hard I heard it in my head.

I'd said it, shut myself back off again, having the remotest idea of what sort of answer I could provide. Why Orion?

Because he'd caught me. Because he'd noticed something in me that I couldn't help noticing in him as well. Because some part of me belonged to him, despite I didn't want it to.

But how was I to tell Keto, the man who had been my rock, my silent guardian, the man I'd trusted all this time to never once judge me?

I steeled myself to meet his gaze, my voice cracking as I fought to gasp, "Because I couldn't fight it anymore."

Keto did not move. His expression did not shift.

But the silence that fell between us was more crushing than any words that he might have uttered.

Keto stayed neutral at first. He just sat there, with his arms crossed over his chest, looking at me as though he was weighing every single sentence that had flowed out of my mouth.

Eventually, he relaxed a bit back, his tone tempered but icy enough to set me free from him.

"It's okay," he told her. "Enjoy you for finally trusting me after holding me at arm's length the entire time, after waiting until Orion issued the public statement before you decided that I was someone worthy enough to add to it." His eyes did not warm up. If anything, they became colder. "Each gross value of you."

The hurt in his tone was louder than any yelling. I flinched, sitting forward, needing to make him understand. "Keto, I didn't mean to-"

He raised his hand, cutting me off. "Don't."

A single word was sufficient in silencing me.
He leaned forward harder, his jaw snapping into place. "I don't need excuses. I don't need them. You made your choice, and you waited until it was slapped in the face of everybody's mind before you even thought about going after me. That tells me everything I need to know."

The weight of his gloom crushed me. "I'm sorry," I whispered in a sigh. "I should've told you earlier. I was scared of hurting you, I didn't want to-"

His eyes blazed, but his tone was even, cold even. "And so we come to this. You did not wish to harm me, and yet, you did. You knew the truth, Ravenna. And rather than tell me, show me, trust me with it, you allowed me to learn it for myself."

I attempted to open my lips once more, but the venom in his stare immobilized me.

"Leave my room.".

They cut deeper than a punch. My chest was pinched, my throat burned, but I strained to remain standing. "Keto..." I tried again, my voice breaking.

"Go." His voice was absolute, there was no arguing it.

I forced myself down past the lump in my throat, and then stepped away from him to the door. My step was purposive, each one taking part of me.

As I slipped away quietly from his door, the corridor was chillier, emptier. My heart was in agony as I shut the door cut off from him, as he had cut me off.

I was empty by the time I got to my room. I flung open the door and entered, my head spinning. I hadn't even sat down when there was a knock.

I gasped for air. "Come in."

The door creaked open, and Kate slipped through it, followed by Kira. Both of them had that look—the look that said they'd seen something I didn't want them to.

Kate closed the door softly and arched an eyebrow. "We saw you sneaking into Keto's room."

Kira crossed her arms. "So? What did you do?"

I collapsed at the end of my bed, staring at my hands. "I finally told him the truth."

There was a silence. Kate leaned forward intently next to me. "And how did he react?"

I produced a cruel laugh that was in fact a stifled sob. "He was angry. He was also broken, I knew that, though he wasn't showing it. But he didn't fight back, he didn't shout, he just told us to leave him alone.".

Chapter 165

Lyra's POV

Kira exhaled heavily, her lips pressing into a thin line. Kate shook her head, her voice softening. “I feel sorry for him.”

The chest pain grew stronger. I hugged my arms around myself. "I wish things were different," I breathed. "I wish I were with Keto, instead. He doesn't deserve this."

Kate's face grew gentle, compassion shining from her eyes. She gave my hand a little squeeze.

But Kira leaned forward, her voice steady, focused. "Listen to me. Don't let guilt overwhelm you. Keto is strong. He'll get past this, even if it hurts now. But you, you need to keep your head straight."

I shut my eyes, felt her words deep within me. My chest tightened. "I just don't want to lose anyone," I whispered.

Kira smiled faintly, sadly. "Sometimes loss is inevitable. But don't kill yourself trying to avoid it. You'll be fine."

Her words hurt me, but there was comfort in them as well.

Kate stood, leaning over slightly as if trying to shake the weight out of the air. "Currently, Ravenna, what you need is rest. You look as if you are going to topple over."

I let out a shaking sigh and nodded. "You're right."

Kira also stood, brushing her black hair back over the shoulder. She was in the doorway, her cool, cutting eyes still on me. "One more thing."

I lifted my head, waiting.

"Don't think about Kevin too much. Don't let whatever Orion is going to do with him draw you back into old scars."

Her reminder sliced through me. I swallowed hard and nodded dumbly.

Kate, as if she felt the burden heaping up once more, changed the subject quickly. "Now that we're talking about Orion. Do you know who he's going to hire to teach me witchcraft?"

Kira shrugged indifferently, her mask of decorum slipping back into place. "No idea. But Orion does not act impulsively. Whoever he picks, he's already made up his mind. We'll find out soon enough."

I sank back onto the bed, fatigue weighing upon my body.

Goodnight," Kira whispered, brushing against my shoulder for a moment before vanishing from the room. The door slammed behind her, and the silence pounced.

Kate didn't move. She stood huddled against the wall, her arms crossed, piercing eyes regarding me as ever.

Finally, she came towards me. "Tell me the truth," she said. "Have you eaten anything?"

I blinked, surprised. "Uh... no.".

Kate clicked her tongue and shook her head, muttering something under her breath before she leveled me with a look. “Then forget about sleeping. You’re not closing your eyes tonight until you’ve had dinner.”

“Kate, I’m not really hungry-"

"I don't care whether or not you're hungry," she cut in. "Your body's been operating on zero all day. You're going to make yourself sick if you keep skipping meals. I'll be back."

She was halfway to the door before I could protest, her braid swinging behind her as she vanished from sight with her usual confident stride.

Once more alone, I breathed slowly. My nerves were still raw from the encounter with Keto, from the sting of his words and how he'd brushed me aside.

But Kate was right here, I couldn't go on ignoring myself.

I glanced toward the bathroom and resolved to take advantage of the time it would take her to return. She'd probably lecture me if I still was in the same state when she returned.

So I stripped off my clothes and went into the bathroom. The water was chilled at first, having me shiver, but soon it was warm, washing away some of the heaviness from my chest.

I washed hastily, more for rejuvenating me than calming me down, but even so, there was something earthy about washing the day away.

As I stepped out, I wrapped myself with the soap-fragrant towel, drying up in a jiffy before slipping into a loose frock. My hair still wet, I styled it up, and hardly was I done when I heard the door creak open again.

Kate rolled in a small trolley with food stacked high upon it: a loaf of bread, roasted meat, some fruits, and a jug of water.

"I said so," she said, with a piercing look, "you're not missing dinner tonight."

I couldn't keep a small smile back. "You sound more like a mother than a friend at times."

She arched her brow. "Maybe that's what you need."

I smiled quietly, then went and sat down at the small table in the corner of the room.

Kate put down the plates and sat with us a moment before, soon enough, the room was filled with the scent of the meal, earthy and warm.

We sat in silence for a bit, though never did she look away from me. That was Kate's way, watchful, quiet, but holding back until the moment when it would be suitable to engage in conversation.

Finally, I lost my patience. "May I ask you something?"

She leaned back and munched on some fruit. "Go ahead.".

"About Captain Zack."

Her expression didn't alter much at his name, but her eyes fluttered briefly. Then she shrugged. "What about him?"

I tilted my head, grinning wryly. "Oh, come on, Kate. Even a preteen would be able to see there's something between you two. The way you look at each other sometimes. the tension. There's some sort of past between you two, isn't there?"

Kate's fork danced suspended in mid-air before she set it down very slowly on her plate. Her lips pressed together to a thin line, and I thought for an instant that she was going to cut me out, as she always did when things became too personal.

But then she sighed, leaning back in her chair. "You pay attention," she said finally, the tone with which she spoke being flavored with reluctance. "I'll grant it.".

I leaned forward, interest burning in me now. "So, I'm right, yes?" I inquired, my eyes narrowing.

Chapter 166

Lyra's POV

Kate gave me a dry look. “That depends on what you think you’re right about.”

I grinned faintly. “That you and Zack weren’t just colleagues. That there was something more between you. Something you’re both pretending doesn’t exist anymore.”

Kate did not respond right away. She filled a glass of water instead, drinking it slowly as if she needed to gather her thoughts.

I waited for her, patient but impatient. Kate was not the type of woman who easily opened up. For her to even consider this kind of conversation meant something.

And then she placed the cup down on the table and sighed. "There was once." she began, her voice softer now, free of its usual harshness. "But it was complicated. Always was, and always will be."

I edged a little closer, my heart beating a little faster. "Complicated how?"

She shot me a sly look. "Let's just say Zack and I don't exactly see eye to eye on what loyalty means." She shook her head, "They don't."

Her words hung in the air, heavy with meaning.

I realized then that what had occurred between them hadn't been some passing affair, it'd been serious.

"And you still love him," I breathed.

Kate didn't answer right away, but the sympathetic flash in her eyes told a thousand more words than words ever could.

She sat back down with her fork again, stabbing her food rather too aggressively. "Being a werewolf changed so much of me, including my appetite for men."

I chewed on my lower lip, staring at her. She was very good at hiding behind plates of steel.

I held back from pushing her further. I instead leaned forward and grazed her hand with a gentle touch. "Thank you for everything."

Her eyes held for a moment before she pulled back her hand, throat clearing.

"Don't make a fuss. Someone has to remind you not to disintegrate before the real wars start."

I managed a weak smile, but in me, warmth seeped.

Kate would never tell you so in so many words, but she did care, cared about all of us.

Kate's head leaned forward over me. "And you?" she said urgently. "Who have you been with, before Orion?"

The question hit harder than I had been prepared. For an instant, my chest felt clamped down, the memories rising up out of the deep well I kept them in.

Kevin's face. The weight of his betrayal. The pain of my former life gnawing at my skin like an open wound that refused to scab.

I forced myself to smile, pushing it all behind bland practiced convention. "The way you say his name," I quipped instead, trying to change the subject. "It sounds like almost like you care for him."

Kate's mouth curled into a smile, not a humorous one. "I don't love him, though," she said matter-of-factly. "I want him."

The stark tone surprised me. I blinked, fork held suspended halfway to my mouth.

She stepped closer again, eyes still glinting. "You're just lucky you made up your mind so quick. If you'd played it cautious any longer."

She let the pause linger, deliberate, heavy with meaning. Then she smirked. “I would have shot my shot at Orion.”

I laughed, though it came out a little shaky. “You’re not joking, are you?”

Kate sat back, folding her arms across her chest, her expression unapologetic. “Not at all.”

Her honesty sent a strange chill through me. She wasn’t bluffing, not even a little.

For all her quick wit and occasional dumbness, Kate had never lied where lust was concerned. And now, she was informing me that she lusted after Orion.

I covered my unease with another sarcastic grin. "Well," I replied carelessly, "it doesn't matter. I have been with no one but Orion."

The deception slipped off my lips more easily than I had anticipated. I did not wish to share with her the reality of Kevin. Not yet. Not when the evils of my own history still held me in their grasp.

Kate considered this for a moment, her eyebrow furrowing faintly as if she believed that there was something more to what I'd said than I was willing to admit. But then she nodded brusquely. "That's fair enough."

I slowly breathed out, my ribcage easing.

"Okay, now?" I asked.

She frowned. "What do you mean, now?"

My grin strengthened. "Being a werewolf can. increase your appetite. You know. Make you hungrier than normal."

Her cheeks flushed with warmth because she had an exact idea of what I was implying.

Kate shrugged. "Me? Absolutely." And, with a mischievous grin, "And now that you've gone and bruised Keto's ego, I'm thinking maybe I'll pop on down to give him a hug."

My jaw dropped slightly. "You're kidding."

She winked. "Not a chance."

"Kate," I said, my voice laced with incredulity. "You can't be serious.".

"Dead serious." She leaned back in her chair like a queen on her throne. "I do not desire to spend tonight alone, and Keto, well, he's the perfect candidate. Heartbroken. Vulnerable. And.... she smiled even more widely, he's not so bad to look at, either."

I shook my head, amazed, and smiled gently. "You just want to play him and throw him away."

"Wrong," she said serenely. "I want to play console mode."

"Enter... console mode?" I echoed, gagging on how ridiculous it was.

"Yes," she said, deadpan. "Give my sympathy in my flesh. Make him utilize me, or rough around on me if that is what he has to do. That's not using and dumping him. That's therapy."

A snort slipped out before I could clasp my mouth. I tapped my head, clasping my hand over my mouth. "You're impossible, Kate."

"And you're too tight," she shot back, but with a glint of laughter in her eyes.

I nodded my head on the table, my shoulders shaking. "In that case, you'd better leave before I do."

Kate stood and moved back from me, her stretch inclining towards feral. She smiled at me again, a final wicked glint. "Goodnight, Ravenna."

"Goodnight," I said, still smiling. "But tomorrow you're going to have to tell me everything."

She wagged a finger in my direction as she headed for the door. "You'll see."

Chapter 167

Lyra's POV

Then, with a flick of her braid, she was gone, leaving the room strangely quiet.

The smile slowly faded from my face as her footsteps retreated down the hall. I leaned back in my chair, staring outside through the window, and her words echoed in my head.

I would not like to be alone without a man tonight.

Kate needed to fill the void within her with Keto. What about me then?

Not after the whirlwind of emotions with Keto, Kevin, and all that Orion had seen in my eyes prior to that.

My gaze drifted to the door. My heart began to pound faster.

I knew where I was headed.

More slowly, I stood and crossed to my closet. My fingers hesitated for a second before pulling out a piece of lingerie, red silk as rich as the room's curtains.

I pressed it against myself, my breathing uneven, before dressing.

Over it, I drew on a plain nightgown, something respectable enough to cover what lay beneath.

I saw myself in the mirror, the high points of my cheeks warm with red. Fear and desire warred inside me, and desire was winning out.

I laid one hand over my heart, soothing the wild thudding of it. Then I turned, strode to the door, and stepped out into the hallway.

My bare feet made the cool stone floor a soft slapping noise as I went towards the one place I needed to be.

Towards Orion.

My heart beat a bit more rapidly as I approached Orion's door. I lingered there for a moment, hesitating about whether to knock or just walk in.

Something within me chose insanity. My hand skimmed the doorknob and, to my surprise, the door opened.

Unlocked.

I moved quietly in, closing the door gently behind me. The first thing I saw was the wispy mist curling about the space.

The gentle hiss of water told me he was showering.

A sly smile touched my lips. Better.

Rather than wait politely, I moved over to his bed, running my hand across the sheets as if to feel for their softness.

I sat down, crossing my legs, my eyes scanning his room. On his nightstand stood a half-bottle of wine.

My fingers closed around it like it was made for my hand. I poured a glass, observing the red liquid swirl around in the glass before I drank it down slowly.

The door to the bathroom groaned open.

And then he stepped out.

Naked.

For an instant, I froze. Then my gaze raked over his body shamelessly, to rest where no woman should, on his huge dick.

My lips curled. He stopped in his tracks, shock etched across his features.

"Ravenna?" His voice was quiet, shaded by incredulity.

"So," I replied, lifting my glass slowly, "you decided to play dumb about not hearing me arrive."

He let out a snort of laughter, shoving his hand through his wet hair as drips ran down his chest.

"I didn't catch that," he answered, finding a towel and loosely binding it around his hips. "I don't use my talent all the time, especially when I'm attempting to sleep."

I let my head tip to one side, taking another sip, regarding him with careful hunger. "Mmm. I'm sorry," I breathed, but a smile slipped past my lips. "But there's no sleeping for you this evening."

He gave me a subtle, narrowed look. "And why not?"

I rose up off the bed, the glass still clutched in my hand.

Each step that I took towards him was slow and calculated. When I was positioned in front of him, I extended the glass. "Drink."

He paused for a moment, a look of suspicion crossing his face. But then, perhaps deciding to humor me, he took it.

His fingers brushed against mine, hard and warm, before he tipped the glass to his lips.

I watched him drink, my teeth sinking into my bottom lip. And then I took the towel. Slow, slow slowness, I pulled it loose.

It hit the floor.

His body stiffened, his eyes becoming hard as if daring me to continue.

And I did.

The glass slipped out of his hands, shattering softly against the rug.

With one smooth motion that was so quick it took my breath away. His fingers wrapped around the fragile straps of my nightgown, and with a single powerful tug, the nightgown tore from my body, leaving naught but my lingerie.

I felt a quiver.

I smiled up at him, unworried. "I thought you said no powers."

"Not when I'm dealing with another Alpha," he growled, his eyes darkening.

"Mmm." My hand trailed further down, bold, staking claim.

"I want you to fuck me," I breathed in his ear.

He head-shook, which caught me by surprise. "No, you suck me first."

I arched an eyebrow, grinning, then I knelt down, my arms encircling his cock.

I slowly kissed the head of his cock, before sucking him completely into my mouth.

Something about the way it felt in my mouth caused me to moan as I sucked his cock so deeply.

I caught hold of his lapel for support as I quickened the pace of my movements, and he caught hold of my hair, slowly pushing himself towards me to hasten.

His breathing was stopped, for a second, I thought he would cum, but he did not.

He thrust me away from his cock and then caught hold of me, his strength slamming me against the wall.

My heart pounded, passion and defiance clashing like tempest and fire.

"Watch your step, tiger," I challenged, my voice low and husky.

His lips brushed inches from mine, his authority cloaked in sensuality. "No, Ravenna. Not now. You don't get to call the shots. You'll trail behind."

Inferno coursed through me, a wicked thrill spreading in my chest. My lips passionately opened, and I gasped, "Then take me.".

He swatted my butt, and I liked the little sting it gave.

I turned on him, palms down on his shoulders, sinking, holding like wrestling and falling simultaneously.

"I want to see your eyes while you're screwing me," I said to him, my chest thudding.

He laughed, then grabbed one of my legs and in one fluid motion, thrust his dick into me.

I moan softly, my lips opening as the ecstasy coursed through me.

Then he started thrusting, as his other hand lay on my neck, one finger raising my chin to see his face.

I gasped, whispered, moaned his name, each word dragged from my mouth as if dragged from my heart.

"I'm cumming," I said to him, holding him tighter.

He grasped my second leg and carried me straight to the bed. "Cum on my bed," he groaned as he slammed harder and faster.

I bit him on the neck, on the brink of tears, and then held my breath, then screamed at the top of my lungs as my body convulsed under him.

He came deep and hard inside me with a low grunt as he spent his cum in me.

He crashed into me, my body trembling. He had me there, chest rising and falling, his heat on my neck.

I rolled my face over, getting my voice back, lips brushing against his ear as I muttered softly, "Told you. No sleeping tonight."

He chuckled and pulled me into him.

Chapter 168

Kate's POV

I didn’t waste time after leaving Ravenna's room. My mind was already made up, and my body was restless.

Keto’s door was slightly ajar when I reached it, and I caught him stepping out, dressed casually, his expression tired but still composed.

"Going out?" I asked, resting easily against the frame.

He looked over at me, surprise warring in his eyes. "Not exactly. Just getting wine from the cellar."

I raised a brow. "Drunk night, then?"

He half-shrugged, his mouth twisting into a crooked grin. "Who knows what tomorrow brings?"

For a moment, there was nothing between us. Then, with a slight tilt of my head, I told him, "Take wine for two. I'll be coming back."

His brow shot up, a glint in his eye. "Okay," he said slowly, his tone between amusement and curiosity. "You're welcome."

I offered him a quick smile and walked away, my pulse racing more than I'd expected. That went more smoothly than I'd expected. Much more quickly.

In my room, I shed my clothes, letting them fall wherever on the bed, and went to the shower.

Water hissed against me, warm and fresh, but my head was spinning round and round with Keto's face, the way he had glared at me, the way he had not questioned my temerity.

By the time I came out, steam trailing behind me, I had already chosen what to wear, something sharp, something fierce, something that said what I needed tonight.

The dress clung. Revealing, dangerous, impossible to ignore.

As I adjusted the straps, a knock on the door broke in.

"Wait," I yelled, pulling the fabric into place.

When I opened it violently, my breath caught up.

It was Zack.

He tensed, his eyes widening as they moved over me.

His throat rose and fell on a hard swallow, and he just stood there for an instant before gritting, "May I come in?"

I didn't move fast enough, probably, before moving aside. "Yes."

He came in, though his eyes remained on me in a way that made me feel suddenly self-conscious for the first time that evening. "Are you leaving somewhere?" he asked cautiously.

I shook my head, attempting to gather a flippancy of laughter. "Not at all. Just going to bed."

He nodded, despite the fact that I could tell he didn't believe me. His second question was in a gentler voice, tainted with something more open. "Do you have somebody visiting?"

I didn't answer. Couldn't. My chest closed, guilt flooding in like an unwanted tide.

So instead, I snapped curtly, "What do you want, Zack?"

His brow furrowed at my tone, but he spoke honestly. "Couldn't sleep. Thought I'd come talk to you."

I felt nauseous. He was too honest, too sincere, and that made it that much worse.

I forced a smile that seemed tenuous on my lips. "I have to go pick something up from Ravenna. If you can wait ..."

He looked shocked, but nodded. "Okay. I'll wait."

I pushed the door open and glided out, closing it firmly behind me.

The moment I leaned back against the door, my breath escaped. My hand was held over my chest.

"Why did I lie?" I whispered to myself, voice cracking with something like remorse.

Because I had to. Because tonight wasn't his.

"Sorry, Zack," I whispered, leaning my head back against the wood. "You'll have to wait a long time."

I got up and walked down the hallway, each step heavier than the last, until Keto's door came into view again.

It was open this time, light streaming across the floor.

When I walked in, his eyes roved my body all at once. His lips parted, his eyes darkening.

"You look... really hot in that," he breathed, his voice low.

I blushed with heat, but attempted to smile flirtatiously. "Thanks."

He tilted his head slightly, an eyebrow raised in a subtle smirk. "I thought you weren't coming anymore."

The words exploded before I could stop them. "I'm not Ravenna."

It fell silent. An aching pinch of guilt struck me, and I winced. "I shouldn't have said that. Sorry."

But Keto shook his head, the expression on his face relaxing. "It's all right. Don't apologize."

I nodded hastily, trying to chase away the embarrassment, and reached out to the bottle in his hand. "Here," I said, taking it and raising it to my lips.

The wine burned sensually down my throat, anchoring me.

Then, glass held firm and eyes narrowing in bravery I wasn't so sure I had. "So, Keto. Are you going to keep grieving and mourning for Ravenna or are you going to fuck me over?"

His eyes widened, shock passing over his face.

I continued to hold his eyes. Challenging him.

Finally, he let out a harsh laugh. "Ravenna can suck my dick," he spat, voice rough.

Then his eyes captured mine, with sparks of something new. "Tonight is about you."

He was drunk. I knew it. I could smell the booze on him, detect the earliest hints of a stumble in his walk, hear the strands of taking chances in his speech.

And my heart tightened, not with disdain, but with something dangerously close to relief.

I think I like the drunken version of Keto," I panted, closing in.

My hand traveled up over his chest, fingers following the line of his jaw.

Then, before I could lose my nerve, I pulled him down into me and kissed him.

His body stiffened initially, the shock of it making itself known to him. Then, though, he kissed me in return. Hard. Like he wanted to tear away every single memory of Ravenna from me instead.

We kissed for a little while, and then he pulled away. I slowly unbuckled his belt, my eyes meeting his until he was bare.

I kept out his already hard dick and dragged him with me as I moved towards the bed.

"You're mine sheep leading your dick to slaughter," he taunted as he followed behind, he had no option, my hold on his dick was tight.

"It may be your mine slaughter, yet I want it to be mine," I stated seated on the bed.

He smiled and then kissed me again, pushing me slowly with his body until my back was against the bed.

Then his lips dropped on my boobs. He sucked it tight until I started to moan in his ears.

"Fuck me already," I whispered, voice strained.

But he wasn't paying attention, his mouth was still busy on my boobs until I slapped him on the butt and he stepped away smiling.

"Fuck me," I whispered again, touching his chest.

He nodded and then rubbed his dick against my clitoris, I moaned softly, gazing at him until he thrust his dick into me.

I gasped, holding on to the sheet as the pleasure shot through my body.

Then he started thrusting. I wrapped my legs around his waist, while I pulled him into a kiss.

"Fuck me harder," I whispered into his ears and he did exactly that.

I was thrusting hard and fast until my cries were not just within his room but throughout the mansion.

At that moment, I did not care if Zack heard me. I simply did not want Keto to cease fucking me, and he did not.

Chapter 169

Lyra's POV

For a while, it was just all right to fall asleep with my cheek against Orion's warm chest.

"You are up," he muttered, still a little sleep-tormented.

I said, "Yes," hugging him around the waist, holding him close to my body. I was going to hold him forever.

His hand caressed down my back with a gentle touch, but stiffened again in his voice; "Today will be a long day."

I tilted my head, trying to catch his gaze. "How so?"

"'Cause Kevin won't talk," Orion said, his countenance hardening. "Meaning I have to approach it another way."

A chill ran down my spine. "What plan?"

He smiled, a smile that had no kindness in his eyes. "You'll see."

I swallowed and nodded. The thing was, I wasn't really sure I did want to see, but I trusted him. Better than that, I loved him.

Moving away from the bed, I touched my knotted hair. "And what am I to wear now, since you destroyed my nightgown last night?"

That provoked a low laugh from him. He indicated the robe on the chair. "Wear mine."

I raised an eyebrow at it, then at him, my smile curving my lips. "Okay."

I slipped it over my shoulders, and his scent remained behind, clinging to me. I leaned down to kiss him good-bye. "See you later."

He nodded, his eyes following me. "Okay."

I had opened it and I was in the hallway. My heart still smoldered after having had such experiences with him.

Walking down the corridor towards my room, the last thing that I could have ever imagined was to have almost collided with Kate coming out of Keto's room.

My eyes widened and, of their own accord, a smile tugged at my lips. "This is serious."

Kate, however, looked more shocked than I did. Her eyes went wide with surprise as she stood there, her face looking like I'd just been caught doing something naughty.

"Where are you off to?" she hissed, glaring at me.

I did not blink. "Orion's room."

She dropped her jaw and jerked her head back up again with a jerky motion. "I'm offended. You didn't give me a warning."

I smiled sweetly, raising my hands. "I thought of it when you left my room. I wasn't really meaning to."

Kate rolled her eyes, but no ill intent lay behind them as she wrapped arms around herself.

We strolled together toward her bedroom. I was about to taunt her further when I pushed the door of her room open.

What I saw in her bedroom left me covering my hand with my mouth.

On Kate's bed, fast asleep, lying fast asleep, was Zack.

My jaw was going to hit the floor. "Oh my gods." I gasped, staring at Kate with eyes wide with shock. "You slept with two men?"

Kate's face furrowed in disgust, and she shook her head so hard the quantity of hair vibrated. Her hands flashed up, palms outwards, as if to ward off the blow. "No! One!"

I blinked heavily, my eyes darting between her and Zack and back again. "But he's sitting there."

"The other one," she broke in, voice lowered but still taut, "was simping around."

I gnawed my teeth, resisting the urge to laugh, but incredulity in her tone was too big. "Simping around?"

"Yes!" she snarled angrily, frowning at me. "He came in, chatted, and slept. That's all."

Oh, I informed her, but I wasn't so sure. "So you're saying. you slept with Keto and just left Zack behind like, like some dumped puppy?"

Kate winced and ran her hands over her face. "I didn't mean to! He surprised me when I wasn't ready. I didn't even know he was coming, Ravenna. I had to make excuses."

I covered my mouth again, shaking with stifled laughter. "This is bad enough. Kate, can't you realize how awful this is? One man in your bed and another in the room down the hall?"

She shot me a look of outrage, but her cheeks tinged with a telltale pink. "Don't you dare make this worse than it is."

I tilted my head, not wishing to be drawn into one more zing. "Oh, I don't have to make it worse. It's already terrible."

Kate groaned again and turned her back on me, pacing around the room as Zack rolled over in bed, still sleeping peacefully, none the worse for all the devilry that was going on around him.

I was still in the doorway, shaking my head with a grin. "You've really done it this time, Kate."

Zack flopped over, gritting his teeth as he sat up in bed. His eyes flashed open, becoming briefly blind before sharpening up to read the two of us looming over him.

He glared for a second, totally lost, unsure if he was dreaming or not.

"Wait," He croaked out, his voice like gravel.
"Are you two? bi?"

I blinked at him with shock. "Bi?" I repeated, tilting my head. And then, for dramatic effect, I raised an eyebrow. "Bisexuals?"

He nodded slowly, still half-asleep but trying to get his head around it.

His eyes darted nervously between Kate and me, suspicion and questioning on his face.

I tried a small smile, playing innocent. "Perhaps," I said suavely, lying my heart out.

Safer to give him something innocuous than to risk exposing him to even a whiff of what Kate actually went and did last night.

If Zack were to find out that she had left him behind to get screwed by Keto who happens to be their neighbor, then the man would be crushed, and Kate wasn't ready for that backlash.

By my side, Kate bristled but hid it. "Zack," she said, softer than she usually talks. "Sorry 'bout last night. I... got hooked up."

Zack shrugged barely at all, running his hand over his hair as he sat up. "No big," he snarled, though there was a tension to his voice that betrayed him.

Before the silence could dwell for too long, I moved. "Your men arrive tomorrow morning," I reminded him with a smile. "You would do well to make preparation for the transfer."

He blinked, as if remembering something, and then nodded firmly. "That's right."

And with it, he got out of bed and disappeared from the room without casting one last look back over his shoulder in either my or her direction. One minute later, he was gone.

Chapter 170

Lyra's POV

Kate let out a long breath and collapsed onto the chair near her vanity. “Thank you,” she muttered, glancing up at me. “For covering up for me back there.”

I crossed my arms and gave her a pointed look. “You owe me.”

She giggled sheepishly. "Yeah, I do."

I glared at her for a moment, unable to remain silent. "Why did you not simply tell him the truth, Kate? Why did you lie?"

Her eyes dropped to the ground. "I don't know. I just... I didn't want him to know anything. Not yet. Maybe never. I'd rather I hurt him, in case he still likes me."

Her words hit harder than I had expected, slicing into my chest. I sat beside her. "Exactly my issue with Keto."

She flinched at me, her eyes squinting. "That's a lie."

I arched an eyebrow. "What's going on?"

That is not the same," she told me. "You and Keto? That is nothing like me and Zack. I am doing it to protect him because I don't want to see him so exposed." She stabbed a finger into my arm. "You're keeping away from Keto because you don't want to have to get around dealing with your own emotions for him. Don't make it some hero thing.".

I had parted my lips and closed them over them again, shocked at her bluntness. She was not as far from the truth.

Just before I could say anything, a booming knock shook through the door, and then Kira shrugged and yelled. "Ravenna! Kate! Are you two in there?"

Kate and I both exchanged looks, the tense space between us for a moment breaking down into something more cautious.

"She's early," Kate said, getting up from the chair.

My throat tightened with fear, tension pressing in my chest.

Kate headed for the door but hesitated before she could open it, turning back to me, her eyes slitted. "Not a word about last night."

I held up my hands. "Don't worry. Your secret's safe."

But when Kira knocked once more, this time louder, I couldn't help but think secrets, my secrets, Kate's secrets, our secrets, were past their time to be kept.

The door creaked open before we had a chance to catch our breath. Kira slid inside, her black eyes scanning me to Kate in a swift glance that made my gut churn.

What is wrong with you two, as white as a ghost? she snapped, her eyes narrowing.

Her voice was not quite raised, but there was that quality in it which made it impossible to tell her a lie.

Kate immediately stiffened, wrapping her arms around herself as if she were shielding herself from Kira's questioning. "It's nothing. You're overanalyzing things," she said too hastily.

Kira tilted her head, then let her eyes wander to the tangled bed.

The covers were in a twist, and I already knew what leap of conclusion she would make. Her eyebrow went up. "So... who was it?"

My heart skipped a beat. Kate froze beside me, and that was enough for Kira.

"Got to be kidding me." Sarcasm twisted Kira's mouth as she emitted a cold laughter. "You attempted to conceal it from me? Out of all the people?"

I attempted to step in before Kate shattered from the tension. "Kira, don't make it more than it is."

"Oh, please don't do that, Ravenna," Kira interrupted me, moving deeper into the room.

Her eyes flicked back and forth between me and her, shining with brightness and awareness. "You're standing behind her. And you're hiding something too."

Kate chewed on her lip, guilt passing over her face, but still said nothing. That just made Kira's suspicions stronger.

"You're not even going to deny it?" Kira's voice was a bit softer, but not warm, more in disappointment and disbelief.

She folded her arms over her chest, drumming her fingers on her sleeve. "I didn't know we had secrets between us."

Kate finally released a breath and sat down beside the bed, her shoulders slumping. "It's not what you think."

Kira raised a brow. "Then tell me. Because from where I'm sitting, it looks exactly like what I think."

I sat with Kate, close enough to help her but also to anchor her.

"Her not hurting him is why she didn't say anything."

Kira's eyes snapped to me, knife-sharp. "And do you find yourself lying more in prevarication?"

Kate caught her breath, "It's not a lie. It's just." She didn't continue, struggling to force the words.

"An omission," I finished softly.

Kira shook her head, clearly upset. "You two are great. First, you lie for each other, then you cover. Don't you know that secrets ruin everything?"

I swallowed hard, her words coming a bit too personally.

Kate's eyes flashed with unshed tears, but she blinked them away quickly. "I know. But I can't... I can't let him know yet.".

Kira released a breath, rubbing her temples as if the weight of our sloppy choices was pounding in her head. "You're playing with fire. Both of you."

She gazed at me a fraction of a second longer than I cared about. She might know something about Orion, too. My heart winced.

Kate tried to dispel the tension, struggling to produce a half-smile on her face. "You won't tell him, right?"

Kira's laughter was harsh, on the edge of bitterness. "You'd think I'd want to get in on his broken heart? No way. But don't assume my silence is consent."

We stood there for a minute in silence. Kate lowered her face, flushing, and I clenched my fists together, fighting to maintain an even tone. "So, what do you want us to do, Kira?

Kira looked at both of us, her expression unreadable. Then, with a tired sigh, she sat in the chair by the window. “I don’t want anything. You’re both grown. Make your mess. But don’t expect me to clean it up when it explodes.”

That stung more than if she had yelled.

"How did you know?" I asked. "How did you know Kate kissed Keto and broke up with Zack in her bedroom?"

"My nose," she replied. "I knew Zack was home by the smell of him. I knew he slept on the bed because the smell is so strong. Kate, though, smells like Keto no matter where."

I squirmed in my seat, already contemplating how to redirect the conversations from where they're headed.

Kate spoke up after a time, her voice tiny. "I'll do it. I promise.”

Chapter 171

Lyra's POV

Kira nodded a little, but her expression said she didn't trust her. She leaned back in the chair, crossing her arms and legs, her body language closed off.

I tried to brighten the mood. "Well, since we're all awake now, let's eat before the day eats us up."

Kira leveled me with a look. "Breakfast won't fix this."

Kate whispered hard, almost pleading, "Please, Kira."

That placated her somewhat. She glanced at Kate, then at me, and finally sighed once more. "Okay. But let me make one thing clear: if you think I didn't see the robe you have on, Ravenna, don't be such a fool."

My cheeks flushed with heat. I automatically pulled Orion's robe tighter around me, but the smile that spread across Kira's face warned me it was too late.

Kate stared at me with wide eyes, and I could do no more than shrug by way of apology.

Kira rose, brushing imaginary specks from her tunic. "Secrets, lies, robes that do not belong to you, this morning is simply full of surprises."

She floated to the door, then turned, standing facing us once again. "Just don't let it ruin you."

And with that, she was gone, leaving a silence more constricting than its absence.

Kate let out a sigh and leaned back onto the bed. "She knows everything."

I rubbed my face. "Not everything. But enough to torture us."

Kate turned her head in my direction. "Do you think she'll really keep it under her hat?"

I weighed it out. Kira wasn't gossipy, but she wasn't the sort of person to drop things either.

"She'll keep quiet about it, at least for the time being. But don't expect her to keep covering for you if things get any worse."

Kate nodded, nibbling once more at her lip. "I'll talk to him soon. I promise."

I half-smiled in return to her, but my stomach was churning. Promises around here were made to be broken before they ever actually got fulfilled.

I glared at Kate, speaking in low tones so that she alone could understand. "We need to get washed and up for the day. The longer you're like that, the more likely someone else will use their nose and figure out that you were with Keto."

Kate went pale and nodded quickly, sweeping her hair back behind her face. "You're right. I'll take a bath now."

I reassured her with a shoulder hug before I slipped out of her room and into my own.

I peeled Orion's robe off from within me, still redolent with him.

The sensation of his touch, the tone of his voice as it had whispered in my ear the night before, persisted longer than I wished to admit.

I rattled the notion from my head and stepped into the shower. The water was cold, then warm, pouring over my body and washing away the details of the night.

After I finished, I was cleaner, less on edge, more myself again. I put on a new dress.

As I emerged from the room and headed downstairs, the sound of voices surprised me.

Instead of the normal scattering of footfalls or mumbled talk, it almost seemed like everyone was going in one direction.

The big table was half-filled already in the dining hall. I had the shock of a realization that I had never seen them all sit together before.

It did something to make me more nervous than it should.

Even so, I bolstered up and made room, grabbing the empty chair in the middle.

The only one missing was Zack. His chair sat empty like an absent jigsaw puzzle tile in the image.

Orion took the head of the table, relaxed, his expression serene but firm enough that everyone else didn't relax.

He looked at me when I sat, and something trembled in his eyes, gentler than what he wore for the others.

"I thought," he said, "that this time we should all sit together, instead of fanning out like wolves who do not make up one pack."

There were nods, murmurs of agreement. No one said a word, but the power of his presence was enough to keep them all there.

The maidservants hurried, serving the courses with the drill of accustomed habit. Roasting-meat courses, fruit dishes of fresh fruit, and hot breads filled the table.

I took my fork, attempting to act as if nothing was out of the ordinary while the initial bites were being consumed.

Orion broke that illusion with his next words.

"We're on the brink of war." His tone was even. "And we have two enemies closing in from all sides."

I felt the atmosphere at the table shift. My hand suspended in mid-air to my lips.

"The first," Orion continued, his eyes sharp, "is Ruth. She's already swinging and we all know what she can do."

I glanced around, feeling the unease in the faces of all present.

"The second is Alpha Lucas," he went on, his tone firmer. "He'll never stop until he believes he's acquired what he believes is his."

The sound of the name ran down my spine.

"And when the third." Orion's eyes flickered infinitesimally, as though he spoke to shadows in the room. "The third is Ladon.

The sound cut off even the faintest susurration of breath at the table.".

Then Orion shifted, rolling in Keto's direction. "Have you acquired all we need to kill it?"

Keto hunched forward, stiff back, calm face with an edge of tension around the jawline.

"Close enough. Only one thing remains. But I'll get it today."

Orion nodded once. "Make sure you do. The sooner, the better."

Then Orion reclined, his eyes scanning the table until they fell on Kate.

"After we've finished breakfast, Kate will nip Zack and his family."

Kate's tone scraped across the plate in a subdued clatter. She glared up, but Orion did not relent.

"They will be departing soon," he continued, "and I have no tolerance to continue clearing room for people who are not part of my pack.".

Even before anyone could speak a syllable, two guards rushed into the dining hall, stopping inches short of Orion's seat. They inclined their heads slightly.

"Alpha," said one of them, his tone level but with a sense of urgency, "Zack's forces have come."

Chapter 172

Lyra's POV

I felt the ripple of tension move across the table.

Orion's gaze narrowed, and he nodded once. "Good." He leaned back in his chair, the creaking of wood on stone echoing too loudly. Rising to his full height, he gazed down the length of the table. "Keto. Kate. With me."

Kate's fork hit the floor for the third time, clattering against the plate this time. She swallowed hard, steadying herself, and rose.

Keto strode without hesitation, his composure firm, though his eyes betrayed a bit of curiosity.

Orion's gaze swept farther. "Kira," he said to her, his voice deep, contained, "come with us. Just in case we need to treat injuries or emergencies."

Kira got up at once, already in a healer mindset, the expression on her face serene but focused.

I pushed back my chair, the decision made before I even thought about it. "I want to go too."

Orion's eyes flashed over to mine. He remained quiet for a moment. Then, to my amazement, he nodded. "You're free."

I rose to my feet, smoothing the hem of my dress. My heart thudded in my chest, but I forced myself to remain still.

The two of us, and the others, began to file out of the dining room.

We descended into the lower parts of the house, through doors which I'd never even seen before.

The path grew narrower until finally Orion stopped in front of a massive iron-sealed door. He placed his hand on it, and the door slowly opened.

It wasn't a basement, it was an armory, a dungeon. The kind of place that whispered violence, secrets.

And Zack's men stood at its core.

There were five of them, arrayed in a line behind him, towering and broad-shouldered, their attitude respectful but wary.

They threw off their glances as we entered, some of them interested, others rigid. Zack himself was collected, although the jawline firmed when his gaze landed on Orion.

"This is it?" His voice carried weight, although he dipped his head. "We're ready."

Orion's expression didn't alter. "Yes," he said flat out. And then he moved slightly, motioning Kate forward.

Kate bristled at his tone. I could see her fingers twitch where I was standing, curl and uncurl around her sides.

She glanced at Keto, who nodded curtly, but that didn't unwind the knot in her shoulders.

I gulped hard, my throat closing up as I watched her move to the center of the basement.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Orion asked, almost convincingly calm. "And are you also sure you don't want to join my pack?"

The question bristled Zack. For a split second, his men exchanged wary glances, as if debating the risk hidden in Orion's question.

Zack's tone was resolute, though I could see the tension in his jaw. "I want the bite. But I also want to be myself. Without submission to your pack."

The defiance was clear, yet Orion did not give in. He nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Very well." His voice dipped lower, colder. "Once each of you has been bitten, you'll remain in isolation cells until after your first shift. That shift will be this evening, during the full moon. But since you're not members of my pack, I can't be held responsible for you."

He let the words hang before him like a hangman's noose.

“You’ll have to navigate the difficulties of being werewolves on your own.” His gaze cut briefly to Kate. “Or employ her services. But she knows very little herself.”

Kate’s lips parted, as if to protest, but before she could say anything, Orion’s entire demeanor shifted.

His face darkened, and his eyes flashed red.

I stood frozen, caught breath in my throat. Zack and his pack froze as statues, terror twisting their faces.

Orion rarely shifts, but I have yet to get used to it.

And then Orion's voice thundered out, deep and terrifying, overlaid with the command of an Alpha that shuddered through my skeleton.

"Bite."

Kate's body jerked as punched. She could not refuse, not with that command.

Her form shifted, but not completely, her eyes blazing, her teeth lengthening, her nails turning to claws.

The wolf inside her was forced forward.

She lunged to Zack first.

Her fangs bit deep into his arm in a live wire strike, and Zack howled. His knees buckled for an instant before Keto and Kira charged in, pinning him down and dragging him towards the opposite corner of the basement.

They shoved him into one of the iron-barred cells and shut it, his groans echoing off behind the bars.

Kate cleaned her mouth off on the back of her hand and moved on to the next man.

Every single one of them moved forward, and every single one of them Kate bit.

Some of them gritted their teeth through it, some groaned, one dropped to his knees clutching the mark in front of Kira as he hauled him off into another cell.

Then came the last man.

He was the tallest of the group, broad-shouldered, with a scar across his cheek. He stepped stiffly forward, but I could see the shaking in his hands.

Kate bit him cleanly.

For a moment it was fine. Then, however, as she staggered back, his eyes rolled back into his head.

He collapsed to the floor of stone.

His body arched uncontrollably, convulsing, foam frothing at his lips.

I stepped closer, my voice breaking the silence. "What is happening to him?"

Kira dropped to her knees next to the man, attempting to keep him steady, but his body twisted out of her hands.

Orion did not move. His red eyes burned, his expression stony.

Finally, his voice cut through the frenzy. "His body is rejecting the venom."

I stood frozen as the man thrashed more and more furiously, his cries drowned out by the foam clogging his throat.

His chest rose and fell with savage power, then froze, utterly still.

The silence that followed was absolute.

I looked to Orion, hoping for some glimmer of pity. But there was none.

He stood over me, his eyes scanning the dead man without remorse.

Then he stated, flat tone like rock, "He's dead."

And, without another glance, he turned and left.

Chapter 173

Lyra's POV

I could see the pain in Zack’s eyes, a silent torment that said more than words ever could.

One of his men was lost because of his choice, and I comprehended, as did he, that his remorse would ride behind him like a ghost throughout the entire course of his life.

His jaw clenched as he tried to keep it hidden, but sorrow tends to seep out, no matter how hard a man attempts to cover it.

Kira placed a hand on my arm, her tone a mere whisper, "Get her out of here. Both of you." She glanced at Kate, who was frozen, staring at the body on the floor.

Kate's face had paled, almost see-through, and her hands trembled. Her mouth opened, yet nothing came out, only shallow breaths as if she were underwater on dry land.

I inched forward and slid an arm over her shoulders. "Let's go," I breathed, pulling her toward the stairs.

She stumbled, resisting initially, her big eyes glued on the body she'd left behind. "It isn't your fault," I whispered gently, trying to anchor her. "Don't let it devour you."

It's my fault," Kate whispered against his chest, her voice breaking. "I.., he trusted me. I decided to give them a bite. And now he's dead. Because of me." Her throat closed as she swallowed, her eyes watering.

I drew her closer, forcing her to keep moving. "You didn't kill him, Kate. His body... it just couldn't take it. You survived your bite. We didn't know it was possible for this to occur. How could you blame yourself for something we didn't know?"

Her steps dragged behind, burdened with guilt, as we emerged out of the basement into the quiet hallway above.

Keto stayed below, tending Zack and the other men.

Kate's voice cracked as she whispered again, "But I should have known. I should have prepared myself."

I stopped on the stairs and encouraged her, turning her around to me.

Her eyes brimmed with unshed tears. I brushed a lock of hair back from her face and spoke softly,

"That wasn't ever your fault, Kate. Don't take on guilt that isn't yours. You survived the bite because you were hard enough. This guy... maybe he wasn't. That doesn't mean you murdered him."

Her lip shook as she shook her head. "It doesn't feel that way."

"Inked Men" by Cat Farthingale is in the public domain.
I maintained eye contact with hers, forcing her to hear. "It wasn't your fault."

And with that, we came into the principal room where Orion lounged in his high-backed chair, a glass of heavy red wine tracing its slow course in his hand.

His position was relaxed.

Kate stepped back at the sight of him, recoiling a bit beside me.

I felt her tension, but I didn't let her pull away. My own anger was boiling, and I wasn't going to stifle it this time.

Why didn't you warn Zack?" I growled, my tone rasping out the stunned quiet. "Why didn't you inform him that one of his men could die from the bite?"

Orion didn't flinch. He set the glass of wine on the table beside him with deliberate aplomb.

Then he leaned back in his chair, crossing a leg over the other. His eyes met mine, cold and unreadable.

"Because," he said slowly, his voice imbued with the authority that could silence a room, "it was not my responsibility."

My hands clenched at my sides. "Not your responsibility? You knew what could happen. You could have saved them, saved him, from entering into this blind."

Orion's lips curled into something that was not quite a smile. "And if I had cautioned them? Do you think that would have dissuaded them? Do you think Zack would have departed?"

He shook his head, just a little. "No. They would have begged for the bite. They wanted the power. They wanted the curse. And power always has a price.".

Kate made a soft sound beside me, as if she wanted to speak but did not want to.

Orion's gaze flicked over to her and back to me.

I gave them what they wanted," he continued, his tone colder now. "I do not coddle strangers. Zack chose to remain apart from my pack. He wanted freedom, not loyalty. Freedom has consequences. His man's killing is not on my conscience, it is on Zack's.".

My chest tightened, I wanted to scream at him, to shake him, to get him to admit that he might have been able to do something to prevent this. But the power of his aura overwhelmed me like a hurricane.

Kate's fingers slipped against mine, trembling. "Ravenna, no," she whispered, almost begging.

I glared at her, and saw the way she flinched before Orion's gaze.

Anyway, I wasn't about to let him have the last word. I drew a swift breath. "Maybe it wasn't your fault. But you did have the authority to present them with an option that was truly their own. You didn't. And now a man is dead who might not have been."

Orion's eyes tightened, a momentary flash of annoyance breaking through his cover of serenity.

"Go," he told me. "Grieve your loss if you must. But don't preach at me on the weight of choice, Lyra. You have no idea yet the cost of being Alpha."

Those words stung worse than I'd meant them to. I bit down on the inside of my cheek to keep from snapping back at him. Instead, I caught Kate's hand and swept her away, not wanting to stay with him another moment.

As we proceeded along the hallway, Kate said quietly, "Thanks."

I squeezed her hand. "You don't have to thank me. Just don't let him make you think that this blood is on your conscience. It isn't."

Kate's tone was gentle, almost too fragile to hold. "We should... get some wine. Pour down this sorrow before it drowns us." Her humor was weak, but I was able to nod, even a little.

Go up there, I told her quietly. "I'll get it. You don't have to pass by Orion again."

Her tension was on her shoulders, which slumped as she let go of a breath and nodded, retreating back towards the stairs without saying another word.

I turned back around, my pace carrying me toward the bar along the far side of the room where Orion still lounged.

I ran my hands over the smooth wood of the counter to pick up a bottle, but then,

A queer wind swept over the room. I stood locked where I was. It was no common wind. I knew it too well. It was the sort of wind that came with a witch.

I turned to Orion. "Do you have a visitor?".

Chapter 174

Lyra's POV

Orion’s lips curved into a smile that was too knowing. But before he could speak, another voice answered.

“Yes,” the visitor said, smooth and cold. “He does.”

The sound made my heart stutter.

I turned, and there she was.

My breath caught in my throat. My eyes widened in recognition, in fear. It was her.

The witch.

The very same who had aided us in the battle against Orion’s brother.

The same one who had cornered me, threatened me, promised she would kill me and haunt me beyond death.

Her gaze met mine, and the corner of her mouth curved upward in cruel amusement. “Nice to finally meet you in the flesh, Ravenna.”

I swallowed hard, my body taut, but I didn’t hesitate or step back.

Fear clawed at me, yes, but I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of seeing me cower.

Orion rose from his chair with a fluid motion, his happiness vivid in the room as he stepped forward. “Welcome to my mansion, Alira.”

He extended his arms, and to my shock, embraced her.

But what came next sent a wave of heat and disbelief crashing through me.

Alira kissed him.

It was brief, light on the surface, but the power it carried was unmistakable.

Not power in the magical sense, but in the statement.

It was intentional. Possessive. A warning meant for me, as clear as any words could be.

My hands clenched into fists at my sides as my stomach twisted.

Before I could process, a cheerful voice cut through the thick tension.

“Alira!”

Kira’s bright tone rang out from the doorway as she entered, smiling wide.

My head snapped toward her in disbelief.

She crossed the room quickly, arms already extended as though greeting a long-lost friend.

They embraced tightly, genuine warmth in Kira’s face as she said, “It’s been so long.”

I blinked, unable to mask my shock. Kira knew her? Kira, the gentle healer, the steady one who had stood by us through everything, was smiling at this witch as if she were family.

What kind of game was this?

Alira pulled back from Kira with an easy smile, though her sharp eyes flicked toward me for just a second, savoring the look of confusion etched across my face.

Then she asked, her tone suddenly light, “And where is Keto?”

The question hung in the air like she was asking after a friend she hadn’t seen in years.

It was Kira who answered Alira. “Keto is busy in the basement,” she said.

Alira nodded, then turned to Orion. “What about the meeting?”

Orion raised a brow. “You just got here. You can relax first.”

But Alira shook her head. “No. Let’s get straight to business.”

The air in the room grew tense.

Orion glanced at me. “Ravenna, call Kate.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but Alira’s sharp voice cut in. “Call her.”

Her tone left no room for argument. My chest tightened. I felt frozen, lost for words. I didn’t dare look at Orion or Kira.

So I turned and walked upstairs, forcing myself to move. My heart was racing.

I reached Kate’s room and knocked before stepping in. She looked up at once and noticed my face.

“What happened?” she asked quickly, concern in her voice.

I sat down on Kate’s bed, still trying to catch my breath. “The witch… the one that helped us during the battle,” I said quickly. “She’s here. She finally came.”

Kate's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

I nodded. "Yes. Orion said I should get you. She wants to meet now."

Kate blinked in shock, then frowned. "Wait… is she the one who's supposed to help me learn my abilities?"

"Yes," I whispered.

Kate studied my face. "Then why do you look like this? You don't seem happy at all."

I swallowed hard. "Because I have a bad feeling about her. Something in me says she's pretending to be good. She doesn't feel safe. She feels dangerous."

Kate crossed her arms. "Well, maybe we should pretend too. Let's stay cool, act normal, and wait until we have proof. Then we can tell Orion."

I shook my head. "That's the problem, Kate. Orion already knows her. He welcomed her like family. And it's not just him… Kira knows her too. She even smiled when she saw her. And I think Keto also knows her."

Kate's lips parted slightly. "This is worse than I thought," she said in a low voice. "If all of them already trust her, what do we do?"

I stood up slowly, nervous energy running through me. "We just go downstairs. Let's hear what she has to say first. Then we'll know how to act."

Kate nodded after a moment, though her face showed doubt.

Together, we left her room and walked toward the stairs. My steps felt heavy, like I was walking into danger with no way back.

Kate and I walked down the stairs together. My stomach was tight the whole way.

As soon as we entered the room, Alira's eyes went straight to Kate. She smiled, warm and charismatic, like she had known her forever.

"Kate," she said smoothly, "how are you doing?"

Kate answered with a polite smile. "I'm fine. It's good to see you."

They talked for a while, mostly Alira asking questions, her tone kind and almost motherly. I stood back, watching every move, every smile.

Then Kira cut in. "Will it be possible to hone your magical abilities?" she asked.

Alira didn't respond immediately, she just kept staring at Kate as though weighing her up.

"According to the stories," Kira continued. "No one has successfully been able to hold the magic of a witch and the power of a werewolf together. And we're afraid it might consume Kate."

Then Alira finally responded. "Creating a balance between being a werewolf and a witch can be hard," she said, her gaze still on Kate. "But don't worry. I'll do my best to teach her. She looks strong, and her mind looks unbroken."

Chapter 175

Lyra's POV

She turned to Orion. “Have you prepared her room? Training begins tomorrow.”

Orion leaned back in his chair, calm as always. “Her room is well prepared.”

I found my voice and asked, “How long is the training going to last?”

Alira's eyes turned to me. Her smile was pleasant, but her voice was cutting. "Even if we trained for twenty-four hours continuously, it would not be a problem. I have come to reside here, in Orion's house. Forever." She inclined her head a fraction. "You object to that, Ravenna?"

The challenge in her tone hit me like a slap. I could feel the rivalry hanging in the air, cold and biting.

I forced a faint smile. "No. I don't have any issues."

Orion stood up from the chair, his lips curving into a smile as he placed a hand on Alira's shoulder. "Don't be too harsh on my Luna," he said in a soft tone.

Alira's eyes twinkled as she said, "I'm just getting along."

Orion did not ask more questions. His tone, instead, turned firm. "By the way, I have an important task for you."

Alira raised her brows. "What is it?"

"I'm forcing someone to give me information. His name is Kevin," Orion said in a low, threatening tone.

Alira's brow furrowed slightly. "I don't know Kevin."

Orion didn't have a chance to respond before Kira stepped in. "But you must surely know Ruth."

Alira's smile was back, but this time it was pointed. "Yes... I know Ruth. But what is the relationship between her and Kevin?"

I leaned forward, my voice even but tense. "Kevin's the one who knows where Ruth is. And we want to find her before she tries something... like last time."

Alira's gaze shifted back to Orion. "And now Ruth is your enemy?"

'Ruth is an enemy. She tried to kill Ravenna and me. And more than that...' His eyes darkened. " She's the reason Ladon's chasing us."

The moment the name crossed his lips, the mood shifted.

I saw the color drain from Alira's cheeks. Her shoulders became rigid, her breath suspended. For the first time since she stepped into this house, she wasn't the poised, untouchable witch I'd encountered.

"Did you just say..." Ladon? Her voice broke slightly.

Orion's gaze never wavered. "Yes."

She opened her mouth to say something to them, but nothing escaped at first. She moved backward, shaking her head slowly.

"No. No, no..." Her eyes scanned the room as if she were searching for an exit. "You can't be serious. If Ladon is upon you, then I am unable to help. I can't. You don't know,"

Her voice rose, her usual calm replaced with real terror. “I’m under oath. All witches are. It’s binding. Ladon cannot be killed by us. None of us can raise a hand against him. If he is after you…” She swallowed hard, fear clouding her eyes. “Then you’re doomed.”

The words hit me like a boulder. Doomed. My heart clenched, my esophagus afire. I gazed at Orion, but his face didn't even change.

"Alira." His voice was calm, steadying. "I told you, don't worry about Ladon. That's all set."

I couldn't look away from him. How could he be speaking in such a logical manner about something so terrible?

But Alira looked at him as if he had lost his mind. “Covered?” she repeated, her voice low and sharp. “No one has Ladon covered. No one! He’s the hunter of worlds. He devours. He doesn’t stop until everything is ashes. You’re telling me not to worry?”

For a moment, the room trembled with her rage and fear. The lights did flicker, Kate gasped, and Kira's hand instinctively went to her dagger.

But Orion. he simply stepped closer to Alira. He placed a hand on her shoulder, holding steady her trembling form.

"Listen to me," he told her, his tone softer but firm. "You're not here to fight Ladon. You're here because I have a use for you that doesn't involve fighting Ladon. Ruth is playing games with Kevin. He knows where she is, and I need to know that. That's why you're here."

Alira's lips were pressed firmly shut. She was gasping unevenly. I could sense the struggle going on inside her, the oath holding her back, fear of Ladon, and allegiance which she clearly had for Orion.

Finally, she closed her eyes, breathed slowly. When she opened them again, her voice was firmer, but no less uncertain. "So... you need me to handle Kevin?"

"Yes," replied Orion without hesitation. "I want the truth from him. You're the most skilled at extracting truth from liars. You can tear down walls they don't even realize they've constructed."

The compliment appeared to ease her point, even while in a state of agitation. A small, bitter smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. "I see. You don't want me here as a fighter. You want me here as your tool."

Orion didn't flinch. "I need you here as a friend."

Something unspoken passed between them in that moment, a hidden understanding that made my gut twist.

Alira straightened up, her aplomb coming back in increments. "Alright. I will do it. For you, Orion." She didn't even glance in my direction when she said it, which only tightened the knot in my chest further.

Orion smiled, satisfied. Next, he turned his head to look at Kira. "Take her to Keto. I want Keto to be with her when she does her job."

Kira's eyes widened in surprise but she did not protest. "Yes, Alpha."

Alira set her chin high, restoring her charming attitude.

With no more than a swift look at me or Kate, she turned and left the room with Kira.

Her footsteps were determined, elegant, as if she hadn't just let us see the biggest gap in her defenses.

The door closed behind them, and silence fell again.

I let out a slow breath I hadn't even known I was holding.

My heart continued to thud, palms damp. I couldn't get Alira's terrified face out of my head.

For someone as seemingly unapproachable as her to tremble like that at even just the mention of Ladon… gave me the chills.

I caught Orion's eye, his face vigilant for even a whiff of danger. "You really think we're okay?" I whispered.

His eyes softened when they met mine. "We are."

There was something in the way he said it that instilled faith in me, even though every part of me was screaming at how absurd it was.

But still… Alira's words echoed in my head. You're doomed.

And the worst part? A small part of me believed her.

Chapter 176

Lyra's POV

I could not stop myself. The question came out of my mouth before I had the chance to weigh it:

“How did you meet Alira?”

Orion’s face was calm. That kind of calm he always wore when he didn’t want to give an answer.

His eyes flicked to me briefly, then back to the glass of wine on the table in front of him.

"That's not important," he replied. His voice was even, but I could sense the underlying tension there.

Kate moved a step closer, her eyes shining with curiosity.

"Oh, don't do that, Orion. Don't bolt. We all know she isn't some freak witch. The way she went into that place, kissed you, and then bossed you around like it was her house? You owe us some answers."

My heart constricted. I wanted to know the truth but feared it at the same time. However, I kept my eyes on him.

Orion took a deep breath, setting down his glass. "If you want to know. Alira. is my ex. We were together for three years. She left me after she'd decided to devote herself entirely to witchcraft, informed her that she was going to have to work on building her powers and would not have me in the way."

His words knocked me like a rock to the chest. Ex-girlfriend. Three years. I felt Kate stiffen beside me, as shocked as I was.

Kate laughed with a harsh edge to it, but no humor. "Wow. Three years? That's not a fling, that's technically a marriage."

I clamped my lip, biting myself not to speak. I wanted to, but the knot on my throat had me not able to talk.

I hated how Alira had kissed him first, hated even more now that she had held his heart.

Before Kate could press for more, movement at the far end of the hall caught my attention.

Kira entered with Alira gliding gracefully beside her. Keto followed behind, his expression tight.

Orion sat straighter, frowning. “You’re back already? That was fast.”

Kira nodded, her tone clipped. “She extracted the information. Kevin has talked.”

Alira grinned smugly as she crossed her arms over her chest.

It wasn't difficult. He cracked when I probed in the right location. Ruth is mobilizing followers, Orion. She will attack you head-on. If you don't act quickly, she'll be off the radar, and then you won't be able to find her.

The air was electric with tension. I saw Kate's eyes tighten in anger.

"We need to put a stop to her now," Kate said to us. "If Ruth figures out that you and Ravenna made it back alive, she'll go into hiding. This is our chance."

Orion rocked back in the chair, stroking his chin. His gaze shifted to Keto, who stood tall behind Orion, hands pressed behind his back, silent but attentive.

"Keto," Orion said after a while, his tone turning into a command. "Can you do this? Can you kill her?"

Keto's jaw was clenched. For a moment, his gaze flashed my way. My stomach dropped.

He glanced at me in a way that indicated he was weighing things, thinking about all the things between us, all the things not said. But his eyes became cold, and he nodded.

"If that is what you want, Alpha, then I will see her out." His voice was hard, but I sensed the weight of the vow lying across the room.

"Good," Orion said coldly. "Go and bring me her head. I want verification, a trophy."

My chest tightened in agony. My lips parted, but I did not whisper. Keto. attacking Ruth, to kill her.

The image of his peaceful face distorted into fury and blood made shivers cascade down my back. But I did not say anything. I could not. My throat closed up, and I swallowed the glob instead, showing no expression on my face.

Keto nodded in confirmation and then spun on his heel and sprinted away.

I trailed behind him until he vanished from sight, my racing heart thumping even more fiercely with every second.

And then Alira said again, her voice questioning, playfully so.

"And what of Kevin?" she asked, leaning forward as though she did not already know what Orion had in mind. "What do you plan to do with him now that you have the information?"

Orion's gaze grew cold. "Kill him," he said bluntly.

The word sliced through the room like a knife.

"No!" The word spilled out of me before I could take it back.

Each head was turned in my direction. Orion's eyes scrunched up, Kate's mouth open in shock.

I clenched up my fists, my heart pounding in my ears. I couldn't unsay it now. I needed to remain steadfast on what I had said.

"I should be the one to kill him," I declared, shaking but firm enough for everyone to hear.

Their eyes bored into me, Orion's with curiosity, Kate's with bewilderment, Alira's glinting with whatever passed for amusement.

"Why?" Orion eventually asked, his voice calm but loaded, demanding.

Because he had been my husband. Because he had betrayed me. Because he had dismantled my life in ways I could never even start to count.

The words burned in my throat, screaming to be uttered, but I held them back. They couldn't understand.

I forced myself to meet the gaze of Orion. "Because he hurt me. Because I am the one who has to be the one to kill him. Please."

Orion simply stared at me for a moment, as if trying to read the severity written on my eyes. And then, relaxing his eyes quietly on the room, he sat back in his chair and tasted his wine.

"Very well," he said at last. "If that is what you wish, then you shall have him. But you need to be warned, Ravenna… blood on the hands is not so easily washed off. After this, you shall carry the mark forevermore."

My breath was shaking, but I shook my head. "I know."

Kate took my hand under the table and squeezed it tightly. She didn't speak, but the pressure communicated to me that she recognized my decision, even if she wasn't pleased.

Alira's smile grew broader, though there was a fiery quality to it, something that abraded my skin.

Oh, how intriguing," she whispered. "The Luna hungers for blood. I have to admit, Orion, you definitely have a talent for making life on this vessel interesting."

Her voice twisted my gut. But I did not say anything. I had already said too much.

Chapter 177

Lyra's POV

I followed Kira down the steps, deeper into the mansion’s basement.

Kira led me past the usual holding cells, the ones I had seen before, until we reached a separate compartment sealed by iron doors.

She hesitated, keys in her hand, her pinched face. "Are you absolutely sure you're doing the right thing, Ravenna?" she inquired gently.

I nodded firmly, though my belly roiled. "Yes. Kevin must know the truth before he dies."

Kira looked at me, maybe for doubt, but I didn't blink. At last, she released a small sigh.

"Alright. But remember, once that door is closed, you're alone with him in there. If you do change your mind, or if something goes wrong, just knock. I'll hear you."

She fitted the key into the lock and the iron door creaked open with a loud groan. My throat tightened, but I went in despite it.

Kevin was fastened to the wall by chains, his wrists pinned in iron cuffs that yanked his arms apart.

As he listened to the door shut, he looked up. His bloodshot eyes.

"Well, well," he sneered, twisting his lips into a grimace. "If it isn't Orion's darling Luna."

I froze for a moment, the venom in his words making my skin prickle. But then I recalled why I had come here.

I stepped forward. "Don't call me that. I'm not here as Orion's Luna. I'm here for myself.".

He tilted his head, a spark of amusement flickering in his tired eyes. "For yourself? Hm. Interesting. Tell me, Ravenna, what is it that you would desire of me?"

I clenched my fists at my sides. "The truth."

Kevin laughed, though his laughter was hard and bitter. "The truth? The truth about our affair that Orion is not aware of? You were supposed to be mine, and Ruth only gave you up to him as bait?"

My heart pounded, but I coerced myself to stand upright. "That's why I've come here. I'd like to learn. And I'd like you to hear my own tale as well, before you die, you'll realize the weight of it."

His smile faltered, just a bit. "So you've come to sermonize over me before I meet my maker?"

No, I said sternly, my voice harder now. "I came to make you aware. To make your death not easy.".

He pulled against the chains, the clinking of metal shattering the quiet. "You believe that I'm frightened of your little words, girl? Death never frightened me. Orion can send Keto, or Alira, or even you yourself, it makes no difference. I've lived with the knowledge of the darkness, I've invited it. You can say nothing that will change that."

I moved in closer, close enough to see the creases on his face, the craziness flashing in his eyes. "So listen to them anyway, and we'll see if they can have any effect on you or not."

His smirk weakened, and for the first time, I felt like I was seeing doubt.

"Kevin, now answer me, what is happening between you and Ruth, why do you work for her? Is she your actual lover? Perhaps you inherited after my father passed away. I have a weird intuition you're sleeping with my stepmother, I just wanted to confirm."

Kevin's eyes darkened. "You don't know anything about Ruth. You think you're safe with Orion standing at your side? And I'm not going to say anything."

My heart crunched, but I didn't back down. "Maybe not. Not like it matters anyway, Ruth will be with you soon enough, and you and she can carry on your age difference affair in the afterlife."

A thick silence hung between us that seemed to last an eternity. His breathing grew more labored.

Then he grumbled under his breath, "Kill me already and have done. This talk is dull."

I frowned. "Oh, I haven't reached the best part yet. I'm just delaying."

Kevin tensed into laughter. "You're wasting time, Ravenna. Nothing you say will break me."

Indignation flared through me, keen and burning. I wanted to strike back at him, but I kept my hands still.

"You two, you and Ruth, have tried to kill me all these times but still failed to do it. But, what if I were to inform you that it succeeded the very first time, Ravenna died."

Kevin sneered, but I could see the glimmer in his eyes, the fissure in his mask. My words were hitting somewhere.

"Recall when I first called you Jacob? A name you've successfully kept hidden from the folks surrounding you here. Didn't you question how I knew that name?"

He laughed. "You're inventing, Jacob was never my name, you're only trying to get to me."

I smiled and crossed my arms."'Alright then, if you're going to turn down the use of the name 'Jacob'. What is it about the name 'Lyra' does it ring any bells? hmm.'"

He blinked and I could tell he was uncomfortable, then he stiffened. "Lyra is dead. I saw her die, I was the one who hit her with that car."

I swallowed hard, eyes widening just a little. I had always figured I was hit by a reckless driver, when actually it was Kevin who had staged it. He killed me?

I shook my head, dispelling the pain in my head. His confession took me aback a little.

I gritted a smile. "If she's dead, then why isn't her body around here somewhere?"

He snorted. "It doesn't matter, her parents don't even know where she is, and as long as she can't be found. It means she died."

"Hmm. As I said earlier, and I will say it plain now. Ravenna is dead, but Lyra isn't."

He blinked, still looking confused as hell.

"You told me you loved me Jacob, then got me pregnant and left, but you didn't just leave. You had me killed, but I didn't stay dead. Your little trick somehow switched me into Ravenna's body."

He gasped in shock, he just stood there staring at me like he was staring at a ghost, and it made me smile.

Chapter 178

Lyra's POV

I watched him carefully. His jaw worked; his chest rose and fell with slow, ragged breaths.

Finally, his trembling lips parted and he said, “It’s impossible… a soul cannot transmigrate. It’s against the laws of this world.”

I tilted my head, smiled inadequately, not with enjoyment but with bitter irony. "And yet," I unfolded my arms slowly, deliberately, "here I am."

He shook his head violently, the sweat already dampening his temples. His chains rattled harder now, his body fighting against the restraints, as though if he struggled hard enough, he could banish me from his sight. “No. No! You, this isn’t real. You’re not real!”

I leaned in closer, my voice a whisper. "You tried to get rid of me, Kevin. You tried to erase me from the world. But you introduced me to something far greater, better. I am Luna now. Luna to one of the strongest alphas in the world."

I let the words settle, my voice as hard as steel. "And you..." I looked him up and down, bound and broken. ".you are nothing but his captive. What an irony."

Kevin's jaw thrust out, his chest moving with ragged breaths. His eyes darted towards me, pleading.

"Orion doesn't know what really happened to you, does he?" His voice cracked as he rattled the chains again, metal on stone.

I folded my arms across my chest. "Doesn't matter." My voice was flat and steady. "Because you won't live long enough to see it."

He stopped struggling, stopped fighting, and regarded me with an empty sort of fear.

"Why?" I panted. "What was wrong with me in the first place? Why did you murder me?"

The weight of the question compressed the air.

Kevin's face crumbled. His voice broke as tears brimmed in his eyes. "It wasn't my fault!" he cried, shaking his head. "It was Ruth. She made me do it. She told me that if I killed you, I would have power. She told me I could be with Ravenna. I didn't mean to, Lyra. I swear, I didn't mean to kill you!

His voice was cracking, echoing, and desperate, and for an instant I stood there, staring at the pitiful creature in front of me.

He choked on his words and snuffled. "I missed you. I love you. I never stopped loving you."

A cold laugh exploded from me, one that even I wasn't prepared for. "Touched," I said softly, even though my voice was full of mockery.

I leaned in towards him, my eyes on him. "In truth, I am touched by your love. And I also love you, Kevin."

His face lit up in a ray of hope, but I dashed it immediately with the venom of my next words. "The way that you loved me and killed me... is the same way that I will love you... and kill you."

Kevin shook his head wildly, the chains jangling again. "No, no, no!" His voice cracked as he fell to his knees, his hands still bound. "I can change! I'll do better! Please, just let me have a chance. I was dumb! Please, Lyra, please."

He crawled toward me, the sound of metal against stone ringing out in the air. "Let me out. We'll get away from here. You and I, together at last. I'll make you happy. I'll protect you."

I bristled with resolve, my face grim. "In your dreams, Kevin."

His crying grew louder, his tears flowing now. He tugged on the chains with such force his wrists turned red, as if pure hope could break iron.

His voice cracked again and again. "I love you, Lyra! I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it!"

But I was cold, too cold. The anger had been consumed by fire, leaving only ice. "You think I'll come here and forgive you? That I'll listen to your apologies? No." I shook my head, slowly. "I came here to finish what you started. To return the gift you gave me."

He remained, mouth agape, eyes wide, lips shaking. "No. No, please."

There was a second of total silence within the room, only for his struggling breathing. I could see the weight of all that he had done, the lies, the deceit, the pain.

My heart thudded against my chest, not because I was uncertain, but because it was now. The one I had waited for.

"I figured I'd despise this," I admitted quietly, my voice hard, cutting through the quiet. "But I was wrong." I looked at him, my face curling into a thin smile. "I'm enjoying every second of it."

Kevin whined, his frame trembling. He kept begging, kept pleading, kept making promises he could never possibly keep. But his words ran over me like hollow noises.

I stepped closer, my shadow on him. His breath was trapped. His tears fell down his cheeks. "Please," he begged a final time, broken and weakened.

I bent close, inches from his eyes to see the fear they contained. "Goodbye, Kevin."

And with that, I sank my claws into his chest and pushed his heart out of it with blood flowing.

His body spasmed, his begging truncated mid-breath.

Silence weighed down the basement. The chains that had clanged noisily now hung silently, motionless and dead.

I rose from the floor, my chest rising and falling in ragged breaths.

I had thought revenge would empty me out, but instead it was. freeing. Not cheerful, not joyful, but conclusive. The shadow of his betrayal was no longer over me.

I wiped away a tear that I hadn't even realized had rolled down my cheek. My hands trembled, but I clenched them into fists. It was over.

I walked to the door and knocked once, as Kira had instructed me.

As the door creaked open, the soft light from outside filled the room. I caught a glimpse back for an instant at Kevin's lifeless form.

My voice was steady when I spoke quietly to myself, "Justice served."

And I strolled out of there, leaving the past behind the iron bars.

Chapter 179

Lyra's POV

I sat at the edge of the bed, staring at the floor, trying to steady my nerves.

It has been over three weeks now since Kevin had been kidnapped, and two weeks since Keto returned with the head of Ruth.

Both deaths had made a profound impact on me, but I forced myself not to dwell on them too much.

Today was not the day for that. Today was the day when Orion would face Alpha Lucas for me, for us.

The air in my chest was tense. Ladon had been silent. But I couldn't help but wonder if maybe it was waiting, lurking in the dark for the perfect moment to strike when none of us would suspect it.

Not knowing was worse than its presence.

I exhaled slowly, rose from the bed, then forced my feet to the door. The moment I opened it, I stopped.

Alira stood in the doorway.

Her expression was unreadable, leaving an edge to her presence that tripped up my heartbeat.

I did not even have a chance to speak; she lifted her hand, a small movement, yet one that stopped me where I stood. She wanted me to go in.

Perplexity wrapped around me, yet I obeyed. I stepped back, allowing her entry.

Alira moved in slowly, her eyes raking across my room as though she was measuring every corner.

When they finally reached me, I felt exposed.

"I have always adored Orion," she began, her voice smooth but with something toxic beneath it. "But I was compelled to give him up. Now I'm free, and I want him back."

Her words cut into me like an icy knife.

"Too late," I told her, my voice steady even as my chest trembled. "Orion is mine already."

There was a small smile on Alira's lips. "I know. But not for long. Let us see what he will do when he finally discovers you're not Ravenna, but an imposter. That you're Lyra."

The world seemed to whirl beneath me. My heart thudded against my flank, a scream building in me that I fought not to unleash. How could she?

My shock must have been obvious, because her smile increased, pleased with my reaction.

"Don't worry," she said casually, as if remarking on the weather.

"I won't tell him immediately. I'll wait till the fight is done. Telling him now would ruin the game, and Orion would call off the fight altogether. But later? Later, Lyra, your little secret will be everywhere."

Her words were like daggers. I swallowed hard, trying to regain my composure, but inside I was crumbling.

As she walked towards the door, she turned and glanced back, her eyes gleaming with malice.

"Something more. You and Orion are sworn. You may not kill a witch or any magical creature. Do it, and your own life is forfeit."

She spoke it as warning and as threat.

Then, with a final satisfied smile, she walked away, leaving the door ajar.

I stood still, my breath shallow, my mind spinning.

The silence was oppressive, and I nearly jumped when Kate appeared in the doorway.

Her eyebrows frowned. "I just saw Alira leave. What's wrong?"

My lips trembled, but I forced them into a weak, dismissive smile. "Nothing," I lied quickly. "She was just... admiring my room."

Kate tilted her head, doubting, but didn't press. She glanced at the clock on the wall and sighed.

Then let's move. We don't want to be late."

I nodded, grabbing my cloak. But as I walked beside her, Alira's threat dug into my chest like a stone.

The battle hadn't even begun, and already I was fighting a war on every side.

We climbed into the vehicle that was driving us to the battle. Just Kate and I.

Kira had stated she doesn't want to be there, she'd rather wait for the aftermath.

It took five hours for us to get to the building built more like a stadium.

The far-off drums echoed as Kate and I walked down the stone hallway.

Every beat was like beating directly into my chest, heavy and unyielding.

We stepped into the courtyard, and my breath caught. The ground was crowded with pack members, warlords, and even strangers who had come from far villages, towns to witness the fight.

The weather was gradually changing, like it was about to rain.

And there, in the middle of the stadium, was Orion.

His eyes locked on the opposite side where Lucas was approaching.

Lucas wasn't any less daunting, broad, confident. Those two were like two tempests ready to unleash.

"Do you see them?" Kate whispered, tilting her head towards the edge of the circle.

I followed where she was gazing and spotted Alira standing there, arms folded, expression calm but eyes slit, staring at me instead of Orion.

My gut twisted. She had meant everything she had previously said. She would expose me when this was over.

Yet I could not allow myself to be sidetracked by the thought. Orion needed my strength, even if in silence only.

Lucas stepped forward, his voice echoing through the courtyard.

"Orion, I've dreamt of this day, and here it comes. I don't like to kill you but what can I do, but never mind, I'd take care of Ravenna well."

The crowd murmured, restless with expectation. My body tightened, and I felt Kate's hand brush against mine, stilling me.

Orion replied steadfastly. "I did not expect you to be less confident. Fighting with cowards has never been my desire."

The drums ceased. Silence spread like wildfire through the crowd. Then the order was given.

Lucas struck first, attempting to crush Orion with a strike. But Orion was quicker. He sidestepped as if he knew the blow was forthcoming.

I was shocked, neither of them had shape shifted yet. I wondered why?

Lucas struck again, and his hand landed on Orion's jaws with a mark.

The spectators gasped, some yelling for Lucas, others roaring for Orion.

I gripped my cloak, my whole body aching with fear and anticipation.

Each hit Orion took made me flinch, each hit he gave made my breast surge with wild relief.

Then Lucas slammed Orion hard onto the ground, the earth shattering beneath him. My heart stopped.

"Orion!" I whispered, my voice barely audible.

But he got up again, his eyes afire with that untamed determination I had come to know so well.

They circled each other, both of them panting now, blood soiling their lips. Lucas sneered.

"She won't stay with you, Orion. She'll come to know what you are. A wolf blinded by false love."

Orion's reaction was a snarl as he pounced on Lucas, holding him by the throat and shoving him to the ground.

And through it all, I could feel Alira's gaze on me, reminding me of the secret she knew, the truth she could destroy me with at any moment.

My mind screamed at me to consider Orion only, yet the fear was present.

I watched the sky darken then, the sun disappear.

And I prayed, silently, desperately, that Ladon would not choose now to strike.

Chapter 180

Lyra's POV

My heart raced, as I suddenly noticed Orion gaining the upper hand.

Lucas tried again and again to overpower him, but each attempt was weaker than the last.

The crowds held their breaths, waiting to see who would emerge as the victor.

Then Orion lunged, his claws sunk deep into Lucas's chest.

Lucas let out a loud cry, shifting halfway between man and wolf, trying to fight back.

But it was useless. Orion tore through him. with his claws until Lucas' heart was out.

Lucas's body fell to the ground with a heavy thud, lifeless.

Silence fell over the battlefield. For a moment, everyone seemed frozen, unsure of what to do next.

Then the whispers started, rising into howls and cheers.

"He is the winner!" someone shouted.

"The new Alpha!" another cried.

Voices rose higher, and soon, everyone bowed to Orion, acknowledging him as the new leader of Lucas's pack.

Wolves celebrated, pounding their fists and claws against the earth, some chanting Orion's name. Even Kate, beside me, let out a relieved breath.

I looked at Orion, pride swelling in my chest. He had done it. He had won. He was not just my Alpha, he was my mate, my protector, my everything.

The battle was over… or so I thought.

Until a shadow moved across the sky, swallowing the cheers.

Then a terrifying sound, like thunder mixed with laughter, rolled from the sky.

I looked up and froze. My blood ran cold.

It was Ladon.

It flew above us, wings stretching wide, blocking the sun.

Seven monstrous heads hissed and laughed together, eyes glowing like fire.

The ground shook as he descended, his claws smashing into the soil, sending people scattering.

Then the screams followed, one of its heads struck, snatching up someone and tearing him apart.

Another head spit fire, burning through the crowd.

Chaos erupted. Wolves ran in every direction, some trying to fight, most just trying to survive.

“No…” I whispered, my chest tightening.

Without thinking, I shifted, fur covering my body as I leapt down to Orion’s side.

He was already readying himself, his eyes glowing bright red.

Kate rushed in, clutching the sword Alira had prepared.

I saw her quickly wrapping it with Lucas's head and blood, completing the ritual as she'd been taught.

"It's done!" Kate shouted, her voice trembling but steady enough.

Orion caught the sword, but instead of rushing forward, he looked at her and said, "We can't kill him immediately. We'll lure him. Kate, you'll strike the final blow. Ravenna and I will distract him."

I froze. My chest tightened again, but not from fear. From guilt.

Unknown to them, I had already made my decision. Quietly, without anyone noticing, I switched the swords.

The one with the ritual mark was now in my possession. Kate held only a decoy.

My mind screamed at me, but my heart knew the truth: it was better to die fighting Ladon than to stand alive while Orion found out what Alira planned to reveal, that I was not Ravenna. That I was an imposter. That I was Lyra.

Better death than his rejection.

Ladon landed in front of us, earth breaking apart beneath his weight.

His seven heads swayed, each one grinning with cruel hunger.

"I have been looking everywhere for you," he hissed, his voice shaking the ground. "It's time to finish what we started."

Orion stepped forward. "Then what are you waiting for?"

He launched himself into the air, shifting mid-jump.

But even Orion was no match. One of Ladon's heads swung at him, knocking him aside as though he were nothing.

Orion hit the ground hard, groaning.

Another head opened wide, lunging to swallow him whole.

"No!" I cried.

I saw the opening. My body moved before thought could stop me.

I shifted again mid-air, clutching the sword tightly. And then I jumped, straight into Ladon's gaping mouth.

The beast snapped its jaw shut and darkness swallowed me.

"Ravenna!" Orion's roar echoed.

"No! No!" Kate's scream followed, her voice cracking with horror.

But it was too late.

Inside Ladon, the air was burning with toxins.

My body trembled, but I pushed forward. I could hear Ladon's multiple heartbeats.

"There!" I whispered, spotting the thick, thunderous beat of his main heart.

With all my strength, I drove the sword deep into it. The blade glowed as the ritual activated.

Ladon screamed. His whole body convulsed, thrashing wildly.

I held on, driving the sword deeper, refusing to stop. My body screamed in pain as the magical toxins spread into me, but I didn't care. This was my end.

"Goodbye..." I whispered, my vision blurring.

The last thing I felt was the rush of victory, the monster's heart collapsing around my blade, before the poison consumed me completely.

Darkness took over me.

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I opened my eyes slowly. My body felt heavy, weak, and pale like all the strength had been drained out of me.

I felt cold air brushing against my skin, and when I looked around, my heart jumped.

I was lying in the middle of dead bodies.

Some wrapped, some bare, stiff and lifeless. It was a morgue.

My hands shook as I touched my own skin, it looked embalmed, gray, almost not mine.

A group of ladies at the far corner noticed me move.

Their eyes grew wide, and before I could say anything, they screamed and ran away.

I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time.

I was alive. Somehow, against all odds, I was breathing again. But how? How could this be?

I pushed myself up slowly, my legs trembling under my weight. Each step felt like a struggle, but I forced myself out of the morgue.

Then I saw a man standing at the end of the hallway. He didn't run from me. He just stared, concerned.

"Please… help me," I whispered, my voice breaking.

He hurried to my side and slipped an arm under mine to steady me.

Without a word, he led me to a bathroom and turned on the water.

He swallowed hard. "How can this be?" he asked in confusion.

Then he shook his head. "Just wash up," he said as he released his grip on me.

I stepped inside and washed the embalming liquid and dirt from my body.

When I finally lifted my gaze to the mirror, my breath caught.

It wasn't Ravenna's face staring back at me anymore. It was mine. My face. Lyra's face.

My eyes widened in shock and excitement.

I was back. I was truly me again.

THE END