

## Owned by the Alphas |

### The Promise

"You can't go with them," my mom cried. Her face crumpled as if she was in pain, and she probably was. She had raised me for a choosing ceremony I didn't get chosen for.

I held her against me, patting her hair down, my bag open on my bed, half-packed. I had been given fifteen minutes before I was leaving with the alphas.

My stomach stirred in excitement; I was looking forward to seeing something other than the scorn of the village.

My mother didn't understand though, she thought I was normal, she had always treated me the same, but it was her own denial.

I wasn't.

I pulled her back and smiled at her. "I'll be fine, Mom. They won't hurt me."

"They already did!" she cried, then pointed to the bruises on my arms. I went to defend them when she pulled me in again. "They're werewolves, Lorelai. Please don't forget that."

She sobbed and I nodded against her.

"I'll be careful, Mom," I promised, then moved away to pack my bag.

I didn't have much to pack, a few paintings from my mom before her arthritis in her hands got bad, a pillow I'd had since I was born, and then a few undergarments and dresses.

I ran my hand over the notebooks lining my rickety wooden bookshelf. They were all full. My journals with dreams I'd had. I always had vivid dreams, ones I had to write down or they stuck in my brain and I couldn't focus.

I wanted to take them all, but I was pretty sure I wouldn't be able to carry them and they wouldn't fit in my pack anyway.

I grabbed my half-full notebook, bound by leather, and chucked it in my bag, hoping the wolves had charcoal or ink so I could keep getting my dreams out of my head.

“Fucking werewolves!” my dad growled from the living area as I buttoned up my pack and walked out of my room.

I had redressed in one of my everyday peasant dresses, then walked into the living area as he kicked the side table that my mother had placed very neatly next to our old couch this morning.

Her favorite potted plant toppled as he growled and fisted his hands at his side.

“I’m going to teach those filthy dogs a lesson one of these days,” he swore, and I swallowed hard.

Now was probably the wrong time to tell him that I was actually looking forward to going with the werewolves. I had no idea what awaited me or what this decision meant for my future, but that was the exciting part.

“Father, I’m going to be okay,” I said, and he looked at me, pausing his tantrum to sigh.

“Maybe, but they should not be able to do this. They broke the contract, and yet there are no consequences for them. I’m sick of them doing whatever they want to us because we are human,” he snapped, and I understood the anger because I had felt the same way about the offerings before I had been a part of it.

I was about to try and reason with him when my brother came in, holding the hand of a girl from the village. We all turned to them as he grimaced under the attention.

“This is Ryleigh. She’s my new bride,” he admitted reluctantly.

She was a plump girl with a friendly face and long dark hair in curls down her front. She had striking eyes, one brown, one green, and she smiled warmly with blushing cheeks.

“Ryleigh? McEevy’s daughter? The farmer?” Father asked, a brow raised, and Lucas nodded.

“Hi,” she said softly, edging closer to my brother.

“Hey, Rye.” I smiled, grateful my brother had chosen one of the girls I didn’t want to stab with my fork at dinner. This one was nice and quiet, keeping her mouth shut and whatever whispers she had out of my ear.

She smiled and nodded once, waiting for approval from my parents.

My mother smiled at her as my father narrowed his eyes on Lucas.

“And this was who you chose? You put her name down?” he asked.

Lucas nodded. “Yes,” he said, and my father finally nodded.

“Then welcome, Ryleigh,” he said tightly, and Lucas visibly relaxed.

Lucas turned to kiss her on the cheek, then turned to Mom.

“Mom, can you take her to our hut next door? I need a minute with Lorelai,” he asked, and Mom nodded, smiling brightly as she looped her arm through Rye’s.

Mom knew everyone in the women’s village and had been friendly with the McEevy’s for years, trading her jams and sauces for cheaper produce to make them.

“With pleasure,” she said, then led them out the door.

I turned to Lucas, but he was glaring at Father.

“She will be a fine wife and mother. Don’t look so disappointed,” Lucas snapped, and my eyes went wide.

I didn’t know people spoke to my father like that, but then again, what did I really know of either of them?

“She’s...not what I expected. You are my son, you outrank them. You had your pick.”

“I picked who I wanted, Dad. She’s got the heart I want for my kids, the love I want for myself, and she has the will to stand up for herself. Don’t write her off.

"But we can talk later, I need to talk to Lori before she goes. Excuse us," he said, then hauled me into my bedroom and slammed the door.

I raised a brow at him as he turned to me.

"Thanks for sticking up for Rye. She's one of the good ones. Although I was under the impression she didn't have the right...equipment for your tastes?" I asked, not caring if I was being a little forward.

He chuckled and nodded. "True, but her older brother does, and we've been fucking for years. She's like another sister to me and said she's happy to play wife, have my children so I can have her brother," he said, and I smiled.

"And what of her needs?" I asked, prying when I had no right, but I wanted to know.

He grinned. "We made a pact when we were younger and learned of the offerings, right before she hit puberty and I wasn't allowed to see her. That I would pick her so her brother and I could be together.

"The guy she likes is older, hangs out in the widow's hut, and I will help them meet. We're both happy with it." He shrugged.

I laughed at that and nodded. As long as he was happy.

"So is that what you wanted to talk to me about?" I asked, and he shook his head.

"No, we didn't get to talk before about the shadows and now that you're going with the wolves, we need to."

I shuddered at the mention of them, red eyes flashing in my mind.

"You see them too?" I whispered, and he nodded.

"Yeah. See them, hear them. They're powerful." He grinned and I shrugged. They could keep their power if it came with the dead feeling I got whenever they were there.

"You talk with them? Like the red eyes?" I asked, and he nodded.

"You see the red eyes at first, but the more you listen to them and interact with them, the more they grow."

“I don’t want them to grow,” I bit, and he narrowed his eyes.

“You’re going to need them, sister. You’re literally going into the wolves’ den. They may have acted like they give a shit on offerings night, but you are going to be living there, as theirs. Their property, their pet.

“But you are still human, and you will never be anything more than that to them. Unless you show them you’re not to be fucked with,” he explained.

It contradicted the way they had behaved with me. They hadn’t cared that I was human—well, they had, but they had broken the rules for me, treated me differently than the other humans.

That meant more, right? He had me doubting it, and I didn’t like where he was going with it.

“You want me to trust the shadows, not the wolves? The red eyes?” I asked to clarify, and he nodded with a sly grin.

“Yes. The more you listen, the more power you are rewarded with. It’s a gift after being cursed with our birth,” he promised, but I wasn’t sure.

It didn’t feel like a gift when I saw the eyes. They made me curious, and it sometimes felt like they were pulling me in, luring me, but they still felt heavy and cold.

Like deadweight. Like danger.

It didn’t feel like something I should trust.

“Lucas—” I tried.

“Trust them, sister. It is how you’ll make it through your new life with them.” He smiled. “I trusted them and now I have a wife who accepts me for my sinful attractions and I am the strongest warrior in our army. They reward us if we listen,” he said.

He really believed they were good, but how could I?

“And if I don’t?”

He frowned at that. “Why wouldn’t you?”

I shrugged. "I'm not—"

"Lorelai, the wolves are demanding you back or they are coming after you," Father interrupted.

I sighed and went to hug Lucas. I wasn't convinced on the shadows, but I hated having to say goodbye to him again.

"Don't tell the wolves about your shadows. The Water one can sense the ones inside you, but they are different to the ones we see. If you let the red eyes in, everything gets clearer, stronger," he promised, then kissed the top of my head and let me go.

I nodded and left the room, not promising anything back. Braxton sensed my shadows, and he didn't seem comfortable with anything about the ones I could see—and neither was I.

Mom came back in then and hugged me tightly as Lucas slipped out. She started sobbing, then sniffled and held my face.

"I'll walk you down," she said, then let me go and pulled her shawl tighter.

I nodded as my dad grabbed my things. I walked with my parents back to the center of town, which was dead quiet and humming with tension.

The offerings had already dispersed, but the others? They were watching with wide eyes as I approached the three alphas, all three of them dominating and intentionally pouring out fear and don't-fuck-with-me vibes.

I stepped toward them, but my mother grabbed my wrist.

She looked to Nikolai. "I have a condition that I know I have no right to make, but I wouldn't be her mother if I didn't," she said as boldly as me, and I smiled.

She lifted her jaw as Nikolai nodded at her to continue.

"Don't keep her to yourselves. She is still my daughter, and I want to see her regularly," she said, and I held her hand.

She squeezed it as my father stepped behind her, watching with wary eyes. Nikolai's eyes softened at the sides, but I was pretty sure I was the only one who noticed.

He stepped forward and leaned down to my mother, who didn't flinch as she held the alpha's gaze.

"Every fortnight she may visit. Sundays, midday to midnight," he said. He went to walk away, then frowned and turned back. "And every full moon, you will have her for the night," he added, before his eyes glanced at me.

I knew that look, and I knew my brother was wrong. I was different to them. Nikolai wanted me out of harm's way for full moons. That meant he cared, and I had to believe that meant something.

"Thank you." My mother trembled, then stepped back against me.

I caught her and wrapped my arms around her one last time. "I love you. I'll be okay, and I'll be back," I promised.

She nodded before looking at Braxton, who came forward with Derik. D took my bag to the carriage that Nikolai had already climbed in as Braxton's soft grip took my hand from my mother's.

"Don't hurt her," she whispered.

Braxton leaned in so only we could hear. "She is ours now. And we will not let anyone or anything hurt what's ours," he promised.

My mother's hand left mine, handing me over as she turned to Father and sobbed against him. He just narrowed his eyes as I waved and got in the carriage, Braxton closing the door behind me, closing me in behind the tinted glass.

I let out a breath as I went to sit down just as Nikolai yanked me onto his lap. I landed with a huff and looked at him with a raised brow.

"So, what now, wolves?"