

## Alpha-less 531

### Chapter 531 Fading Lines

Only now did Avery realize-Tessa's wolf form might be small, but her speed was terrifying.

Each time one of the Ironfang mercenaries lunged at her, she slipped past them with ease, letting their heavy bodies crash into each other in confusion.

Even more unsettling-wherever her claws struck, a faint white mist would rise from the wound. The victims would freeze mid-motion, their limbs growing stiff.

"Her claws are poisoned!" Tigre finally figured it out. No wonder the spot where she'd kicked him burned and went numb.

Roaring in anger, he shouted for his wolves to surround Tessa. But quietly, he began to back away.

As the leader, his instincts were razor sharp-and everything about this female screamed danger. Her fighting style was too strange. Too unpredictable.

But Tessa didn't give them a chance.

A sudden, piercing howl tore through the air. Blue mist began to rise in a perfect circle around her.

The mercenary wolves closest to her cried out in agony. Their fur blistered, their limbs locking up entirely.

Avery's eyes widened. He recognized this-Innate Domain, a legendary ability recorded in ancient wolf texts. Only wolves with the oldest bloodlines could awaken it.

"Leave."

Tessa returned to her human form, only slightly out of breath. Her voice was cold as frost as she pointed to

the door.

She had only used half her strength while fighting. If she hadn't held back, these mercenaries would've been torn limb from limb.

Tigre looked from his fallen men-some writhing, others unconscious-back to Tessa's emotionless eyes. After a long, tense moment, he clenched his jaw and waved a hand.

With that, the surviving Ironfang wolves fled, battered and defeated.

Avery's bandmates stood frozen in shock.

So this... this was Tessa's true strength?

The four of them combined probably couldn't even land a hit on her.

They never imagined it would end like this-so fast, so one-sided.

Even the seasoned members of the Wolfborn Corps stared in disbelief..

She didn't talk much, but she hit hard.

She'd fit right in here.

Tessa stepped up to Avery.

"Avery. I already told you-you're not cut out for a mercenary corps. What they need is someone ruthless. But you're kind. And no matter how hard you try, you'll never be able to change that."

Of course he knew he wasn't fit to lead the Wolfborn Corps.

But if not him-then who?

This was the legacy his father had built with blood and fire. If he walked away too, what would the Qi family have left to protect themselves?

To keep everyone safe, he had to stay, even if it meant forcing himself to become someone he wasn't.

"Captain, I agree with Tessa. You're really not suited for this," Steven said softly.

If a person wasn't made for something, then clinging to it was pointless. That kind of determination would only lead to ruin.

Even the Wolfborn members nodded at her words.

It was true-Xavier had built this corps from the ground up. But if his son couldn't lead it properly, then he shouldn't lead it at all.

The mercenary life was one lived on a knife's edge. With the wrong leader, it wasn't just profits at stake-it was lives.

"Enough. You all need to leave. Make sure no media sees you with the corps." Their futures still lay ahead. He didn't want them throwing away their music for him.

"Captain, we care about you. But if you're not right for this, then don't force yourself. There are so many people in the Wolfborn Corps. It doesn't have to be you, right?" Steven pleaded, still not understanding why Avery refused to let go.

What was the point of holding on like this?

"You're not me. So don't pretend to make my decisions for me," Avery said, his voice firm.

He turned to Tessa. "Tessa, take them and go. This place isn't for you."

Tessa looked him dead in the eyes.

"Are you sure? Because it sounds a lot like you're trying to draw a line between us."

Her words cut straight through.

Chapter 532 Severed Paths, Shifting Loyalties

Avery's heart was in turmoil.

But for their sake, he had to draw a line.

"That's right. I am trying to cut ties with you. From now on, your path is yours, mine is mine. Don't meddle in each other's lives again."

"Captain, how can you say that?" Steven protested, his voice trembling. "Didn't you say we'd stick together? Even if you're struggling now, we could've faced it as a team!"

How could he throw them away so easily?

"Don't act on impulse, Captain. Whatever you're facing, we can figure it out- together." Steven looked around at the wreckage of the day, imagining what else might lie ahead. Today was bad. But what about tomorrow? Or the next time?

"Enough. Leave now. Or I won't be so polite." Avery raised his wolfbone dagger, the threat in his voice unmistakable.

"Captain!"

Steven couldn't believe it. Even if they disagreed, this was too far. It hurt more than anything.

"Tessa, let's go." His voice cracked with disappointment. He never thought they'd come to this.

Tessa gave a silent nod.

"Avery, you don't have to say anything more. We'll leave." She knew he was hurting.

But she didn't agree with what he was doing.

They were only being honest with him-friends who genuinely cared. There was no need for this cold rejection.

Without another word, Tessa led the others out.

Avery watched them go, their backs growing smaller in the distance

His chest ached.

How had it come to this?

And now, all he had left was regret.

But what good was regret?

It changed nothing.

After they left, members of the Wolfborn Corps stepped forward.

"Avery, honestly... they were right. You're not suited to lead the corps. If things keep going like this, we're headed for disaster."

Yeah," another added. "I'm going to speak with the old Captain about this. You're not cut out for it

Avery exhaled, heavy. "Don't worry. I'll become the leader this corps deserves."

No one was born for this, right?

If he worked hard enough, maybe he could become what they needed.

"Avery, some things are inborn. You just don't have the instinct. That girl earlier- Tessa-she's got it."

That crushing combat power, her unshakable composure, and brutal decisiveness-that's the kind of leader they needed.

"Don't get any ideas about her," Avery said firmly, frowning. "She has nothing to do with the corps."

He didn't want to drag Tessa into the bloodstained world of mercenaries. He just wanted her to live the life she loved-peaceful, free, untouched.

No one should interfere with that.

But no matter what Avery said, the others had already made up their minds.

In their eyes, Tessa was exactly the person to lead the Wolfborn Corps into the future,

They didn't argue with Avery anymore. Instead, they all headed straight to Xavier.

They relayed every detail of the incident that had just unfolded

"Captain, we've watched Avery grow up. We know him better than anyone. He's just not fit to lead the Wolfborn Corps."

Truthfully, they'd all known this for a while.

But out of respect for Xavier, no one had dared speak it aloud.

Today had changed that. Today, it had to be said.

And something had to be done.

Xavier looked at the men who had followed him for over twenty years.

So it was true-none of them supported Avery as his successor.

"So what are you trying to say?" he asked quietly, his voice low and heavy. "The Wolfborn Corps was built by me-brick by brick. Having Avery inherit it was my decision. Are you saying you no longer trust my judgment?"

The silence was tense. No one dared speak.

But for the future of the corps, none of them could back down now. "Captain," one of the men finally said, "We've always followed your orders. But this concerns the lives of thousands of our brothers. It can't be taken lightly."

Xavier knew, deep down, that they were right. Avery really wasn't suited for this.

But if not him-then who?

"Boss," someone else said, "Tessa... she's different. That girl who came to challenge you last time-she's the

one."

Xavier blinked. "You all want a girl to lead you?" he asked, genuinely surprised.

Chapter 533 A Different Path

After their last fight and everything that had happened since, Xavier was now certain-Tessa was more than qualified to lead the Coldfang Corps.

He sincerely hoped she would join them.

"If she's willing, we only care about strength. Gender has never mattered to us."

Xavier didn't respond right away.

"Boss, you really should give this some serious thought."

Still, he said nothing.

"Alright, I got it. You're all dismissed."

Once his subordinates had left, Xavier immediately activated the mind link and

called for Avery to come

over.

"Father, what happened?"

Thinking something major had gone down with the corps, Avery ran over in wolf form.

When Xavier saw him, he sighed heavily.

"Is there really no chance between you and Tessa?" If Tessa became his daughter-in-law, everything would be so much simpler.

Hearing that question again, Avery instantly knew his father had heard what happened today.

He shifted back into human form and replied sternly, once again making himself clear. "Dad, there's no way. Nothing is going to happen between us. Stop trying to push her on me."

"There's no such thing as impossible. Even if she has a fated mate, even if they've already formed a mate bond, if you want her, I can find a way-"

"Her fated mate, her partner... is Landon, the Alpha King of Montedra." That shut Xavier up completely.

He'd been ready to insist that if his son wanted Tessa, he'd make it happen one way or another. But knowing that her fated mate was the Alpha King of Montedra... he instantly dropped the idea..

No matter how strong the Coldfang Corps was, they couldn't take on Landon.

Xavier rubbed his temples, frustrated, and waved his hand. "Alright, enough about that. Go take care of your own business."

Only after seeing his father give up on the idea did Avery leave to handle matters with the Coldfang Corps.

Left alone in his study, Xavier thought about what Tessa and his men had said— and began to doubt the decision he once made with such certainty.

Forcing Avery to inherit the Coldfang Corps... was that really the right choice?

It seemed like no one was happy with it.

Just like her subordinates had said: even though Avery had skill and power, she

lacked the ruthless edge needed to lead a mercenary corps.

Not to mention, Avéry had always been passionate about music.

If she truly wasn't suited for this, was there any point in forcing it?

The Iron Fang Corps' provocation today wouldn't be the last.

If Avery struggled this much with ordinary disputes between mercenary corps, what would he do when something bigger came along?

Could he really lead thousands of mercenaries?

Maybe... it was time to reconsider the possibility Tessa had once brought up... Meanwhile, Tessa had already brought Steven and the others back to the villa.

None of them had said a word since returning.

The whole thing had hit them hard.

Even when the captain had once said he was leaving, they hadn't felt this crushed.

They had never imagined that the members of Avery's band would end up like this.

Steven especially couldn't bring himself to accept it..

But what could he do now?

"Alright, guys, don't overthink it. That's not what Avery meant. He just didn't want to drag you into this," Tessa said, trying to hold back her own frustration. Her tone

was firm-she knew Avery's twisted sense of protection all too well.

"Tessa, don't you think the captain's changed?" Steven said quietly, his voice weighed down by disappointment.

He still couldn't understand how their captain could have pulled a dagger on them and said something so "hurtful.

"Steven, you have to trust him." Tessa gave his shoulder a reassuring pat, the warmth of her fingers seeping through his clothes. "He's just trying to keep you out of the mercenary mess. Be good, get some rest. I'll take care of this."

Chapter 534

A Way Forward

"Tessa, I think I should head back to Falindale," Steven said quietly, head down. "The band's fallen apart. There's no reason for me to stay here."

"If you want to go back, I won't stop you. But if you're just trying to run away, then I can't support that. Tessa replied, her tone hardening. "There's always a way to work things out. You need to face this."

"Face it?" Steven looked up sharply. "The band's gone. What are we worth now? Are we just supposed to sit here waiting for some imaginary future?"

"Steven!" another bandmate finally cut in. "We're still artists under TS Entertainment. Tessa started this company for us. And now you just want to leave like it's nothing?"

"That's not what I—" Steven clenched his fists, but didn't know how to respond.

"Enough. Everyone calm down," Tessa interrupted. "You've been brothers for years. Don't you know Avery by now? No one's more upset about this than he is."

Steven turned his face away and muttered after a long pause, "I'm tired. I'm going to rest."

As they watched him walk away, shoulders slumped, the other three bandmates sighed.

"Tessa... what do we do now?"

"You keep practicing, keep performing. Don't let this affect you," Tessa said firmly. "As for Avery, I'll handle it."

"What about Steven?"

"Keep an eye on him. He's not in a good place right now," Tessa instructed. "Don't let him spiral."

"Don't worry. We'll stick close," they promised. "But you need to be careful too. It's dangerous around the captain."

"I will."

Tessa nodded and left.

By the time she returned to Wisteria Apartment, Landon was already waiting for her in the living room.

Noticing the tension in her expression, he walked over and wrapped her in his arms, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "What happened? Something bothering you?"

Tessa hugged his waist tightly, burying her face in his chest and breathing in the comforting scent of pine that clung to him, drawing strength from it.

"It's not TS Entertainment. Something happened with Avery. I'm going to deal with it."

The moment she mentioned Avery, Landon understood.

He knew just how deep her bond was with the members of Avery's band.

"You're not hurt, are you?"

He was well aware of the brutal, bloody side of werewolf mercenary groups. He didn't care about anyone

else-only her safety,

"I'm fine. It's just... I really don't know how to fix this."

Avery truly wasn't cut out for the Coldfang Corps.

But then, what could be done?

"Don't panic. Let's think it through. There's always a solution-it's just a matter of time. Maybe we can help Avery's father see another path: that the Coldfang Corps doesn't need Avery to thrive."

Tessa held him tighter. "That's what I was thinking too. But Xavier would never accept an outsider leading the corps. And if we're looking for someone from the inside... I don't know them well enough."

"But Avery does."

The words lit up her mind like a switch.

Of course. She wasn't part of the Coldfang Corps-but Avery was. And not just a member, he was the current leader.

All she had to do was get Avery to keep an eye out for potential talent within the corps, then help that person rise. If Xavier could see with his own eyes that someone other than Avery could lead the corps successfully, maybe he'd finally back down.

And with her help-especially the refined crystals she'd collected-she could enhance the Coldfang formation. A two-pronged approach. That just might be enough to change Xavier's mind.

"That's a solid plan. I'll get started right away."

"Not so fast. You've done enough for one day," Landon said, gently pressing her back down. "Don't forget, Ysabel's album launch is coming up. You promised you'd be there."

"Right, I remember. Of course I'll go support her!"

Seeing her smile again, Landon grinned and tousled her hair fondly.

"Dinner's ready. Come eat."

"Okay!" Tessa beamed, rising on her toes to kiss him on the cheek.

Without him, she'd probably still be stuck chasing her tail in frustration...

## Chapter 535 Two Paths, One Heart

Avery stood frozen on the training field, gripping his phone tightly. His thumb brushed again and again over the photo case-a picture of the five band members taken backstage at the Grammys last year. In it, Tessa was flashing a peace sign with a bright smile, while he stood beside her, grinning like a fool, his small fangs peeking out.

The words he'd said earlier-cutting ties-were like a thorn lodged in his throat. It stung just thinking about it. He knew he'd acted like a jerk. He only wanted to protect his brothers, but the words that came out had been like a blade, cutting deep.

Would Steven and the others really leave? Would Tessa think he'd lost his mind?

The phone screen dimmed, then lit up again. He opened Tessa's contact, his finger hovering over the call button, unable to press it. He'd rehearsed his apology a hundred times in his head, but when it came to saying it out loud, all he had left was clumsy regret.

Just as he took a deep breath, ready to make the call, the screen lit up again-with an incoming call.

From Tessa.

Avery jolted, nearly dropping his phone.

He stared at it, making sure it wasn't his imagination, then frantically swiped to answer, his voice tight. "Hello?"

"What were you doing? Took you long enough." Tessa's voice came through the speaker with a hint of a smile. "I just thought of a way for you to keep the corps and return to the band. Wanna hear it?"

Avery froze, then awkwardly rubbed at his burning ears.

So... some things didn't need to be said out loud. She'd already understood.

"Yes! What is it?" Avery's breath quickened with hope.

Could there really be a way to have both?

Tessa didn't waste time. She laid out the plan: support an internal successor while providing crystals to help improve the corps' formation.

There was silence on the other end for a long time-so long she wondered if the signal had dropped. Finally, Avery's voice came through, thick with emotion.

"You're saying... I can really go back to making music?"

"Only if you help me find someone solid inside the corps," Tessa teased. "If you pick a dud, Mr. Xavier's not going to buy it."

"I already have someone in mind, but I need to double-check the records." Avery's voice turned serious. "There's a guy named Scarface. Fought alongside my dad for ten years. He led the Crimson Valley mission -solid rep, commands respect. Bit blunt, though... I'll need to check the files and talk to people who've worked under him."

He spoke in a steady stream, his excitement impossible to hide.

In the days that followed, the two of them worked in perfect sync.

Avery immersed himself in the training grounds and archives of the Coldfang Corps, combing through five years of Scarface's mission reports. He casually chatted with over a dozen mercenaries who'd served under him, and the picture became clear: not only had the veteran shown brilliant leadership in the outnumbered victory at Crimson Valley, but he'd also earned a quiet reputation among the ranks as someone who looked out for the younger ones-always setting aside extra pay for injured rookies after missions. He was the safest, most reliable candidate.

Meanwhile, Tessa tapped into the Nightshade Pack's intelligence network and sourced three crates of high-purity energy crystals-each with an 80% purity rating. More than enough to fuel Xavier's overhaul of the corps' core battle formation.

Just as their plan was beginning to take shape, the day of Ysabel's album launch arrived.

True to her word, Tessa showed up arm in arm with Landon at the event venue.

Backstage, Ysabel had already changed into her gown and her makeup. Nathaniel stood nearby holding her purse-and a thermal cup clenched tightly in his hand.

"I told you to drink more water, but you wouldn't listen. Don't you know how important your voice is as a singer? Come on, one more sip," he nagged with the earnest concern of a fretful parent.

Ysabel gave him a helpless side-eye. "Nathaniel, it's just a launch. Do you really need to be this nervous?"

"I'm not nervous," he insisted, though his grip on the thermos betrayed him. "I just don't want your throat going dry on stage."

Watching his reddening ears, Ysabel's tone softened.

"Thank you... for always being there."

In that moment, it felt like she'd truly grown up.

Chapter 536 The Spotlight She Deserves

Nathaniel froze for a second, then scratched his head. "Ysabel, you being all polite like that... feels weird?"

Yep, this guy clearly needed to be roasted every now and then.

As soon as Tessa walked in, Ysabel jumped up to greet her. "Ms. Tessa! Finally! I thought you were going to

bail on me."

Today was the most important day of her life. She wanted the people she cared about to be there.

"Relax. There's no way I'd miss your big day." Tessa smiled, giving her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "Don't stress. You've poured so much into this album. It's going to be great."

"Yeah, I was panicking at first, but now I actually feel calm," Ysabel said, taking a deep breath. "I mean, I can't control the outcome, so I might as well enjoy the ride. This is something I love-I don't want it to turn into a burden."

"You've really grown up," Tessa said, her eyes full of warmth.

Ysabel leaned in and hugged her. "Meeting you in my last year of high school was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me. Without you, I wouldn't even know what path to take."

"I'm lucky to have you too," Tessa replied, hugging her back. "I'm not easy to get close to, but you never shied away. You've always been in my corner."

Their friendship had always been mutual-never one-sided.

Nathaniel watched from the side, genuinely happy for her.

He'd always wanted to support Ysabel, but had constantly felt like it wasn't enough. Tessa, on the other hand, never made a fuss-but she'd paved the way for Ysabel in countless ways. Ysabel really was lucky to have her.

"Alpha," Nathaniel turned to Landon with heartfelt emotion, "Ysabel's so blessed to have someone like your Tessa."

Just then, Cameron and Hudson arrived as well.

They had watched Ysabel grow up, so of course they wouldn't miss such an important day.

"Tessa really is impressive," Cameron said with a grin.

The launch began not long after, with Yanxi personally overseeing the event. It turned out to be even more packed than expected.

Backstage, Ysabel peeked through the curtain and saw the mass of reporters already seated. The nerves she'd just managed to suppress surged up again, and she instinctively held her breath.

Tessa noticed the stiffness in her posture and reached over to gently squeeze her hand. "You're doing great. Just breathe. You've got this."

"Okay!" Ysabel squeezed back, her eyes lighting up once more. "We've prepped for so long-this is the moment. I can't back down now!"

The moment the host announced her name, she took a deep breath, lifted her dress slightly, and stepped onto the stage

The audience-already filled with fans thanks to weeks of promotion-burst into synchronized cheers the second she appeared.

"Ysabel! Ysabel!"

It was the first time she'd truly felt the warmth of a crowd's enthusiasm, and the tension in her chest instantly melted away.

"Hi everyone, I'm Ysabel."

She took the mic, her voice clear and bright. "To be honest, I'm just a rookie. To receive so much attention already-I'm really grateful."

According to the program, she performed the lead single from her new album live-an exclusive song commissioned by Tessa from a legendary love ballad artist. The name alone was enough to keep media buzzing for weeks.

Many of the singer's longtime fans had only shown up out of curiosity. But the moment Ysabel began to sing, the entire venue fell silent.

Her voice was clear, with a slightly gritty edge that gave it a stubborn warmth- instantly recognizable and deeply moving.

"This girl's actually really good!"

"Her voice is so unique-I'm hooked!"

"The King's got a concert coming up. Think she'll show up as a guest?"

"Who knows? He's never written songs for anyone else before, and now he made an exception."

"Exactly! In this world, is anything ever really impossible?"

Backstage, Nathaniel overheard the audience chatter, and couldn't help the smile stretching across his face.

He knew Ysabel had finally stepped into the world she loved-free to be herself, full of joy.

And the road ahead? She was just getting started. She'd walk it stronger, farther than ever before.

Chapter 537

A Place Beside Her

"Ysabel really is talented. I really liked that song too," Cameron said sincerely.

He'd always thought she was just a kid dreaming out loud about being a singer- he never expected she'd actually stand in the spotlight one day.

"I loved it too!" Nathaniel added quickly, his eyes shining as he stared at her figure on stage.

"Come on, Nathaniel," Hudson teased, "is there anything about Ysabel you don't like? Bet even if she took up trash collecting, you'd be head over heels."

"Well, I do like everything about her." Nathaniel answered earnestly, but his fingers curled slightly at his side

Because deep down, he couldn't help but wonder: would this affection of his end up being a burden to her?

"Nathaniel, it's time you made a move," Hudson said, turning serious. "There's too much temptation in the industry. If you're serious, stop waiting around."

"You've got to trust Ysabel," Tessa cut in. "She knows what she wants. She won't just go with the flow."

"Yeah," Landon agreed. "Even though she hasn't awakened her wolf traits, she's still part of the Nightshade Pack-she's a Thorne. And Thornes always know where they stand."

After the launch, the album signing event kicked off.

Thanks to a full live broadcast, many who'd heard the lead single rushed over in person. Ysabel was on her feet for over three hours before she finally got a break.

And Nathaniel?

He stood at the backstage entrance the entire time, not moving an inch.

The moment Ysabel walked back in and saw him, a sense of calm settled over her. She walked straight to him. "Nathaniel, thank you... for staying by my side all this time."

It was the first time she'd ever said that to him with genuine calm.

Nathaniel opened his arms, his throat too full for words-he just wanted to hold her.

Ysabel didn't hesitate. She stepped right into his embrace. "Really.. thank you." Nathaniel pulled her in tightly, resting his chin lightly atop her head, voice soft as moonlight. "I'll always be with you. So... promise me you'll always leave a place for me beside you. Okay?"

Ysabel froze.

She'd never seen Nathaniel like this before-so gentle, so vulnerable.

But when she thought about it, he had always been there. No matter what mess she got herself into, he was always the first to stand up for her.

"Nathaniel... do you like me?"

The question slipped out before she could stop it. As soon as the words left her mouth, she clenched her

fists, heart racing.

Nathaniel hadn't expected her to be so direct. He'd been in love with her for years, but now that it was finally out in the open, his heart pounded like the rhythm of a werewolf war drum.

Looking down at the girl in his arms, his eyes brimmed with a tenderness that couldn't be contained.

"Yeah. I like you. So, what about you? Do you like me?"

"What the hell, Nathaniel!" Ysabel jerked her head up, eyes wide. "I always thought of you as an older brother, and you're out here trying to hit on me?" Her words were sharp, but the smile tugging at her lips betrayed her.

"Who wants to be your older brother?" Nathaniel sighed, half-laughing, gently pinching her cheek. "I want to be your boyfriend. Your future mate. Isn't that better?"

"Hmm..... I'll think about it." Ysabel turned her face away, ears burning red.

Truthfully, she'd sensed his feelings for a while now-but she'd never let herself think too deeply about it. Nathaniel raised an eyebrow, pushing, "What does 'hmm' mean? Not even a little bit of a crush on me?" He'd waited for years. But now that he'd finally confessed, he couldn't hold back anymore-he wanted to claim her, right here and now, mark her as his.

"I... I don't know," Ysabel muttered, avoiding his gaze. "Don't push me, okay?"

Nathaniel exhaled softly and pulled her close again, voice firm and full of conviction. "Ysabel, remember this-no matter what you want to do in life, I'll support you. But there's one thing I won't give up. I will have a place by your side. Always."

This wasn't just a crush-it was a bond. Even if she hadn't awakened her wolf, both Nathaniel and his wolf had already chosen her.

When a werewolf chooses a mate, it's for life.

And in his world, her place had already been marked-forever.

Chapter 538 Seeds of Change

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Back at Wisteria Apartment. Ysabel sat on the couch in a daze, a suspicious little smile playing on her lips.

"What's got you all giggly over there?" Tessa tossed her a bottle of juice, her eyes full of amusement.

"Ms. Tessa... do you think it'd be weird if I started dating Nathaniel?" Ysabel gripped the bottle so tightly her fingertips were turning red.

"What's weird about that?" Tessa raised an eyebrow. "If you like him, that's all that matters. Who cares what anyone else thinks?"

Finally, this girl was waking up.

"But I always saw him as a big brother..." Ysabel groaned, smacking her forehead. "He's been so good to me -how did it take me this long to realize?"

"Better late than never," Tessa said, poking her cheek. "You're still young. You've got time to figure things

out.

"I think I... really like him," Ysabel whispered, so softly it was like she was afraid the wind might blow the words away.

"Then be with him," Tessa said, as direct as ever. "Once you know how you feel, don't hesitate."

"But I just debuted... would dating now hurt my image?" Ysabel frowned again, anxiety creeping back in.

"Don't worry. You just focus on your music. Leave the rest to Yanxi," Tessa reassured her. "She's handled plenty of stuff like this-she won't let anything touch you."

"Okay!" Ysabel nodded hard, eyes regaining their shine.

Meanwhile, at the Thorne Corp office, Nathaniel was staring blankly at a file, the edges of his mouth twitching up into a goofy smile every few minutes.

Landon slammed a folder down on the desk. "Nathaniel, get a grip. You've been spacing out all morning. Are you even working?"

"Alpha, I confessed to Ysabel," Nathaniel blurted, sitting up straight, eyes full of nerves. "Do you think she'll say yes? I'm so much older... what if she thinks I'm-"

Landon rubbed his temples. "It's working hours. Focus."

"I can't calm down!" Nathaniel tugged at his hair. "What if she turns me down? I totally blurted it out-I should've planned something more romantic..."

Cameron rolled his eyes from across the room. "You're the beta of the Nightshade Pack, a major figure in Montedra's werewolf circles, and you're this insecure?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Nathaniel snapped. "I want her to like me, not my title!"

"Alright, enough," Hudson cut in. "Wrap up the work first. You can spiral afterward. No point wasting time

now."

Finally, Nathaniel took a deep breath and reeled himself back in. "Fine. Work first-

The four of them refocused and plowed through the day's stack of files. Over an hour later, they finally wrapped everything up.

"Oh, right-Alpha," Nathaniel suddenly remembered, "does the old man know about Tessa yet!"

The Thorne patriarch had always been strict about the heir's mate-especially if she was expected to become Luna of the Nightshade Pack. She had to be capable of leading alongside Landon in every way,

Nathaniel honestly feared the old man might give Tessa a hard time.

But Tessa was so exceptional-anyone who truly got to know her would have to respect her.

"I haven't told him yet," Landon said, leaning back in his chair, fingers tapping rhythmically against the desk. "Tessa just started college. I don't want my father meddling too early and distracting her. I'll bring it up at the right time-no need to catch him off guard."

"Smart," Hudson agreed with a nod. "Tessa's a great girl. No reason to let old- school expectations spook her."

In the days that followed, Tessa juggled university classes while waiting on the moonstones to be delivered -and steadily pushed forward the plan she and Avery had mapped out.

Avery practically lived in the Coldfang Mercenaries' war room, working nonstop with Scarface-running tactical simulations, checking supply reports, reworking logistics.

He compiled Scarface's legendary Crimson Valley operation into a detailed dossier and left it front and center on Xavier's desk. Using "new recruit training" as a cover, he had Scarface lead three separate border patrol missions.

Every time they debriefed, Avery stayed silent, letting Scarface take full control- explaining his own deployment strategy and reporting the results himself.

At first, Xavier simply watched coldly from the sidelines. But that changed the day he saw Scarface slam his hand on the table during a strategy meeting-firmly opposing the deputy commander's aggressive approach and insisting on a plan that minimized casualties while still securing the black market outpost. For just a moment, Xavier's fingers paused on the rim of his teacup.

That night, for the first time, the name "Scarface" appeared in the Coldfang Mercenaries' supply ledger under the column, Acting Commander.

Chapter 539 Back to the Beat

At the same time, the energy crystals Tessa had sent began making their mark.

Xavier spent three full days and nights locked inside the formation simulation chamber, working with those shimmering, ice-blue stones.

When the modified Coldfang formations showed a 30% improvement in simulated battle outcomes, he found himself staring at the crystals-watching the energy swirling inside-and suddenly, he remembered a much younger Avery, cradling a guitar, humming and strumming with a look of pure joy. Those fingers... they were never meant to carry the scent of blood.

That evening, just as Avery and Scarface finalized next month's training plan, Xavier summoned his son to the study.

"Tessa was right," Xavier said, his voice lacking its usual steel. "The Coldfang Mercenaries don't need you to inherit. You really are better suited to music."

He looked at his son, a rare softness in his tone. "It was always something you never wanted. That wasn't fair."

me

-forcing this on you, dragging you into

Avery opened his mouth to speak, but Xavier raised a hand to stop him.

"Go," he said simply. "Go do what you love."

Then he turned to face the window, watching the Coldfang banner fluttering fiercely in the wind. "Didn't you say you loved singing? Then go sing."

And with that, he walked out of the study without looking back.

Avery stood there frozen, still holding the training schedule they'd just finalized. The sunset filtered through the window, casting a golden glow across his face- warm and almost unreal. He really... accepted it?

His heart jolted like something had burst inside it, pure elation flooding through his veins. He nearly laughed aloud.

The sleepless nights of doubt, the meticulous breakdown of Scarface's records, the tense moments under his father's cold stare... all of it melted into a rushing wave of relief.

He looked down at his palm-the callus from years of gripping a wolf-bone dagger was still there-but now, his fingers twitched as if they'd just brushed against familiar guitar strings, his heartbeat bouncing along in -rhythm.

"Dad..." he whispered to the empty room, voice trembling with emotion.

So this is what it feels like to break free... like a caged wolf catching the scent of open plains.

He practically ran out of Coldfang Mercenaries' base, fingers flying across his phone screen as he typed a message-only realizing after hitting send that his hands were still shaking: "Tessa, meet me. I've got goo

news."

They met at a café near the medical university. The moment Avery sat down, he slapped the training schedule onto the table, eyes sparkling.

"It's done! My dad... he really let me go!"

He retold everything from the study, and when he reached the part where Xavier said, Go do what you I his throat tightened and his Adam's apple bobbed hard. "Scarface's been officially promoted to deputy, commander. When my dad listened to his report today, he couldn't even keep a straight face - you were right. He knew all along who was better suited... he just didn't want to admit it."

Tessa paused mid-stir with her coffee, then looked up with a soft smile. "Told you-no knot that can't be

untied."

"It's all because of you," Avery said, eyes serious, like he was making a vow. "If you hadn't found those crystals, if you hadn't pushed me to track Scarface's results..."

"Stop." Tessa cut him off with a grin. "No need for thank-yous. I just want you back in Avery Band. That's where you belong."

"Tessa..." Avery's voice caught.

Even now, all she thought about was his dream.

"Steven and the others are still waiting at the villa," she said, nudging his coffee cup closer. "Don't keep them hanging. Of course, if you've changed your mind, that's up to you. No one's going to force you."

"I'm going back," he said, without hesitation.

He once thought that farewell concert was the end-but now, more than ever, he knew: Avery Band wasn't just a memory. It was something etched into his bones. "That's more like it." Tessa smiled with her eyes. "Come on. Want me to go with you?"

"Yeah." Avery stood up, but paused halfway and scratched his head awkwardly. "Actually... I was just thinking on the way here-will people say we're just doing this for attention? Like, we disbanded and now we're 'getting back together..."

"Who cares what they say?" Tessa slung her bag over her shoulder with a shrug. "You're Avery Band-not the 'Fan Opinion Task Force.'"

Avery stared at her walking ahead-and suddenly burst out laughing.

Yeah... what was there to be afraid of?

As long as the five of them were still here, what did it matter what anyone else

thought?

Chapter 540 Home Again

Tessa didn't have afternoon classes, so she went with Avery back to the villa.

The moment they pushed open the gate, the sound of a guitar drifted out from inside the house-it was their breakout hit. The chords were a little clumsy, but there was a stubborn edge to them, a refusal to let go.

Avery froze in place. He glanced at Tessa, and when their eyes met, they both smiled.

He knew now-those waiting for him to come home had never left.

The second the front door swung open, the guitar stopped cold.

Steven sat frozen on the couch, guitar still in his arms. The other three had snacks in hand, but everything was suspended midair. Four pairs of eyes locked on the doorway, like statues paused mid-motion.

"So..." Avery scratched his head, dragging the words out. "I'm home."

No one said a thing. The room was so silent they could hear the wind brushing past the windows. Steven's fingers hovered just above the strings, knuckles white from gripping too hard.

Avery took a deep breath and raised his voice. "I talked to my dad. I don't have to deal with the corps anymore. And-"

He turned to Steven, eyes glinting with uncontainable joy. "Avery Band... isn't disbanding."

"What did you say?" Steven shot to his feet.

The guitar dropped onto the couch with a thud, but he didn't even notice. "Say that again?"

"I said, we're not disbanding," Avery repeated, stepping forward to clap a hand on Steven's shoulder. "I was an ass. I said awful things. I'm sorry"

Before he could finish, the tallest bandmate charged over and hooked an arm

around his neck. "You jerk! Do you have any idea how miserable we've been?!"

Another one gave him a punch to the back-eyes red, but holding back his strength.

Steven looked at him for a long moment, then sniffed, turned, and picked up his guitar. "What are you all standing around for? That song's not ."

His fingers trembled on the strings. The first note was wildly off-key-and it made everyone burst out, laughing.

"What are you laughing at?!" Steven glared at them, eyes welling up. "Get over here! Rehearsal starts now!"

Avery smiled and stepped forward, barely getting his hands on the bass before the three others yanked him. into a hug. Four grown men stood tangled together in the middle of the living room. No one said a word, but their heartbeats echoed louder and louder-as vivid and alive as the first time they'd ever practiced in that basement all those years ago.

Tessa leaned on the doorway, watching quietly.

Then she slipped away, leaving the space to the ones who had just found their way back to each other.

The next morning, Tessa headed straight to TS Entertainment.

Xylia was sighing at her computer screen when she walked in. Seeing her, she immediately spun the monitor around, voice frazzled. "Finally! Look at this-Is Avery Band falling apart?' 'Can we get an official statement?... If we keep quiet any longer, this might turn into a full-blown PR disaster!"

"No need to worry," Tessa said calmly, pulling out a chair and sitting down. "Avery Band isn't disbanding. Avery's coming back today."

Xylia's head snapped up so fast she nearly dropped her coffee mug. "Wait-what? Say that again? Avery's coming back?"

"Mm-hm. He's had a change of heart." Tessa briefly explained the situation with the corps. "Now I need you to do two things: First, let him return with dignity. Nothing overly dramatic, but make it clear that it was his own decision. Second, address the 'publicity stunt' rumors-just drop a clip of their rehearsal from last night. Frame it as a spontaneous jam session. Keep it natural."

"That's easy!" Xylia's eyes lit up. She grabbed her phone and jumped to her feet. "I'll get the crew in place, draft the PR statement... Oh! What about a bonus livestream? All five of them on camera? The fans would go crazy."

"Up to you," Tessa said with a smile and a nod.

Ysabel came running in moments later, breathless. "Tessa! Is it true?! People are saying Avery Band's getting back together!"

"It's true." Tessa looked at her overjoyed expression, and couldn't help but smile herself.

"You're seriously my goddess!" Ysabel flung her arms around her in a hug. "How do you fix everything you touch?!"

