

2. Gift

"Trigger warning: Mention of suicidal thoughts"

Salvador

An arrow lies past me, missing me by mere millimeters as I charge at the lthy vampire cornering a young she-wolf by a tree. She was wounded, large cuts covering her small body as she quaked with fear. All around me, the battlefield is drenched in blood, the smell of death and burnt esh filling my nostrils. Warriors of the Ivory Phoenix ght erocely against the enemy, taking down the bloods suckers one by one. As I come near the girl, I jump shift in mid air and pounce on her attacker. My jaws clamp down on the vampire's head and in one swift motion, I rip it clean off.

The she-wolf collapses from fear and I shift just in time to catch her. As I turn to drag her to safety, a pain surges through my left ank, a silver tipped arrow burning through my esh. My leg gives out, my knee digging into the earth. I hold the girl tightly to my chest, afraid to let her go.

I cry out as a second arrow buries itself in my shoulder, causing me to lean my body against a tree for support. The pain becomes unbearable and I let out a blood curdling scream. The girl whimpers before her body goes limp.

"No, wait! Wake up," I plead, tapping her cheeks.

Suddenly, the she-wolf's light brown hair turns jet black and her eyes turn to honey. She wears an innocent smile as she morphs into Aurora.

"You failed us," she whispers, her voice soft.

I stare at her in confusion. "N-no," I shake my head.

Her bloody smile sends shivers down my spine and she suddenly disappears from my arms.

The battle eid slowly morphs into the Lluvia Blanca pack house. Down the hall, I hear a faint scream and walk cautiously towards it. I turn the corner and end up in the laundry room. Cries for mercy come from the closet, the door shaking as it's prisoner screams for help.

"Let me out, Chava! Please let me out! Please! Please help me!" Aurora wails, thrashing her arms against the door violently. "Somebody please help me!"

I stare at the door, placing my hand on the handle but unable to make myself turn it, because I knew if I did, I would have to face the horror of my actions. When the sounds fall silent, panic surges through me and I swing the door open.

The room was empty, Aurora no where in sight but the evidence of her torture scattered everywhere. The door was covered in scratch marks from her clawing at it for hours and thick pools of blood cover the oor of the closet from the beatings.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up and I spin around to nd Aurora behind me. Before I can react, Aurora shoves me inside the closet, slamming the door shut and locking it from the outside.

I bang on the door, screaming to be let out but all I hear is her laughter.

"Scream little b****!" She giggles.

I tug on the handle, hoping it'll budge but it doesn't. Instead, the dark closet morphs into a bedroom with a crib in the corner that seemed familiar, but no matter how hard I tried, I could not place it in my memory. Every dream I had always brought me here.

"Why do I always end up here?" I mutter to myself as I look down at the empty crib.

"Perhaps because it was once your home," a voice whispers.

My heart nearly stops as I recognize the voice instantly. I had not heard that voice in almost 6 years now.

"Dad?" I murmur, my lip quivering with hope as I turn to look behind me.

Tears ll my eyes as the man I had loved so much approached me. We were the same height now, but somehow it felt as though he still towered over me and I would never measure up to him.

A perfect mustache lives on his upper lip and his kind chocolate eyes still make me feel as though I am the most precious thing to him. His warmth spreads across the room and after many years, I nally felt at home.

"You're not real," I whimper, a few tears rolling down my cheek. "I'm just dreaming."

"What makes you say that?" He smiles, his eyes twinkling with mischief as he places his hands on my shoulders.

I burst into tears as I feel his touch.

"Why do you cry, mijo?"

I could hold back my sob no longer and bury my face in his chest. His large hand wraps around the back of my neck while the other rubs my back.

"I'm sorry," I cry, my body trembling with every sob. "I'm so sorry I failed you."

He pulls me back, forcing me to look him in the eyes. "You did not fail me, mijo. It was I who failed you."

I hiccup as I look at him, not understanding what he meant.

"H-how could you have failed me? Y-you've done nothing wrong..."

The room morphs back into the closet, Aurora curled up on the corner as she pleads for mercy. From where we stood, we could see the scars and the bruises on her body.

"Chava, please!" She whimpers into her arms, her voice growing weak.

Suddenly, she looks up at us, blood oozing from a cut on her forehead. Mustering up whatever strength she had left, Aurora drags herself towards us and as she does, I realize she's not looking at us at all. Dad and I step off to the side, allowing Aurora to crawl over to a jar containing laundry detergent. She wraps her small hands around the jar and smashes it against the cold oor.

I watch in horror as she picks through the detergent, searching for a sharp piece of glass.

"Please take me home, Moon Goddess," she whispers as she holds the glass to her wrist.

"Don't," I cry, horrified by what I was seeing. "No, Aurora don't!"

Her lips quiver as she hesitates, the glass shaking in her hand. Dad crouches down beside her, gently stroking her hair.

"If I had not failed you," my father sighs as he looks at his weeping daughter. "You would have never done this to her."

He reaches for the glass in her hand, pushing it away from her wrist and it's as if she feels his presence. She closes her eyes tightly, savoring the moment of peace before letting the glass slip through her ngers. Ashamed of herself, she screams in frustration, knowing well that no one would come to her rescue.

"I'm so sorry, Aurora," I whisper, crouching down beside her.

An immense pain ll's my heart as I think of all the times I locked her in here.

She must have felt so alone, so afraid to live. How many of those times had she tried to end it all?

I reach a hand to stroke her hair but as soon as I touch her, her head shoots up to look at me and I scream in horror when I see her face is completely gone. She had no eyes to cry with, no mouth to scream from, no nose to breathe through... She was empty.

I fall back in terror as she fades away, leaving just my father and I in the closet.

"Why do you scream, mijo?" my father laughs, his face still looking at the space Aurora had occupied.

When he looks up at me, his face is gone too.

I scream once more, backing away as far as I could until my body hits the door. I scramble to my feet, tugging at the door handle only to nd it locked. I bang on it, throwing back a few side glances and seeing my father walking towards me.

Frightened, I bang on the door and call for help.

"Let me out!" I cry. "Let me out!"

.

.

.

"LET ME OUT!" I shout, shooting up from my seat and opening my eyes to nd myself back in my ooe.

Beads of sweat line my forehead, my heart still racing from the fear of my nightmare. There's a bouquet of crushed sunowers in my hand, several petals scattered across my desk.

A bang on the door sends me ying out of my seat and I stare suspiciously at the exit.

"Chava, open up!" Javier calls out, banging on the door. "Dude, her Majesty arrives in 25 minutes. Are you ready?"

Panic settles into the pit of my stomach as I remember what day it was and what I had come into my ooe for. I rush to the door, letting Javier in and he stares at the mess in my hands.

"Please tell me those aren't for Aurora," he laughs, pointing at the owers.

I frown at him as I step aside to let him in.

"Do you have her gift?" he sighs, leaning against my desk.

I nod my head, walking over to my drawers and pulling out a small gift box I wrapped before falling asleep. Today was Aurora and Celina's birthday and it happened to fall on Father's day and the Summer Solstice. The twins agreed to celebrate the occasion here at Lluvia Blanca so Aurora could visit Dad and we could all be together as a family.

"Then please go get ready," he says, shoving me out of the ooe and closing the door behind us. He plucks the owers from my hands. "And I'll take care of these."

I don't argue, running down the hall to my bedroom and hopping in the shower. I change and comb my hair, anxious as hell about the party. Aurora hadn't had a birthday celebration in six years and everything had to be perfect. I spent weeks trying to gure out her gift knowing well I could never reverse what I did.

I hurry out of my room and down the hall, running straight into her Highness, Celina.

"Celina, I-I'm sorry," I stutter.

She rolls her eyes at me, smoothing down her yellow dress. "Whatever," she scoffs, forcing a smile on her face and reaching for the collar of my shirt to x it. "Now let's get our stories straight. You and I are getting along just ne and the only reason I have yet to have a Luna ceremony is because I want to nish school before taking on those responsibilities. I don't want Aurora worrying about me here. She has enough on her plate as it is. Understand, Dick-head?"

I stare at her cold grey eyes. The truth was quite simple. Celina and I did not get along. She had not forgiven me for what I had done to Aurora and refused to take her title as Luna if it meant she needed me as her gamma. Javier had tried to convince her that I was the only man for the job but Celina thought otherwise. I have tried to step down from my role but Javier was just as stubborn as Celina. Neither would budge on the issue so for now, Lluvia Blanca had no Luna.

"Yes, ma'am. Understood," I nod.

"Good," she chirps, looking over at my hand and the gift. "So what did you get her?"

I stare down at the box. Aurora's present was something special and I refused to explain it to anyone else but her. I'm saved by the sound of the doorbell echoing throughout the house.

She's here!

Celina squeals and disappears into thin air. I would never get over how powerful the twins were. I run to the stairs and look down just in time to see Celina open the door, spreading her arms out wide. Aurora rushes into her sister's arms, bursting into giggles as they embrace.

Behind her, Alpha Oliver, Diego, Eric, Mia and the **** gamma trickle into the room. In Oliver's arms, an overactive pitbull struggles to get out his grip and greet Celina. On his head sits Santos the hummingbird.

Evan sighs in exasperation as his Luna nearly bursts into tears

"Aurora, you saw her last week!" He groans. "And she lives right next door!"

Oliver glares at the ****, smacking him over the head for being stupid.

It didn't matter to Aurora and Celina that they saw each other regularly or that they lived in different packs. Having been robbed of their own presence for over 18 years, each moment spent together was a joyous occasion for the two.

The twins ignore Evan's comment, relishing in her rat's birthday hug to each other before pulling back to exchange gifts. Both giggle like lunatics when they realize they got each other the same gift, matching charm bracelets.

Taking a deep breath, I make my descent down the steps, drawing Aurora's attention. She waxes me down, a warm smile on her lips. I sheepishly climb down the stairs. Oliver and Evan glaring at me. Aurora may have forgiven me but Oliver made it clear he never would and Evan only tolerated me for Mia's sake.

I lower my head in a bow, Mia and Aurora rushing to give me a hug and kiss on the cheek, the others simply acknowledging me with a nod.

"Happy birthday Aurora," I sigh in her hair, feeling her grip tighten on me.

"T-Thank you," she whispers, her voice a little shaky.

She pulls away, her eyes darting across the house.

"It hasn't changed," she says quietly. She hadn't set foot in the house in almost a year and I knew every inch carried a horrifying memory for her. "It's nice," she lies, biting her lip nervously.

Celina leads us to the courtyard and out towards the rose garden where the party was being held. Several guests are seated and bow their heads in respect to the Queen and her King. Javier is waiting at the main table and congratulates the twins on their 19th birthday.

As we're seated, I feel Evan's stare on me from across the table.

"So are you going to give her the gift or what?" He scoffs. "Ow, ow, ow, ow!" He cries as Mia yanks him by the ear.

"I thought I told you to play nice, asshole!" She hisses.

Aurora looks at the box in my hand and shifts nervously in her seat. I place the box on the table and slide it across to her.

"I hope you like it," I whisper, more to myself than her.

She blinks a few times at it, her shaking hands undoing the bow and carefully peeling back the wrapping paper. She slowly lifts the lid off, her breath hitching as she peers into the box. Tears line her eyes and her lower lip quivers as she stares at my gift. She pulls out the small stuffed bear, holding it against her nose and inhaling its lavender scent.

Dad had given her the bear as her very rst toy. She used to carry the bear everywhere she went and refused to sleep without it. When Dad passed, I took the bear and tore it to shreds. In my eyes, she didn't deserve to keep any of his gifts.

"I tried so hard to put it back together," She smiles through her tears. "I spent hours trying to sew his arms back to his body," she sighs, stroking the little bear's head. "I hid him away so you could never take him again. I thought I'd never see him again in his former glory."

"Where is it?" Javier asks. "The original, I mean?"

"Under the oorboards in the laundry closet," Aurora shrugs as she wipes her tears. "He kept me safe when I was afraid."

I wanted to vomit as I remember the horrible dream I had but manage to keep it together.

"Thank you," She smiles, kissing her bear.

For the remainder of the evening, Aurora chatters away with her sister and family, asking a million questions about Celina's studies and how Valentina and Danny were settling in Lluvia Blanca.

As the sky darkens, Aurora excuses herself to visit Dad. She allows me to accompany her and we walk side by side in comfortable silence.

At the cemetery, Aurora grows fresh owers around Dad's grave and sits down beside him, discussing her plans for the repairs of the Amethyst lake territory. Amethyst Lake would become a sanctuary for women. She would be turning the former pack house into a women's center complete with a clinic, a daycare, a library, and several classrooms. Many of the females of that pack never received a proper education and could hardly even read. Aurora was going to change that, getting instructors to teach the women skills they would need to nd decent jobs. The training grounds would be revamped and the women would receive training to protect themselves and their families. They would never fall victim to abuse again. The Lunas from all seven packs of the Kingdom had all agreed to allocate some of their best warriors to protect the territory until the Amethyst Lake she-wolves could learn to protect themselves.

I felt my heart swell with pride as Aurora detailed her ideas to him. She was everything Dad would have wanted her to be: Strong, kind, forgiving, and determined to make her mark on the world. Dad would be so proud of her. I already was.

"Thank you for the gift," Aurora sighs, patting the ground beside her.

I hesitantly sit down at her side and she sighs.

"But I don't need your gifts, Chava," she says, resting her head on my shoulder. "I just need my brother back."

"I'm not sure he still exists," I shrug, pulling my legs to my chest. "I think I may have killed him a long time ago."

"That's not true," she smiles. "I saw him all the time protecting Mia. Dad would have wanted you to protect her."

"He would have wanted me to protect you too," I snap, growing frustrated with myself. "But I didn't. I failed you."

She grows silent, knowing she could not argue with me there. I think back to that horric dream and look down at her hands. Beautiful tattoos on awless skin wrap around her wrists where there had once been scars.

"It'll be okay, Chava," she says quietly. "I'm not alone anymore so you don't have to worry about protecting me. You can nd your witch and be happy. I want you to be happy."

"I don't need Gwen to be happy."

She frowns at me. "Mate bonds are a blessing Chava. There is a reason why Gwen is your mate."

"Then why did she leave?" I growl. "Why did she leave me without so much as a goodbye? Why did Moon Goddess pair me with someone like her?"

She stares at me, unable to give me an answer.

"I can't answer that for you Chava," she nally responds. "But Moon Goddess doesn't make mistakes," she adds, dusting herself off. "I got a patient mate who helped me piece myself together."

Almost as if on cue, Oliver emerges from the cemetery gates.

I could hear her heart begin to race as he approached and she blushes under his gaze. She turns back to look at me. "There's a reason you got a witch for a mate, Chava. It's up to you to gure out why. I would start by asking Alpha Patric to help you look for her. He had a relationship with Gwen."

I growl at that, much to Aurora's amusement.

"Not that kind of relationship," she laughs. "He just knew her. If anyone can track her down, it's him."

She kisses my cheek before skipping off to her mate and jumping into his arms to carry her away. Alone with my thoughts, I sit in silence for a moment..

I was furious the day I woke up alone in bed, my mate leaving no trace of her existence other than her scent on the sheets. She didn't even say goodbye. I hated to admit it but I was hurt. She didn't want me but I wanted her. I wanted to have her every morning, to steal kisses from her, to dance with her under the moonlight, to make her laugh.

Try as I might, I could not get her out of my head and I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to forget Guinevere Wright.

"I guess I have no choice," I groan, getting to my feet. "I have to nd my mate."