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Three Month Later...

“Damn you, Rebecca!” Eric cursed out from down the stairs; his voice flowed down the stairs into the kitchen. Emma and Travis looked up from their breakfast and then at Rebecca. Sitting next to two wide eyed children, Rebecca had found her morning beginning as normal.

For the last three months her routine had remained the same. Around 4 A.M. she showed up to cook breakfast for Travis and Emma then she would wake them up, get them ready for school. But every morning for a month she would sit at the table and share breakfast with the two wonderful twins while reading the news paper. It was usually then that Eric would come storming down stairs growling at her over some adjustment that she’d made in the household and how it infuriated him.

Setting her newspaper aside, she released a deep, tired sigh. Bringing her coffee mug to her lips, she was thankful for the rich caffeine that rushed through her. Something told her she’d need it today.

“Can I have some?” Emma’s small voice asked.

Rebecca’s heart nearly melted at the look of innocence in little Emma eyes. In such a short time she’d found herself growing impossibly more attached to Eric’s children.

Chuckling, Rebecca shook her head. “Coffee is for grownups. You wouldn’t like it, drink your milk instead.”

“Dad lets us have whatever we want after you go home.” Travis remarked, while placing a fork full of pancakes and syrup in his mouth.

“Well, I’m not your dad and I say the last thing you two need is caffeine.”

After both gave her a disappointed look, Emma and Travis turned their full attention back to their plates. The silence was short lived, just as Rebecca turned her attention back to an interesting news article, Eric’s booming voice vibrated down the stairs.

“Rebecca! Get up here, now!” Rolling her eyes, Rebecca rose from her seat, tossing the newspaper down next to her steaming mug.

“Eat your breakfast. I’ll be back.”

Striding through the living room, she kept a relaxed pace as she climbed each step, leading to the second floor. Passing both Travis and Emma's bedroom, she stopped just outside of the master bedroom.

Inside the room, Eric was presently stalking back and forth across the length of his bedroom in a desperate search of something. His chocolate brown hair was slicked back, still wet from his shower as moisture glistened off his square jaw. The strong columns of his legs were incased in gray cotton suit pants while his white button up shirt hung open, not a single button done. Against her will, she found her breath catching as a shiver of awareness that shot through her body at the sight of him.

Leaning against the door jam, she tried to look away from his glistening sculpted and defined chest. "You bellowed?"

Turning to glare at her, Eric approached the door, anger evident on his face. "Why do you do this to me? Of all days, why did it have to be on the day I have a meeting? Now I'm going to be late because you couldn't leave my things alone."

"Eric, if you want me to help you need to speak in plain English. What's the problem?"

"Where the hell are my ties?" he growled out.

Why don't you sniff them out? Biting down on her lip to keep her laughter from escaping, Rebecca folded her arms across her light blue t-shirt.

"Did you try your sock drawer?" she smirked.

Narrowing his eyes at her, he stomped over to his dark five drawer dresser. After jerking the top drawer open, Eric rolled his eyes as he let out a sigh of relief. Jerking a silver silk tie out of the drawer, Eric quickly buttoned up his shirt while looking back at her.

"I don't care how you clean the rest of the house, but leave my room alone." He growled out, his hands busily tucking in his shirt.

Pressing a finger to her chin in an attempt to look pensive, she mumbled in a low voice. "I don't remember that clause in my contract."

Glaring at her, his fingers moved with efficient speed as he knotted the tie around his neck. "Enough of your sass, Rebecca, It's too early for it." Crossing over to the bed, Eric shrugged his arms into a dark gray suit jacket. Turning his attention back to

Rebecca, his expression softened. “Listen. I’m probably going to be late getting home tonight, so if you could go ahead and put Emma and Travis to bed for me.”

“No problem.”

“Also, I may be bringing some of my workers back with me to go over this new house I’ve been commissioned to design.”

“The work of an architect is never done?”

Chuckling, he shook his head, “Not for me. Any way; as soon as me and the guys get here, you’re free to go home.”

“Alright,” She nodded in agreement. “Wait; your tie is crooked.” Approaching him, Rebecca leaned into Eric’s warm frame.

With quick movements, she loosened his tie to straighten the knot around his neck. Unconsciously; Rebecca moved closer to Eric, examining her completed work with approval. Looking up at his face she was surprised to see that he was studying her. Not looking at her, but studying her. His eyes narrowed and Rebecca felt herself go still. Her heart pounded so loudly in her chest that she was for sure that he could hear it.

Out of nowhere, she felt a shift in the air around them. A heat swept through her body like a rush of liquid fire. The warmth of his body flowed over hers, bathing her in his masculinity. She longed to feel this hard arms wrap around her, caressing her, loving her. Her hand unwillingly slid from the smooth cloth of the tie to lie over the heavy muscles of his chest. At the soft touch of her hand, his muscles flexed and shifted beneath his sun kissed skin.

Struggling to fight off whatever had come over her, unwillingly, her eyes drifted from his tense expression to his firmly set lips. He possessed lips that made a woman just want to nibble on. The thought brought amusement to her and a strange need to attempt such an action herself.

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Her scent assaulted his nose, playing havoc on all his senses. Causing his wolf to awaken and fight for supremacy, fighting for the female he wanted. His wolf had never reacted to a female like this before and it concerned him. The worst part was; his wolf wasn’t the only one to react to Rebecca’s close proximity. Instantly he could

feel his cock jump and pulse beneath the fabric of his clothes as her fingers brushed against his chest and her hand encircled his tie innocently.

Why was he reacting this way to her? She was human, after all. His interest should end right there because of that fact, but instead, he felt a strong force pulling him closer to her. The temptation was almost too strong to resist. In the last few months everything about her seemed...he didn't even know the right words to explain it to himself. All he knew was that she seemed...more, more than she had been since he'd first met her.

Her melted chocolate hair and eyes shined, nearly glowing with an ethereal beauty. Her smooth, porcelain skin nearly had him begging to place his mouth and tongue against it. His hands ached to glide over the soft curves of her flaring hips and round buttocks. And don't even get him started on her mouth.

Against his will, Eric watched as her eyes focused on his tie as her small pink tongue slipped out to wet her bottom lip. She may have meant the action to be innocent as she was lost in her concretion, but it stirred a need within Eric that he thought he'd long since buried.

For a moment he simply watched her. There was something different about her. Slowly he felt her hand drift down from his corrected tie to his covered chest. The brush of her small, soft fingers were like a drug and in the back of his mind it left him craving more. His eyes locked with hers before drifting down to her plump sinful lips once more. All he needed to do was to cut away the space between them and then he could taste the forbidden fruit standing tauntingly in front of him.

There's no harm in just one taste, is there? His inner wolf inquired.

Like fingers brushing at the inside of his mind, Eric jolted at the voice echoing inside his head. It was his wolf. Never had he heard his wolf's voice so clearly in all his life. His thoughts of surprise at his beast emerging were quickly pushed aside as a need beat through his being like a battle drum. His cock hardened and pulsed with a painful need that he couldn't name, it was a hunger for something—no, not something, it was for her.

No. He wouldn't.

Like a deer caught in headlights; he froze. He hadn't even realized that he'd been so enthralled with watching her that it was then he realized that his hands were reaching out to touch her face. What was he doing?! What was he thinking? Rebecca was not for him. Not even for this moment.

He had to put an end to this before it went any further and before he wolf gained power over his mind. With his wolf so close to the surface, he knew if he stayed in the same room with her a moment longer, he would do something that he would regret. He had to get away from her. Shoving his wolf back into its isolation, Eric forced his hands slowly back to his sides, praying that Rebecca had been so focused on her task that she'd not seen him move.

“Are you done yet?” He forced the harsh words from his lips.

Surprised, Rebecca stepped back, letting her hands fall away from him. Eric didn't miss the embarrassment that she quickly hid. More than anything he wanted to draw her close to him.

Hold her close? What was wrong with him? Why was he even thinking of doing something like that?

Shaking his head at the absurdity of the idea, he pushed it from his mind. Fearing that he may not be able to hold back from her any longer, Eric quickly grabbed his black leather jacket off his king size bed and left without a backward glance.

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Left standing in Eric's room as he stormed past her, Rebecca found herself shaking her head with confusion. Closing her eyes, she covered her face with both of her hands before dropping them with a groan. What just happened? How did simply fixing his tie nearly turn into her nearly kissing him? What was wrong with her? Forget about how much she'd probably embarrassed herself in front of her employer. Did she have so little regard for her life? The moment Eric or any other shifter discovered that she knew about them, her life would be forfeit. No amount of kisses or lust would change that.

Releasing a heavy sigh, Rebecca's hand stroked the scars that lied beneath her soft blue t-shirt. Reminding her that she could never trust Eric, no matter how much she wanted to. She needed to build some space between Eric, herself, and whatever this building infatuation was.

More likely his werewolf allure, simple chemicals in the brain, nothing more.

“Becca!” The high, sweet voice of Emma shot up the stairs, startling Rebecca out of her haze. Quickly leaving the alluring atmosphere of Eric's room, she made her way down the stairs with relative ease. Waiting at the bottom of the stairs, Emma was

struggling to hold up her pink, Dora the Explorer book bag while she struggled to zip it up.

“Here let me.” Gently taking the book bag from her and zipping it closed, Rebecca proceeded to help Emma slide her small arms through the short pink straps. “Ready to go?” she asked smiling down at Emma’s calculating expression.

“Yep!” Emma beamed up at her, excitement lighting her eyes.

Chuckling, Rebecca rose to her full height, “Let’s get you and your brother to school before you’re late.” Enfolding Emma’s small hand with her own, they made their way back into the kitchen. By the front door, Travis stood with his entire focus on the game boy in his hands.

“Travis, do you have everything you need?” She inquired while grabbing her purse and keys, with Emma still clinging to her other hand.

“Yeah,” His mumbled out answer caused Rebecca to smirk. Shifter or just plain human children were all the same.

Her routine of getting Emma and Travis off to school began as normal. After a short drive up the road, she pulled up in front of their school, a familiar teacher waited by the curb to escort children from the vehicles and onto school property. The teacher smiled at Rebecca as he bent down to look inside her small gray Honda from the passenger side.

“Hey Becky, how's it going today?”

“Hello Rick, Just the same usual stuff.” Rick Evert, Emma and Travis’s Math teacher. Rick was a thickly built man; he was tall, but not as tall as Eric. His hair was the color of dark wheat. Rebecca had met him the first time when Eric requested that she attended a parent-teacher conference with him, giving the teachers a chance to meet her.

Nodding with a smile, Rick moved away from the passenger door and opened Emma’s door, helping Emma and Travis out of the car. As they disappeared inside the building, she couldn’t prevent her eyes from roaming over to three small giggling children rolling around on the soft green grass. Often times she wondered how many teachers and students were shifters. She only prayed that Emma and Travis had a few fellow shifters that would understand them.

The blaring sound of a car horn from behind; startled Rebecca out of her previous thoughts. Putting the car into gear, Rebecca pulled out into traffic, fighting the feeling of fatigue that threatened to drown her. She still had too much to do before she could head to her small apartment, where she had a date with a scalding hot bubble bath and with her soft, warm bed. And it was that fantasy that would help her get through the rest of her day.

Hopefully, Eric would be too busy when he came home tonight to engage in another verbal battle with her and with any luck she could find a way to keep from throwing herself at him.

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“You’re late, Alpha.” Looking up as he walked through the doors of Black Claw Hunting Lodge, the home base of his pack, Eric was greeted by his unhappy assistant and beta; Chris.

“I know. Has Damon arrived yet?” he asked while shrugging out of his black leather jacket.

“You’re lucky today. He called a little while ago and reported that he’d be late. Just like you.” Chris pointed out with an accusing look.

“You can drop the look anytime, Chris. I wouldn’t have been late if Rebecca would learn to stay out of my room.”

“I wouldn’t be complaining if I were you. When do I get to meet her?”

“Later.” The subject of his children’s nanny wasn’t something that he was keen on talking about around pack members. He’d always been a private person and he intended to keep it that way. Looking around, he noticed that Chris and he were the only ones within the spacious walls of the pack’s lodge.

“Where is everyone?”

“Jason called and said he was on his way, He’s running late because Myra wanted a ride up here.”

“Why the hell is Myra coming?”

Myra was one of the more attractive females of his pack and a pestering thorn in his side for the last five years. No matter what he did, she couldn't take a hint. She was too busy keeping her eye on his mating status to care about anything he said.

Chris didn't bother to hide annoyed but slightly amused smile. "She wants to show her respect and support to her Alpha by being by his side today." His first beta was enjoying his pain too much.

"Call Jason and tell him not to bring her." The last thing he needed was to have a lust crazed, she-wolf hanging around him all day long.

"Too late," Smirking, Chris nodded in the direction behind Eric. Knowing already who it was that had pulled up in front of the lodge, Eric couldn't suppress the groan of displeasure of what awaited him next.

Turning just as his other beta, Jason entered; he took in the unwelcoming sight of Myra. To others, Myra was considered an attractive woman; not that he could see why. Her long blonde hair fell around her high cheek bones and over her shoulders like a golden waterfall. Her thin and tanned body was overly exposed by the revealing red dress that she wore. With the low dipping neck line of her dress and how the thin material fell barely to her mid thigh, she was here for more reasons than to "Show respect and support" as Chris put it.

"Good morning, Alpha." Her voice coming out husky as she approached him, tilting her head to the side, exposing her neck to him; a sign of respect among shifters to their Alpha.

"Thank you for coming, Myra. But it really wasn't necessary." His hard voice growled out as he turned his eyes away from her.

Smiling coyly up at him, she sauntered closer to Eric. "Necessary or not, I'm here. I'm sure you'll find some way I can be of use to you."

Pressing her slender body against his, her small unrestrained breasts brushed enticingly against his chest. What should have made him harder than steel, Eric was surprised when his wolf growled and shrunk back from her touch. Myra's touch once brought him pleasure, now only felt like ice against him, having no pleasurable affect on him what so ever.

Clasping her upper arms, he pushed her away from his uninterested body. "I have stuff to do. If you insist on staying make yourself useful elsewhere." Striding past her, Eric headed for the quiet atmosphere of his office, slamming the door closed behind

him. Hands braced on his hips, he began furiously pacing back and forth across the floor.

An unknown and undeniable rage flooded his mind and body. Myra's touch had enraged his wolf to the point of insanity. Even now his wolf clawed for freedom, a freedom he couldn't afford to give him now. His wolf was on edge. Eric's hands tightened into fists as he fought dominance over his unruly wolf. He had never been out of control and neither had his animal half. Something was wrong, out of place; it was the only thing that could stir up his animal this much. What could it possibly be?

A loud knock on the office door interrupted his thoughts, pushing the door open his second beta, Jason stuck his dark head in between the door frame and the dark oak door.

“Chris and me thought we'd order some food before Damon gets here, if that's alright with you?”

Eric nodded, “Go ahead.”

Once Jason closed the door, Eric found himself slouching down in his chair, looked over the tall piles of documents, floor plans, and sketches. Dragging a weary hand over his eyes, he wasn't looking forward to organize his messy desk before going home tonight.

Deciding not to wait, fifteen minutes later, he'd organized his neglected workspace and transformed it into a more manageable work area. Lain out across his newly cleaned desk was everything he need for the meeting today. Everything from the floor plans to the architecture design of the doorways and windows for a large three level house the Beta from a neighboring pack had hired him to design. All his attention focused on going over every detail lain out before him, in the back of his mind Eric recognized the sound of his office door opening.

At first he dismissed it as unimportant and assumed it was one of his Beta's bringing him some of their food. Until the strong smell of sweetened floral perfume filled his office and burned his sensitive nose. Looking up, he saw Myra leaning against the now closed door. Her small manicured fingers swiftly flipped the lock into place, while flashing him a lusty smile. Slowly running a hand down the front of her dress, Myra's fingertips trailed down the low neckline of her dress and skimmed over her exposed flesh.

Rolling his eyes, he leaned back in his chair, his eyes moving back to the papers scattered across his desk. His wolf growled his warning as Myra approached from

behind his chair. Her hands slid from his shoulder and over his hard chest. Once again her touch was cold, causing his wolf to want to snap his jaws at this unwanted female.

Ignoring the frightening glow of his eyes, Myra moved between the desk and his chair. Leaning back on the desk, kicking off her red stilettos, she planted one bare foot beside his thigh and the other on the opposite arm of his chair. Her position spread her thighs wide, flashing her black lace thong.

“Myra,” His voice held an irritated tone. “I have work to do,”

Grasping a hold of his tie, she tugged him forward. “All work and no play make you a very dull wolf, Alpha.” Leaning closer, a hairs length between their lips, Eric pulled away with a look of displeasure set on his face.

“You forget your place, Myra.”

“Then show me my place, Alpha. I remember where yours was—”

Grasping his hand she pulled him forward, shoving his hand between her warm thighs. The thin thread of his wolf’s control snapped and as his wolf leapt towards her in anger. Jerking his hand from between her thighs, his hand shot out, wrapping around the thin column of throat.

In his anger, he shoved her down on her back and pinned her against the wood of his desk. Leaning over her, his irises glowed brightly as his wolf rose to the surface. His jaw ached as it reshaped and his teeth lengthened. His killing gaze swept over her startled face as his face partially shifted. His facial bone reshaped with loud crunching sound until his face resembled a wolf’s more than his human face. His wolf growled dangerously and snapped his jaws at the trembling female beneath him.

He growled in a deep rumbling voice, “Get out.” Eric jerked away from her, his wolf slowly receding back within him. His partially shifted face slowly faded back to normal.

Glaring at him, Myra slowly slid off his desk and bent down collecting her heels. Intentionally lingering in her bent over position as her low neckline dipped lower, flashing her braless chest at his angry eyes.

“Get out before I throw you out.” He growled out, as his eyes narrowed dangerously at her.

“She was never your mate, Eric. Open your eyes! She’s never coming back! I’m the strongest female in the pack; I would make a proud mate for you.” Her voice rose with each step she took toward him.

“Myra, you will address me as “Alpha” and nothing more if you value your place within my pack. Furthermore; were I ever to take another mate that wasn’t my true one, it would never be you.”

Instead of a look of hurt, he’d expected to cross Myra's features, her expression only shown with anger and the promise of revenge that she no doubt would collection on. Spinning away from him she marched towards the door with angry strides. Her delicate hand covering the door knob, Myra turned to look over her shoulder at him, angry flames filling her gaze. Jerking the door open she sent him a smothering glare before slamming the door shut behind her.

Breathing heavy, Eric slammed his hand down on his desk with a snarl. This wasn’t like him, he knew that. Normally he could brush aside Myra’s attempts to worm her way back into his bed very easily and without emotion on his part. But this time his wolf reacted so violently that he’d nearly ripped her throat out. He had to get a handle on whatever was happening to his beast before he lost control and harmed someone. He was Alpha; he was never out of control. It was unthinkable and unacceptable.

When the door opened again, Eric’s anger filled eyes lifted. His lips peeling back in a snarl. “What?!” he shouted as Chris poked his head in between the door jam and the door. Seeing his fierce expression, Chris looked warily at Eric.

“Are you alright?” Chris asked. His wary expression gave away to a look of confusion.

Shoving a hand through his hair, Eric huffed out a heavy breath. “I will be once I get through today.” He muttered. “What did you need?”

Slipping into the office, Chris closed the door behind him softly before turning back to look at Eric. His lips twisted into an uncertain expression. Hesitantly, he spoke. “The elders are here.”

Scowling, Eric’s lips pinched together while his hands moved to rest on his hips. “What?”

Why would the elders be here? In shifter packs; elders were the only individuals that held any semblance of power; other than the Alpha. They helped to maintain the laws

and they irritated the shit out of Eric. If all four of the elders were here, it meant that something was up.

“They are waiting for you in the meeting room and have asked that you make yourself available now.” Chris said with obvious distaste. His beta didn’t like the elder’s underhanded attitude any more than Eric did. Often times the elders abused their rights as councilors to the Alpha to push him around to their liking and he was getting tired of it.

Rubbing a tired hand against his forehead, Eric nodded. “Let’s get this over with.” Striding around his desk, he followed Chris out into the wide lobby of the pack’s lodge. Turning down a hallway to the left, Eric strode toward the meeting room with Chris following behind him. The long hallway was flooded with morning light from the countless chest high windows on the left of the long hall leading to their destination. Idly, Eric’s gaze shifted out the windows as he walked. His gaze took in the sight of the lush forest that surrounded the pack’s lodge. He’d rather be running in his wolf form out there than facing a group of sour faced elders.

His strides didn’t slow when he entered the meeting room. The room was basically empty save for a long table that stretched the length of the room. Coming to a stop at the head of the table, Eric noted that the elders had already made themselves comfortable in the padded chairs at the middle the carved table. Adopting a blank expression, Eric turned his attention on the scowling faces of the elders.

The elders sat in a close unit with two sitting on either side of the table. He recognized the head elder; Peter Smyth, a willowy man that treasured tradition and hated anything that didn’t glorify or strengthen the pack. He sat in his chair as straight and stiff as a board.

Pulling out his chair, Eric sat down in a relaxed manner; his eyes flickered over the room. Chris had pulled the door closed as they entered in an effort to keep this meeting private. For that, he was very thankful for. He highly doubted that the elders had ordered this meeting to talk about the weather with him.

“Good morning.” He murmured. None of the occupants at the table returned his greeting.

This was going to be fun...he thought dryly.

“Alpha,” Peter began, displeasure evident in his tone. “We have come to discuss several pack matters that concern us.”

Ignoring the way the elder glanced at Eric like he was a child about to be reprimanded, he shrugged. "I wasn't aware of any issues among my pack."

"That is precisely why we are here." A second elder commented. The second elder was a woman; not that he could care to recall her name, but he noted that her expression was aloof and stiff as she regarded him. "It has come to our attention that some of your decisions of late may not be in the best interest of our pack."

Before Eric could reply the Peter explained. "One of those being your decision to form an alliance with those filthy Mackenzie's," The elder's face held a look of distaste. "A decision that you neglected to share with this council before hand; I might add."

Eric had to fight the urge to smile. It had been months since he'd heard from Doyle and his pack, much to his relief. Doyle's pack may be an odd one among shifters, but Eric respected Doyle. As Alpha of his pack; Doyle welcomed many different shifters and offered protection where it was needed. He found it amusing that others of his pack viewed Doyle with such distaste. The grizzly bear shifters may be a bit odd and extremely possessive of their mates, but they at least didn't fight amongst themselves like these people before him were doing. He didn't care about the challenges that Doyle was battling at the moment, it wasn't his business. He had enough to worry about with his own pack. What he cared about was their alliance, nothing more.

"The peace treaty with the pack of Darkwood Springs is what this pack needs." he stated firmly as he tapped his finger against the table.

"And who said that was what this pack needed?" Derik; the third elder stated with a scoff.

"What you should be doing is focusing on strengthening your pack; not making friends. There are several wolf shifters in Darkwood Springs, not to mention several rival packs nearby. Why haven't you made any attempt to expand this pack's reach?" He asked, giving Eric a rude, accusing look.

"Expanding the pack's reach" was just another way of saying to make war with other packs in effort to take control. In the past it's what was done amongst wolf packs. But the thought held no taste for Eric. He was by no means a peace loving man; he was a man that did what had to be done. Damn the consequences as long as the outcome was worth it in the end. He did want his pack to be strong. Constantly engaging in pack wars for more power was not what he wanted.

“The treaties with other shifter packs are important to the survival of this pack. One of these days, there will come a time that we will need the aid of the shifters of Darkwood Springs. For this pack to survive and thrive we need to have allies. That is what will increase our strength, not warring with other packs for more territory.” His hard gaze fell on each of the elders as he spoke firmly.

Silence stretched through the room, as the elders must have seen that his mind wouldn't be changed on the topic.

“Our pack will never be strong until we have an Alpha pair to protect and govern us.” Jonathan; the fourth elder reasoned gently, earning several approving nods from the others.

And there it was, the true reason for the elder's ambush meeting today. Eric growled in the back of his throat. Why couldn't they just leave this matter alone? He was a strong and fair leader. What the hell would having a woman at his side matter?

“What does this have to do with the security of my pack?” his voice rumbled out with displeasure.

Peter folded his hands on top of the table before answering. “An Alpha female is required within any shifter pack. The reasons for this are unimportant, but it is something that needs to be addressed.” At the end, his thin finger tapped against the table in emphasis. Peter's voice rang out with a tone of authority that he seemed to think he possessed in that moment.

“This is not the fifteenth century,” Chris stated, moving from his guarding position by the door to come and stand beside Eric. Folding his arms over his chest, he frowned at the arrogant elders. “It's never been a requirement that our Alpha has to have a mate to control and run this pack.”

Eric was grateful for his friend's support, but he was too furious to summon the effort to show it. None of the elders ever liked how he'd won the title of Alpha. Unlike most Alphas; who were born into the position and only had to challenge their parent for the title, Eric had been different. He'd been born of two low ranking parents that held no title within the pack. He'd always known that he wouldn't be content to follow the leadership of another. So, he'd fought and shed his own blood for his title and he'd be damned if some snooty elders were going to find ways to take that away from him.

“As of this moment, we've come to an agreement.” The female elder said gently, responding to Chris's words as she waved her wrinkled hand toward the other expressionless faces around her. “We've agreed that it should be a requirement. Your

recent interests have shown us that you are not concerned with what is best for all the members of this pack and its future and that puts the safety of this pack at risk of attack from another. By seeking out other; unnecessary alliances and your refusal to seek out a replacement for the position of Alpha female, you have made us appear to be a weak pack and we cannot tolerate that.”

Eric’s teeth gritted together, his eyes flashing with dangerous rage. How much more of this was he expected to sit back and listen to? If it were possible he would gut every elder before him and he’d do it with a smile. Releasing a slow breath, he leaned back in his chair. “With all due respect—” he began; but was cut off as Peter shook his head and held up a staying hand.

Did he just shush me?! Eric raged silently. He didn’t know how much more disrespect he could take before his beast exploded.

Rising from his chair, Peter smoothed a hand down the front of his silk tie with an unhurried motion. “With all due respect, Alpha.” He practically sneered. “This isn’t up for discussion. As elders of this pack we believe that you’re no longer the best option for this pack.”

“I don’t like threats, Elder Peter.” Eric growled out.

Peter simply smirked at him. Turning to nod at the other elders, he motioned for them to rise as though he’d just called the meeting to an end with the simple action. Without a word the other elders rose from their seats and left the room without a backward glance. Turning his attention back to Eric, Peter stepped as close to his Alpha as Chris’s shielding body would allow.

“My suggestion to you, Alpha,” Peter began. “Find yourself a replacement mate and show the pack that we have two strong leaders. A lone leader; no matter his strength is still an easy target. You have not met a challenge in some time and that can change very quickly with your recent disregards to the elder council.”

“I rule this pack, not you or any of the other elders.” Eric hissed out, rising from his chair to hover menacingly over the thin man.

Smirking, Peter shook his head; unafraid. “Regardless; give our words some thought. Otherwise, when you are challenged for your title, you will not have the support of the pack behind you.” With those words uttered gently, Peter turned and left the room with slow strides.

The moment the door closed, Eric paced away from the table with a murderous expression falling over his face. His wolf rose to the surface. Fighting to break free and destroy any that opposed him. The elders had no right to tell him to get married or else lose the loyalty of his own pack. They were advisors for God's sake! They held no power over him!

"Eric?" Chris's voice cut through the murderous fog that shrouded his mind.

Drawing in a deep breath, Eric forced his wolf back into the cage of his mind before turning to face his beta. Releasing a deep sigh, he rubbed a tired hand over his stubble dusted jaw before returned to his chair.

As much as he hated agreeing with the elders, he knew they had a point. Without a mate, he was vulnerable. He'd been Alpha of the Ravenwillow wolf pack for twenty years, upon taking that title, he'd taken a mate. His wolf went still at the memory of Emma and Travis's mother. Rage boiled in his stomach like lava. Pursing his lips in anger, he pushed the memory of his mate-by-choice aside.

Pack law dictated that there must be an Alpha pair; if he waited much longer the elders would push the issue further. He needed the support of the elder council to have the loyalty of his pack. As much as the thought turned his stomach to think about it, he would have to consider finding a woman to fill the leader position beside him. He would either have to choose a mate from one of the available females of his pack or a neighboring one. Or he would face challenges daily for his position as Alpha and if defeated, his pups and he; if he wasn't killed, would be driven from the pack. But could he bear to enter into another loveless and despondent mating?

A light knocking at the door caused Eric to growl low in the back of his throat. "WHAT!" He snarled out.

Slowly meeting room door opened, a tall muscle bound man stepped through. His body encased in a black and blue, pinstriped suit. The top three buttons of his silk, navy shirt undone. His short golden hair glowed against his rough olive skin.

"What type of greeting is that? Should I feel insulted?" A crooked smirk formed across his firm lips. "Jason told me I would find you here."

Pushing his present worries aside, Eric forced a friendly smile on his face. "Damon, I see you were able to pry yourself away from your current bedmate and your mirror for our meeting."

Chuckling Damon ran a hand through his hair with a mocking look. “Who am I to deny the desires of a beautiful woman when she looks my way?”

Rolling his eyes, Eric shook his head at his old friend’s teasing. Damon was beta of one of the many packs of wolf shifters that Eric had formed treaties with. In all the years Eric had known Damon, he found him to be a playful lover of many and a strong wolf like no other.

“Whose bed did you slink from this time? You must have known her well if risk being late today.”

Taking the seat near Eric’s chair at the head of the table, Damon grinned with amusement. “I knew all I needed to know at the time. She has the largest—” He paused, holding his hands out in front of his chest as if he were cupping a bountiful pair of breasts. Damon shot a playful grin at Eric as he finished, “Heart.”

“Right,” Eric acknowledged disbelievingly. “Enough talk of women’s hearts. Let’s get Jason and get this meeting over with. I want to head over to the building site before it gets late.”

“My friend you need to get out more and treat yourself.” Damon stated with his usual teasing grin. Standing, he pushed away from the table. Walking around the opposite side of the long table, Damon’s eyes flickered around the room. “I noticed the beautiful Myra has graced us with her presence today.” His eyes searching Eric’s for a reaction of some sort.

“Feel free to take her with you.” Eric whispered with an unfeeling tone.

Shaking his head, Damon clicked his tongue mockingly at Eric. “Thank you for the offer, my friend. But my Alpha would have my head if I ever thought of taking another male’s mate.”

“She’s not my mate!” he snarled, growling low beneath his words, causing him to sound more animal than man. His wolf snarled at the very idea. Myra...his mate; not a chance in hell!

“You say that as if you already know who it is.” Damon stated, no doubt fishing for information in hopes that Eric would give him something to gossip about.

Rising to his feet as well, Eric’s gaze shot to the watchful gaze of his first beta. Chris watched him with a cool silence that he was known for. Turning away from Chris’s watchful eyes, Eric ignored the amusement that danced within Damon’s expression.

Pacing along the opposite side of the table, Eric shook his head in denial. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Damon shrugged his shoulders carelessly. “Makes no difference to me, I was just hoping to hear that you had finally found your true mate. I’ve been dying to see the great Eric Daniels brought down a peg by a slip of a woman.”

From behind him, Chris began to laugh only to cover it the sound with a round of fake coughing as Eric turned to look at him. His true mate? The fates weren’t that kind to him. When he’d visited Darkwood Springs to meet Doyle face to face, he hadn’t been able to push aside the feeling of jealousy that surged through him at seeing Doyle with his own true mate. The bond between Doyle and his mate; Aria was evident to any that saw them together. It was as though they were linked together by thousands of ropes, with no way to separate one from the other.

He craved that; or at least he had at one point in his life. It was far past the time that he should have found his one true mate, if he was worthy enough to have one. After all this time, he seriously doubted that there was still any hope of finding her; the one meant for only him.

In his youth, he’d enjoyed many females of his pack and many not of his pack. When he’d searched for his true mate with no luck, he’d settled for a simple mating among his own pack and he’d chosen Beth.

He’d known that Beth; the mother of his children, wasn’t his true mate. At the time; it hadn’t seemed to matter much. As Alpha, it was expected that he would mate a strong she-wolf that would stand by his side and give him strong pups. Beth had been his best friend and it had made sense at the time. Even though she hadn’t stirred his wolf, he’d hoped that they would have found some happiness in their mating. He’d been wrong.

Not soon after Emma and Travis’s birth, it became obvious to him and others around him that Beth had found her happiness in someone else’s arms. He hadn’t expected love from her, but he had expected loyalty. Before he could confront her about it, she’d disappeared without a trace and her lover with her. For years he’d endured the sympathy filled looks from his family and pack.

He had long given up hope that Beth would return and be a mother to her children. He’d let go of the dream of waking up every morning with his unknown and unfound true mate, the dream of utter happiness and the feel of a true mates love. Hearing from many mated males, the overwhelming and powerful feeling of finding your one true

mate, and the over rush of powerful emotions. No words could have been found described to him the intensity of emotions that he would never experience.

Shaking the thoughts away, Eric forced his mind to a more productive subject. There would be time to worry about his mating status; but now wasn't the time. Turning to look at Damon, Eric gestured toward the open doorway with his hand.

“Let's head to my office and I'll show you the blue prints that we've drawn up for your house before we head out.”

Damon nodded. “I hope you made the bedroom extra large.” He teased. “I need my space.”

“For what? You're large ego and blow up dolls?” Chris commented from behind as they headed down the sunlight filled hall.

Scoffing, Damon turned to look at Chris as he continued walking. “I'll have you know I graduated from blow up dolls a long time ago.”

The combined teasing words and friendly laughter echoed behind Eric as he made his way to his office. He couldn't help the returning feel of a strange restlessness within his wolf all of a sudden. His beast was on edge. As one would feel as if they were being hunted or watched, neither of which Eric cared for.

Cautiously, Eric allowed his gaze to wonder around the wide open lobby area of the lodge as they moved toward his work office. Sitting with a lazy posture was his second beta; Jason. His eyes briefly lifted once Eric exited out of the long hallway, only to drift away and back at the motorcycle magazine he was glancing through. On the far side of the room was Myra; he dismissed her seeking gaze within the second he'd spotted her.

Something had put his wolf on edge and had left his skin crawling to the point of madness. But what was it?