Chapter 28

Jaden's chest ached, a dull throb that pulsed in time with his heartbeat. He hadn't felt this kind of pain in years, not since the last time he had been forced to watch his father die. The memory was a boiling knot of guilt and helplessness, a wound he had spent years trying to stitch closed. Now, the stitches were gone, and the wound was open for all to see.

The Ashen Wolves had taken everything from him. They had taken his sister, they had taken his peace of mind, and they had taken his sense of security. He had thought he was safe, that his pack was safe, that the Council was a boogeyman meant to scare children into behaving themselves. He had been wrong. He had been a fool.

Kaylee was standing by the window, her arms crossed, her face pale in the moonlight. She was trying to be strong, trying to be the calm, collected Alpha her father had taught her to be, but Jaden could see the tremor in her hands, the way her eyes kept darting toward the door every time someone walked by in the hallway. She was terrified, and she was terrified because she was responsible for everyone in this room, and she was terrified because she was the only one who could do something about it.

"We can't let this happen," Jaden said, his voice hoarse from the smoke and the screaming. "We can't let the Council think they can just walk in and take whatever they want. We have to show them that we're not weak, that we're not easy prey."

Kaylee turned to him, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "And how do we do that, Jaden? We're outnumbered, we're outgunned, and we don't even know how many of them there are. We don't even know if we can win."

"We can't, we can't, we don't know," he mimicked, his voice cracking with frustration. He pushed himself up from the couch, ignoring the protest from his bruised ribs. He was covered in bandages, his skin still tender from the burns he had received in the fire, but he was not weak. He was not easy prey. He was a wolf, and he was a member of the pack, and he was not going to let his family be slaughtered without a fight.

"We have to try," he said, his voice low and intense. "We have to try because if we don't, they will come back, and they will take everything we have left. They will take our home, they will take our children, they will take everything we have left and they will burn it to the ground and they will laugh while they do it."

Kaylee's shoulders slumped, and she turned her head to the window, her gaze fixed on the darkness outside. The moon was hidden behind a bank of clouds, and the forest was a wall of shadows, impenetrable and threatening. The pack was scattered, hiding in the woods and in the abandoned houses on the edge of town, waiting for the Council to leave, waiting for the storm to pass. But the storm was not going to pass. The storm was coming back, and it was bringing with it everything they had feared and everything they had refused to believe.

"I don't know how to do this," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "I don't know how to be a leader, I don't know how to make the right decisions, I don't know how to protect my family. I don't know how to do any of this."

"You don't have to know how to do it alone," he said, his voice softening despite himself. He was still angry, still frustrated, still terrified, but he was also tired of being the strong one, tired of being the one who had to carry the weight of the pack on his shoulders. He was tired of being the one who had to be the wolf that he was supposed to be, the wolf that his father had taught him to be, the wolf that the pack needed him to be. He was tired of being the one who had to be the leader.

"We're all in this together," he said, his voice low and intense. "We're all in this together and we're going to stay together and we're going to fight together and we're going to win together. We don't have a choice. We don't have a choice because if we don't, they will come back and they will take everything we have left and they will burn it to the ground and they will laugh while they do it."

Kaylee turned her head, her eyes meeting his across the dim room. The pain in her face was still there, the fear was still there, the guilt was still there, but there was also something else, something that looked like hope, something that looked like determination, something that looked like the beginning of a plan. She was not the only one who was responsible for everyone in this room, she was not the only one who was terrified, she was not the only one who was the leader. He was all of that too, he was all of that and more, and he was not going to let her do it alone.

"We need a plan," she said, her voice gaining strength with every word. "We need a plan and we need to stick to it and we need to be smart about it because we don't have the numbers and we don't have the weapons and we don't have the money and we don't have the time and we don't have the luxury of making mistakes."

"We don't have the luxury of making mistakes," he agreed, his voice low and intense. "We don't have the luxury of making mistakes because one mistake is all it takes and we have already made too many mistakes and we are paying for them with our lives and our homes and our families and our futures."

"We need to know how many they are," she said, her voice rising with the intensity of her thoughts. "We need to know how many they are and we need to know what they want and we need to know why they are doing this and we need to know if there is a way to negotiate or if there is a way to buy time or if there is a way to make them think that we are not worth the trouble and that they should just leave us alone and go back to their territory and leave us alone forever."

**"They will not leave us alone forever," he said, his voice low and bitter. "They will not leave us alone because we are in their way and we are in their way because we are the largest pack in the region and we are the largest pack because we have been growing and we have been growing because we have been taking in people who have been displaced by the Council and we have been taking in people who have been displaced by the Council because we have been the only pack that has been willing to do it and we have been the only pack that has been willing to do it because we are the largest pack