

Kidnapped by My Mate Novel

Chapter 41 – 50

Filed To Story:

I felt a blush travel up my chest. I hoped Elijah didn't see me as weak, like glass he needed to care for so that it wouldn't break. I was very capable of walking. "You don't have to carry me again," I said. "I can walk."

Elijah shook his head, not moving from his position. "Absolutely not. You're swaying just standing there and shaking like a leaf. I'm going to carry you."

I still hesitated. "Won't it be too heavy to carry me and my luggage?" I asked.

Elijah laughed and directed his gaze over his shoulder to me. "No. It won't be too heavy. I'm a werewolf with amazing strength and you're..." his eyes traveled up and down my form, a frown forming on his lips. "Well, you're skin and bones.

That's the first thing I'm going to do when we get out of town. I'm making you a four-course meal and making sure you eat every bite."

I stiffened a bit at his words. "You, you're coming with me?" I asked in shock. I had thought that he was simply going to put me on a bus and be done with me. I had thought that I would never see him again after today.

Elijah finally turned and looked at me, a soft expression taking over his features.

"Of course I am. I'm not going to just let my luna go off on her own without any protection. Especially after what you just went through. I probably should have told you that, but with all of the commotion, it just slipped my mind. Kyle is coming too.

He's going to meet us wherever we end up going and bring my things with him.

He'll mind-link me the moment he can get away from the alpha without him noticing. He can't stay with us forever, unfortunately, but he's going to commute back and forth when he can. We've already discussed it through mind-link. So I'm sorry, sweetcheeks, but you're stuck with us," he smiled widely.

I didn't smile back. Although I appreciated the fact that he wanted to care for me, I couldn't let him do this. And Kyle too?

Nope.

No way.

They both had lives to live.

I wasn't going to let them disrupt their lives just because they took pity on some girl who was rejected by their alpha.

"No," I shook my head, leaving no room to argue in my tone. "I'm not letting you come. You need to stay here and be close to your mate. I'm not your luna anymore,"

I said bitterly. "In fact, I never was. Not officially at least. You don't owe me anything. You barely even know me."

Elijah winced slightly at the mention of Grayson's betrayal and the wavering it caused in my voice. "You are my luna," he said in a firm tone. "The alpha may have chosen somebody else to help him lead the pack, but my loyalty will always be with you, the true luna of my pack. Nothing will ever be able to convince me otherwise."

A tiny bit of tenseness left my form. My gratefulness for Elijah only grew with his kind words. It felt good to know that at least one person still cared about me. Maybe even two, I thought as I pictured Kyle's smiling face.

"And I can live without seeing Kyle every day. I don't know if you've noticed, but he can be a bit much sometimes," Elijah laughed. I smiled a bit. "Our bond is strong.

We'll be fine."

I searched his expression for any sort of hesitation. But I couldn't find any. He really did want to come with me. And who was I to deny his care? It would be nice not to be on my own for once.

"Fine," I finally said. "But only under one condition."

Elijah raised a brow in question.

"You can't call me Luna anymore. My name is Belle."

Elijah frowned, immediately shaking his head and opening his mouth to argue.

"Please," I said before he could disagree. "It hurts too much to be called Luna. The title only comes with horrible memories. I just want to be Belle. Just Belle. Not Luna."

Elijah hesitated for a moment. He didn't look happy but eventually, he nodded his head. "My wolf and I don't like it but... But I'll try my best."

I was pleased with his answer. That was all I could ask for.

“Shall we get going then?” he asked, motioning for me to get on his back again.

I nodded, ready to be as far away from Grayson as I could get. I climbed onto his back, locking my ankles together and squeezing my legs tightly around his waist so that he could grab my suitcase and hold it instead of gripping my legs to keep me in place.

Elijah started to move quickly.

I found myself suddenly very glad that he had insisted on carrying me.

Even just hanging onto his back in my weakened state was proving to be extremely difficult.

And all the movement was making my nausea come back with a sudden vengeance.

But I didn’t complain. Instead, I just tightened my arms around his neck and laid my head on his back. I imagined I was on a boat in the middle of a lake somewhere, fishing with my dad.

That had always been one of our favorite things to do together.

As we continued our trek further and further into the forest, I couldn’t stop myself from longingly looking back at the direction from which we came.

I wished more than anything that things were different.

I wished I could go back to those few weeks in Paris when Grayson still seemed to love me.

I wished that I could live in that memory forever.

But since I knew I couldn’t, since I knew that it was time for me to move on to the part of my life that no longer involved Grayson, I shut my eyes gently, leaning my head back onto Elijah’s back.

And I tried my very best to let my mind drift off to happier thoughts.

BELLE POV

Elijah carried me with ease, never showing a single sign of fatigue.

The tranquility of the forest surrounding us in addition to the comfortable silence between Elijah and me, made for a soothing environment. All that could be heard was the faint chirping of some birds nearby and Elijah’s rough steps in the snow.

“So where would you like to go?” Elijah asked me about a mile into our hike.

I set my chin down on his shoulder and sighed deeply. I didn’t want to make any decisions. I wanted to go to sleep. And then never wake up.

It was like my head was filled with murky water, not letting a single clear thought through.

I was drowning in the water, gasping for air, violently swimming upwards.

Swimming, swimming, with no end in sight. My chest constricted painfully as if I was really in the water and my breath caught in my throat. I tightened my legs around Elijah’s waist, trying to calm my shaking, exhausted body.

I shrugged weakly. “I don’t care,” I barely got out. “Wherever you want.”

Elijah chuckled softly. “I’ve only ever been off pack lands a handful of times. I wouldn’t even know which direction to head in if you asked me to decide.”

I paused.

Do I even know what direction to head in? I didn’t know much about the world either.

I had been to Paris and that was about it. The rest of my life had been spent in hospitals and at home taking care of my dad.

“Come on,” he urged in a soothing voice. “There’s got to be somewhere you want to go.”

Only one place came to mind. “I guess we could go to Minneapolis,” I said.

Minneapolis was the city where I grew up and only a few hours away by car.

Although it didn’t contain many good memories, mostly just memories of my dad dying, it was the only home I had ever known. A thought popped into my head.

I might even be able to stop by my old apartment and get some of my stuff.

That is, if my old landlord, Mr. Hummer, hadn’t sold all of it yet.

He was a mean old man with beady eyes, yellow teeth, and breath that only ever smelled like either cigarettes or salami, nothing else. The number of eviction notices that I had received from him for forgetting to pay rent not even twenty-four hours after it was due was ridiculous.

I had no doubt that Mr. Hummer would not react kindly to seeing me, especially after I went missing for months, leaving him without a rent check and with the responsibility of dealing with all of my things. But it was worth a shot, right?

“Minneapolis could work,” Elijah said in approval. “I’ll go anywhere you want but Minneapolis is close enough for Kyle to commute back and forth but far enough away from the alpha for you to heal.”

I cringed slightly at the mention of Grayson. My heart constricted in my chest.

Elijah winced.

“Sorry,” he said quickly. “I’ll stop talking about him.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s okay. I’ll get over it. I’m...” I hesitated, but only for a moment. Then lifted my chin in determination. “I can handle it. I’m strong.”

Elijah didn’t waste a second in replying, “Hell yeah, you are! You don’t need him.

Especially since you’ve got me. I’m pretty great in case you haven’t noticed.”

I laughed. And it felt good. It gave me hope.

At that moment, I became determined to get back on my feet as soon as possible so that Elijah could get back to his life. While I appreciated him to the moon and back and knew that I wouldn’t have been able to get through this day without him, he had better things to do than to take care of me.

I had been on my own basically my entire life.

I was good at it.

I could do it again.

I stretched my neck and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. “Thank you, Elijah. I know you’re giving up a lot to be with me. It really means a lot.”

Elijah smiled. “It’s an honor. No need to thank me.”

We walked for a few more minutes before my arms and legs began to get tired. My body was running out of adrenaline, quickly making me exhausted beyond belief.

Not to mention the aching pain that was still throbbing throughout my body.

It felt like I had the worst flu ever.

“How much further until we get to town?” I asked. All I wanted to do was get on a bus, curl into a little ball in one of the seats, and sleep until we reached the cities.

“About ten more minutes,” Elijah said. “Do you need to take a break? We can stop for a few minutes.”

I shook my head quickly. “No. No, that’s okay. I don’t want to stop. I just didn’t realize how far away the nearest town was from the packhouse.”

Elijah looked down at me over his shoulder with a worried expression. “Are you sure? You’re not looking so good, Luna.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. He had promised to call me by my real name.

“Sorry,” he said quickly. “I’m still getting used to not calling you that. It might take some time. It goes against all of my instincts to call you by your real name.”

I chose not to mention the fact that he hadn’t even tried calling me Belle yet. How did he know he couldn’t do it if he didn’t even try?

I sighed. “It’s fine.” I tightened my arms around him, trying not to fall off his back and straight onto my butt in the snow. My forehead came in contact with his shoulder, trying to find some sort of stability. “I think I should walk for a while. I’m starting to feel motion sickness.”

I didn’t have to look at Elijah to know he was frowning. He slowed his steps, thinking about it. Then, thankfully, he stopped. He set my suitcase down in the snow and gently grabbed my legs so he could help me off his back.

I couldn’t stop myself from leaning against a nearby tree the second my feet touched the ground. I shut my eyes tightly, trying to breathe. When I opened them a few seconds later, Elijah was looking at me with a distressed expression.

“I’m fine,” I said before he could ask how I was doing. I straightened, pushing off the tree and tugging my shoulders back. “Let’s keep going.”

Chapter 42 –

Filed To Story:

Elijah didn’t look convinced by my lacking display of strength.

He thrust out his hand, palm up. “Backpack,” he said, motioning for me to give my bag to him.

My brows knit together in frustration. I wasn't that weak. I could still carry my own damn backpack, thank you very much.

"I've got it. I can do it," I said stubbornly. I started to walk in the same direction we were going before, hoping he would drop the subject.

Unfortunately, I wasn't so lucky. Elijah stepped in front of me, blocking my path. "I know you can do it," he said sternly, still holding his hand out. "I just don't care. If you're walking, I'm carrying your backpack."

I frowned at him. His unfaltering expression told me I wasn't going to win this battle. I sighed deeply and angrily yanked the backpack straps off my shoulders. I thrust it at him. "Fine. Here."

The corner of his lips turned up, as he contently took the bag from my hands.

"Thank you," he said.

I rolled my eyes, feeling my own lips form a small smile. Why he looked so happy to be carrying a bag filled to the brim with books, clothes, and other useless objects was beyond me. But I was still grateful for his help.

He put the bag on his shoulders and bent down to pick up my suitcase as well. Then he looked at me, waiting patiently for me to give the go-ahead to keep moving. I used all the willpower left in my body to walk straight without stumbling.

But it was hard. Really. Fucking. Hard.

My legs screamed at me with every step, the burning in my chest traveling throughout the rest of me the further away I became from Grayson. It was like my body knew that I was leaving the man I loved and because it had such an intense connection to him, it was determined to let my mind know that it hated it.

I had never felt like my mind and body were two separate entities before, but that was the only way to describe it now. My mind and body were fighting against each other in a rigorous battle that neither would win.

All for a man who hated me. Beat me, used me, gained my trust and then tore me down in the most painful way possible. I hadn't even realized I was crying until my vision blurred with unshed tears. I groaned in frustration and violently wiped at the tears, mad at myself for crying yet again.

I looked down at my feet, determined to keep walking, willing them to carry me just a little longer. And then a branch, hidden deep in the snow, seemed to grab onto my foot like a twisted hand, tugging my body down with a sudden force.

I crashed into the snow with a surprised scream, landing gracelessly on my front. I couldn't stop myself from crying out my frustration. I slammed my fists down in the snow angrily over and over again.

Somewhere deep inside of me was screaming, Get your act together, Belle!

This is why Grayson couldn't love you!

This is why your mother left you!

You're weak, you can't even walk without falling!

I let out a sob, more out of anger and frustration than sadness.

I would prove the voice wrong.

I would prove everyone wrong.

I could do it.

I could be strong.

And I was going to do it on my own. Nobody would hurt me ever again.

Elijah didn't waste a second, quickly crouching down next to me the moment I fell.

"That's it," he said harshly. He set my suitcase to the side. "I'm going to carry you.

We're leaving your suitcase here and I'm carrying you the rest of the way whether you like it or not. I'll come back for your stuff later, once we've gotten you somewhere you can rest that isn't in the freezing cold." He tried to wrap his arms around me so he could lift me into the air but I stopped him.

"No," I said roughly. I shoved his arms away from me, letting my anger and frustration show through. "I can do it. I said I can do it and I will."

I wiped my hair out of my face and sat up. One of my elbows was severely scraped up through my jacket and dripping blood. My knees didn't look any better.

I tried not to care that my only jacket now had a huge hole in it.

Pushing the pain aside, I stood with great effort. I looked at Elijah who was still watching me from his crouched position.

He shook his head in amazement, bringing himself to stand as well. "I know you don't want to hear this right now and, honestly, I'm not really sure why I'm telling you this

right after you had your heart broken,” he started, “but you would have made an amazing luna. Truly. The alpha made a terrible mistake giving you up.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. “Yeah, well,” I said, shifting my weight uncomfortably. “That’s all in the past now. Let’s keep going. I’m cold.”

Elijah nodded, not hiding his sad expression. “Okay.”

We continued our trot through the woods, Elijah now walking extremely close to me, I’m sure ready to catch me if I fell again. We only got a few more steps in before Elijah suddenly stopped.

I paused as well, turning to look at him a few feet behind me. “Elijah?” I asked.

His brown eyes were glazed over and glassy, appearing much darker than they usually did.

He was looking off into the distance with a strange expression on his face.

I didn’t know a lot about it, but by Grayson’s explanation and the few times I had seen him do it, I knew Elijah was midlinking someone, talking to them in his mind.

But that wasn’t what worried me. Elijah’s expression was quickly turning panicked, his breathing quickening more and more by the second. Whoever was talking to him was not delivering good news.

When his eyes finally cleared, his gaze snapped to me. His jaw clenched roughly.

“Elijah?” I asked again. “What happened?”

BELLE POV

“Elijah,” I said again, “what’s wrong?”

Elijah’s face had turned as pale as a sheet of paper.

I couldn’t tell if it was his wolf or his human side that was upset, based on the rapid change of colors in his eyes. Either way, whatever had just been told to him through mind-link—communicated to him through his brain—could not be good.

I tried approaching him when he didn’t answer.

The pain I was feeling suddenly didn’t matter; it was quickly being replaced by worry.

Elijah growled when I approached and took a step away, putting a fair number of feet between us. My brows knitted together.

“Kyle,” Elijah breathed out heavily.

My heart dropped.

“What?” I asked frantically, “is something wrong with Kyle? How do you know?”

Elijah shook his head rapidly, grabbing onto his hair in tight shifts.

It was obvious now that he was trying to rein in his wolf. Was this what it looked like to be fully mated and know that your mate was hurt?

He looked like he was in a lot of pain.

Shouldn’t he be running back to Kyle in a panic?

“Mind link. Mate bond,” he choked out, answering my question in short, pained sentences.

The way he spoke, without a hint of deception, made me believe that what he was saying was true. Something was wrong with Kyle. But if Kyle was seriously hurt, Elijah wouldn’t be taking his time getting back to the packhouse.

He wouldn’t be standing here talking to me.

I may have never known what it felt like to be fully mated, but deep inside I knew I would feel it if something life-threatening happened to Grayson. And nothing would keep me from getting to him. It was the way Elijah was looking at me right now—

wide eyes, serious expression—that told me there was something he was keeping from me, something he couldn’t tell me.

Something serious.

With cautious movements, I stepped towards him.

“There’s something else, isn’t there?” I asked in a quiet voice.

Elijah shut his eyes tightly for a second before he nodded sharply in confirmation.

I sucked in a breath.

“Grayson?” I asked. “Did Grayson do something?”

He didn’t give me any sort of confirmation, but his intense, nonstop stare gave me all the answer I needed.

I was right. Grayson had done something, and based on Elijah’s reaction, it wasn’t good.

My mouth went dry, my heart rate escalating until it was beating at the same pace as a horse's hoofs at the Kentucky Derby.

"Has he hurt someone?"

Elijah blinked once.

There was no doubt in my mind that he was struggling with whatever he was told through mind-link. He wanted to talk to me but couldn't for some reason.

Something, or someone, was stopping him.

He ignored my last question, instead struggling to say, "Luna. You have to—"

He choked on his words, stopped by an unseen force.

His mouth shut and his eyes snapped closed tightly.

He grabbed onto his chest in immense pain, bending over himself until he was kneeling on the ground. Panic filled my body.

I didn't waste a second running to him and grabbing his shoulder. I tried to help him up, wrapping my arm around his waist and tugging him to his feet.

"No!" he yelled the moment I touched him.

He pushed with just enough force to send me stumbling backward. I yelled out in shock.

Elijah didn't give me any time to process his actions.

"Please..." he continued, desperation and pain lacing his tone, "you have to tell me..."

"Tell you what, Elijah?" I asked.

I tried to keep my distance, knowing now that he didn't want me to touch him, but it was getting harder and harder to stay away as his pain only seemed to increase.

"Tell you what?!"

And then, without warning, his back straightened. He sprang to his feet and looked at me with a bright, content expression. He smiled widely, showing all his teeth.

It sent chills down my spine.

"I must report back to the packhouse now. Goodbye," he said through that smile of clenched teeth.

And without giving any sort of other explanation, he spun on his heel and began walking in the direction from which we had come.

Chapter 43 –

Filed To Story:

What. The actual. Fuck.

I allowed myself to stand there for a second, staring at his back, before I set off after him.

His confusing words ran through my mind. He needed to go back to the packhouse?

Why? It made no sense.

What had happened? What couldn't he tell me?

It didn't bother me that he seemed to not be coming with me anymore. I wasn't selfish enough to worry about my own comfort when other people's wellbeing were at stake. No, what bothered me was the fact that something was obviously very, very wrong.

And Elijah was walking in the exact direction of the danger, acting completely insane and unaware.

"Hey!" I shouted, jogging a bit to catch up with him. "Where are you going? What the hell is going on?"

He didn't say a single thing in return. As if I weren't there, he continued walking, still sporting that eerie smile. I grabbed onto his arm, not willing to give up.

"Hey, you'd better tell me what's going on right now, Elijah!"

He continued to ignore me.

"Hey, stop! Please! Did something bad happen to Kyle?" I said.

Still, Elijah didn't stop. He continued to let me scream in his ear for a good minute without responding.

"I'm not leaving you until you tell me what's going on!" I yelled.

Suddenly, he grabbed my arm and forcefully yanked me behind him. I screamed, surprised by his sudden commanding force. I was now walking straight up against his back, my movement incapacitated by his death grip.

He walked in the same way he had before. His hand moved down my arm, maintaining enough pressure to keep me in place, and then held my hand harshly.

I noticed how badly his body was shaking against mine.

He squeezed my hand twice, then placed his pointer finger against my palm, moving it frantically over my skin.

It took me a second, but I realized with shock that he was tracing letters on the palm of my hand.

DON'T FOLLOW.

DANGER.

My breath caught in my throat as I interpreted his writing.

The fact that he needed to write the words out on my palm instead of telling me face to face only distressed me more. Why couldn't he flat-out tell me what was wrong? Was somebody listening? Was he in trouble?

Whatever it was, Elijah was trying to tell me to stay behind while he went and dealt with it.

While, might I add, he continued to smile in a way that I could only describe as soul-chilling.

I decided then and there that, although the last thing I wanted was to see Grayson again, the thought of Kyle or somebody else getting hurt as a consequence of my actions earlier today was reason enough to go back to the packhouse and help however I could.

I squeezed his hand once and began to write my own message on his palm, hoping he would understand how I felt instead of trying to argue.

I'LL COME.

Elijah's steps faltered for only a second as he interpreted the information I relayed to him.

Then he squeezed my hand so hard it almost hurt.

NO, he wrote back, his letters accompanied by another hard squeeze, emphasizing his point.

I squeezed his hand back just as harshly.

YES.

With that, Elijah stopped walking so abruptly that I ran into his back.

His body was still shaking as he wrapped his other trembling hand around mine so that both were squeezing my fingers.

He waited a second, his shoulders rising and falling with a deep, focused breath before he squeezed my hand yet again, softer than before.

PLEASE. DON'T FOLLOW. PLEASE.

I faltered. He was serious. He really didn't want me to come, wanted to go back on his own while I stayed behind. I could feel the guilt eating at me.

I couldn't handle it if Elijah or somebody else got hurt fighting my battles.

My stubbornness was surging forward in full force.

But did I really have a choice?

Sensing my resolve, Elijah squeezed my hands gently again writing, GO BE HAPPY.

I didn't expect the tears that started to run down my cheeks. Even though they were just letters on my palm, his words meant the world to me. There was sincerity and hope emanating from his firm grip, causing deep warmth to spread through me.

Elijah wanted what was best for me. I knew that.

And if that was going off on my own and leaving him to fight my battles... Then so be it.

I trusted him. I couldn't stop myself from launching myself onto him, wrapping my arms around his waist from behind in a hug that I hoped conveyed all I was feeling.

My gratitude for his help and friendship.

My hope to see him again one day under better circumstances.

"Thank you," I whispered against his back, holding back tears, "Thank you."

Elijah didn't respond. It didn't surprise me given the circumstances. But I knew he felt the same way. I knew that, if he'd had the chance, he would be telling me I was a badass who was going to rock it in the real world.

He placed his hands over mine in front of him and sighed, squeezing me lightly.

As sad as I was, the whole experience felt strangely cathartic. Not only was I saying goodbye to Elijah and the incredible friendship that had proven to be so important over

the last month or so, I was saying goodbye to Grayson and the life and people that came with loving him.

I felt stronger. I felt happier. I felt ready.

We stayed like that for a minute, both of us silently communicating our goodbyes through our tight embrace. Elijah let me hold onto him for as long as I wanted to, seeming to need the release of emotions just as much as I did.

“Be safe,” I whispered to him.

And then, as if we both knew it was time, he squeezed my hand, wrote, GOODBYE, LUNA, and let me go.

Leaving me, once again, completely alone.

Elijah was right.

The nearest town was a good ten-minute walk from us.

After grabbing my suitcase and backpack, it didn’t take me long to make my way into the small town. Once there, I was able to get a bus ticket with what little money I had stashed away in my backpack and hop a bus to Minneapolis.

During the ride I allowed myself to process what had happened to me over the last several months. I reminded myself that Elijah had told me not to think about Grayson, that it would only make the pain worse.

He was right about that too.

I ached all over just imagining Grayson’s smile, his laugh, his pet names for me, the night we had spent hours talking under the sparkling lights of the Eiffel Tower.

Just for now, I told myself, ~you will let yourself think of him~.

You will let yourself be consumed by the thoughts of what could have been.

But the second you get off this bus, the second you get back to your old life, you will push him out of your mind.

You will not let yourself drown in self-pity.

You will not wonder what you did wrong.

You will be strong. You will walk with your head held high and not let what he did weigh you down.

And that was exactly what I did.

At the bus station in Minneapolis, I had a newfound outlook on things.

I wiped my tears and pushed back my shoulders, wasting no time before walking to my old familiar apartment building. I had intended to retrieve my things. I had left most of my belongings in my small studio apartment before going to Paris.

Although I'd been gone a few months and hadn't paid rent since before then, I hoped that my landlord had found it in him to keep at least a few of my things instead of selling them all or leaving them on the street.

I was wrong.

My crusty old landlord wouldn't even open the door for me when I came knocking.

He screamed at me for a few minutes before telling me to go away. When I continued to beg, he threatened to call the police. So I found myself back on the street with only the items in my backpack and suitcase and the clothes on my back.

As I looked around, I was flooded with memories of my childhood with my dad.

While I was walking, I came across the playground where he had used to take me on the weekends. Then I passed the hospital where he'd died, only a few blocks from my old apartment. The good memories suddenly and thoroughly turned bad.

I realized that this place, this city, only came with reminders of sadness or heartbreak, even if the memories had been happy at the time they were made.

My dad would have wanted so much better for me than what I was doing right now.

I almost broke down then and there, not knowing what to do next, but I didn't let myself.

Instead, I got another bus and let it take me far away. And then, when I felt like it, I got another one, letting instinct and chance decide where I went.

I rode that bus through the night and didn't stop until the driver told me I had to get off.

I found myself in a new city with the hope of a fresh start blazing in my chest.

I was ready to move on and meet the stronger, more independent, more capable version of myself.

I wasn't going to let anybody tear me down.

Bring it on, world.

KYLE

Several hours earlier, the morning of Belle's departure

I couldn't sleep.

No matter how I tossed and turned through the night, the tension running through my body kept me awake. I had come across some information last night that I wasn't supposed to know about—information concerning my alpha.

It had all started when I couldn't stop worrying about the luna, her odd behavior constantly on my mind. I never saw her anymore. In fact, I hadn't seen her in weeks.

Chapter 44 –

Filed To Story:

Even when I looked for her, she was nowhere to be found. At first, I just missed her; she was fun to have around and made the alpha's ever-changing moods more bearable.

But then it turned into something else.

Something was going on between the alpha and luna that I didn't know about.

My first clue was when the luna asked me to be the mediator between her and the alpha due to some fight they'd had during her second night with the pack. This wasn't the oddest thing in and of itself. Mates fought, it's the way it was—Goddess knew Elijah and I fought on a regular basis. But the alpha and luna just didn't seem like the type.

The next clue was when she showed up in the kitchen sporting a black eye and bruised chin and said she hadn't been eating! What the hell? She had looked worried and tired, maybe even depressed.

Thinking it could solve the problem and looking to take care of my luna, I had taken her straight to the alpha. I ignored the fact that she was screaming and crying as if she was scared of seeing him.

I ignored the look of terror in her eyes.

Now in hindsight, I regretted my actions.

I should have spoken to her first. I should have listened to her before deciding what was best for her.

I hadn't seen her since that morning, several weeks ago. My worry grew with every day that I didn't see her. She wasn't even at the weekly pack dinners, the chair next to the alpha always empty.

The alpha never gave an explanation for her absence: he was quiet and focused on his work, more so than I had ever seen him.

Time passed until it was as if the luna hadn't existed at all.

Yesterday, my worry had finally become too much and taken over my common sense.

The alpha might lash out at me for thinking I knew what was best for his mate instead of him.

But I convinced myself that I had no choice. I cared too much about the luna to let this go.

After a long meeting that morning, I decided to ask the alpha about the luna, hoping for a logical explanation. I was shocked when he only seemed bothered that I had brought the subject up, not angry.

He acted as though it was an inconvenience to talk about his mate.

He nonchalantly told me that she was having a hard time adjusting and needed space, and insisted I didn't worry about her anymore.

Of course, these words that were meant to reassure me did the complete opposite.

Something wasn't adding up. Alphas didn't leave their mates alone, especially at a time like this, important not only for the pack but for the luna as she adjusted to life as a leader.

If the luna was struggling even a little, the alpha wouldn't even consider leaving her side—and if, for some odd reason, he did consider it, his wolf wouldn't let him act on it.

Put off by his answer and not ready to let the subject drop, I joked about my surprise over the fact that he hadn't mated. I hoped this would get a response out of him: alphas were known to become furious and overprotective when asked about their own mating processes.

To his credit, the alpha did react. Just not in the way I had expected.

He perked up and looked at me for the first time since the start of the conversation.

He didn't speak for a moment, thinking. Then his lips curled up in an odd smile.

"Ah, yes... Mating," he said, leaning back in his chair.

He looked up at the ceiling and licked his lips. Then he looked back at me with a new twinkle in his eye and clapped me on the back.

“Not to worry. Mating will be happening soon. Very soon.”

Without another word, he had strode out of the conference room, determination evident in every single step. I watched him go to his office with a sour taste in my mouth.

The way he spoke made it seem as though he had forgotten what mating was.

So by this point I was in a panic. His strange behavior mixed with the missing luna equaled a need for answers.

I had to find the luna and figure out exactly what was going on. My first stop was the room she shared with the alpha. I knocked multiple times and, when no one answered, barged in.

I couldn't bring myself to care that no one besides her and the alpha was allowed in here; I was too focused on my mission.

To my shock, the room was empty. The luna was nowhere to be found.

I had figured this was where she had been hiding out, and obviously I had figured wrong.

As I looked around the room, my eyes stopped at the alpha's desk.

It was extremely messy—strange, as the alpha was one of the neatest people I knew.

He became upset when even a paperclip was out of place. There were papers thrown across the entire surface of the desk, covered in red ink.

I approached, curiosity and concern overriding my usual dedication to rules.

What I found made my heart drop.

All of the papers were letters written to the alpha.

Sent by vampires.

No, that can't be right. The alpha wouldn't be in secret communication with our mortal enemies.

I reread the letter I was holding before moving on to the next, hoping to find some other explanation. But there was none. All the letters were written by a vampire clan to the alpha.

And that wasn't even the scariest part.

This wasn't just any clan—it was the most famous clan in the world other than the royal family. It was also the most evil.

This was the Clan of Azazel, receiving the title after supporting the rule of Azazel Mortar, the former king of the vampires.

They had helped him in the War of the Vampires years ago, becoming an army of the most wicked beings ever known.

Unlike other vampires who seemed to have at least some morals, this clan was notorious for murdering without cause and performing despicable acts. Their vile conduct was the reason werewolves and vampires had been at war for so long.

As king, Azazel Mortar moved to allow rogue vampires into the royal clan, ignoring how dangerous that could be, only thinking of gaining more power. Rogues couldn't control their thirst for human blood... And this was why Azazel had lost the throne.

The letters spoke of an ambush on our pack that would take place in three days' time.

The alpha had shared with them all the weak spots in our borders, given them information on the best attack strategies. Together, they had formed a plan to take down our pack.

And after the defeat, they would give us the choice to join them in conquering the next one. And the next one.

Or die.

My hands shook as I read through each letter, taking in the details and committing them to memory. Their ultimate goal was to woo enough wolves to their side to defeat the Mortars, the royal vampires.

And they would. If our pack was defeated and fought against other packs with the help of vampires, we would win. There was no doubt.

The army of vampires and werewolves would grow until it was the most powerful in the world. Azazel Mortar would have the throne once again.

I dropped the letters back onto the desk after I had finished reading.

I wasn't supposed to know any of this. The alpha was hiding the evidence, and with good reason. My mind drifted to when he had proposed us letting a group of much less dangerous vampires into our lands.

He had thought it would be nice to have them on our side during battles in case we were ever attacked. His idea was shot down immediately by the elders and me.

Vampires and werewolves had never gotten along. Both our species were too proud to work in harmony. If the alpha had proposed us teaming up with the Clan of Azazel during a meeting with the elders, he would have been deemed insane, possibly unfit for his role.

He could have lost all his authority and credibility.

So he had gone behind our backs and communicated with the clan in secret.

Alpha Grayson took great pride in having the most powerful pack in the world, and he had worked hard to earn that title. But I had never thought he was power-hungry enough to willingly endanger the entire pack.

Didn't he know that most, if not all, of our members would die before they agreed to take orders from vampires and help them kill other werewolves?

If he imagines this will somehow help us rise to the top or make history, then he's badly misjudged. It will mean the end of our pack as we know it.

I had very little time to take action.

I thought about going to Beta Adalee, but her name had been mentioned in the letters multiple times. In fact, now that I thought about it, she and the alpha had been awfully friendly ever since we had come home from France.

Was it possible they were in on this together?

There was no one else I could trust with the information who wouldn't be put in danger by knowing. I had to do this myself.

In a flash, I was out of the alpha's room and down the hall.

Although I was still worried about the luna, she was now the last thing on my mind.

It was better for her to stay away anyway. She would be safer if she had no contact with the alpha.

And the alpha would be weaker without his mate.

Once I was in my office, I hurriedly wrote a letter explaining the stakes and handed it off to our strongest pack warrior, Ben. I sent him out with orders to deliver the letter to the nearest pack, about a day's run away.

Ben had amazing endurance and would be able to run all the way there while just barely breaking a sweat. He wasn't to stop for any reason or let anyone except the alpha of the other pack see the letter. Once he had his instructions, Ben sprinted off without any questions, sensing the urgency.

It was clear to me that a war was coming in three days, a war we would not survive if we didn't get help. Hopefully, the pack next door would be willing to help us.

We had a good relationship and a record of fighting battles together. Although this battle would be more dangerous than any of the other ones, I had little doubt that they would step up, especially since it concerned their wellbeing too. But that wasn't enough. I was going to need more than that.

After ensuring that the alpha was still in his office, I called. a pack meeting in the forest.

I ordered everyone to start training and getting ready for an intense battle, emphasizing that these were the alpha's orders instead of my own. At first they were confused and worried and wanted to know what was going on, which was more than fair.

I assured them that I knew just as little as they did, that I was just the messenger.

They got to work right after that. I thought about contacting other packs but stopped myself.

It would take too long to get letters to them, and I couldn't call them without arousing the alpha's suspicion. If all went well with the neighboring pack, I would have an army of about six thousand on my hands.

However, the Clan of Azazel was over ten thousand rogues strong and counting, constantly biting humans and turning them, adding to their numbers.

I needed more assistance if I was going to save my pack.

And there was only one way to do that, only one person who would have just much to lose if the Clan of Azazel were to gain power.

I would have to negotiate and partner with the king of the vampires, the brother of Azazel.

Zagan Mortar.

KYLE

I looked down at Elijah sleeping soundlessly on my chest.

I had joined him in bed about an hour ago but hadn't been able to close my eyes once.

Chapter 45 –

Filed To Story:

I'd been up all night trying to figure out a plan to contact Zagan Mortar, the vampire king, in order to tell him of the upcoming war that would kill us both.

Getting in touch with the Mortars was not easy.

Their kingdom was hidden away by dark magic, only accessible by pureblood vampires, a person born a vampire instead of being turned. No werewolf had ever set foot in the royal kingdom—it was hidden too well.

The only way to contact the royal family was to have another vampire deliver the message.

That meant I had to do two things: First, find a vampire willing to listen to a werewolf long enough to give them a message—a very hard task. Second, convince that vampire to get a hearing with Zagan Mortar—an even harder task.

Only then would my message be delivered. It was almost impossible.

Except that, in a stroke of pure luck, we just so happened to have a vampire in our dungeons.

One of our captives from the attack a couple months ago, a girl named Elina, hadn't yet managed to escape. We had been planning on keeping her locked up in case there was ever a need for information...but plans change.

I had spoken to her yesterday, tried to convince her to be the one to deliver a letter I had written out to the royal family. At first, as predicted, she had hissed at me and even tried to take a few swipes through the cell bars with her long claws.

If werewolves were the dogs of the mythical world, vampires were definitely the cats.

She continued to hiss and swear at me until I offered her something that would force her to listen: her freedom. I told her I would let her go if she agreed to deliver my letter to Zagan Mortar. It was an offer I knew she couldn't refuse.

She was already weakened from not having drunk blood since before she had gotten here.

Vampires could last without blood for up to a year but started to get weak and grumpy after only a day.

It didn't help that Elina was also a newborn vampire, meaning she had been turned not too long ago. Her inability to contain her hunger due to her new passion for blood would convince her to do almost anything.

"They're not going to let me in," she'd said after I had finished my plan. "I'm not a pureblood, I was bitten a year ago." So a very new newborn.

And even after she was no longer new, she would be a half-blood, someone who wasn't born a vampire but made one. Half-bloods were not allowed in the royal kingdom.

But in this case, that only worked in my favor.

"Yes"—I nodded—"but the king won't be able to ignore a young half-blood trying to break into his kingdom. Especially if she has this." Through the bars, I handed her the letter.

It was written on old parchment paper and sealed with wax and the pack emblem in gold.

"The emblem belongs to one of the most powerful werewolf packs in the world. It smells like wolves and was written by the gamma of Alpha Grayson. If a newborn half-blood comes waltzing into the royal kingdom with that letter, there is no doubt the vampire king will meet you. He'll have no choice."

I had expected her to bring up some other point and expose more faults in my plan, but she didn't. She took the letter and tucked it into her pocket, promising to do what she could.

She was desperate for her freedom and probably for blood.

It occurred to me now that she could have been lying when she'd promised to deliver the letter. She could take the letter and her freedom and never think about me or my pack ever again. But somehow I sensed she wasn't the type to make a vow just to break it, especially one concerning the lives of so many.

I could only hope for the best.

Suddenly, Elijah shifted against me and kissed my chest, knocking me out of my intense thoughts. I had almost forgotten where I was, too caught up in my own world.

He set his chin on my chest and sleepily looked up at me.

"You're disturbing my beauty sleep," he whispered. "I can feel your concern through the bond."

I sighed. Crap. I hadn't meant to wake him up.

"Sorry." I leaned down and kissed him once on the lips.

The action calmed my wolf but only seemed to agitate Elijah more. When I pulled away, he sat up, frowning.

"This has something to do with the battle that the alpha wants us to train for, doesn't it? Do you know something? Is there something you're not telling us?"

It didn't surprise me that Elijah immediately knew I was hiding something from him.

Throughout our years together, our bond had grown incredibly strong. We knew everything about each other. We could practically read each other's minds without batting an eye.

I sighed and sat up as well, starting to feel his panic through the bond.

My wolf didn't like it and was urging me to make him feel better. I took his hands in mine.

"If I could tell you, I would." I kissed his knuckles gingerly, staring into his eyes.

"Please believe me."

I felt his concern only grow with my terrible attempt at reassurance.

"I know," he whispered, honesty pouring from his tone. He paused, studying me.

"But you also would tell me if you were in trouble, right?"

My wolf whimpered, beginning to pace in my mind.

Shit.

I was going to have to lie to him. And I was going to hate myself for it. I simply refused to put him in danger. If I told him what was really going on, there was no doubt in my mind that he would do whatever he could to help me—even come face to face with a Mortar if he had to.

I couldn't let that happen.

I was already considering locking him away when the battle started so I knew he wouldn't get hurt.

Putting on my most reassuring smile, I said, "Yes, of course. I'm fine, I promise."

He didn't look convinced. In fact, I was almost certain he knew I was lying. I kissed his lips before he could say anything else and continued. "I'm going to go get some coffee. Do you want some?"

Elijah watched me get out of bed, a frown still on his beautiful face. My heart squeezed painfully at the sight. I was thankful he seemed to drop the subject for now.

"Yeah, sure," he responded.

I nodded once and put on some slippers, then walked back over to him and left a lingering kiss on his forehead.

"I love you," I said.

The corners of his lips turned up a bit in a sad smile. He nodded.

"I love you, too."

Guilt ate at me on the long walk down to the kitchen. My wolf was angry with the decision to lie to Elijah. But he didn't understand that my telling him the truth would only put him in danger.

Stupid wolf. Making me feel guilty for doing the right thing.

A sudden sound made my internal battle stop and my feet falter.

Someone was crying—sobbing, actually.

And I recognized the voice.

My legs started running before I had time to process what I was doing. Turning corners and running up a flight of stairs, I found myself in the main corridor of the packhouse.

My gaze fell onto the shaking form of a woman hunched over on the stairs. It was the luna.

She seemed beyond distraught, sitting on the steps in pajama bottoms and a white T-shirt.

Her body shook with sobs and her hands were covering her face.

"Luna?" I asked gently, trying not to scare her, but she jumped the moment I spoke.

Her head snapped up and her tearful eyes connected with mine. She looked a mess, bags under her eyes, hair unkempt. She had lost weight too, a lot of it, leaving her cheekbones—one still swollen from the intense bruise a few weeks ago—caved-in and bony.

Fury and protectiveness slammed me like a ton of bricks.

My wolf surged forward and howled in my head, wanting to help his luna at whatever cost.

“What the fuck happened to you?”

I approached her as I might a wounded animal about to flee at the slightest movement.

Her mouth opened and closed multiple times, but no sound came out besides gasps and subdued sobs.

I realized just how right I had been to worry about her. I’d had a feeling that something was wrong... But I’d never expected this.

Suddenly, the luna was unexpectedly launching herself at me, her arms wrapped around me in an instant, her face in my neck. I could feel tears on my skin as she sobbed even harder.

Her momentum caused me to stumble back in shock, but I was able to stay upright.

Hesitating for only a second, I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her closer.

She obviously needed comfort right now, and I was happy to be the person to provide it.

“Hey, shh,” I said, running a hand up and down her back.

I wasn’t sure what else to do. It felt wrong holding someone other than my mate like this, but also right as it was my luna who needed it. I allowed us to stay like that for a long moment before I decided I couldn’t wait any longer for an explanation.

Somebody had hurt her. And I was going to make them pay.

First things first, she needed her mate, even if he was some vampire-loving lunatic.

“Hey, it’s all right, everything is going to be all right.” I leaned back so I could try to look at her, but she kept her head in the nape of my neck. “I’m going to mind-link the alpha and he’ll help you. Whoever did this to you is going to face severe consequences. Everything is going to be okay, I promise.”

Her head lifted and her eyes snapped to mine the moment I mentioned the alpha.

“No!” she yelled in fear. “No, you can’t mind-link Grayson! I can’t see him right now, I can’t, please, Kyle. Please don’t tell him!”

Not wanting to upset her even further, I nodded in agreement. If she would go so far as to beg me, it only confirmed my fear: that the alpha had done this to her. My respect for Grayson had officially reached zero as I looked into the broken eyes of his mate.

“Okay, I won’t tell him,” I said, “but you need to tell me what the fuck is going on, right fucking now.”

I needed answers, and I wasn’t letting her leave until I got them. She shook her head, tears streaming down her face.

“Grayson,” she choked out, “Grayson—he—” She didn’t finish. Her eyes widened and her face twisted in pain. She let out an ear-piercing scream and doubled over.

“Luna!” I yelled.

I tried helping her up and asking what was wrong, but she just continued to writhe.

She was scratching at her neck and arms, sobbing as if some unknown thing were crawling on her body and trying to break through her skin with claws.

It was horrifying to see.

Then, all of a sudden, her screaming stopped and her hand grasped my arm.

“Something is wrong with Grayson,” she said.

Yeah, no shit. He’s a douchebag.

Chapter 46 –

Filed To Story:

Without another word, she turned and sprinted up the stairs faster than I had ever seen a human run. I should have stopped her. I should have never let her into that room.

But my own worry for the alpha, traitorous as he might be, blocked my better judgment.

So instead I followed the luna until we made it into the alpha’s room. And I watched as her heart broke.

Grayson was sitting on the edge of the bed with a naked woman in his lap. Neither of them looked up as we came barging in, too consumed by their grinding bodies and nonstop kissing.

They hadn’t started mating yet, but it was obvious that they were about to.

I looked at the luna in shock, but she said nothing, only stared at her mate—my alpha—preparing to have sex with another woman. Her face held no expression, but she had gone pale and her body was swaying back and forth.

She looked like she would fall over or faint any second.

Although she and Grayson had never completed the mating process, she undoubtedly felt her soul being ripped in two, probably the worst feeling in the world.

I wasn't going to let her stand there and watch as her mate, a man I no longer recognized, mated with someone else. I had to get her out of here.

I considered scooping her up and sprinting away with her, but I couldn't.

I was too blinded by the rage telling me to beat Grayson to a pulp, alpha or not. The confusing behavior of the luna over the past couple of weeks was becoming clear.

It was Grayson who had hit her. Probably multiple times. He was neglecting her.

No wonder she looked like she hadn't slept in weeks and had been practically reduced to a skeleton. I couldn't let Grayson mate with someone else knowing that it would likely kill her.

She had been through enough already. She deserved better.

I had to stop him even if it meant risking my life and fighting him.

But first, I had to get the luna out of here.

I quickly stood in front of her, blocking her view.

Thankfully, she didn't try moving past me, seeming too out of it to even notice. I grabbed her face and tilted her head up toward me.

"Luna," I said.

She just stared straight ahead with a blank, dead look.

I wasn't surprised; I would have acted the same way if this had happened to me.

But I had to keep at it.

"Luna! Look at me!"

Slowly her glossy eyes found mine.

“You need to get out of here,” I told her in the most urgent tone I could muster.

I glanced behind me. Grayson was now moving further with the other girl, back onto the bed, fiercely making out...

What the fuck is wrong with him?

He doesn't care that his mate is in the room while he's about to fuck some other girl?

The luna still wasn't responding, continuing to stare at me without actually seeing me.

Was she even processing my words?

To emphasize my point, I pushed her backward just enough to get her to move. She stumbled toward the door. As she caught her balance, the zombie-like trance seemed to fade and the fog lifted from her expression.

Rather than words, a hard, broken sob left her mouth.

My heart broke. I knew she was finally beginning to understand what was happening.

That she was losing her mate. The tears started again. I approached quickly.

I wanted more than anything to pull her into my arms and hug her until she stopped crying, but now wasn't the time.

“I know. I know, Luna”—I wiped her cheeks—“I know you're feeling horrible, like you can't move, but you need to get as far away from here as possible. Please leave.

Right now. Go. Now,” my last words were firm. I pushed her again, this time more forcefully.

She took a few steps back but didn't keep going; it was like her feet were glued to the ground.

Her body was probably seeking the comfort of her mate, unaware that he was the one causing her pain. She wasn't going to be able to do this on her own, then. She was going to need help.

Elijah! I shouted to my mate through mind-link. ~Elijah, wake up!~

His sleepy voice answered.

What? Did the kitchen run out of coffee again? No need to sound so grumpy.

Elijah, I need you to meet the luna at the foot of the stairs in the front corridor. She's going to be coming down soon and she's going to need help.

I swallowed harshly, preparing to tell him the gory details.

There isn't much time to explain, but the alpha is mating with someone else and the luna is in a lot of pain. I need you to take her as far away as you can get her.

Wherever she wants to go after that—I'll meet you there with our stuff as soon as I can.

Elijah's worry in the bond was almost drowning me. But I also felt determination.

He didn't ask any questions. He immediately knew how serious this was.

I'll do what I can, he said.

Then I directed my attention back to the broken-looking luna.

"I'm sorry, Luna. Elijah is going to meet you downstairs and get you out of here. You must move."

I turned her body around and nudged her with the most force yet. At last with the momentum she needed, she stumbled out of the room, down the hall, toward the stairs, not looking back.

I listened until I heard the comforting voice of Elijah, ready to take care of her, and let out a breath of relief.

Then I turned back to Grayson, ready to do whatever was necessary to avenge the luna.

KYLE

The second I knew the luna was safe in Elijah's care, I let my wolf take half control of my mind. Doing this didn't bring on a shift but allowed the power of my wolf to enter my body, making me larger and stronger.

My anger blinded me to reason as my gaze fixed on Grayson and the girl on his lap.

No going back now.

Once I was in front of the bed, I grabbed the girl and threw her to the ground. She went tumbling, letting out a screech as her bare legs scraped against the hardwood floor.

I couldn't bring myself to feel guilty for using my strength against a defenseless wolf.

She knew she was betraying her luna and, therefore, her pack.

“Get out of here,” I said, grabbing her clothes pooled on the ground and tossing them at her. “Go!”

I was about to turn back to Grayson, ready to fight, when I noticed her eyes. Her irises were an unnatural dark blood-red. Then I watched, dumbfounded, as they turned to a normal hazel color. She frowned as her eyes cleared and scanned the room.

She looked down at the clothes I’d thrown at her, as if she’d only just realized she was naked.

Her face went pale and she hugged the clothing to her body, trying to cover as much as she could. She looked at Grayson, who was still on the bed in only his boxers.

“What...?” She didn’t finish.

With tangible confusion and embarrassment in the air, she sprinted out of the room. The image of her terrifying red eyes burned in my mind as I turned back to Grayson. I didn’t have time to consider what the red irises meant.

Perhaps she was under a spell? Maybe she had some gene mutation?

All I knew was that I had never seen anything like it—not in werewolves, at least.

Lying back on the bed, Grayson growled loudly at me.

“You’ve ruined my fun,” he said sternly. “I thought gammas were supposed to help their alphas. You just threw out an opportunity at claiming more power.”

He had been my alpha for several years now. I had been lucky enough to watch him grow as a leader, developing the skills to make hard decisions and the compassion to guide his people no matter the circumstance.

In this moment, staring at a man I no longer recognized, who couldn’t possibly be my alpha, I realized the things that I had idolized him for had all been an act. All performed to obtain and retain power. My wolf surged forward and took control over my mind and actions. Both of us could only focus on one thing.

Avenging our luna and getting revenge.

My fist went flying before I could fully comprehend my actions. Fueled by raw anger, it connected with Grayson’s face with more force than I knew I had in me, resulting in a satisfying crunch. Grayson let out a sound of surprise as his head flew to the side.

A hissing noise I had never heard him make before came from his throat.

I didn't give him time to react as I repositioned my arm for another punch, hoping to break his nose with this one. But then Grayson grabbed my fist, halting my movements.

"Stop," he said calmly.

His jarring tone reached my ears and, like magic, immediately caused my body to freeze.

I grunted in discomfort and shock—it was as if I were made of ice, frozen and cold, shivers running down my spine. I couldn't move no matter how hard I tried.

My wolf howled in my head, wanting to charge forward and bang on my skull so that he could get out. But he was completely frozen too.

Panic encased me. How had Grayson done this? How was this possible?

He wasn't looking at me. He still had his head turned away, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth, and he dropped my fist.

"What the fuck did you do to me?" I seethed.

I tried once again to move my body, but I was stuck in the same position, fist raised.

Grayson rubbed at his jaw.

"You carry a mean punch, little wolf."

My wolf bristled at the insult.

"I can see why he wanted you to be his beta."

I was barely listening, too focused on moving my body. "Let me move!" I yelled.

He shook his head, his eyes finally meeting mine. They were blood-red just like the girl's.

I sucked in a breath.

Chapter 47 –

Filed To Story:

"Your eyes," I whispered, "that's how you got that girl to sleep with you. You were controlling her."

He chuckled quietly but didn't respond. I didn't need verbal confirmation. I knew I was right.

Grayson stood from the bed and walked past me until I could no longer see him.

“Your little outburst has to do with that little brunette girl, doesn’t it?” he said from behind me.

Little brunette girl. I knew he hadn’t forgotten her name. He was toying with me, trying to rile me up. I gritted my teeth.

“Belle,” I said, “the girl you were about to kill by mating with someone else. Your luna.”

“Ah, see, that’s where you’re wrong, my boy,” Grayson said.

I could hear ruffling behind me, as well as the opening and closing of drawers. He was putting on clothes.

“That girl would have never been my luna. My plan was to mate with her and feed off the power of the mate bond. But she was never worthy of being my mate. Small and weak. A human.” Disgust laced his tone. “We weren’t meant to be together.

Even she knew that. It was why she ran away. It was why I chose another to mate with.”

“She didn’t run away, you fucker,” I growled. “You chased her away.”

Grayson was in front of me in a second, faster than I had ever seen anyone move in my life, now fully clothed in jeans and a shirt. I blinked in surprise.

“How...” I began to ask, but was silenced by a hard slap to the face. Pain spread across my cheek.

“Remember who you are speaking to, wolf,” Grayson said, deathly calm. “You are lucky to still be alive.”

I bared my teeth. His harsh expression dropped as he watched me with interest, looking from my canines to my fist. I was still ready to strike the moment I was set free from this fucking mind control. He sighed.

“Stand down”—he waving his hand dismissively and walked away—“you’re making me nervous.”

The tension in my body released in an instant. My arms moved to my sides and my legs stepped together. I was standing in a straight position and facing Grayson as if I were a part of the army. Grayson faced me as well. I couldn’t move, but my muscles weren’t taut in preparation for a fight.

He sighed in frustration and crossed his arms over his chest, watching me closely.

“Your loyalty to the luna is impressive. It shows your bravery.” He scowled. “Your loyalty to me is not. You have willingly defied me and doubted my decision to take another mate. My belief was that werewolves had blind devotion to their alphas.

This little stunt of yours proved me wrong.”

He rubbed the forming bruise on his chin, looking me up and down, assessing my body.

“Be grateful that I am willing to let this go. You are one of the stronger members of the pack and a good gamma. You would be no good to me dead. But be aware that I let you live with faith in the assumption that you will not defy me again, wolf.”

I opened my mouth to swear at him, to tell him that he was no longer my alpha.

But a sudden realization stopped me.

He kept calling me wolf. Young wolf. Little wolf.

The names were meant to be belittling—but I was a wolf, young, and smaller than he was.

I studied Grayson: red eyes, hissing mouth, the way he could somehow control me with only his words. I had never seen him do any of those things before this moment; I hadn’t known he was capable of it. No werewolf had any powers of that kind.

As a matter of fact, there was only one species that did.

“Vampire,” I gasped.

The red eyes widened slightly. The jaw dropped. A small smile formed on the lips.

“Well,” he said casually, tilting his head to each side and cracking his neck, “good for you. I was beginning to wonder if anyone was going to figure it out.” He laughed and rolled his shoulders. “A pity, really. I was having so much fun.”

I watched, still incapacitated, as Grayson morphed and shifted as if he were turning into his wolf. Only instead of growing and sprouting hair, his body shrank and changed until there was a completely different man in front of me.

And not just any man.

Azazel Mortar.

KYLE

Azazel Mortar was one of the larger vampires I had ever seen in my life. He had long black hair and a neatly shaved beard. His red eyes were darker than Grayson's or the girl's had been, boring into my soul, telling me he was a powerful pureblood.

I felt stupid.

How could I not? All the warning signs had been there just waiting for me to notice them.

They couldn't have been clearer if they were biting me in the ass.

Grayson wasn't Grayson at all—well, it was his body, but it wasn't him controlling it.

It had been Azazel this whole time. Azazel laughed as he stretched his arms and legs.

"You have no idea how good it feels to be back in my own body after being stuck inside of that filthy dog for so many months." He shook his head in disgust. "As much as I enjoyed the power Grayson's body provided me, nothing beats your own skin."

I bristled, clenching my jaw. "What did you do to him?" I ground out. I was desperately pushing against the mind control that kept me from moving. "Where is Alpha Grayson?"

"Shh, shh, shh, little wolf," Azazel taunted me, stepping forward and patting my cheek.

If I could have moved anything else besides my mouth, I would have bitten him.

"Don't worry about your poor alpha. He's still in here." He tapped his temple. "I wouldn't be able to use his body if he weren't alive."

"Can he speak?" I asked. "Can he see me?"

Suddenly Azazel hissed, showing off his vampire fangs in obvious anger. He looked away from me, his gaze fixating on some point in the room. He was silent for a moment.

"He can see you. And he can speak, only to me. In fact, he doesn't shut up."

I could tell that he was no longer talking to me alone. If all of what he was saying was true, Grayson was in his mind and communicating with him. I almost smiled at the thought.

If Grayson were really present and able to speak to his occupied body, I could only imagine how terrible the constant chatter was.

I wouldn't have been surprised if Azazel hadn't had a moment's peace since taking over.

Azazel shook his head and smiled calmly back at me.

“Forgive me. He thinks he can talk as much as he wants now that his mate is gone.

He seems to have forgotten that I could kill the rest of his pack just as easily. You included.”

He paused, waiting for something.

My best guess was that he was waiting to see if Grayson would continue to speak after the threat he had just made.

After a second, the calm, threatening smile widened.

“That’s better,” he said.

Grayson had finally stopped talking. Azazel chuckled in amusement.

“Your alpha cares very much about your pack and especially about his mate. Maybe a little too much. It has made him weak and controlling his body easy. The price you pay for love, I suppose. What a costly price that is.”

I growled. “Let him go. You already have your clan coming to wage war. You already have all the information you need to succeed. Release your control on Alpha Grayson and fight the battle you arranged for. Only a coward would hide in the body of someone stronger.”

Azazel looked only a little shocked at the revelation that I knew of his plans.

“So it was you rifling through my things yesterday.” He chuckled darkly. “You’re smarter than you look, young gamma. I have underestimated you.”

“I know my alpha,” I replied hotly, “and you are not him.”

His expression turned into a mocking frown.

“Oh, boo. Here I was thinking I was doing such a good job acting as the powerful Alpha Grayson.” He sneered out the name. “After all, I do have access to every single thought in his mind.” He dropped his shoulders in feigned sadness. “Oh, well.

I can live with the fact that I can’t act like a dog.”

My wolf pushed forward. I could feel my eyes turning black with his presence. He wanted out.

“Calm your wolf,” Azazel said dismissively, “there’s no need for that. All of this will be over soon. I need your alpha for a few more days, and then I promise you I will go. I will ensure that Alpha Grayson dies in the most honorable way possible, but only after he tells

his pack to give their lives over to the Clan of Azazel and fight by their side for the throne.”

“They would never do that,” I growled, “fight alongside disgusting vampires.”

“It’s sad, really,” Azazel said as he circled me, completely ignoring my last claim.

“You would have made a fantastic second-in-command for me. You have impressed me these last few months. But I can’t have you spilling my little secret, now, can I?”

He moved in a blur, throwing me to the ground in a single graceful motion. I was helpless as my body fell backward. Then Azazel was by my side on the ground with that evil smile.

“Let me move!” I yelled. “Stop being a coward and fight me without restraints!”

He laughed. “Oh, my boy. I am anything but a coward.”

And his fangs plunged into my throat. I knew at that moment that I was going to die. I had no way of stopping him from sucking every last drop of blood from me. It was hopeless.

I could only try to convince myself that I had done enough to keep my pack safe from the battle coming tomorrow, that the vampire king had received my message and was on his way to help. Little by little, I could feel my energy leave me with every drop of blood that Azazel sucked out.

My wolf fought against the barrier keeping us from moving, but it was no use—he was quickly losing strength too. I thought about reaching out to Elijah. I wanted to tell him how much I loved him. Until now, I had been blocking him from my mind, making sure he didn’t feel what I had been feeling throughout the night.

But I couldn’t die without giving him an explanation.

He deserved to hear my voice one more time and to know that I loved him.

Maybe he could even be the one to save the pack.

Dark clouds started to close in on my vision, and I was about to open my mind to speak to Elijah one last time.

Then Azazel was thrown off of me.

KYLE

Azazel’s teeth were ripped from my throat, tearing my skin apart. I yelped in pain, blood leaking from the now much larger wound.

“Help him,” a deep voice said from across the room.

The face of a very small girl was suddenly in front of me. She was obviously not the owner of the deep voice. She knelt above me. She had short brown hair and blood-red eyes.

Another vampire. Great.

“Hi there,” her squeaky voice said, “you can move now.”

My body relaxed as Azazel’s power was released from my mind.

I groaned loudly in relief but regretted it immediately as pain traveled through my body.

Chapter 48 –

Filed To Story:

It felt like I had been working out for three days straight, sore and weak from my own commands. Even though I was relieved that I could move again, the small red-eyed vampire girl kneeling above me became my main focus.

Her ability to bend me to her will with just her voice told me she was also a Mortar.

Fucking fantastic.

My hand immediately went to the wound on my neck, and came away covered in blood.

I winced, my world spinning at the sight—or maybe from the blood loss. Either way, it couldn’t be good. I put my hand back over the wound to try and staunch the bleeding.

The vampire girl cringed as she watched me.

“Oh, that doesn’t look too good,” she said as she touched the hand covering the wound.

“Here, let me help.”

“Don’t touch me, Mortar,” I spat, leaning away from her. “Are you here to aid Azazel?”

“Dear Lord, no,” she smiled brightly. “I’m one of the good guys.”

I didn’t have time to fully process what that meant. Grunting and yelling could be heard outside the room in the hall.

Shit, what happened to Azazel? Did he get away? Is he hurting pack members?

I tried to sit up.

“Where’s Azazel?” I asked hoarsely.

The girl gasped as I grunted in pain and tried to stand.

“Oh, no! You shouldn’t do that!” She put her hands to my chest and pushed me down onto my back once again.

I snapped my teeth at her, trying to bite her filthy vampire hands.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” I said.

“Oh, wow, you’re strong,” she said as I struggled against her, “but you’ve got to stop moving.”

And, just like that, I was frozen again. My gaze met hers.

“Stop using your Mortar powers on me,” I grunted. “Fight and injure me if you wish to incapacitate me.”

“Look,” she said, and I could detect worry in her voice, “I needed you to stop moving so I can heal you. Trust me, I wouldn’t use my powers if I didn’t have to.”

My vision was starting to blur. I shut my eyes tightly. My neck hurt like a bitch.

“I can see you’ve been through a lot,” she said, “but you don’t need to worry anymore. At least, not about me.”

I didn’t care what she thought. I needed freaking royal vampires to stop taking control of my body so that I could kick some asses. I watched as she brought her pointer finger to her mouth and pressed it to the tip of one of her fangs, breaking the skin.

She squeezed the tip until a bead of blood came out.

Then she stuck her finger into my mouth.

I gasped and struggled as she stuck it far into the back of my mouth.

I tasted vampire blood, the metallic coppery flavor taking over my senses, and gagged.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she repeated, low and soothing, as she continued to move her finger.

I bit down on her finger.

“Ow! Hey, don’t bite me!”

To my disdain, my jaw released its clamp at her command.

A few seconds more and she finally took her hand away. I coughed. A tingly feeling began to run up my body: it didn’t hurt, but it was uncomfortable and invasive.

I didn’t like it. I panicked as I looked at the girl.

“What the fuck did you do to me?”

She winced at my harsh tone.

“Sorry,” she said one more time.

I decided that if she didn’t stop apologizing, I was going to stick my finger in ~her~ mouth.

“Give it a second,” she said. Suddenly, the pain stopped.

My muscles loosened, and the sting from the bruise on my cheek dissipated.

I could feel the skin beneath my hand mending together.

I gasped as the skin moved beneath my palm, stretching until it covered the wound.

My vision cleared. Energy flowed through me. I felt amazing.

The girl smiled widely at my shocked expression, her red eyes twinkling.

“I love watching people get healed for the first time,” she said, smiling.

Could it be? Had she healed me?

I had heard stories of vampires and their insane abilities, but never anything about magical finger blood. I tried to sit up and move to confirm it, but I still couldn’t move.

I sighed in frustration.

The girl realized my dilemma.

“How about this: I’ll let you move if you promise not to bite me again?”

She waved her finger, which had my teeth marks on it.

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, sure, I promise.”

Her eyes narrowed warily, but she gave in.

“Okay. You can move.”

The tension released once again. I sighed in relief, sitting up and rolling my neck and shoulders.

“How did you do that?” I asked.

The girl put out her hand for me to shake.

“Amelia Mortar. Everyone calls me Minnie. King Zagan’s fourth child and the royal clan healer.”

When I didn’t grab her hand, she took mine.

“You must be Kyle King, the beta of the most powerful werewolf pack in the world.

I’m so excited to meet you.”

I was stunned, to say the least. She knew who I was. Was it bad that I had never heard of her?

“Uh, yeah, same here. You’ve got one thing wrong, though. I’m the gamma, not the beta. Adalee Johnson is the beta.”

Minnie shook her head.

“I’m not wrong. You’re the true beta of this pack. Adalee Aude...”

She emphasized the last name, which I had never heard attached to Adalee before.

“...used her powers to become the beta but doesn’t actually deserve the title. I should know. She’s my second cousin.”

What?

“Wait... Adalee is a Mortar?”

Minnie frowned.

“Well...not really. She’s mostly werewolf because her father is—well, was—Beta Carl Aude, who was half vampire. So she did get the vampire gene from the Mortar bloodline.”

I was trying to wrap my head around all this.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on. Back up. Adalee’s dad is Carl Aude? Like, the Carl Aude?”

Minnie didn’t get to respond.

There was the sound of breaking glass somewhere in the packhouse.

Minnie glanced over her shoulder, and I was on my feet.

Now hissing and screaming. That could only mean one thing.

“More vampires,” I said.

I could feel their presence. And my wolf and I hated it.

“You’re probably right,” said Minnie, following me out toward the noise, “This may not be the best time to talk about the good ol’ family tree.”

My heart was pounding as we came across a broken window on the third floor of the packhouse. Pack members crowded around in their pajamas, probably woken by the noise.

I growled to get their attention.

“Everyone back to your rooms!” I commanded.

They had no choice but to obey me, especially when I used my special gamma—

well, beta—tone. It was only to be used in emergencies, and I officially deemed this moment an emergency.

I mind-linked the rest of the pack, telling them to stay inside until further notice. I could hear everyone scampering for cover in their rooms. I had probably scared them and even woken some of them up, but I didn’t care as long as they were safe.

“Whoa,” murmured Minnie, “that’s pretty cool. I can never get anyone to listen to me.”

Ignoring the constant commentary, I ran to the window and looked down to the forest floor.

Someone had obviously fallen out of it, breaking it in the process.

In the snow was Grayson’s body—with Azazel inside.

Chapter 49 –

Filed To Story:

He was fighting another man with the same dark hair, wearing the royal attire of the vampires.

“Oh my God,” I whispered.

Zagan Mortar, king of the vampires, was on my pack land. I could be one of two things right now: Ecstatic that he had obviously received my letter and come to help.

Or terrified that the two most powerful vampires in the world were having it out on my front lawn.

KYLE

I sprinted down the hall toward the front door.

Just outside, Azazel and Zagan were locked in a fight to the death.

“Hey, I wouldn’t do that if I were you!”

Minnie was a few steps behind me.

“They haven’t seen each other for years, and you do not want to get between them.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” I said, “that’s my alpha. If Zagan kills Azazel in Grayson’s body, Grayson will die too. I can’t have that.”

I came to the front door and sprinted out into the snow, instantaneously wishing I were wearing any shoes other than slippers. I couldn’t believe I was having the battle of my life in my pajamas.

Azazel and Zagan were a blur of motion and body parts as I approached, using my newfound energy from Minnie’s healing to propel me.

I was about to help Grayson when—

“Stop!” Minnie shouted.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” I grunted as my legs ground to a halt.

I was really getting annoyed with these vampires.

“Let me go, you stupid Mortar!”

Minnie was in front of me in a flash, holding her face in her hands.

“Sorry, sorry, but you saving your alpha is not part of the plan. And you don’t want to mess up one of my dad’s plans. He is not a very forgiving man.”

My jaw clenched in anger.

I didn’t care about the stupid plan. Grayson could not die.

“Let me go right now, or I swear to God your throat will be the first I rip out when I get control of my body,” I said.

Minnie’s jaw dropped. “How rude,” she uttered, and crossed her arms and scowled.

“You just made sure you won’t be let go for a while.”

BOOM.

My gaze snapped over Minnie’s shoulder.

Zagan had slammed Azazel back into a large oak tree, splintering and cracking it.

They went tumbling over. Azazel, in Grayson’s body, fell to the ground, spitting blood.

But it didn’t stop there. The fight continued, moving in a blur that I could barely keep up with. Their graceful movements were powerful and almost choreographed.

It was obvious that they were both extremely well-trained in combat.

Zagan was not going easy on Azazel and soon dominated the battle, throwing Azazel around like a rag doll. With every move, Azazel became weaker and less capable of hitting back.

I was watching my alpha, whom I was incapable of helping, get beaten to death.

Azazel had chosen to fight in Grayson’s body in the case that Zagan won. Because if Zagan defeated him now, Azazel would be able to leave Grayson’s body with no harm done to his own. It was becoming very clear very fast that this was going to be the case.

Azazel was going to lose, and Grayson was going to die.

Finally Zagan lifted Azazel from the ground, holding him up by his neck.

He jumped high into the air and forced Azazel back with powerful might, stabbing a large tree branch into Grayson’s back and all the way through his chest.

Azazel gasped as the branch punctured his chest.

He was stuck in the tree, twenty feet up in the air.

The battle was over. Zagan had won.

“No!” I screamed.

I fought more than ever to break free of Minnie’s vampiric control.

I had to get free. I had to.

Grayson was going to have his life taken from him. I was barely aware of Minnie’s small hand on my shoulder.

“It’s going to be okay. Don’t worry.”

Then I looked at her. There was genuine confidence in her expression. She believed her words. I wished I could have the same confidence.

“I’m not going to let him die,” she said.

Another loud noise.

Zagan had jumped from the tree and landed on the ground. He looked up at Azazel, who hissed at the large branch in his chest.

“You have gotten strong, brother,” he said to Zagan, dribbling blood. “No one would know you were a weak little boy who could only dream of being king.”

Zagan held his brother’s harsh gaze with an even harsher one.

“Leave this body now or die with it, Azazel. Stop hiding in another’s body like a coward. Come out and fight me in the way you tried to avoid all those years ago.

The way you owe me.” Azazel smiled faintly. Grayson’s body was running out of time.

“You will get your fight, King Zagan,” he said, spitting out the title as if it were an insult, “just not today.”

Black dust rose, spreading into the air, swirling around and around until it finally flew away into the forest.

Grayson slumped against the tree, held up by the branch lodged in his chest.

Azazel had left his body.

KYLE

“Alpha!” I screamed in horror.

Grayson’s lifeless body slumped over the tree branch twenty feet in the air.

He wasn’t dead yet—I would have felt it if he were—but he was close. Very, very close.

I could feel the life leaving his body as if it were my own.

Minnie, who was holding onto my shoulder, nodded.

“Go.”

My body was released from the restraints, and I wasted no time sprinting to Grayson.

“We need to get him down!” I yelled.

He was too high up for me to reach. A vampire could have easily jumped and gotten him, but werewolves couldn’t climb trees.

I looked at the vampire king.

“Help him!”

I didn’t care that I was trying to give orders to a man much more powerful than me.

If he killed my alpha over some family dispute, I would not hesitate to let my wolf out.

Zagan nodded once. “Casimir.”

Another vampire, one I hadn’t noticed until that moment, stepped forward.

He looked just like Minnie and Zagan—same black hair, dark features, and red eyes.

Must be another child of Zagan’s. A vampire prince.

Casimir nodded, then, in one quick movement, gracefully jumped onto the tree branch.

He looked down at me. “Be ready to catch him.”

I nodded quickly.

Casimir jumped down onto the branch forcefully enough to snap the branch in half.

Grayson came down with it still lodged in his chest. I caught him and laid him down as gently as possible.

Zagan approached Grayson slowly, his eyes on me.

“May I?” he asked, motioning to Grayson.

My wolf growled in my mind. Neither of us wanted this filthy vampire near our weakened alpha—vampires were the reason we were in this mess in the first place.

But Zagan Mortar hadn’t done anything untrustworthy yet.

In fact, he might be the reason my pack is alive and intact come tomorrow.

I nodded slowly, giving Zagan permission to come near. He grabbed hold of the branch and motioned for me to do the same. Together we were able to pull the branch from Grayson’s chest and throw it to the side.

Even in his unconscious state, Grayson groaned in pain, his face contorting. I winced at the baseball-sized hole in his chest, blood spilling onto the white snow.

My wolf whimpered, pushing against the front of my skull to see through my eyes.

It would be a miracle if the alpha made it through this.

Zagan didn’t waste a second. “Minnie.”

She nodded and, just as she had done with me, put the tip of her pointer finger to her fang and drew blood.

But Grayson didn’t struggle when she put her finger in his mouth.

Chapter 50 –

Filed To Story:

Instead, he closed his mouth around it, greedily sucking. I had never been more grateful for magical finger blood in my entire life. It took a minute for Minnie to remove her finger and step back.

Grayson still wasn’t moving. He lay unconscious, the big hole in his chest not mending the way my wounds had with Minnie’s blood in my system.

He wasn’t healing. Nothing was happening.

I started to panic. Was he already gone? My heart was beating so fast that I could hear it in my ears. I turned to Minnie anxiously.

“Why isn’t anything happening?” I said.

“It’s going to take a little while,” she answered, putting on her most comforting smile. “His wounds are extensive, both physical and psychological. Give it time before you jump to conclusions.”

I growled softly. I didn’t want to give it time. I wanted to know if we were going to have to live without our alpha.

“Do it again,” I said. “He needs to live.”

She didn’t respond, just looked down sadly. Zagan crouched down on Grayson’s other side, inspecting him. I almost snapped at him, my protective instincts surfacing.

“Your alpha is strong,” he remarked.

I almost scoffed at the plainness of the observation.

“Stronger than anyone I’ve ever met, vampire or wolf. Not many out there would be able to withstand bodily control for so long. You felt it yourself when Azazel commanded you—you become weak and broken.” He shook his head, a dark expression coming over him. “Most would not last longer than a week or two of being controlled like that. Your alpha lasted two months. It is a wonder he is not dead.”

Genuine respect and admiration shone from his face as he watched Grayson closely.

Then he looked at me and nodded once. “Do not worry, beta. I will be shocked if this is what kills him.”

I was silent, too worried to speak. I could only hope he was right.

Zagan stood. “Casimir.”

His son stepped forward.

“Where is Adalee?”

My gaze snapped up to look at them. They’re looking for Adalee?

Casimir shook his head.

“I searched everywhere for her. She’s not on pack lands. Her scent is fresh, though, she couldn’t have left more than an hour before we arrived.”

Zagan sighed. “A coward like her grandfather, I see.”

I spoke up. "Is it possible she's just past the border in the woods? My mate is out there with the luna. I can ask them to search for her on their way back."

"Alpha Grayson's mate is still nearby?" Zagan asked.

"We...were trying to get her out before Azazel hurt her," I said, cringing at the memory of the tears on Belle's bruised cheeks. "It won't take them long to get back after I explain what's going on. The luna will be beyond relieved."

Zagan shook his head. "No. The alpha's mate cannot come back. It will only distract him from the fight."

I stood, not liking what he was saying. There was no way I could let the luna go on thinking the way she was, thinking Grayson hated her.

She needed to be with him as himself, not Azazel's version of him. And the alpha needed her by his side.

"With all due respect, sir, you don't know the situation. Mates are stronger when they are together. The alpha needs her to succeed in battle."

If he lives through the night, that is.

"Not in this case," Minnie squeaked from behind me.

I looked at her.

"They have been apart for too long," she insisted. "If the alpha—or, I guess, Azazel

—hurt the luna badly, Alpha Grayson's wolf will be going insane the moment he comes to. He won't leave her side. Even with a war happening around him. It's safer for them both if she stays away."

"Minnie is right, young beta," Zagan interjected. "We need Alpha Grayson present during battle. Your pack needs its leader."

"But the alpha will never allow it," I pushed back. "You don't understand how he feels about the luna—he's crazy about her. He won't even talk to you until he has her by his side. Even if it means leaving now, in the worst time possible to go find her. We should bring her back now."

Zagan apparently wasn't going to back down.

"Alpha Grayson will allow it because he knows this war will only put his human mate in danger. He knows she's better off somewhere far away, where Azazel cannot use her to

bait him. If Azazel gets his hands on her tomorrow, it will all be over. She will die and we will lose.”

He sighed.

“I know you want to protect your luna. The best way to do that is to keep her away.

And if you don’t believe me, wait until the alpha wakes up. Let him decide. I assure you he will say the same as I have. He is smart, and he knows good leadership is all about sacrifices.”

As much as I hated to admit it, Zagan was right.

Grayson probably would make that decision if he were conscious, even if it broke his heart.

Putting the luna in danger was the last thing he would want.

I nodded solemnly.

“Fine. We’ll wait. I will update my mate without telling him to bring the luna back.

We will let the alpha decide when he wakes up.”

“No,” Zagan said yet again.

I raised an eyebrow.

This vampire really thinks he knows everything, doesn’t he?

“You will tell your mate to return to the packhouse and leave the luna.”

I gaped at him. Was he insane? I wasn’t going to tell Elijah to leave Belle alone in her most vulnerable hour.

“I’m sorry, there’s no way in hell. The luna needs someone right now. He is staying with her.”

Zagan shook his head again. “The alpha will not be able to resist the temptation to go to his mate if he can easily ask a pack member where she is through mind-link.

And the luna will not be able to resist the temptation to come back to the alpha if she sees that your mate knows something. You will tell your mate to return to the packhouse. You will use rank if you have to. And he will leave the luna behind where she is safe.”

The familiar weight of a Mortar's command encased my body. He wasn't suggesting that I do this—he was ordering me to.

“You're commanding me to manipulate my own mate with my status? To leave the luna alone just when she needs someone the most?” I said, cold fury edging my voice.

Zagan's eyes narrowed as he recognized the threat in my voice.

“It seems you give me no choice,” he said.

My wolf growled, the sound reverberating through my mouth. Neither of us liked the fact that a bunch of vampires kept telling us what to do and exercising their power over us.

“Do it now,” said Zagan, “before the alpha wakes up.”

I growled again, trying to fight the command and failing. I had to do what he told me.

Glaring once more, I opened my mind to my mate.

Elijah.

Kyle!

My mate's immediate response rang through my mind. Just the sound of his voice calmed my nerves.

Are you okay? What happened?

I'm fine. Everything is okay, I replied quickly. ~I don't have much time. Just know that what I'm about to tell you isn't from me. I have three very powerful vampires in front of me telling me what to say. I have no option other than to listen.~

To his credit, Elijah only paused for half a second to process what I said.

What? What the hell do you mean? Have they hurt you? Are you okay?

“Out loud,” Zagan demanded, “I want to hear what you are telling him.”

I growled, wanting nothing more than to give my own set of commands to him to jump off a cliff.

“You have to come back to the packhouse,” I said through mind-link, speaking out loud so everyone around me could hear. “And you have to leave the luna behind.”

I felt Elijah's anger and confusion through the bond.

I'm not doing that. She needs me. She's falling apart.

"What is he saying?" Zagan asked.

"He doesn't want to leave her. The luna is not doing well."

Zagan nodded. "Use your beta tone on him."

I shook my head, fighting his command.

"Don't make me do this. Please. The luna needs Elijah right now—"

Zagan's eyes narrowed. "Do as I say."

Elijah was not going to like this. Taking a deep breath, I said, "As your beta, I command you to leave the luna and return to the packhouse."

Excuse me?

I winced. Yep, he was pissed.

You're not even a beta! And you're not about to pull rank on me. Especially with an order as ridiculous as that. Take it back.

I can't take it back, I told him between the two of us. ~You have to do it. Trust me, I hate it just as much as you do. But it's a command from a Mortar. Zagan Mortar, the vampire king.~

You're with Zagan Mortar? Elijah's tone was pure disbelief.~ Is this what you were hiding from me? You're communicating with vampires? Did the alpha decide this?~

Well...kind of, I guess. ~I linked.

Elijah's anger spiked through the bond. That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard.

How could you let the vampire king onto pack land? Maybe you guys should invite Azazel Mortar too. Have a party!

I nearly laughed. If only he knew.

"Out loud!" Zagan said. "Have the rest of the conversation out loud. Tell him to come back, now, in your beta tone."