

The Hunted Wolf – Chapter 61

I walked up to Jori, looking around the empty room. He was the only presence I was, and he made no indication that he was aware of my presence. I sat in front of him, crossing my legs underneath me. He was staring right at me now, but his eyes looked far away. He wasn't fully here.

"Jori?" I waved my hand in front of his face.

His eyes flicker, and for the first time he registers that I'm there. "Adira? Is that really you?"

I nodded my head. "It's me."

"Oh."

My chest tightened. He almost seemed like a shell of the person I thought I knew. His entire personality seemed subdued.

"Jori, you can't give up. I can't imagine what you've been through, but your wolfpack needs you."

He let his head fall forward, hiding his eyes from me. "I failed everyone."

"It's not your fault."

"I wasn't strong enough."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. I understood it was hard not to blame yourself in situations like these, but I didn't know what to say to him to make him realize none of this was his fault.

"So be strong enough now."

Jori looked up at me. "How?"

"Don't stop fighting. Don't sit here complacently. You're free from your shackles, so take your control back. Fix what was broken. Fight." I wanted to tell him that it would be selfish to give up, but I didn't want to make his guilt worse. It was clearly keeping him locked away in his own mind already.

Jori's eyes glistened. "I'm sorry, Adira. I'm sorry I took you away from Mark and tried to harm your baby. I never wanted to do any of that."

I placed my hand on Jori's arm. "That wasn't you. Just because it was your body, doesn't mean you made those decisions."

Jori looked off to the side. "I think Xavier found me because of my hatred for Mark and everything that happened between the two of us. Somehow he found me, and he fed off my negative emotions. If I had been able to let go of my grudge, Xavier wouldn't have been able to get to me. That's why he picked me and not Mark."

"Maybe that's all true, but there's no point in dwelling on the past. We can't go back in time and change what was broken. All we can do is move forward, hoping to do better."

"I heard Mark talking to me earlier."

I tilted my head. "You did?"

"He told me not to give up. He said other people needed me. I don't get why he doesn't hate me. My family and I took everything away from him and his family. He has every right to wish me dead, but instead he tells me not to give up. How does he do it?"

"Mark is a patient and caring person," I said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the whole world. "He cares for everyone, and it takes a lot for him to truly hate someone."

Jori looked up to the ceiling, stretching his neck back. "He hated me at one point. I know that much. He was my best friend, and when he came to me, needing my help, I turned my back on him."

"Maybe if you two sat down and had a real heart to heart, you could clear the air. You can start the real healing between you two."

Jori let out a long sigh, looking back at me.

When I stared into his eyes, I saw remnants of the man who I first met. He was still mostly Jori at that point. He was confident and knew what he wanted. He also had pain lingering below the surface. Now that pain was crawling on his skin, not even trying to hide.

“Okay. I won’t give up.”

I smiled and nodded. “Good. I’ll see you when you’re awake then.” I stood up and started walking away from him.

“Adira?”

I stopped and looked over my shoulder. “Hmm?”

“I’m glad you are Mark’s mate. And congrats on that baby.”

“Thanks. I’m glad I’m Mark’s mate too.” It was then that I realized I didn’t feel that soft tug towards Jori anymore. There was no lingering pain from his rejection. There were no remnants of the mate bond I felt with him. A wave of relief washed through me. This just confirmed that Jori was never my mate.

“I’ll see you on the other side.” I waved to Jori as I left his subconscious.

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I walked down the stairs of the pack house once I had finished with Jori. I had half expected Jori to wake up once I left his subconscious mind, but his body was just lying there, still as ever. It made me worried that I didn’t actually make a difference, and Jori would never wake up. I could stand just sitting there and waiting, so I linked Mark to find out where he was and decided to visit him.

I cracked open the door to the conference room and peeked in. Mark, Reyland, Percy, Scythe, and Mason were all sitting around the table discussing some tactic or other.

“We can’t possibly prepare for an attack we know nothing about. How are we going to keep this town safe from the Council of Magic?” Mason asked.

“It seems like we have the help of the warriors from Pack Sallow now. They want to keep training and improve their skills. Some of them even asked about training with Pack Aphelion,” Percy mentioned.

Scythe spoke up next. “That’s great, but Mason is right. We know nothing about fighting sorcerers, and some of the magic these people hold seems impossible for a werewolf to fight. How can we prepare against something like that?”

“Zayla is trying to reverse engineer a serum that will help us be resistant to magic. If we can level the playing field, then we have a chance,” Mark said.

“We can’t give up just because we don’t know the enemy.” Reyland’s voice rang out, firm and confident.

“I wasn’t saying we give up,” Mason said. “I just don’t know how to prepare for something like this. We know nothing about our enemy. What kind of powers they have, how many there are. We need more information.”

I stepped into the room, making my presence known. “I agree. I think it’s time we talked to Cain to see what we can figure out.”

Mark locked eyes with me. He smiled for a brief moment when he saw me, but concern quickly replaced it. “Are you sure you are up for that?”

The room was heavy as everyone looked around at me. All of these people were fighting hard to get me back. I knew that now. Of course, none of them would like the idea of me approaching my kidnapper, but I couldn’t let fear hold me back. Everyone worked so hard for me, so I needed to contribute my part.

“I am. We shouldn’t wait any longer.”

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I stood outside the prison cell, my heart pounding in my chest. If Mark wasn’t holding my hand at that moment, I wasn’t sure if I would be able to stand steady. I knew it would be safe to talk to Cain. Ginger was there to help control him, he had been drugged, and there were plenty of people around to help me. The idea of facing this man was terrifying. He had tried to take me away from my mate.

Mark squeezed my hand. “It’s not too late to change your mind. Reyland and I can do this on our own.”

I squeezed his hand back and took a step forward. “No. I need to be here. I know he’ll be more open to talking to me. In his twisted mind, he was doing all of this to protect me.”

Mark nodded and opened the door for me. Cain was already sitting inside on the opposite side of the table. He was chained to the chair, and his eyes were

sunken in. He was sitting still with his hands in his lap, only looking straight ahead.

“Good afternoon, Cain.” I sat down across from him, and Mark took a seat next to me.

Cain’s demeanor completely changed the moment he saw me. “Adira. You’re okay. Is the...” his voice drifted off.

“The baby is okay, not that it’s any of your business.” I kept my back straight and my head held high. No matter how difficult this was going to be, I didn’t want to show my emotions.

“I’m so glad. I can’t believe that wolf tried to harm you and the baby. I thought he just wanted to harm Mark.” Cain’s jaw tightened at the thought.

Mark’s hand shot to my thigh, and I knew he was having a hard time biting his lip. I placed my hand over his and squeezed. I knew where he was coming from, but we had to be careful. We couldn’t afford to be reactive and cause Cain to shut down. We needed his information after all.

“Cain, I know you’re not stupid. You know that was the Son of Blood and Magic. It wasn’t Jori. It was Xavier.”

Cain looked at the table. “I know. I was naive. I sensed there was something wrong with that boy, but I thought it was just his hatred boiling inside of him. I thought I could manipulate him and control him. I still didn’t think he would want to hurt you.”

“He was power hungry, and when he found I would rather be with another man, have another man’s baby, he lost it.”

Cain smiled. “I still can’t believe I’m going to be a grandfather.”

I squeezed Mark’s hand and bit my tongue. I wanted to tell him that he was not this baby’s grandfather. He was nothing to me. I wanted to slap his face until he understood I would never accept him as part of my family, but I knew I couldn’t do that.

Instead, I said, “Not if the Council of Magic comes after me.”

Cain tensed up at those words. “We can’t stay here. They’ll find you, and they’ll take you away or kill you. We have to leave, and you have to join the magic society, forgetting all of these wolves.”

“And what about the father of my baby? Do you honestly expect me to just leave him behind? I’m not you. I’m not going to abandon my child.” My words were filled with spite.

“I left to protect you. You should leave to protect your child too.”

“And what happens when they find my baby is part werewolf too? Do you think they are just going to accept that? This baby will be more werewolf than sorcerer. Do you really think they are going to overlook that fact? They don’t exactly seem like a forgiving group.”

Cain didn’t respond right away. He looked back and forth between Mark and myself.

Mark leaned forward. “Do you really want to ask Adira to do what you did? You gave her up to protect her, but it’s obvious you wish you would have had a chance to be a family with her. Now you suggest Adira leave her mate and child behind. If you could go back in time, wouldn’t you rather stay with your family and fight for them instead of hiding them away?”

Cain locked eyes with Mark. Something seemed to change in him in that moment. “I did what I thought was best at the time. I just wanted to protect everyone.”

“Would you choose the same thing now?” Mark asked. “Because I would rather fight and possibly die than lose my family.”

Cain looked back at me, and I saw pain in his eyes. “You’re not going to run, are you?”

“No.” My answer was firm. I refused to give Mark up just because someone else thought they could control me and my actions. “Which is why we need your help figuring out how to stop the Council of Magic.”

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CAIN

I stared across at my daughter, facing a harsh reality. The safest way to keep her protected was no longer an option. I only had two real choices. I could refuse to help and run away again, or I could actually stand up to the Council of Magic and risk my life. I had spent my entire life doing the safe thing that simply kept me alive.

"I can talk to the council for you. Convince them you don't mean any harm to them."

That mate of Adira's nose twitched. I could tell he was fuming. He would have killed me for sure if it weren't for Adira. Or maybe it was only because I had information about magic and the council that he needed.

He looked over at Adira, and I knew they were linking each other. I could tell they were having some kind of intense debate. "No. We can't trust you. We can't let you go off on your own to do as you please."

"Would they talk to me?" Adira asked.

Simultaneously, her mate and I said, "No."

"Adira, Cain has already told us they want you dead. If you talk to them, what's going to stop them from just killing you right then and there?"

"Your mate is right. It would be suicide to just approach them like that." It was already difficult enough for me to convince them to spare Adira, and they had some sort of trust in me. But the Daughter of Moon and Magic, the girl who threatened everything they owned and built? They wouldn't hesitate to drive a knife through her heart if she gave them a chance.

Adira's shoulders slumped. "There has to be a way to do this peacefully." I gave her a look, but she quickly continued, "That doesn't involve giving up my life and my mate."

"You could threaten them." As the words came out of my mouth, a shiver ran down my spine. Threatening the council was a suicide mission. Strangely enough, it almost seemed right.

"How would that help? Wouldn't it just make them attack us?" her mate asked.

"It's a possibility, but if you scare them enough, threaten their positions and powers. They care more about that than anything."

“What’s the best way to threaten them?” Her mate was watching me closely. This is the first time he didn’t seem ready to kill me. He was more interested in what I was saying.

“I can’t do everything for you. Make sure you’re strong enough to take them out, and then let them know what you can do.”

Adira looked at me. “How much time do we have before they’ll come for me?”

“I would say three to six months. The council is not one to act fast, and they think I’m still trying to convince you to come with me. As long as they don’t learn otherwise, it’ll buy you some time. They will grow impatient eventually though.” I hoped my estimations were correct. I had never seen the council move swiftly in any matter, but they were afraid of this prophecy, and fear made people act rashly.

“Do you know any weaknesses the council has?” Her mate was asking good questions. With proper training, he could run an army. No wonder my daughter liked him. He was strong and fought for her.

“Only the typical weaknesses for sorcerers. Belladonna is a major one. Anything that takes away their powers. Most sorcerers have only known their magic, so they are pretty useless when you take that away.” I felt useless right now. I hated sitting in a prison cell, unable to do anything.

Adira looked at her mate, and it was clear they were linking again. I was always jealous of that ability werewolves had. It was never something I was able to experience with my mate. They both stood up at the same time, still holding hands. It was actually sweet to see how much they cared about each other.

“Thank you for your help,” Adira said before they started walking out of the room.

I stood up quickly. No, they weren’t supposed to just leave like this. “Wait! What about me? Haven’t I proven myself? I’m helping you.”

Adira paused in the doorway, her body stiff. She didn’t even bother looking at me as she spoke. “You should have helped me weeks ago when I asked for it. This doesn’t prove you have changed.”

My entire body tightened. How could she be so ungrateful to me? I could help her protect her family, but not from here. "You need me!"

Adira looked over her shoulder, her face tight and unlike herself. "I have never needed you, and that hasn't changed." She took another step out the door but then she stopped again. "Oh, Freya is here and wants to see you. I haven't decided if I'll let that happen again or not, but maybe if you continue to cooperate with us, I'll allow it."

I collapsed into my chair as Adira and her mate left. It felt like the blood had completely drained out of my face. Freya was here, and she wanted to see me. It had been over twenty years since I had seen my mate, and there wasn't a day that went by without me thinking about her. This just showed me I was still on her mind, too.

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MARK

I watched Adira as we left the room. Her face was stoic and unmoving. I know dealing with her parents was hard on her. She deserved parents who loved her and cared for her and actually listened to her. Cain seemed like he cared for her, but he didn't really know her. He loved the idea of having a daughter, but I didn't think he loved Adira for her.

In the end, even if Cain loved Adira, it didn't matter. His actions were what mattered the most, and he was manipulative and controlling. She deserved so much better than that. I was grateful that at least Reyland was doing better as a father now, but that didn't simply erase the pain.

Are you okay? I linked her.

She nodded her head, but she didn't look at me. I wished I knew what was going on in her head. Then maybe I could help her through it better. I squeezed her hand to let her know I was there, but I didn't push any more conversation. If she wanted to talk, I knew she would come to me. She was always good about that, and I knew she felt safe talking to me.

As we made our way back into the pack house, Reyland started to approach us.

"How did it go?"

I stepped up and took the lead, not wanting Adira to feel pressured to speak right now. “He wants us to threaten the council. He says if we show them we have the power to destroy them, they’ll back off. They are too afraid to take on a real challenge.”

“And how do we threaten them?” Reyland asked.

“Numbers? And when Doctor Zayla finishes that serum that makes werewolves resistant to magic, we’ll be harder to defeat.”

“Will that be enough?”

“I think I’m the key,” Adira suddenly said.

Reyland and I both looked at her. Her eyes still seemed far away, but she was confident in her statement.

“What are you thinking?” I prompted.

Adira finally made eye contact with me. “They are afraid of me, right? Well, they must be afraid for a reason. If the Son of Blood and Magic was too powerful to handle, that means I will be too. I just have to figure out how. I haven’t had as much training, but if I can find a way to fully unlock my power, I think it’ll be enough to scare them.”

I stared into Adira’s eyes, and I saw truth in them. I saw her determination and strength, but more than that, I saw her raw power. It was still hidden deep away in her, but it was there, ready to break free.

I knew she was right about them fearing her, but it still worried me to use her as the ace. “They managed to kill the Son of Blood and Magic, didn’t they? And he had more practice than you. What if they manage to get to you, too? This seems risky.”

Reyland looked at her as well. “I agree with him, Adira. There’s already a target on your back. We don’t need to make it bigger.”

Adira grabbed my other hand and turned to face me directly. “You said you would rather fight and possibly die to protect your family. You didn’t want to run. Well, I feel the same. I’m tired of running and hiding. I’m ready to fight for the life I deserve. I want peace and happiness with you, knowing our child is safe and not under constant threat. If I have to put a larger target on my back

to get that life, so be it. We have some time, so I'll train with Ginger, get stronger and find a way to unlock my full potential. When we go to the council and threaten them, I will be a bigger threat than what they can deal with."

My stomach sank, hating every word she said but also knowing I couldn't critique this decision of hers. I would die for this family to make sure they were happy and safe, so why wouldn't Adira want to do that? There was just one big difference that made my stomach feel rock hard.

"What about the baby? Zayla already said you should be careful because of the trauma you went through. Training won't be easy on you and the baby."

Adira squeezed my hand and smiled. "I will get daily check-ups if that will make you feel better, but I can't just sit around and do nothing, knowing I may be the key to stopping this madness and keeping my family safe."

I hated every aspect of this, but I wasn't going to tell her that. I wanted to support her, because I knew she would do this with or without my blessing. She didn't need my blessing in this situation. She needed my support.

"Just promise me to rest if Zayla says you need it. Don't push yourself so hard that it'll hurt the baby."

Adira lifted up on her toes and kissed my cheek. "Of course. I want to protect our family, not hurt it."

Reyland cleared his throat. "I think we should still come up with our own plan for this. That way, we don't have to solely rely on Adira. We can reach out to other wolf packs to see if they can help us out. I don't know how many people know about the Great War, but those who remember it will come, especially if they know one of our own is being threatened."

Adira tensed at his words. "I don't want to cause a war, especially not over this. War affects the innocent the most."

Reyland pulled his lips tight. "Unfortunately, there's a chance that this could all end in war, no matter what we do. We can do what we can on our end to make sure it doesn't end that way, but in the end, if the Council of Magic declares you an enemy, they are declaring all werewolves an enemy. If they choose to force our hand, I would rather be prepared than caught off guard."

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ADIRA

“Adira,” Rie whined, dragging out the second syllable of my name. “Take a break and come pick out dresses with me. You clearly are tired.”

Sweat was dripping down my face, and I was exhausted, but training with Ginger wasn’t going well. The heart monitor on my arm was also beating, which meant it was time to take a break, but I still didn’t want to. Zayla only agreed to let me train if I wore this heart monitor and took a break whenever it beeped. It felt like overkill, but her and Mark insisted it was for the best, and the last thing I wanted to do was hurt the baby.

“Take a break, girl,” Ginger said. “You’ve been working hard all morning. Have some fun today. We’ll pick up training again.”

I looked at Ginger, feeling exasperated. I wanted her to help me train hard, but she was strict with having me take breaks. I knew it was a good thing, but it was still a hard pill to swallow. I couldn’t do everything I wanted because I was restricted. Even though I knew the importance, it didn’t make it any less frustrating.

“Can’t we train a little more tonight?” I asked. We had such a short time before the Council of Magic started to get suspicious. I needed to make the most of my time, but I knew the farther along with the pregnancy I got, the harder it would be to train.

“Nope. You relax, just like you’re supposed to. I have my own things to do anyway,” Ginger said. She started walking back inside to the pack house, giving me no choice but to relax.

“Say hi to Daniel for me!” I shouted out after her with a smile. Ginger and Daniel had a surprisingly cute dynamic. He loved her like a grandmother, and she acted like he was annoying. I knew she secretly loved the attention though.

I lay still on the grass for a moment and closed my eyes. It felt nice to just relax and breathe, even though there was a slight chill in the air. I probably was pushing myself a little hard, so it was good the people around me were keeping me in check.

Are you resting enough? Mark linked. He would check on me every so often while I was training if he couldn’t make it to my training session. He had come

to most of my training sessions with Ginger. I knew part of it was concern for me and the baby, but the other part of it was he wanted to spend time with me. We both agreed to make time for each other, even with our duties and busy schedules.

Ginger told me no more training for the rest of the day.

Does that mean you're free?

"Adira!" Rie's voice was right next to my ear, making me jump. "Stop linking Mark and come with me. We need to get you ready. The girls are already here, so it's time to try on dresses."

You're going to have to pry me away from Rie. It's dress day.

That's a death sentence.

I chuckled, finally opening my eyes. Rie was staring at me, her face only inches away from mine. She was vibrating from impatience, but I wasn't in the mood to rush, especially not when it meant trying on dress after dress.

"I can't get up unless you move."

Rie moved back and then helped me to my feet. "Finally! We have a lot to do! The ceremony is only tomorrow after all."

"Just remember I only have a few hours. We are going to let Freya meet with Cain before she completely explodes on us." I still wasn't sure if this was the best idea, but Cain was still cooperating, and Freya insisted that we were going back on our word to let her see Cain. At this point, I just wanted to let her see Cain so she could leave and get out of this pack house.

There was a point where I loved that woman, despite her driving me crazy. I supposed a part of me still loved her, and I probably always would. That didn't mean I had to put up with her behavior and put her in a position where I had to be around her.

Rie rolled her eyes. "You should have told that woman to just leave and never come back. She's awful to be around and treats everyone around her like they are beneath her."

I hummed, but I didn't give a proper response. Freya was always bossy and demanding, but she had grown bitter over the years. The resentment for her decision long ago was burning a hole in her soul, making her worse for it.

"I know, but we made a deal. She'll be gone after this." I needed this to be true. It was the only thing getting me through her presence. Knowing she would soon be gone made it more manageable to be around her in the brief seconds I passed by her.

I pulled the door to the pack house open, and Rie followed behind me as I entered. Suddenly, there was an arm around my waist, and I was being spun away from the back door. A pair of strong arms swept me up, spinning me even more. I giggled with surprise, looking up into Mark's eyes as he set me down. He quickly pressed his lips against mine, distracting me with his mouth. I completely melted into his touch, all of my worries fading from my mind.

Rie cleared her throat and placed her hands on her hips. "Excuse me. I have dibs on Adira right now, and must I remind you that you're not allowed to come."

Mark shook his head. "No, you don't have to remind me. That's why I wanted to capture my future luna while I had the chance."

I linked my arms around Mark's neck, enjoying the physical affection. Being with Mark made everything a million times better. It also made it harder to part with him every time. I leaned my head against his chest and closed my eyes for a moment, just taking in his scent.

Rie sighed. "Fine. You two have five minutes, and then I need Adira back."

Mark smirked, knowing he had won this battle. I barely heard Rie stomp away as Mark pulled me into another kiss. This one was much softer than the hungry one he attacked me with earlier.

"I missed you." Mark brushed his nose against mine.

"I missed you, too. I like training better when you're with me. I'm stronger when you're nearby." I wasn't sure if it was our mate bond that made my magic stronger or if it was the constant reminder of what I was fighting for, but I could do more for longer when Mark was nearby.

"And I like being there to make sure you aren't pushing yourself too much."

I bit my lip and looked up at him, purposely trying to look seductive. “Then come to all of my trainings. It sounds like the best option.”

Mark let out a long sigh and pressed his forehead against mine. “I wish I could. I wish I could spend every minute with you, but there’s still a lot to do for this pack and Jori’s.”

Jori still hadn’t woken up since I talked to him, but Zayla said his vitals were getting stronger. It was starting to look like he was going to recover after all. It was a relief to hear that, but I was a little disappointed he didn’t wake up right away. I had this fairytale that I would use my magic touch and convince him to keep fighting, and then he would wake up like he was napping. That had just been a fairytale, though. In reality, his body and mind needed time to heal and get back on the same page.

I pouted, sad Mark wouldn’t be joining me for every training. I knew it wasn’t realistic, but I still hated being away from him in a way that wasn’t there before Cain kidnapped me. I fought through the need to be with him all of the time, since I knew it wasn’t healthy, but it didn’t stop the constant desire to be in my mate’s arms to know he was still here with me.

“Don’t give me that look. I may not be able to resist it,” Mark laughed. “You’re too cute.”

I stuck out my bottom lip even more, trying to emphasize the sad look even more. “Maybe that’s what I want.”

Mark smirked and then suddenly took my bottom lip in his mouth, nipping it in the process. He pushed me against the wall and then swirled his tongue in my mouth. I could feel him harden against me, and I knew this was doing just as much to him as it was doing to me.

Rie is going to kill us, I linked, since I was unable to use my mouth.

Mark dug his fingers into my hips. I don’t care what she does to us at this point. I just want you.

I moaned into the kiss, knowing I wouldn’t be the one pulling away. I didn’t care if Rie scolded me for being late in this moment. My body heated with desire for Mark, and that was the only thing on my mind. I knew his mind was in the same place when he suddenly lifted me up. He started carrying me up to the bedroom, refraining from kissing me again until we were in privacy.

He opened our door, and just as he was about to enter, I heard Rie's voice echo down the hallway. "Don't you dare!"

Mark sighed and set me down. "We were caught."

I pouted, my body still on fire. "Damn."

Rie stomped down the hallway and grabbed my wrist. She started pulling me away from Mark. "Your five minutes are up. I had a feeling you two wouldn't be able to control yourselves."

"You didn't even let me say goodbye," I complained.

"You lost that right when you let him stick his tongue down your throat."

I shut my mouth, knowing I had no defense. We were definitely planning on being late. If Rie had been five seconds later, there would have been no stopping us.

We'll finish that later, Mark purred in my head, making me smile like a lovesick school girl.

Rie pulled me down to the lounge, where several people were already waiting for me to get started. I was pleasantly surprised to see Cindy and Eva in the crowd. All of the girls from Pack Aphelion were also in the crowd, and Scythe and Percy were there too. Percy looked unenthused by the ordeal, but he was holding Scythe's hands as he vibrated next to his mate in anticipation.

There were more people than I had anticipated for picking my dress, but it was actually exciting. It made it feel more like a party than a dress tryon session. This made the whole ordeal seem more fun, and I started to actually look forward to it.

Rie finally let go of my wrist and addressed the crowd. "I finally found the future luna trying to sneak off with her alpha, but don't worry. I caught her just in time." She gave me a wink, and I instantly started blushing. Everyone, except the two children in the room knew what Rie was hinting at, making me feel embarrassed. I should have had better control when it came to my mate, but now that Mark and I were mated, it was nearly impossible to resist him.

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ADIRA

The first dress Rie had me try on was a large, pink, puffy dress. It seemed like something a fairytale princess would wear, but it felt like it was absolutely too much for a luna ceremony. I walked out of the dressing room and into the room full of people waiting for me. Eyes went wide, and I heard some instant snickers echoing through the room.

I shot my eyes at Rie, and she stopped laughing and put her hands in the air, trying to act innocent.

"I just thought you would look good in pink." The smile that formed on her face immediately after told me it was a complete lie.

I stomped back into the dressing room, hearing Scythe shout after me, "You did look cute!"

Rie rushed over to help me change outfits. She helped me get out of the dress, giggling the entire time.

"You're cruel," I muttered. I grabbed the next dress and looked at it carefully to make sure it was a real option.

"It's payback for trying to run off with Mark right before trying on your dresses." Rie hung up the pink dress as she spoke to me.

"That just happened!"

"I know the two of you too well. Besides, I probably would have done the same thing with Mason."

Rie paused, and when I looked at her, her face was glowing as she thought about her mate. It made it hard to stay mad at her.

"Who would have my Rie would be head over heels for my childhood best friend?"

She looked up at me, a smile still covering her face. "I know. I never understood the appeal to finding your mate, so I was never that concerned that I hadn't found my own. I always thought you and Mark were a little sickening, too. I didn't understand it. I don't think I could understand it before. But now? Now I get it. I miss him, even now."

Rie buried her face in her hands.

I put my hand on her shoulder. "There's nothing wrong with that. You can miss your mate and want to be with them while understanding you each have your own things to do."

Rie looked up. "How did you manage to spend so much time away from Mark when you were locked up?"

My face fell at the question. "There were some moments it hurt so much that I couldn't breathe, but I had to keep fighting. I couldn't give up, knowing he was out there searching for me."

"How did you know we were searching?"

A small laugh escaped my lips. "Because I know Mark and I know you guys. I knew you wouldn't give up until you found me."

Rie nodded. "Okay, let's finish trying on these dresses and lighten the mood. Everyone is waiting for you."

I continued trying on dress after dress, until I had tried on over ten of them. They were all beautiful. I would wear them on any other fancy occasion, but they didn't feel right for a luna ceremony. I wanted something special. It shouldn't feel like a prom dress.

I was feeling tired from trying on so many dresses, so I sat down in front of everyone, still in the last dress I had tried on. It was a red, short dress that felt like a clubbing dress more than anything.

"How many more dresses are there?"

"Just one more. I saved the best for last!" Rie seemed proud of that statement, but I just narrowed my eyes at her.

"Why would you save it for last? We could be done already?"

Eva jumped up and jumped into my lap. "But Adira, it was fun seeing you in all of these pretty dresses."

Scythe leaned forward. "We thought you could use some time where you could just have fun and not worry about everything else."

“And we thought everyone else would enjoy seeing our future luna playing dress up,” Rie added.

Eva looked up at me. “I wish you were my future luna. I hate that Pack Sallow doesn’t have a luna.”

I tucked a piece of hair behind the girl’s ear. There was definitely something different about having a luna in a wolf pack. She usually had a more caring touch than the alpha, so she was able to add to the pack in a way that the alpha struggled with. It didn’t always work out that way, though. My own mother was very business-like as the luna. She made sure the pack was well taken care of, but she had never been a source of emotional support.

“Whether or not you are part of the pack, you can always come to me.” I gave Eva a hug, and I felt tears welling up in my eyes. I had felt so much more emotional with this pregnancy, and I hated it. It made me feel like a mess.

Eva reached up and brushed the tears out of my eyes. “Don’t cry, Adira. You’re supposed to be happy right now.”

I smiled at her. “I am happy. I’m so happy that you look up to me like that. Sometimes I worry I’m not going to be a good enough luna of this pack.”

Suddenly, the rest of the people surrounded me, wrapping me in a group hug.

“Adira, you’re going to be great.”

“You’ve already worked so hard for us. You should have been made our luna so much sooner than this.”

“You’re the best.”

As all of the words of encouragement flowed around me, tears welled up in my eyes, and I couldn’t hold them back. I was relieved and touched that so many people cared this deeply about me and were excited about me becoming the luna.

Are you okay? I can feel your emotions, Mark linked.

It’s good emotions. Don’t worry.

I always worry about you.

I smiled, knowing it was true. Mark cared about me more than I thought anyone else would, and I knew all of this kidnapping business got to him just as much as it did to me.

We should be done with the dresses soon. Can't wait to see you.

I'm counting the seconds.

"Okay, okay, that's enough emotions. Future Luna Adira needs to try on the last dress." Rie started shooing people away from the group hug. She grabbed my wrist and pulled me into the dressing room for the last dress.

I grabbed a tissue and dabbed the tears off my face. "Sorry about that."

"Why are you saying sorry? There's nothing wrong with crying, especially when you're prego." Rie gave me a wink as she pulled out the final dress.

It was a long, gold dress that was covered with beads at the bottom. The top of the dress was made with sheer fabric on the arms and the upper part of the dress, and it sparkled in the light. The bottom was long and flowy, layered with a gold fabric and then the sheer fabric on top of it. It made me think of royalty with the colors and complexity of the dress, and I knew it was perfect for it.

Rie helped me into the dress, and it fit my body perfectly as well. It emphasized my curves in the perfect places, and I felt like I was glowing. I could only imagine how perfect it all would be once it was all put together with makeup and a hairdo.

I looked at Rie with sparkles in my eyes. "This is it. This is perfect."

Rie blew on her fingers with a smug look. "I knew it. I'm pretty great at picking out clothes for people. Ready to show everyone?"

I nodded, and she walked out first to announce me.

"Are you ready to see the future Luna Adira look stunning in her dress?"

People cheered, and then Rie motioned for me to come out. I picked up the front of the dress and walked out. Oo's and ah's filled the room as everyone took in the beauty of the dress. For a moment, everyone was stunned into silence.

“Alpha is not going to be able to keep his hands off you,” Scythe said, knowing.

“He already can’t,” Percy said.

Rie, Scythe, and I looked at him with wide eyes, surprised by his unusual comment.

Percy started blushing. “What? I’ve seen them making out in the common rooms all of the time.”

It was my turn to blush. Ever since I had returned to the pack house, it was difficult to keep the PDA to a minimum, and I knew it was an issue. I just hadn’t realized how many people had seen it.

“There are children here,” Rie said, her eyes still bugging out of her eyes.

“It’s fine. I’ve seen people makeout before,” Eva said. “It’s gross, but I’m used to it. I’ve seen Cindy do it plenty.”

I raised an eye at Cindy, who was hitting Eva with a pillow.

“Is there a boyfriend I don’t know about?” I asked.

“No,” Cindy said.

“Yes,” Eva instantly countered. “He’s cute, too.”

Cindy hit Eva with a pillow again, making me laugh.

“Okay, okay, that’s enough,” Rie said, stepping in and grabbing the pillow from Eva. “We can discuss this boyfriend later. For now, let’s talk about the after party!”

I sat down and watched as the chatter erupted around the room. Talk about the food we were going to eat, and the songs we were going to dance to echoed around the room. I had never been to a luna ceremony before, so I only knew what my mother had told me about growing up. She never mentioned an after party, so I wasn’t sure if that was a custom, or a Rie and Scythe touch to it. They definitely loved throwing parties when given a chance.

A throat cleared behind me, and my blood instantly turned cold. I slowly looked over my shoulder, knowing exactly who was there.

Luna Freya stood at the door of our get-together. She stood tall, and her eyes looked down on all of us, giggling and having a good time. Her gaze finally landed on mine, and I could feel the familiar look of disapproval tearing down my very soul.

“This feels like some sort of frat party. I thought I taught you to act more respectable than this.” Her voice cut through the room, silencing all of the conversations going on.

I stood up, feeling defensive. It was one thing for her to disrespect me, but she didn’t have the right to disrespect my pack.

“Your judgments are not welcome here. I suggest you change your tone right now.” I stood firm, but inside, my blood was shaking with fear. I couldn’t afford to let her see that, though.

She rolled her eyes. “I forgot how disrespectful you were to your own mother.”

“I must have learned that from you. Now you will respect me in my own pack house, or you will be asked to leave.” My mother was taller than me, but I refused to back down.

She took a step back, a little unsure of how to act in response to my confidence. “I was told I would be allowed to see Cain today.”

“Yes, that is the case. Please wait outside and Alpha Mark and I will find you when we are ready.” I looked her straight in the eyes to show I was being serious.

“Fine,” she huffed before storming out of the room. My mother was never the nicest person, but I couldn’t remember her ever being so disagreeable when I was younger. I couldn’t tell if she had just gotten more bitter over the years, or if I hadn’t noticed because I was just trying to live up to her expectations as a child.

Rie grabbed my arm, and that’s when I realized I was physically shaking now that she was gone.

“Are you okay?”

I nodded and turned to everyone else. “My apologies for that intrusion. Please go back to talking. Unfortunately, that means it’s time for me to leave.”

I quickly linked Mark to update him on what had just happened, and he was already making his way down to me. Rie helped me get out of the dress and into my regular clothes again. Just as we finished, Mark found us.

He moved over to me and enveloped me in a hug. "Are you okay?"

"Better now that you're here." I grabbed his hand and forced a smile. "Let's get this over with."

The Hunted Wolf – Chapter 65

MARK

Adira was tense as we walked to get Freya, but she kept insisting she was okay. I didn't understand why she wasn't admitting the truth to me. I could feel her stress and anxiety through our mate bond, and I knew this was hard on her. She wanted to put on a brave face, though, so all I could do was hold her hand and give her my strength.

Luna Freya was sitting in the living room on her phone as she waited for us. She was less than pleased at the wait, and it was written all over her face. She should have been grateful that she was being allowed to visit Cain at all. If it was up to me, I would have kicked her out of the pack house instantly, so Adira never had to see her again. I didn't care that a deal was made. Freya shouldn't have made that deal in the first place.

Adira was her daughter, and she was in trouble. Freya should have done anything she could have to help save Adira without asking anything in return. That would have been a true mother's instinct. Then I would have respected her more if she requested to talk to Cain if given the opportunity. As is, Freya was selfish and only doing things for her own reasons. Adira was too loving to be treated as such.

"We are ready," Adira said.

Freya looked up at us, disgust already written all over her face. "Finally."

I was about to say something, completely over this woman's attitude, but Adira was the one to say something first.

"It's not too late to stop this. This is your only reminder that this is a favor to you. I do not owe you this or anything else." Adira stood tall, and even though

her heart was racing, she was standing up to her. I felt nothing but proudness for the strength my mate was displaying. If she was able to stand up to her own family for what was right, she would be able to stand up to anyone who threatened her wolf pack. Adira was born to be a luna.

Freya dropped the attitude in her voice, but her face was still twisted with frustration. "Yes, of course."

Hand in hand, Adira and I led Freya to the holding cell where Cain was waiting for her.

Is the prisoner ready? I linked Darian.

He is, and we have extra guards on standby.

We stepped up to the holding cell, and Adira paused before reaching the door. She looked at me, and her face was full of panic.

I can't do this. I can't face my parents together. Her heart beat sped up faster.

You don't have to. I can monitor the two of them. You can go and rest, and I'll see you after. Don't push yourself. You've had a long day.

I gave her a reassuring smile, but she still stood there frozen with indecision. Even though she didn't say it, she felt obligated to push herself through this. I didn't understand why. She didn't owe these two for anything at all, and she didn't need to go through the pain of watching her parents reconnect.

She looked at me with her big eyes, which made me just want to cradle her in the privacy of our own bedroom until she felt better.

Are you sure it's okay?

Of course, baby. I've got this. Do what you need to do.

Adira nodded and gave me a quick peck on the cheek. She turned and walked away, acting as if Freya didn't exist.

Freya looked at her and then back at me. "Where is she going?"

"That's none of your business. Are you ready to see Cain?"

Freya's normally strong demeanor changed into something I hadn't seen from her before. For the first time ever, she seemed small and scared. She bit her lip and nodded, and for a brief moment, she reminded me of Adira. The two of them looked alike, but I never really associated them as family before. Freya's ugly behavior made her seem nothing like Adira. No matter how similar they looked, she never reminded me of Adira before this moment.

I opened the door and gestured to her to move forward. After a brief hesitation, she walked into the room. She kept her eyes down, avoiding any eye contact. I shut the door behind me, and when I saw Cain's face, I saw a completely different man.

His eyes were filled with love and pain the second he saw Freya. I could practically hear his heart pounding in his chest as he stared at his mate. Freya finally looked up, meeting his eyes for the first time, and it reminded me of a moment from a movie. It was the moment long lost lovers finally reconnected.

Freya seemed to grow younger as she filled with the love of the man across the table from her. Her walls broke down, and I even saw tears filling her eyes. She was clumsy as she went to sit down, bumping the chair in the process.

"You look different," she whispered, her voice quivering.

"You look just as beautiful as ever." Cain tried to reach out to touch her, but his restraints held him back.

Instead, she reached out to him, touching his cheek. He closed his eyes and pushed into her touch.

"I never thought I'd be able to touch you like this," Freya said, a tear falling out of her eye. "I thought when we said goodbye, that was it. It nearly broke me, and I could barely keep it together."

"I hated every moment we were apart," Cain admitted.

"We should have never separated. It wasn't worth the risk. We should have given Adira up to someone else, so we could still live our lives."

My jaw tightened as I listened to Freya speak. I was grateful Adira wasn't here to hear such awful words. Adira deserved someone who loved her truly, but it was clear that Freya had always blamed Adira for not being with her mate,

and I couldn't understand that. Even if Adira chose to leave to protect our child, I would never hate her or the baby. I know Adira would never resent her own child for a decision she made. She was too loving for that.

Cain looked down at the table, contemplating what to say. "We should have found another way. We should have fought."

"We should have fought for us and our love. I don't want to be without you again," Freya said. Her tears were wetting both of her cheeks now.

"I know. Seeing you now, it feels like a hole in my heart has finally been fixed. I can't stand the idea of not being with you again, but it's not that easy. I've made mistakes." Cain legitimately looked sad, like he regretted his actions. I hoped for Adira's sake that was true.

"I want to know what you taste like again. I have been dreaming about it ever since I left you." Freya pressed her lips against Cain's.

I felt the bile build up in my throat, and I had to look away. I didn't mind mates showing each other affection, but these two didn't deserve a happy ending. They weren't good parents to Adira, and they kept finding a way to hurt her over and over again. I was confident this conversation would have been the exact same, even in her presence, which would have broken her heart.

As their kiss grew in passion, I stepped out of the room, needing a moment to breathe. I stayed in front of the door and leaned against it, closing my eyes. I felt sick from their behavior. I wanted them as far away from here as possible, so Adira would never have to know what happened in there.

"Are you okay, Alpha?" Darian was standing directly in front of me with questioning eyes.

I stood up straight, putting on the proper alpha air. "I've been better."

"Is the prisoner still there with the visitor?" he asked.

I nodded. "Things got a little... awkward, and I needed to step away from it."

Darian raised his eyebrows. "Ah. is it smart to leave those two in there alone?"

I looked at the door, knowing the correct answer, but I also knew my anger would only grow if I had to watch them show each other such love, knowing

they never gave Adira the love she deserved. "I'm not sure. You're welcome to go in there and check, though."

Darian pulled his lips tight. "Not sure I want to see that either."

I chuckled at the thought. The restraints Cain had on were too strong to break. The only way to release him was with a key. His magic was also still being subdued by the belladonna. There wasn't much they could do in there that would compromise Cain's captivity, and the last thing I wanted was to see them trying to compromise each other.

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CAIN

Freya's lips were hot on mine, and it had been much too long since I had felt the familiar spark that came with a passionate kiss from my mate. As the kiss continued on, Adira's mate shifted and then excused himself, clearly uncomfortable with the situation.

The moment the door shut, Freya pulled away and looked at the door. It left me longing for more of a kiss.

"It didn't take much to scare off that alpha. He's not very strong," Freya noted.

I watched Freya, trying to understand what she was saying. Was she trying to scare off Adira's mate?

She looked back at me. "They are going to ask me to leave this pack house now that I've seen you, but I can't leave, not without you."

"I don't want you to leave either, but there's nothing we can do if they ask you to leave. You should try to make peace with them, convince you to stay, so we can see each other." I loved the idea of seeing my mate everyday, even if I was still in shackles. It would make everything that much more bearable.

"No." Freya's voice was firm. "I'm not going to stay here a second later. I'm going to leave this pack house tonight, and I'm going to take you with me."

"What do you mean?"

Freya rolled her eyes. "I've been planning this for days. I know the patrol's schedule, and I can find the key to free you. I'll do it when everyone is asleep

tonight. I'll break you free, and then we can finally run away together. We can live the life we wanted to live so long ago. We can hide in our secret place where no one knows who we are. Now that we have found each other again, I don't want to live without you."

"I don't want to live without you either, but what about our daughter? She is in danger, and she needs our help. We can't just abandon her." I had missed so much time with Adira as she grew up thinking another man was her father. I was finally back in her life, and I didn't want to leave her again, but my heart also ached at the idea of leaving Freya's side again.

Freya pressed her lips against mine again. This time she slipped her tongue in my mouth, and I felt my entire body react to her touch. Just when we were reaching the depths of the kiss, she pulled away, leaving me completely breathless.

"What do you say, Cain? Run away with me?"

The Hunted Wolf – Chapter 66

ADIRA

I washed my face over the bathroom sink, trying to wash away the fear I felt lingering beneath my skin. I thought I was stronger and could face my parents, but the idea of seeing them made me feel sick to the stomach. I didn't want to see them interact, because it was clear they still loved each other after all of these years, and I knew deep down they never loved me as much as they loved each other.

The more I thought about it, the sicker I felt, and the vomit hovered just below my throat. I kept washing my face, trying to wash away those thoughts, but they were stuck on repeat. Eventually, my body couldn't handle it anymore, and I found myself leaning over the toilet, throwing up the contents of my stomach. I heaved over and over again, feeling sick in every way possible.

When I was finally done, I rinsed out my mouth and sank to the floor, wondering how much of that was nerves versus pregnancy. For the first time in days, I found myself completely relaxing, and I noticed just how much my body was protesting. I was exhausted in every way possible. I closed my eyes and just focused on breathing.

It was clear I had been pushing myself too hard, and everyone around me was right. I needed to take more breaks than I had, especially because my body was already strained from growing a life inside. I had just felt so pressured to protect everyone around me, especially my family. I was tired of dealing with threat after threat, and so I pushed myself harder and harder, putting all of the responsibility on my shoulders.

I knew I couldn't do that anymore. I had to rely on others to help where they could. Mark and Reyland were building an army, so I didn't need to push myself to build my full potential this very moment. Plus, the council only had to think I was stronger than them. As long as the bluff worked, I didn't need to actually be stronger than them. Since they were already afraid of me, it wouldn't take much to convince them, maybe just some flashy moves.

"Adira?"

I opened my eyes and saw Mark standing in the bathroom door. I hadn't heard him enter our room. I gave him a lazy smile.

"Hey. How did it go?"

Mark walked over to me and squatted in front of me. "It went just fine. Freya is satisfied and will be leaving in the morning."

I closed my eyes again. "Good."

Mark pressed the back of his hand against my head. "You're warm. Are you feeling sick?"

I gave a small nod. "I think it's just morning sickness."

"Let's get you to bed."

Mark scooped me up and carried me to our bed. He lay me down gently, and then he went back to the bathroom. He grabbed a damp cloth and sat next to me. He dabbed my forehead gently, and with every touch, I knew worry was burning inside of him.

I grabbed his hand and gave it a kiss. "I'm okay. I think I just overdid it today. Don't worry. I realized I needed to take it easier. I will take a break tomorrow, and then I will go much easier."

Mark kissed my forehead. "Good. Should I take you to see Zay? If you're sick..."

I opened my eyes and smiled. "I'm okay. Promise. I'm just worn out, and my body is fighting me a little. Just stay here with me, okay?"

With a nod, Mark climbed into bed with me, moving behind me so he was the big spoon. With his touch, my body instantly started to relax. I knew everything was going to be okay. Freya would be gone tomorrow, I would finally be the official luna of the pack, and I was feeling a little more confident as I realized how much the Council of Magic actually feared me.

Mark placed his hand over my belly, and my stomach started to calm down at his touch. I knew it was too early in the pregnancy to feel the baby move, but I knew it was responding to Mark's touch, as if it knew he was its daddy. I smiled at the thought.

"What are you smiling at?" Mark asked.

My fingers lightly stroked his hand over my belly. "I think the baby feels you."

Mark shifted, suddenly much more alert. He leaned over so he was looking at me. "You can feel the baby already?"

I chuckled at the excitement on Mark's face, suddenly wondering why I was ever scared to tell him I was pregnant. "Not exactly. I just feel better with you touching my stomach. I think the baby can feel you and is calming you down."

Mark beamed. He leaned down to my stomach and whispered, "It's going to be a little while until we meet, but I'm your daddy. I can't wait to see you and show you all of the wonderful things in this life. And don't worry. I will protect you and your mommy." He placed butterfly kisses all over my stomach, making me giggle at the ticklish feeling it caused.

There was the slightest bump on my stomach to show the pregnancy, but unless you were looking for it, it was hard to notice. Even to me, it looked like I was just a little bloated, but seeing Mark kiss my belly like that, made it feel much more real.

When he was finally done, he pulled me back into his arms and gave me a gentle kiss. "Feel better?"

I nodded, giving him another quick kiss. Tonight, I was perfectly content just falling asleep in my mate's arms, knowing tomorrow was a big day.

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Knock! Knock! Knock! The sound echoed through my head, making me groan. I just wanted to keep sleeping, but the knocking wouldn't stop. I turned to Mark to ask him to get the door, but when I opened my eyes, I realized I wasn't in my bed. Instead, I was in the white room of my subconscious, and Moon and Shadow were staring at me.

"You snore," Moon said, licking her paw. "I hope you know that."

"I don't snore!" I said, instantly feeling defensive.

Moon rolled her eyes. "Just ask Mark."

The knocking started again, and I looked over to the direction the sound was coming from. "What is that?"

"Someone is trying to get in," Shadow said.

I stood up and looked down at the two of them. "Should we see who it is?"

"That's up to you," Moon said. "It would be nice if that knocking stopped. It's pretty annoying."

I walked in the direction of the noise, and it wasn't long before I came across a door. The door itself was also white and blended into the walls. The distinct knocking echoed from the metal on the door. I reached for the handle, but I hesitated before actually opening it. I didn't want to just let anyone into my mind.

"Who is it?" It felt strange asking this in my own head.

"It's Cain. Adira, please give me just five minutes to talk to you."

My hand stayed frozen in the air. I would have expected my first instinct to be ignoring Cain, but it was actually the opposite. Something in Cain's voice told me he was being sincere, and I followed my gut feeling. I twisted the handle and cracked the door open. Cain was standing in front of the door, and he looked younger than I remembered. There was more life in his eyes before, and the craze that was there before was now faded.

“What do you want?”

“Can I come in?”

I looked back at Moon and Shadow who were a few steps behind me. I wanted them to give me their advice, but instead they looked to me for the answer. I took a step back and opened the door, hoping I wasn't making a huge mistake.

“What do you want?” My voice was strained as I spoke. I was afraid Cain was going to try his same spiel on me about running away from the council and what not.

Cain looked at the ground, almost shrinking as he entered my subconscious. He stopped moving and turned to me. “I have come to the realization that I will never be a father to you. I didn't want to listen to you when you said it, but I understand it now. Your mother and I were not good parents to you.”

He looked at me, waiting for a response, but I didn't say anything. He was right. Neither of them were good parents, but him saying it to me didn't change it or the fact that I would never see him that way.

“I decided it would be best for me to get out of your life,” Cain continued. “I have caused you more harm than good, and it's time for me to make it up to you.”

I knitted my eyebrows together. “What are you talking about? You're locked up right now. You should even be able to use magic right now. How are you here?”

Cain chuckled, but it seemed like it was more from nerves than anything else. “You never really had me under restraint. Your werewolf friends did a great job, and any normal sorcerer would be restrained in a cell like that. But I'm not a normal sorcerer, and neither are you. When I realized I couldn't restrain you, I figured it was best to go along with you so I could keep an eye on you.”

I didn't know what to say. Knowing Cain could have been a threat, waiting around the corner this entire time sent a shiver down my spine. Once again, it showed me how naive I was when it came to magic.

“Anyway, I won't bother you for much longer. I just wanted to come say goodbye. Freya and I are leaving together. We're going to get out of your life

and get our second chance. I hope you can understand our actions, and please don't look for us. You won't find us, and it'll just be a waste of your resources. I promise I will leave you to live your own life and won't try to interfere anymore."

I stared at Cain and knew what he was saying was true. He was no longer going to be a threat to me, but I didn't know how I felt about it. I knew I didn't want anything to do with him, but hearing he was going to just give up on me, hurt in a way I didn't expect it to.

"You're leaving? Just like that?"

Cain stepped forward, and I flinched as he approached. "I know I can change the things that I've done to you, but I'm hoping this helps." He pressed a small glass bottle into my hand.

I looked down at it, feeling the cool, smooth glass against my skin. I looked back at Cain. "What is this?"

"It's most of my magic. I don't need it where I'm going, but you'll need it to fight the council. Just open the bottle and breathe in the magic, and your body will absorb it."

I stood there, slack-jawed, unsure of what to say to this. This couldn't be real. Cain was trying to tear my life apart. Why would he just give me his magic?

"Good bye, Adira. I wish you luck with your ventures." Cain turned out of my head, leaving me completely speechless.

The Hunted Wolf – Chapter 67

ADIRA

My body flung forward, a cold sweat covering my face. "Mark," I gasped.

Mark was instantly alert and sat up next to me. "What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

I looked at him with wide eyes. "Cain is gone."

Mark furrowed his eyebrows, confused by my statement. He didn't understand how I knew that, but he trusted what I was saying, and I saw his eyes go glassy as he started linking the patrol to have them confirm this information.

I looked down at my hand and felt the glass bottle sitting in my hand still. I rolled it in my fingers, and closed my eyes, feeling the content. I could feel the power burning inside of this small bottle, and I knew everything Cain had told me was true. I was holding Cain's magic in my hand.

Mark got out of the bed after receiving a response, and he started pacing the room. His fingers tangled in his hair as he paced, and I knew they were trying to find Cain. It was pointless though, but I knew Mark wouldn't rest until he at least knew the area was secure.

I stayed in bed, with the sheets pulled up. I kept staring at the little bottle, unsure of what to think. Before I decided what to do, I definitely needed to talk to Ginger about this, just to double check it wasn't some trick, but I still couldn't wrap my head around what happened. After everything that Cain had done, I would have never expected him to give me something so grand in nature. Maybe he really did care as much as he claimed.

Mark sat on the bed next to me, and his body was tense. "Cain is gone. We can't even find any signs of him."

"Freya is gone, too," I said casually.

Mark gave a slight nod, showing he already knew that information. "How did you know this? You were asleep, and the warriors on patrol didn't even know they were gone."

"He visited me in my dreams. He told me they were leaving together and not to bother trying to find them, because it would be a waste of our resources, and we have bigger things to worry about."

Mark's jaw clenched. "That coward is just running away, leaving you to deal with the problem he caused."

My freehand moved to Mark's. I understand why he was angry. I think part of me was angry, but I was also too confused to feel the full extent of anger at this moment. "He wasn't much help anyway. And he didn't leave me completely defenseless, at least I don't think so."

Mark tilted his head to the side, so I opened my hand and continued to explain. "He gave me this. He said it's his magic, and I can have it, so I stand a better chance against the council."

Mark looked at the bottle and back up at me. He had the same look of confusion and concern that I felt. "Why would he just give you that? He seems too power hungry to just give it all up, just like that."

I closed my hand around the bottle. "I don't know. My guess is he found something more important than power." I kissed Mark on the cheeks. "I would give up my powers if it meant being with you forever. He and Freya want the second chance they never got. I think Cain knows that magic can be tracked, so if he still had it, they would never feel safe, not with the council."

I wanted to be angry with them and happy for them to finally get a chance to be with their mate, but I didn't feel either of those things. I felt numb and hopeful. They waited over twenty years to get their happy ending, and they were still trying. Surely Mark and I would be able to get there one day.

Mark tucked a piece of hair behind my ears, and his fingers lingered on my cheek. "How are you handling all of this?"

"I'm okay, I think. Do you have to go help the warriors with all of this?"

Mark shook his head. "Reyland is taking care of it. Besides, I'm not about to leave your side, not when Cain is free. I don't care if he said he was running away or whatever. I still don't trust him, and I'm not going to risk leaving you by yourself again." Mark gave me a quick peck. "Now, why don't we try to get some sleep? We have a big day tomorrow."

Mark and I settled back into bed, but I couldn't relax enough to fall asleep. My mind was racing with all of the possibilities that this night would produce.

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The light was much too bright when the sun started peeking through our windows. I had no idea how much sleep I had actually gotten through the night after the news of Cain leaving. All I knew was my body was saying it wasn't enough. I shifted in bed, still feeling Mark's presence in the bed.

When I saw his face, he was looking down at me with a bright smile on his face. Based on the dark circles under his eyes, he hadn't slept much either, but he was still buzzing with energy.

"How are you this awake after last night?" I croaked, my voice still full of sleep.

He leaned forward and cupped my cheek, gently moving his lips with mine. My body woke up from his touch, and my skin itched for even more. I pressed into his body, deepening the kiss. My fingers ran down his neck, eager for any skin to skin contact. He dipped his tongue into my mouth, and I eagerly opened my mouth, welcoming his taste even more. Every touch was caring and full of love. It wasn't some eager primal desire, not that I minded that side of Mark, but I was lapping up this energy from him.

Mark tucked his knee between my legs and started moving it. The friction instantly had me mewling from the pleasure. I gripped onto the back of Mark's neck as my mind went completely blank. Mark moved his mouth down my neck, adding to the pleasure, and my entire body was sparking.

The things this man did to my body still continued to surprise me. I went from still being half asleep, to being hyper aware of every little touch he gave me, and I didn't want it to stop. I could tell Mark was eager for more, too, as his mouth continued down my body. He pulled the straps of my night shirt down, revealing my chest. He kissed my newly exposed skin, as he continued the friction between my legs.

He lingered on my breast for longer than everywhere else, and my back arched into his mouth. He moved his leg from between mine and replaced it with his hand. He pushed my thin panties to the side and dipped two fingers into my already dripping wet heat. He slid his fingers up and down, circling around my little bundle of nerves. My body shuddered at the sensation, and I could tell I was already getting close.

He slipped two fingers inside of me and started pumping, quickly picking up the pace. He curled his fingers in just the right way, and my body started convulsing with pleasure, no longer able to contain myself.

When I had finished, Mark chuckled into my neck. "That didn't take long." He licked the fingers he removed from me, and I already wanted more from him. He kissed my lips lightly. "Unfortunately, we don't have time to continue this without risking Rie and Scythe interrupting us."

I whimpered, not caring about the scolding that Rie would give if I was late for getting ready for the luna ceremony. "They can wait."

Mark kissed me again, this one lasting a little longer. He pulled away, a soft growl emulating from his lips. "I know, baby. But just think of this as a preview for what's to come tonight. You'll officially be my luna then."

I beamed at the thought. Once I was sworn in as the luna, I would be able to link with the entire pack, which would make communication a million times easier for me. For the first time, when I thought about being the luna, only excitement filled my body. I wasn't nervous or worried I would do a good job. Everyone around me trusted me to be the luna, and it was time for me to start trusting myself.

A knock on the door interrupted this moment with Mark.

He huffed a laugh. "Told you. Rie is here to whisk you away from me."

I pouted. "Does that mean I won't see you until the ceremony?"

Mark kissed my forehead. "Probably. But we can still link all day, and if you really need me, just say the word, and I'll be by your side." He kissed my lips and lingered there a moment, making sure to take it all in, since it would be hours before he could kiss me again.

The knocking on the door got louder. "Don't make me go in there! I don't want to see anything inappropriate."

Mark sighed, exaggerating it. "Looks like our time is up."

He crawled out of bed and then grabbed my hand to help me out of bed. I stumbled a little, my legs still shaky from our excursion. Mark easily caught me with a chuckle and a smirk plastered on his face.

I smacked his chest lightly. "Don't look so cocky."

Mark's laugh only deepened. "Oh, but I've earned it. Just imagine how shaky your legs would have been if I had had time to finish what I intended."

My throat went dry at the thought, and luckily Rie pounded on the door again, leaving no room for me to answer him. Mark moved over and grabbed the door, opening it up. Rie was standing in front of the door with her hands on her hips.

"Took you long enough."

"I wanted to take my sweet time, before you tear my mate away from me for the rest of the day," Mark quipped back.

"Nope, you're the one leaving. We are getting ready in here. Scythe is waiting for you."

"Do we really have to get ready so early?" I asked. "The ceremony isn't until this evening, right?"

"I'm not going to leave just so you two can get back to doing whatever it was you were doing. I know we have most of the day, but there's more to do than just getting dressed. Plus you need to look perfect." Rie turned to Mark and started waving her hands at him. "Now you shoo. I don't want to see you for the rest of the day."

Mark narrowed his eyes. "You do realize I'm the alpha, which means I'm in charge, right?"

"Uh-huh. Now go." Rie pointed at the door, not standing down.

While Mark was right, and he knew he could just order Rie to back off, he wasn't that type of alpha. With a clearly exaggerated sigh, Mark left the room, and Rie shut the door behind him.

She flipped around with a huge grin on her face, and instantly I knew something had happened. She leaned against the door, and she seemed like she was floating.

"Okay, spill," I said, putting my hands on her hips.

Rie blushed. "Is it that obvious?"

"Yep, now what happened?"

Rie bit her lip. "Mason wants to join our pack. He says when Pack Lyna goes home, he doesn't want to go with him, since that would mean spending too much time away from me. Obviously, we have to talk to Mark and Alpha Lyna about it, but I'm beyond happy."

I grabbed her hands, thrilled for her. "I doubt either of them will have an issue with it. I'm so excited for you!"

"Me too. I was a little worried I would have a situation like Scythe and Percy had, and it terrified me. I didn't want to bring up the future with him, because I was afraid of hearing the wrong answer. But he brought it up this morning."

Rie looked like she was about to float to the ceiling because she was completely filled with joy.

“That’s so great. You really do deserve this.”

“That’s so great. You really do deserve this.” I was thrilled at the idea of Mason joining our pack. When things calmed down, it would give me a chance to catch up with him, and I wanted nothing more than for Rie to be happy.

“Okay, enough about me! Today is supposed to be your day.”

The Hunted Wolf – Chapter 68

ADIRA

“Before I start getting ready, do I have a few minutes to talk to Ginger?” I knew Rie was eager to have me get ready, but I still had the bottle of Cain’s magic in my hand, and I needed to talk to her about it. It didn’t feel like something that should wait.

“Is this about what happened last night?” Rie’s face fell. I’m sure Mason told her all about it. Mason was the head warrior in the Alpha Pack after all. All of the warriors reported to him, and I knew there were no secrets between Rie and Mason.

I nodded slowly, biting my lip. “Yeah, there’s just something important I need to ask her.”

“Did that bastard visit you before he escaped?” Rie was turning red at the thought. She had zero tolerance for Cain due to the danger he put me and the baby in.

“Yeah. He left me a gift.” I held the bottle firm in my hand, as if it would just disappear if I let go of it.

“Whatever the gift is, throw it out. You don’t need it. You don’t need anything from him.” Rie was seething at the thought, and I didn’t blame her. If it was anything else, I wouldn’t hesitate to get rid of it. But Cain’s magic could make a difference with threatening the Council of Magic.

“It’s not that easy, Rie. I’ll explain it to you and Ginger at the same time. Come on.”

I walked out of the room, still in my pajamas. I wasn't worried about my attire, especially because I knew I would just be changing again for the ceremony tonight. Ginger's room was on the third floor of the pack house, but it was still a short walk to her door. I knocked as soon as we reached her room.

"Come in, girl."

The door swung open on its own, and Ginger was reading a book in a chair in the corner of her room. She held up her finger as Rie and I entered the door. She finished the page she was reading before setting the book down.

"Sorry. Daniel has me reading all of these books. They're quite good, but don't tell him that." Ginger chuckled to herself and then motioned for us to sit on the bed.

I sat down, and Rie sat next to me. "Did you hear about what happened last night?"

"Yes. I've been waiting for you to come here, girl. I didn't realize he could get out of his restraints so easily. I would've said something. I thought the belladonna would have suppressed his powers, though. It did feel like they were suppressed. Impressive man. Terrible, but impressive. Might as well not have used the belladonna. I hate that stuff, anyway. But I suppose this situation did call for it. He did kidnap you and keep you against your will."

"Ginger," I interrupted. She was going down a spiral and almost sounded like Daniel for a moment with how much she was talking. Those two really were spending a lot of time together. "That's not why I came to you. I don't blame you for him escaping. I think Freya helped him escape, too. It's too coincidental that he escaped the same night she visited him."

Ginger c****d her head to the side. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. You are awfully forgiving. After everything that happened, I would have-

I cut Ginger off before she could spiral again. "Ginger. Cain left me something." I held my hand out to her and opened my fingers.

Ginger's eyes went wide the moment she saw the small bottle. "Is that what I think it is?"

I nodded. "I think so."

“What is it? Adira, you still haven’t told me what Cain left you,” Rie complained.

“Cain gave me his powers, or so he said,” I explained. “He came to me when I was sleeping, and he said he and Freya were running away together to get the second chance they were desperate for. He wanted to leave me his powers to make up for everything he had done.”

Rie stared at me, slack-jawed. “No way. He gave you his magic? Is that something sorcerers can do?”

I looked at Ginger for the answer. “That’s why I wanted to talk to you. When I touch this little bottle, I can feel Cain’s magic. I know Theron was convinced there was a way to take my powers from me, which is why he kept me alive when he kidnapped me.”

Rie scoffed. “Right, that piece of work took you too. Your family has a lot of nerve.”

“As far as I’m concerned, they are not family. You guys are my family. Mark is my family. They are not.” I gripped my thigh as I spoke, digging my nails into my sensitive flesh. I took a deep breath and let go of my skin. “Anyway, I wanted to ask Ginger if this really is his magic, and if it would be safe to absorb it.”

Ginger held out her hand. “Let me take a closer look.”

I handed her the small bottle. Ginger twisted the bottle in her fingers as she inspected it. To the naked eye, it looked like a completely normal bottle. It was a few inches long, and it had a simple cork seal on it. If you could sense magic, the bottle looked completely different. It looked like a small glass case that was bursting at the seams with power. It seemed like it could crack at any moment from the sheer amount of power.

“I don’t sense any evil intent in this magic,” Ginger finally said. “Now, I don’t know how it would affect you or that baby if you suddenly took on this magic, though. I think we should study it more before you make a decision.”

“Why would you risk it at all?” Rie asked. “He could have poisoned it or something.”

I put my hand on Rie's thigh and looked at her. "That's why I didn't rush to do anything. But if we are going to get the Council of Magic to back off, I need to explore this opportunity. Cain was clearly a really strong sorcerer, so with his magic, I might be able to back up a threat."

"He was powerful," Ginger said. "But what I'm worried about is he has had his entire life to train his body to handle that magic. You can barely handle your own. If you just get a jolt of power, it could hurt you."

I looked at the bottle, knowing Ginger was right. I couldn't risk harm to the baby until I knew more. We had time before the council came after us anyway.

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MARK

I was on edge after last night. When I heard Cain escaped, I almost had a heart attack. I was terrified Cain was coming after Adira. When we couldn't find him after we knew he was gone, it was both a relief and absolutely terrifying. At least when Cain was in custody, I felt like I was in control. Now, he could come back for Adira at any point and try to take her from me. Adira assured me he wouldn't do that, but she didn't seem completely convinced of it, either.

"Hey, try to lighten up today. You're officially get your luna today," Scythe said. "I know Cain disappearing was a scare, but there seems to constantly be a threat. We can't just stop everything we are doing because of these things happening. We have warriors looking for him still, but he seems to be long gone."

I thought about Cain and Freya making out, and it made me shiver. That was something I never wanted to imagine again. "Yeah, hopefully they never come back. I guess I feel a little better knowing Freya ran away with Cain."

Scythe scoffed. "She was an awful woman. Those two deserve each other."

"And Adira deserves better." It infuriated me that someone could look at Adira and not want everything to do with her. Once you get past her mixed scent, she was a delight, not that I ever questioned my desire for my mate.

"She has you and us. She'll be okay. She's strong," Scythe assured. "Now let's get you into this suit."

"I don't understand why you and Rie insist on us getting ready hours before the actual ceremony."

Scythe held up a few different ties to my neck before finally picking one. "Because we want tonight to be perfect. You and Adira have gone through too much, and you deserve a night to be happy."

"It's not like we are getting married. It's her luna ceremony. Tonight is about her, not me." I couldn't wait for Adira to be the official luna of the group. She was the unofficial already. Everyone looked at her like a luna, and it made my heart swell with pride.

"When are you going to propose to her, by the way?" Scythe asked casually.

My eyes went wide at his statement, and I found myself avoiding eye contact. "Talk about an interrogation."

Scythe's mouth dropped open. "You already have the ring, don't you?"

The Hunted Wolf – Chapter 69

MARK

"We're not talking about this right now," I said, my face turning bright red. I knew the exact moment I wanted to propose to Adira. It was before she was pregnant. It was the first day we moved into this pack house. The way she plopped on the bed, completely exhausted but she still had a smile on her face.

Her hair was messy, but she was beautiful. She looked over at me and motioned for me to join her. That was the moment I knew I wanted to marry her, but I didn't want to rush her. I didn't want her to feel pressured, which was silly. We were mates, and we loved each other. There shouldn't be pressure, but Adira always seemed a little scared of commitment, so I didn't want her to ever feel any kind of pressure.

But now I knew there was no reason to hold back on the proposal. She was about to be the official luna of the pack, and she was having my baby. We didn't know what the future held for any of us, so I didn't want to hold back in any way with her anymore.

“Oh, please, Mark,” Scythe begged. “You know I’m a sucker for proposals and rings and weddings. Can’t you give me this? You owe me after breaking your promise to me.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “What are you talking about?”

“You promised me and Rie that you would listen to us about the scouting party, but then you went and ran off without even telling us.” Scythe was checking himself out in the mirror, making sure his hair looked perfect.

“I saved Adira’s life by breaking that promise.” I rolled my eyes at him. I knew he didn’t mean any harm by this. He was just trying to pry for details.

“Fine. Does the fact that you’re my best friend and I have stuck by your side through thick and thin mean nothing to you?” Scythe turned and batted his eyelashes at me.

I chuckled, shaking my head. He was right. He was my best friend. So was Rie. They stuck with me when I left Pack Sallow. They helped me set up a new pack. They were supportive and caring through all of the drama with Adira. The two of them were without a doubt my best friends, and I knew I wouldn’t have made it this far without their help.

“You better not tell Rie I showed you this first. She might actually stab me.” I had intended to tell the two of them together, but I knew Rie was with Adira right now, and she would be busy all day. I was confident Scythe wouldn’t stop bugging me until I gave him a little something.

Scythe squealed and jumped up and down. “Oh goodie! You’re lucky you’re showing me first. I have impeccable taste. If it’s a bad ring, we can fix it before you propose.”

“It’s my mother’s wedding ring, so be careful with how much you critique it.” I started pulling the ring box out of my pocket.

Scythe’s hands flew to his mouth. “OMG! You have it on you? Are you planning on proposing today?”

I rubbed the felt on the box with my thumb. “I haven’t decided. I’ve been carrying the ring with me for several days, waiting for the right time or trying to build the courage. I’m not sure yet. I don’t know if Adira would like a proposal in front of a crowd either, so I don’t think I’ll risk it.”

Scythe put his hands on my shoulders and looked me in the eye. “Stop overthinking this. You already have the girl. You and Adira are fated mates, chosen by the moon goddess herself. She is having your baby and becoming your luna for crying out loud. A marriage proposal? That’s nothing. You are basically married already. That mark on your neck is more important than a ring on your finger.”

I scratched the back of my neck, feeling almost a little silly for worrying about this so much. “I know. I really do know all of that. I guess I want to propose so legally we are married in the eyes of humans. Plus, I want to celebrate my love for Adira with our friends and family. I want her to get everything she wants and more. That’s why I’m putting so much pressure on myself to make it just right.”

Scythe let go of my shoulders and smiled. “You’ll know the right time. Don’t stress so much about it. Now, let me see this ring!”

I smiled back, feeling better with Scythe’s support. He was right. I would figure out the right moment when it happened, and Adira wasn’t the type for big shows of affection. I was sure if I proposed while we were in bed together, she would be happy with just that.

I opened the ring box and showed Scythe, and his jaw dropped.

“Wow! That looks expensive!” He grabbed the box out of my hand to take a closer look.

“It’s a family heirloom,” I said. “Thankfully, I didn’t have to spend any money on it.”

“Lucky you, and lucky Adira. This is gorgeous!”

A knock on the door drew my attention. I quickly grabbed the ring box from Scythe and put it in my pocket. I didn’t want anyone other than Rie to see the ring before I had a chance to propose. The more people who know about the intent, the less of a secret it would stay.

I opened the door and saw Mason standing outside. He looked just like a warrior with his tall posture and hands behind his back. “I know you are getting ready for your ceremony now, but Rie said I could find you here. Do you have a few moments?”

I opened the door, my heart racing a little. "Come in." I stepped to the side, giving him space.

Mason walked in, and I could feel his intensity coming off him.

"Is there something wrong with the patrol? I can help out with-"

"No, Alpha Mark. Everything is okay. Don't worry about that." Mason still seemed tense, which confused me. I didn't think he felt that uncomfortable with me.

"You can relax, then. No need to be so formal with me. You can even call me Mark. You're Rie's mate after all." I didn't want this weird alpha and pack member dynamic with Mason. He was Adira's childhood friend and now Rie's mate. I hoped one day we could take proper time to get to know each other and maybe become friends.

Mason nodded and released his hands from behind his back, but he seemed tense. "Sorry to disturb you right now. I was talking to Rie about this last night, but I know nothing can happen without your permission."

"Spit it out already," Scythe said, sitting on the bed. He wasn't annoyed by any means, but I could tell he was curious about what was going on.

I gave Scythe a look that warned him to be patient. "Please, go on."

Mason looked around nervously. "I want to join your wolfpack. Pack Lyna won't always be here, and I can't stand the idea of living away from Rie. With your permission, I would like to join the pack. I am a skilled warrior, and I can help you out wherever you need me. I will be a great asset to this pack if you accept me."

I smiled brightly, already loving the idea. I patted Mason on the arm. "I will have to talk to Alpha Lyna about transferring you to this pack, but you have my blessing."

Mason looked shocked. "Wait, really? Just like that?"

I chuckled at his shock. "Just like that. I've seen what you can do, and I trust Adira and Rie. If they vouch for you, then I would be lucky to have you in this pack."

“Thank you so much, sir.” Mason was still beaming.

“I told you, you can call me Mark. Why don’t you stay while we get ready?” I offered.

“That would be great, since I’m not on patrol. Thanks, Mark.”

Mark, there’s something you need to know, Zayla linked me, drawing my attention away from Mason.

I turned to Mason briefly. “Sorry, I’m going to have to excuse myself for a moment. Alpha business waits for no one.”

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ADIRA

I took the bottle of Cain’s powers back, promising not to do anything with them until we knew more. According to Cain, we should have several months to figure out what to do about the council, so I didn’t need to rush into absorbing his magic. It could wait for another day. Rie insisted it was time for us to start getting ready.

She sent me to take a shower as soon as we got back to my room. I took my time in the shower, enjoying the hot water hitting my muscles. It felt good against my sore body, especially after not getting enough sleep. I was especially missing caffeine at this moment, but I wasn’t able to enjoy coffee because of the pregnancy. I was told I could enjoy a nice herbal tea, but that didn’t do anything for my tired body, and I was never a fan of tea.

So instead, I let the water turn red from the heat until I couldn’t find another excuse to stay in the shower any longer. I stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around my hair and my body before stepping into my room.

I was shocked to see plates of food covering the room along with the addition of Quinn, Callie, Eva, and Cindy. I paused, seeing the sudden, unexpected commotion in the room.

Rie caught my eye when I emerged. “I sent down for food, since I know you haven’t had breakfast yet, and the girls heard we were getting ready in here. I hope you don’t mind.”

I smiled, grateful so many people wanted to spend time with me. “Eva, Cindy, I didn’t know you two were at the pack house today,” I noted.

“We came to see Alpha Jori, and we were told we could stay for your luna ceremony. I hope that’s okay,” Cindy explained. She was brushing Eva’s hair and helping her get ready.

“Of course. I’m glad to see your faces.”

Rie stepped in between us. “Okay, enough of that. I need to start on your hair now, if I’m going to have enough time to do my own hair afterwards.”

Rie brushed my hair out for me and put some hair products in my hair before blow drying it. She decided to go all out with styling my hair, and helping me get ready. While Rie got ready herself, Cindy started doing my makeup. It was more fun getting ready than I had anticipated. Everyone was chatting with each other, and we talked about boys and clothes and makeup, and it was very much a typical girl’s night style with conversation.

It was nice, though. For just a few hours, I didn’t have to worry about the responsibilities that came with helping Mark run the pack or how I was going to stop all of these threats against me and my family. All I had to worry about for a moment was making sure my hair looked okay while laughing with my friends. It seemed a little shallow, but I reminded myself that I deserved to be happy, too.

How is getting ready going? Mark linked to check in.

It’s been a lot of fun. A nice break, you know? I could help but smile when I heard Mark in my head.

I’m glad. I have some news though. I hate to interrupt you, but I know you would want to know this right away. Jori’s awake.

The Hunted Wolf – Chapter 70

ADIRA

I rushed to the infirmary, still in my robe and underwear. My hair was pinned up in curls still, and I had a full face of makeup on, but I didn’t care. It had been days since I tried to wake up Jori, and I had been starting to get worried

that he would never wake up. I wanted him to fight, but in the end, he was the only one who could choose to live.

Today, he chose just that.

When I entered the room, Mark was already in the room with Doctor Zayla. Rie followed me into the room, just a step behind us.

“Mark shouldn’t see you before the ceremony,” Rie said, grabbing my arm before I fully made it into the room.

“It’s not like it’s a wedding. Besides, this is bigger than Mark seeing me.” I shook out of her grip and continued forward.

I stopped walking when I was next to Mark. I grabbed his arm and he looked down at me. His worry lines were showing, and I could feel his heart racing.

Are you okay? I linked.

Mark forced a smile. I think so. I’m not sure. I don’t know what to expect.

I nodded my head, feeling the same way. The Jori I knew was selfish and manipulative. He was pushy and angry. I didn’t know how much of that was Jori and how much of it was Xavier, and I was scared to find out. If Jori was still angry and wanted to cause problems, that would be difficult to process and deal with. I wanted so badly to believe Xavier was the one causing all of the issues for the past few months.

Doctor Zayla finished Jori’s check up and took a step back. “Your vitals look good. Your muscles are a little weak from lying in bed so much, so you’ll need to take it easy for the next few days. Short walks only, and no heavy lifting.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Jori’s voice was soft, which seemed strange. I was used to the confident Jori, not this calm, mellow Jori.

Zayla nodded and turned to us. “Let me know if you have any questions. I’m going to step out of the room for a few minutes.” She left, leaving Rie, Mark, and I with Jori.

Rie grabbed my arm, and her eyes were wide. Her hands were trembling, which made me realize she was afraid. I put my hand on her and gave her a small. “It’s okay. Nothing’s going to happen. There’s no need to be afraid.”

Rie sighed, and then her eyes glazed over for a moment. I looked at Mark, whose eyes were also glazed over, so I knew they were linking each other. After a moment, Rie gave me a weak smile. "Don't take too long. We need to finish getting you ready." With that, Rie left the room, so I turned my attention to Jori.

He was watching the interaction closely, and when I looked at him, his eyes were already on me.

"I don't blame her for being weary of me," Jori said. He knew Rie didn't like him being around me. "I did try to kill you and Mark's baby."

Mark winced at his words. It was still difficult for him to think about what he almost lost.

I stepped towards Jori. "That wasn't you. You didn't have control over yourself. We don't blame you for what happened."

Jori laughed, and he almost sounded sarcastic. "I should have fought harder for control, but I would be lying if I said I did everything I could to fight it off." His eyes shifted towards Mark. "I was angry. It felt like you were trying to take everything from me. Xavier was like this whisper in my head, feeding off the anger so he could feed off me, and I let it happen, because I was just so angry."

Mark let go of me and sat in the chair next to Jori's bed, so he was now at his eye level. "I get what you mean. I was angry for a long time about what happened. After losing my parents, you became my family, so when you didn't believe me when I came to you about my grandfather, it hurt. I blamed you, and I didn't want to be around you. But I've realized what happened wasn't your fault. You didn't even know what happened with your family history, so of course you'd react that way."

Jori closed his eyes and leaned his head back. "You know, after you left the pack, I confronted my father about what you told me. He told me it was all true. He said your grandfather was an evil man who only wanted power. Honestly, I don't know if that's true or not, since I never knew your grandfather, but I should have apologized for the cruel things I said. I should have asked you to come back to the pack, but I was afraid."

Mark took a moment to process Jori's words before answering. "Why would you be afraid of approaching me?"

Jori scoffed and looked back at Mark. "It always infuriated me how much you underestimate yourself. You were always happy being my beta, but anyone who looks at you knows you were meant to be an alpha of a pack. Not only are you firm and strong, but you have the heart of a king. You would die for your people, and it makes people want to follow you. I was afraid that if you rejoined the pack, you would outshine me as my beta, and people would wonder why someone like me was left in charge of the pack."

This time it was Mark who laughed. "I was happy being your beta, because I knew you would make a great alpha. I was never going to go after the pack. But when I found out what happened to my grandfather, I was desperate to understand why. My father should have taken over the pack, but he was killed. I felt lost, like I had lost my entire family for a reason I could never understand."

I was starting to feel like I was intruding on a private conversation, so I wondered if I should leave and come back later.

Do you want some privacy with Jori? I linked Mark, feeling like an outsider.

Mark turned and grabbed my hand, pulling me closer to him. That was a clear no, so I stayed as moral support.

Jori laughed, which didn't feel appropriate at the time. "Our family is pretty messed up, especially for two boys who used to be best friends."

Mark laughed in return. "You're right. Our friendship never stood a chance with that loaded gun."

Jori's laugh faded, and his face softened. "For the record, I'm sorry for my actions. I'm sorry for not being the friend you needed and turning you away. I'm also sorry for trying to take your mate away from you. I promise I don't have any feelings towards her anymore." He looked at me this time. "No offense."

"None taken," I quickly said. "I don't feel connected to you anymore, either."

Jori shook his head, smiling. "Just another loaded gun towards our friendship."

Mark opened his mouth to say something, but then he thought better of it. "We really never did stand a chance, huh?"

“Guess not. For the record, I don’t want to be your enemy anymore.”

“That would be nice.” The tension in Mark’s shoulders left, and I knew this was a conversation he needed to have with Jori a long time ago. I was glad they were finally able to clear the air, but it still felt heavy in the room.

The two of them used to be best friends and things stacked up against them and broke the friendship. Maybe if they were more mature when it all happened, they would have been able to figure it out, but they had just been two teenagers with raging hormones. I understood why they didn’t know how to communicate and figure it out. I didn’t know how to handle things at that age either.

Silence filled the air, and I knew the two of them no longer knew what to say to each other, so I decided it was my turn. “Today is my luna ceremony. If you are feeling up for it, it would be nice if you came.”

Jori’s eyes fell to his lap. “I’m not sure that is a good idea. Rie looked like she was ready to murder me for what I did.”

“What Xavier did,” I quickly corrected.

“It was my face and my hands. I understand why I would receive hate from it.” Jori looked at his hands, and they were shaking under his gaze. I could see the guilt he was still holding onto.

I grabbed his hand. “Stop blaming yourself. You were put in a terrible position. You couldn’t control your body, but you still fought through it and broke free for a moment. That moment where you took back control saved my life. It saved our baby’s life. For that, I am grateful.”

Jori gave me a single nod. I knew he didn’t believe me, but I knew it would take time to move past the trauma he went through, and part of it would always sit with him.

“If you are feeling up for it, please come. Have some fun. You deserve a night off.” I stood up and let go of Jori’s hand, knowing there was nothing else I could do for him at that moment.

“I’ll think about it.”

Mark stood up after me. “Get better. Your pack needs you.”

“Yeah.” Jori’s voice was almost lifeless in response, which worried me a little. He clearly still blamed himself for everything that happened, and I was worried he would fall into a dark place.

Mark grabbed my hand as we left the room, and he pulled me out the door. The moment we were alone in the hallway, he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me into him. For a brief moment, I expected him to kiss me, but then his head fell onto my shoulder.

“Thank you for being there with me,” Mark whispered into my neck.

I stroked his hair and let him hold me for as long as he needed. “I will always be there for you.”