

## Chapter 145

Marisol stirs awake to a warm, furry mass surrounding the entire length of her body. It turned out to be Cedric's massive wolf curled quietly around her and fear would be the only logical reaction, but, her wolf seemed completely content with the abrupt cuddling session, if the satisfied purrs that came on intervals were anything to go by.

She is struck with bewilderment. Immediately going over the last of her memories, or at least trying to understand the turn of events that could've led to them in the least expected position she could've thought. How did she end up here? Why was she still in the hidden castle, and why was this wolf, -If it could even still be called that at such an unusual size-, so out of its element by seeming so relaxed around her?

She tries to look outside and suppresses a yawn. What exactly was going on? At least it looked to be in a deep sleep, so that meant a lesser chance of getting attacked suddenly. She breathed out a relieved sigh at the discovery.

Examining Cedric's sleeping wolf closely, Marisol can't help but feel sympathy for it. Despite its intimidating appearance, the wolf bore the marks of its tumultuous existence. An infested and mangled fur, a plethora of scars that told of attacks with sharp weapons, untreated sores, and wounds that told the story of a creature that had endured much suffering.

Its vulnerable state stirs conflicting emotions within her. From the new angle she was presented with, the beast that haunted her dreams, giving her night after night of sleeplessness, seemed pitiable, and a sudden desire to extend a comforting touch tugged at her.

Her wolf urges her to stroke the creature's fur, bring to it and assuage it so sadly looked to have never gotten, all while insisting that there was nothing to fear. Yet, a lingering sense of apprehension keeps Marisol from succumbing to the impulse.

Caution prevails, and after a few minutes of stiffly studying the creature, Marisol carefully untangles herself from the creature, slow and cautious, so as not to disturb its resting state. Having successfully done so, Marisol silently retreats to the pack house, returning to the familiarity of her room with questions swirling in her mind.

Marisol collapses on her bed, exhaustion washing over her. Her groggy memories suddenly sharpen her mind, seemingly working better without the fright of waking up next to the beastly wolf, and the events of the previous night flood back in.

Cedric had challenged her, daring her to prove she wasn't afraid after she'd pestered him the entire night, seeking answers to his wolf's actions. She couldn't believe he would suggest such, well aware of his wolf's unpredictability.

Disliking Cedric even more, Marisol felt torn. She knew she should have just ignored his goading and left, but the desire to prove him wrong was stronger. Reluctantly, she'd agreed, asking him to shift into his wolf form.

Cedric, looking strangely relaxed, explained that he couldn't willingly shift, not since the curse, and that, these days, his wolf emerged whenever it would.

With clammy palms and struggling to keep her erratically beating heart at bay, Marisol forces herself to sit in wait.

She waited and waited for hours, and yet there was nothing. Dusk fell, fatigue overcoming her, and with Cedric at the far side of the room, she'd drifted into sleep. And then she wakes up to the towering wolf practically wrapped around her.

What a weird night.

Marisol wakes up in her bed this time, feeling rejuvenated and fueled by a newfound curiosity.

After taking a long shower, she ventures out in search of Lily, choosing to ignore every thought of Cedric and what happened the night before in favor of a distraction.

To her surprise, the familiar presence was absent from the kitchen and every other place Marisol had thought of checking. Surprised and a little concerned, Marisol is prompted to inquire about Lily's whereabouts from those around her.

"Hey, did you happen to see Lily? I can't seem to find her anywhere." Marisol questions, curiosity evident in her voice.

The pack member she'd spoken to, thankfully, looks up from her task, not a hint of malice in her voice as she replies almost immediately, "Oh, she went to visit her family. Mentioned she'd be gone for a bit, too."

The revelation surprises Marisol, no doubt, but she decides she can't hold that against the others. A mix of boredom and curiosity spurs her to embark on a spontaneous quest to find Lily and perhaps glean more about life in Redwood.

Hadn't Lily said that there were nice people in Redwood? Well, she would go deeper into the pack dwellings today and find out.

Marisol's journey to find Lily takes her through uncharted territories of Redwood, leading her to a bubbling suburb she had never ventured into before. Initially, the atmosphere feels unassuming, but as she draws closer, into a more lively scene, she begins to get the cold stares and harsh whispers that she wouldn't be too surprised at, at this point.

The people stayed off her path like she was carrying an incurable disease that could be passed by so much as breathing the same air she did. The whispers were loud as ever, too, fingers and pointed stares accusing.

The unfair judgment grates on Marisol, but she chooses to ignore the baseless accusations, focusing on her mission to locate Lily amidst her unfamiliar surroundings.

As she presses forward, the crowd eventually thins, and the architecture shifts, with buildings becoming scantier. Notably, the people here were indifferent, with a subtle touch of courtesy that stood in contrast to the hostility she had faced in the more populated areas.

Eventually, Marisol stood before what she was certain was Lily's home, her scent heavy in the air, and that's where the realization that she hadn't been invited struck her. Wondering how Lily would react to the unexpected visit, she wondered if it would be wise to proceed and potentially intrude on Lily's personal space, or respect the boundaries and turn back?

Contemplating her options, Marisol hesitated. She was already an unwelcome outsider in this part of Redwood. Was it worth risking the awkwardness and potential rejection to find Lily and gain insights into her life?

Her gaze lingered on the modest home, knowing that Lily was probably spending time with her parents or siblings or even her mate - which was the entire reason why she'd taken the break.

The need to make a deciding choice is heavy, and Marisol weighs the potential consequences of her actions. Would Lily appreciate the surprise visit, or would it strain their friendship?

Maybe this was a sacred moment for her. Lily had mentioned being under an oath to Caleb, and she was almost always available for pack duties in the pack house. So maybe this was the only chance she had to get away from all of it.

With a deep breath, Marisol steels herself and takes a tentative step forward. The allure of reconnecting with Lily and unraveling the mysteries of her life ends up overpowering the reservations, her curiosity propelling her toward the doorstep.

Just then, the door swings open, revealing a surprised Lily, her eyes widening at the unexpected guest.

"Marisol? What are you doing here?" Lily's voice holds a mixture of surprise and confusion.

Caught off guard, Marisol fumbles for an explanation. "I...uh, I wanted to check on you. I heard you went to visit your family, and I thought I'd come over. I hope that's okay."

She watches as Lily's initial surprised expression eases into a warm smile, her hand gesturing Marisol closer. "Of course, Marisol. Come on in."

The moment Marisol steps into Lily's house, she finds her formally tense shoulders drooping, relaxing physically and mentally in the atmosphere that was so ambient and welcoming. She immediately feels more at home and welcome here than she'd felt in any other part of Redwood.

Lily, brimming with excitement, gestures toward the living room where a group of young people sits, eyes curious as they look at the newcomer.

"Marisol, I'm so glad you came! My parents are out, but they would have loved to meet you. Anyways ... meet the gang!" She exclaims.

Marisol smiles, appreciating the warmth and ease that envelops her despite being in the presence of completely new faces. The "gang", all looking to be within her age range, consisted of two males and one female. Each face held a unique charm, and Marisol's curiosity deepened as they all waved enthusiastically at her.

"Marisol, this is Jake," Lily points to a friendly-looking guy who had the whole easygoing demeanor thing down to the tee. "And this is Ryan," she continues, a more reserved yet amiable young man, nodding at her, and finally, she turns to the only female in the group. "And here's Maya."

"Hello, I'm Marisol. It's nice to meet you all." She introduced herself with a small smile.

With a quick, curious sniff at the air, Marisol saw Jake's brows pinching, no doubt noting she wasn't a member of the Redwood pack, and he voiced his question immediately, "Where do you come from?" The straightforward question looked to hang in the air and just as Marisol almost spoke the name they all seemed to be waiting for, she caught Lily's pleading gaze from a corner of her eyes, silently urging her to stay silent.

In that fleeting moment, Marisol remembers the unspoken oath Lily had taken when working at the pack house and the secrecy surrounding Alpha Caleb's actions, unknown to the common people of Redwood.

Before Marisol could cook up a lie, Maya interjected, "She's Marisol alright. The visitor who followed Alpha Caleb all the way back to our pack because she wanted him. She's trying to take Caleb away from his mate, Sophia," Maya declares, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

Jake seemed to find the revelation the most hilarious thing he'd heard in his entire life as he burst out in loud laughter, slapping his knee continuously. Meanwhile, Ryan has the exact opposite reaction, his expression darkening as his eyes narrow at Marisol. The atmosphere suddenly shifted, and Marisol could sense the sudden hostility directed towards her.

Marisol still and Maya, with an eye roll and arms coming to cross over her chest, seemed to revel in the drama she had stirred. The room goes awkwardly quiet, and Marisol shoots Lily a look, one that Lily correctly translates to mean, "What did I tell you about them all hating me, regardless of what I say or do."

Lily's shoulders slump, and she shakes her head tiredly before regarding Maya exasperatedly, "Where did you hear that, Maya? Who gave you that absurd information?"

Maya scoffs, brows pulling "Since when do you question me, Lily? And why did you think it right to let this traitor into our midst without any discussion or our agreement?" Her argument hangs heavily in the air, the tension in the room climbing to a new height.

Marisol feels her hackles rise. She hated the fact that she couldn't take so much as a step within Redwood without being subjected to blind judgment and hostility without a chance to even explain.

"And I wasn't of the idea that you just go around peddling false rumors." Marisol resorts and Maya snorts, a challenge in her eyes.

"What did you just say to me?"

Jake, still amused by the unfolding events, laughs again before intercepting, "Ladies, Ladies..... let's all calm down," he urges.

But that has always been known to never work on anyone, as growls can now be heard in the room, the atmosphere boiling with animosity.

Finally, Ryan, who had been silent the whole time, spoke up, "Cut it out, Maya. Maybe anyone would believe you if you didn't make it so painfully obvious that you're just jealous of her."

The room is thrown into silence once again, the occupants seemingly needing a few seconds to process the words, until Maya screeches loudly.

"What?!"

Ryan is back to looking impassive but doesn't shy away from her glare.

Marisol shifts uncomfortably in her seat. The last thing she'd want would be to cause a rift amongst friends.

"I mean..... she is definitely a sight for sore eyes, I'll admit to that," Jake adds with a shrug, his words doing nothing to ease the tension as Maya's face grows red in anger.

"I can't believe this!" she huffs, her face flushing in embarrassment. "I'll leave then! Have fun staring at her face since she's so beautiful!" She makes a show of grabbing random items thrown haphazardly on the couch, and Marisol quickly springs to her feet, taking that as her cue to leave.

"I'm sorry for ruining the moment by coming uninvited. I'll leave instead and not displace anyone. I didn't mean to cause any trouble."

Maya remains silent, wearing a sulky expression. She gave each of them a sideways glance. The rest of the individuals in the room, however, shared secret smiles.

The whole atmosphere was now much different than it'd been when she first walked in, and Marisol wanted nothing more than to be away. With another awkward smile, she began to shuffle out of the room.

"Stop," Maya suddenly calls out. "You don't need to leave. I was wrong. That was really mean of me."

Marisol blinks, unsure how to react or respond. Lily rolls her eyes and beckons Marisol closer, the latter remaining unmoving.

"We were just testing you," Jake explains with a mischievous grin, and Marisol only grows more confused.

"Huh?" Marisol blurts out.

"I'm so sorry. It's just something we tend to do. We're embarrassed, I know. Let's forget about that. Have a seat, Marisol. Can I get you something to drink?" Lily says this time, and Marisol is certain she must look like a fish out of water.

"We're sorry for the little prank. We just wanted to see your reaction," Lily further explains.

Still processing the unexpected turn of events, Marisol tentatively takes a few steps closer until she's at her seat again.

"Well, now that the drama is over, let's go back to enjoying the evening," Jake says, and almost like his words physically pulled the weight off, the atmosphere shifts into a more lighthearted one again.

As the evening unfolds, Marisol finds herself genuinely enjoying the company of her newfound friends. Jake's humor, Ryan's intelligence, and Maya's chattiness created a dynamic and engaging atmosphere. To her surprise, the friends were deeply invested in Cedric's curse and its implications for the pack.

Their discussions revolved around the activities of the witch coven, with a particular focus on Guinevere. They firmly believed that another attack was imminent, and they had been actively investigating Cedric's patterns of attack, delving into aspects unknown even to Caleb or the pack council.

"Cedric has never attacked this part of the pack, and no one knows why," Maya discloses in the course of their conversation.

"Cedric is also known to target witch spies. Redwood is crawling with them. He's mostly prowling around the border and attacking corrupt officials. He still attacks many innocents when he's on a rampage, but we've noticed a pattern." Ryan adds leisurely, and if Marisol's eyes could grow any wider, it would. It made sense.

"Explains why this place is a lot more peaceful." She muses. "The dark energy revolving around the main pack house can not be found here. Do you think that's the cause?"

All the attention is suddenly on her, and Marisol shifts, unsure how to react.

"What do you mean?" Lily finally voiced.

"You don't sense it? This place is a lot calmer, with a different kind of energy. It eases my wolf. Ever since I stepped foot into Redwood, my wolf has been disturbed, but it's different here, and I'd wondered why."

"That's a new insight," Maya notes with a hum.

Marisol was curious about a lot of things, and most importantly, she wanted to know if they knew about the prophecy that was tied to her. But she would have to wait and discuss it with Lily first.

Amazed by the wealth of information at their disposal, Marisol walks home with Lily, opening a renewed sense of excitement and purpose. The revelations from the evening had fueled new doors, offering insights that could potentially reshape their understanding of the challenges Redwood faced.