

Chapter 1 - The Last Spirit Wolf

-Vera-

I've been tossing and turning all night, hoping tonight of all nights I could get some decent sleep. The clock on my nightstand reads 4 a.m.; it's time to get up and I've barely even rested. I put on my leggings, sports bra, a loose tank top, my running shoes and take off.

The forest at this time of day is breathtaking; only the soft glow of the impending day lights my way. The birds have begun to wake up and sing, the night critters are making their way back to their dens, and the mist in between the trees makes everything seem so alive.

I stop at my usual spot, on the cliff that hugs our famed waterfall. It's about 10 miles from the pack house and now only visited for special ceremonies or celebrations. It's a shame people don't come to admire it more often.

The Jade Waterfall gets its name from all the green that surrounds it. A thin, vibrant layer of moss found nowhere else covers the 60-foot cliff from which the water falls; the deep pool at its end is of crystal-clear water revealing all the rocky, green terrain underneath. Under the right moonlight, the entire waterfall appears to be made of pure jade. Its gentle fall of water also makes this the perfect place to meditate.

Closing my eyes, I begin to stretch, breathe, and clear my mind but as I'm about to sit down, I feel everything around me still and a chill runs down my spine. My eyes frantically scan the surroundings, from tree to tree, from plant to plant. The forest is trying to tell me something is wrong and alarm bells ring in my head, fear creeping up my spine.

Well, 'morning to you, too- I interrupt her before she can continue.

I need scouts by the Jade Waterfall.

Vera, what's wrong?

I don't know yet, but –

Yes, I know.

Not ten minutes later about twenty-five scouts are joining me, feeling the same tension in the air I do when they approach. Our Alpha arrives shortly after, accompanied by her mate in wolf form. We are all feeling uneasy, but none more so than I. Even in human form, no one is more attuned to the forest than me. Our Alpha speaks first,

“Whatever this is, it isn’t only affecting Vera. Everyone, gather in pairs and search the forest starting from the north side. Keep me informed.”

The scouts do as they’re told, rushing into the forest with a howl. Our Alpha turns to me,

“You should head back with us, Vera. You have an important day ahead of you.”

“If you don’t mind, Alpha -” She grunts.

“If you don’t mind... Sofia... I’m going to stay here a little longer. Maybe I can help.”

Sofia, our Alpha, is the daughter of the previous Alpha and my best friend. We’ve known each other since we were young and know everything about each other, but now that she is our Alpha, this knowledge feels a little intrusive. It doesn’t even feel proper to call her by her name anymore. She gives me a worried look,

“Please be safe, you may be one of the best warriors we have, but you still can’t shift. Whatever is out there, is strong enough for us all to be uneasy.”

I lower my head at this and she sighs. The fact that I have not yet been able to shift has been a great concern of mine. Any decent wolf can transform by the age of 12. I’m 23 and still can’t connect with my wolf; sometimes it makes me wonder if I’m a werewolf at all.

I notice Sofia trying to waddle her way onto her husband’s back. She hates riding him like this, but in her very pregnant state, he has given her no choice. I help her climb on top and he gently stands, bowing his head my way in a silent ‘thank you’. Sofia squeezes my hand before letting go and taking off with her mate.

Once they’re out of sight, I take my shoes off and crouch on the ground, putting both my hands deep in the soil. I take a deep breath, and begin. Goosebumps rise all over my body as I connect to the forest. The wind has once again begun to blow, easing the stuffiness that was there before.

I clear my mind and focus only on my senses; how humid the air I breathe feels, how my hair blows at the wind’s whim, how all the hairs on my body are standing to attention.

5 minutes

15 minutes

30 minutes

Despite my best efforts, I sense nothing. It seems that whatever was there is gone along with the eerie feeling. With a sigh, I take my shoes in my hand and begin walking barefoot through the forest, heading back to the pack house.

As I near the edge of the forest with the pack house in sight, the wind begins to blow on my back and I stop in my tracks. I don't even have to turn around to sense it. I lift my face to sniff the air and it's unmistakable.

It smells like blood. A lot of blood.

I jogged back to the pack house and back to my room. The smell of blood was intense, but there was no way of telling who's it was or where it was coming from.

After a quick, hot shower, I change into my scrubs and grab my duffel bag for the day. Heading down to the pack clinic, I skip breakfast.

I enter the clinic on edge, as if anything could happen at any moment. I'm starting to feel a little paranoid.

"Hey, Violet? Do we have any incomings?"

Violet, our head nurse, gives me a puzzled look as she double checks our charts. I notice her usually long dark curls have been straightened, and her mascara frames her blue eyes perfectly. She's in her forties and an exceptionally beautiful woman with glowing dark skin.

"No doc, we have a quiet day ahead so far."

I can't help but give everything in the ER a quick look, just to ease my nerves. This uneasiness seems unshakeable, it's almost as if I carried the scent of blood with me from the forest; I'm smelling it everywhere.

Maybe I'm just on edge because it is a big day, a life changing day, for me. Today is Dr. Owen's retirement party, which means today I become the Head Physician at the clinic.

Our pack has the biggest population of wolves from all the primary packs in the country, it's understandable considering we guard the south border with lycan territory. Werewolves and lycans signed a peace treaty over forty years ago, proposed by their lycan King at the time. Before that, both species were constantly at war; for territory, for mates, for food sources, for... fun? Lycans are notoriously combative creatures, even amongst themselves.

The clinic oversees all of the wolf population in our pack, and as the Head Physician, I will have to oversee all of the clinic activities, even administrative. Quite frankly, I feel severely unequipped to handle such responsibilities; I've been getting no more than four hours of sleep a night just pre-stressing about it.

I proceed to make my usual rounds for the rest of the morning, all in preparation for the party. Dr. Owens is one of the most important people in my life and we have worked hard to make this a very special day for him. He took me in as an apprentice when no one saw any potential in me.

I was only 12 years old but I was already learning all the basics of surgery; Despite my young age, I had the stomach for it. I graduated early from high school and managed to get straight into med school where I graduated top of my class. Yet here I was facing this new challenge, feeling anxious as heck.

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It's past five o'clock and everything has been rather quiet. I'm ready to pass on my patients to the next shift, anxious to get the farewell party done and over with. I think to mind link Sofia, but she beats me to it,

INCOMING! She yells in my head.

Before I can ask her anything, I hear the commotion outside. A badly injured werewolf comes barging in through the E.R door, holding an unconscious wolf. I rush to them and the nurses that were already in their dresses and heels come to their aid. We place the unconscious wolf on a hospital bed and he shifts to his human form. The other wolf collapses and we help him onto another bed. Dr. Owens has come out of his office at the sound of the commotion.

"Vera, take Eric. Violet, prep the defibrillator. Erica and Sam, prep an O.R." The urgency in his voice can't be missed.

I start checking the vitals on Eric. Wasn't he one of the scouts today? In fact, weren't both of them scouting? He seems to have a concussion and his entire body is trembling in shock. We have to check for internal bleeding.

The feeling of dread I'd been carrying with me all day comes back full force as Sofia mind links me again,

Vera, we're going to need all hands on deck. Get your people ready. Ten injured wolves total, three lycans.

Lycans?! Did you just say lycans?!

Amongst the eight more wolves that show up with minor to severe injuries within the next five minutes, I smell the three lycans immediately, two of them carrying an unconscious one; it's clear he's barely hanging on.

I direct them to a bed and after roughly placing him on it, they both collapse beside him from exhaustion. I instruct the other doctors and nurses to tend to the wolves, prioritizing those who seem to be losing consciousness, but they are noticeably wary of the lycans. Luckily, most of the wolves seem to have mild injuries, notoriously scratch marks. What the hell happened?

I turn my full attention to the severely injured lycan and for a moment, it's as if I can feel his slowing heart beat in my own chest. I check his vitals as a nurse reluctantly hooks him to all the machines. As I put my hand on his head to lift his eyelid and check for pupil response, I feel electricity run below my fingertips. What the...?

Without warning, his eyes shoot open startling me and sending both our heart rates through the roof. He looks at me intently; I would never think those eyes are of a man who is barely alive.

He whispers something too low for me to hear. I get closer and as he whispers again; he flat lines and my head is reeling.

Did he just whisper... *mate?*