

## Meeting Alpha James

"You're getting better," Liam told Lily as he walked up to her in the gym after training. Finn was working at the gym that morning, so Liam had gotten her alone.

"You're back," Lily stated with a small sigh. The werewolf had had to leave Seattle for two weeks on some sort of Council business, but there he was, back again to bother her.

"Don't sound so disappointed," he said with a chuckle. "You should engage your core more when you punch," he informed her.

"Excuse me?" Lily asked with a fair amount of annoyance.

"Your punches aren't as strong as they could be because you're not engaging your core enough and following through properly," he told her.

"Yeah, Finn told me the same thing. I'm working on it okay," Lily grumbled. "What do you really want Liam?" she asked. "I know it's not to give me training advice."

"I just wanted to let you know I'm back and that the Council has started to take more of an interest in this case," he said.

"Why?" Lily asked him, her pulse speeding up at the news.

"They're interested in you, Lily," he explained. "The girl who killed her attacker while weak from wolfsbane, the girl who survived an attack from her savage father who had abused her for most of her life, the girl who a lot of her old pack seems to hate."

"Those aren't the parts of my life I would classify as interesting," Lily told him bitterly.

"I agree with you," he said with a hint of pity in his gaze, "But the Council thinks that there might be more to you than meets the eye."

"What does that mean?" she asked, hiding her worry as best she could.

"They're wondering what makes you so special," Liam told her. "If maybe your family line has strong Alpha blood, or if there's just something about you that makes you different, stronger."

"Well I can answer that question for you— my mom and dad both had Alpha blood in their families, so that explains that," Lily said with a shrug.

"That's what I told them," Liam admitted, making Lily's eyebrows y up.

"Then why did you come back?"

"Because they want me to make sure there's nothing more going on," he told her.

"Why are you telling me all of this?" she asked him, wondering why he seemed to be giving all his cards away.

"After everything I found out about what happened to you in Hood River, I don't think you're the one the Council needs to worry about," he explained, and as hard as Lily looked, she could see no dishonesty in his light brown eyes. "I'm not the enemy here, Lily."

"No, you just work for them," Lily said before walking away, uncertain about whether or not she could trust Liam, but knowing that even if she trusted him, he worked for people who she couldn't.

Besides, she had other things she had to worry about as well— the Alpha was returning that afternoon, and she and Finn would be there with the Luna to greet him. It had been three weeks since Lily and Finn had moved to Seattle, and things couldn't be better, but the arrival of Alpha James posed a shift to the stability that they had found.

Lily had started her second and nal semester of senior year at Gareld High School, and there were several other werewolves in her year that she hung out with and had become good friends with. She no longer dreaded going to school— she had actually started to look forward to it.

Finn, Greg and Damien had set up their gym and had opened for business— it was a bit slow at rst, but things had picked up in the last week. Best of all was that even though the Crescent building and the other two apartment buildings owned by the pack had fully-equipped gyms in them, dozens of pack members had joined the new gym so that they could have Finn or one of the other werewolves as personal trainers. The support that Finn and Lily had received from the Seattle pack was both completely unexpected and wholly appreciated.

Of course, it probably helped that the two of them were doing their fair share for the pack and had been helping the Luna and Beta more and more as the weeks passed. They had mostly been working on the big meeting that Beth had organized for the surrounding ally packs that would be taking place in a week's time. Finn had also helped Drew out with the installation of the new panic buttons in every room though, and after school Lily had been helping Beth with some of her daily tasks like resolving minor conicts within the pack and assigning rooms to new pack members or to current ones who had turned eighteen.

They weren't quite sure how they became so invested in the pack, but as the days went on, they found themselves willingly and happily taking on more and more responsibilities. What had started off as a favor to help a stressed-out Luna Beth, had turned into them being two of the most active participants in the Seattle pack. Through their tasks, Lily and Finn had gotten to know most of the pack, even if not by name but by face, and wherever they went, they were greeted cheerfully by pack members.

Their prominent roles in the pack were probably the major reason that the long-awaited arrival of Alpha James didn't feel quite like the good thing it was meant to be. Another reason being that Finn and Lily weren't a huge fan of his after the conversation they had overheard Luna Beth having with him over the phone.

So, as Lily and Finn stood to the side of Beta Drew and the Luna later that day, waiting in the otherwise empty and dead-still lobby of the Crescent, Lily felt a strange sense of dread at the Alpha's imminent arrival back to the Seattle pack, and judging by the Beta's clenched jaw and sted hands, Drew wasn't feeling much better about their supposed leader's return.

"Are you sure you want us here?" Lily asked the Luna softly, her quiet voice breaking the silence. She still felt a bit unsure about her and Finn being there while none of the other pack members were.

"I'm sure," the woman replied with a small smile. "You two have been working just as hard as the two of us these past weeks, and the Alpha should know who's been responsible for keeping our pack running and stable."

"We really haven't done that much," Finn argued politely. "You and Drew have done a great job of keeping this pack together."

"We couldn't have managed without your help," the Beta insisted, clapping Finn on the shoulder. "You should be proud of what you two have done for us."

"And what is it they've done?" a curious voice asked, snapping their attention to the entrance doors which had opened to reveal a condent and swaggering werewolf.

The Alpha was tall and had the physique of a man who spent a decent amount of time training or at the gym, and like all Alphas, he exuded an air of power, but Lily didn't fail to notice that her mate's aura of authority was stronger and more potent than that of the Settle pack's Alpha, and Alpha James' narrowed eyes— which were directed at Finn— made her wonder if he noticed it too.

"This is Finn and Lily. They're new pack members and they've been great in assisting us with pack business," Luna Beth explained as Alpha James stepped into the lobby and made his way to the group.

"How very... helpful of them," the Alpha replied with pursed lips that made him seem anything but impressed with that information.

"How was your trip?" the Luna asked him with some bite in her tone, reacting to James' lack of decorum.

"Insightful," the werewolf replied vaguely and succinctly. "Let's go up to my oce and you can ll me in on what's happened while I was gone," he demanded more than suggested. "Just the Luna," he added when the Beta began following them to the elevator.

The Luna and Beta bried locked eyes, and when Beth nodded at him, Drew backed off hesitantly and watched as the elevator doors closed on the Luna and the Alpha. For just a second, Lily could have sworn she saw jealousy in the Beta's eyes, and she wondered, not for the rst time, if there was more between Beth and Drew than they allowed others to see.