

Chapter 21 – The Decisions

“Attitude is a choice. Happiness is a choice. Optimism is a choice. Kindness is a choice. Giving is a choice. Respect is a choice. Whatever choice you make makes you. Choose wisely.” — Roy T. Bennett

Halima

I’m now laying in my bed, looking up at the ceiling. Nightfall had made its appearance, immersing the territory in darkness. Up above, the half-moon and its twinkling stars serve as our only illumination. The distant chatter of wolves and their late-night rendezvous echoed in my eardrums, but I didn’t pay attention to it. My mind’s stuck on my therapy session today with Mayra.

I spilled everything from my fears to my desires. It took me two months to get used to speaking to a stranger due to fear and judgment. But Mayra had been nothing but open and warm, allowing me to gradually come out of my shell. Just like the others, she, too, recommended that I make my decision on whether to attend the ceremony. That’s the power I have over the situation, and no one would judge me for it. The entire time, she reassured me I was not a walking disaster warning, if anything goes astray, I shouldn’t take the blame for it.

I roll on my side, resting my arm under my pillow. Why was this so hard? It feels like two strings were pulling me, one to the light and the other to darkness. Sometimes, the pull into the darkness was stronger. It was seductive, cloaking me in a blanket, leading me to believe I was better off dead. But in others, the light was stronger. The light was warm, but also foreign. It was something I’ve never felt before, and it was scary—but now I have people around me pushing me forward to heal.

But It's a battle where I feel unequipped to fight.

“Are you going to go to the ceremony?” Artemis spoke through our mind-link. It was always nice to hear her voice, she helped to fight the demons in my mind since we're both in this together.

“I want to,” I answer back, shutting my eyes to envision my beautiful wolf. Big and majestic as ever, I needed to let her out once I'm okay, **“I'm scared. My mind is coming up with all these scenarios that could go wrong if I show up.”**

“I know. I can see them, and they aren't pretty.” Artemis trotted closer to me, sitting on her hind end. **“I, too, wish things were easier. But, just as Mayra said, we're dealing with many traumatic experiences, so our brain is wired differently. We expect the worst in everything and hide, hoping things go right.”**

“It's much easier to hide than to face the problem,” I admit with a self-deprecating sigh. **“I want to be strong, Artemis. I'm so sick and tired of being weak and scared of my shadow. I look around and see all these powerful wolves, happy and living life. And here I am, deep in a pit that's so hard to get out.”**

“We didn't go into the pit willingly, Hali. They forced us in there, and we didn't have a choice. That wasn't our fault. But what is our responsibility is when and how we get back up. Fighting is hard. You said so yourself. But no one ever said that recovery is easy. It's a long, hard, and treacherous journey. But...I think it's worth it. Don't you?”

I ponder in thought for a little, feeling the weight of Artemis's words.

“Since when did you become such a good therapist?”

“I picked up on a few things during your sessions.” Artemis shrugged. **“It's a process, Halima. Taking back the power that has**

been stolen from us is a process. But I much rather live in the light with you than to be buried in darkness.”

Artemis was right. Her words lit a deep fire within me I didn’t know was there. I rather—no, want to live in the light. Not just that, I want to live here. I want to stay in this pack, they welcomed me, took care of me, and have been nothing but supportive. I want to be a part of something that brought in a broken girl and nursed her back to full health. How often does one run into a pack like that?

I’ve made my decision, or rather, decisions.

Grabbing my cell phone off from the lamp table, I send a text to Lyria. This was my first cell phone, and it had taken me time to get used to its fancy controls.

“Hey. *Can we go shopping tomorrow? I want to find a dress for the ceremony.*”

“*Holy shit, yes! Totally!*” She replied in seconds. “*I got a couple of styles in mind that would fit you! Meet me in the common room tomorrow after breakfast!*”

“*Cool! I’ll see you then. Goodnight!*”

I set my phone back down with a smile as I changed into my cherry red nightgown. Shutting off the lights, it bathes my room in comfortable darkness. Crawling underneath the covers, I fall into a deep sleep, dreamless for the first time in months.

Nikolai

“Did I hear you correctly? You want to join the pack?”

“Yes, sir.”

It was a normal morning when Halima entered my office. There was a small smile on her face, and she looked healthier than I’d ever seen her before. Her skin was clearer and her face was fuller. The beauty hidden underneath was showing. I noticed she no longer had the feeding tube. I feel relieved, it was all in the progress of her recovering. Lyra and I were developing something special for her, and all we needed was to make a file for her.

I’m aware her original file was back at Zircon Moon, but it was too risky to request for it without jeopardizing her safety. I was betting on the fact that they believe she was dead, so her file was closed.

I couldn’t help but smile at the girl sitting on the other side of my desk. The inkling in the back of my mind told me she would accept the offer, though I didn’t expect it to be so soon. I felt as though Halima would make a great addition to Garnet Moon, not the fact she was a white wolf, but that she also fits in seamlessly with the rest of the pack.

“Very well,” I folded my hands on my desk. “You will go through a bonding ritual that ties you to the pack. You will have the Pack Mark branded on you as opposed to having one at birth.”

Her big brown eyes widened in fear. “H-How would I get the Pack Mark?”

I chuckled. “I promise it is not as barbaric as you think it is. I’ve done hundreds of bindings since I became Alpha. It will appear once the ritual is complete.”

“Ah, that makes a lot more sense.” She answered with an anxious laugh, running her hand through her tight curls. “Um. When will the ritual happen?”

“I’ll discuss with Lyra and Anthony about the arrangements. It would be Anthony performing the ritual since he will be Alpha soon. Only the Alpha can bind new members to the pack.”

“So...I have nothing to worry about, then?”

I shake my head. “No, dear.”

“Nice.” She pats her thighs once before standing. “Thank you for giving me the opportunity, sir. I appreciate it.”

“Halima.” My voice dropped an octave, my arms folding under my chest. “You need not be so formal with me. That’s only for those with ranks. Please, just call me Nikolai.”

She stared at me for a solid minute, a smile etching up her bronzed face. I don’t think Halima understands how much her beauty comes out when she smiles. It saddens me how she was trained to be so subservient. I hope her staying in my territory would help her blossom into the person she never got a chance to be.

“Okay. Thank you...Nikolai.” And with that, she left my office with a slight spring in her step. I mind-link my mate, Anthony, and Lyria in my office to discuss the next step in our surprise for the girl. I pull out a manilla folder from the bottom of my desk, pulling out the papers needed to complete the next step.

I have great hope that Halima would like this surprise. She deserves it.

Chapter 22 – The Owl

“Sometimes, reaching out and taking someone's hand is the beginning of a journey. At other times, it is allowing another to take yours.” — Vera Nazarian

Halima

Tonight was the night of Anthony and Alesia's ceremony. Dwayne and Jackie were to be Co-Betas and a man named Ali was to be Gamma. I met him quite a few times, and he was a proper gentleman. And cute, too. I set out the outfit I've decided to wear on my bed, admiring how the color and accessories work well with each other.

Per Lyria's advice, I went with amethyst purple, which was slowly becoming my favorite color. The dress was sleeveless with a turtle neckline guaranteed to cover my back. The scar from the Mark of the Betrayer still gives me a deep sense of shame, so I wanted it covered. The dress was flowy and loose, starting at my waist, reaching down to my knees. My golden flats with ankle straps rest on the floor near the dress.

Walking in heels was a disaster waiting to happen. And by disaster, it involves me kissing the floor.

A pair of gold bracelets and a single charm necklace rest on top of my vanity, glittering under the pale amber light of my room. I don't understand how to style my hair, so I wore my curls down. Thanks to the love and care from Jackie and Violet, my hair had grown significantly after some trims, now with the ends brushing my shoulders. All I need to do was apply some product to make the curls pop and I'll be fine!

Tapping my cheek as I stared at the colorful makeup palettes, I debate whether to apply makeup. I keep it simple to avoid the risk of looking like a clown with warm neutrals and lip-gloss.

Stripping down for my shower, I wash the day's stresses from my body, falling in love with the rich lather of my floral-scented body wash. I learn to appreciate the hot water showers, not realizing how much they did me good. I've grown accustomed to cold, pleasureless showers that the joy of a decent warm one was fleeting. Today, I was happy to experience that simple pleasure. After completing my business, I work

on my hair in front of the vanity in my towel. I was so deep into moisturizing my hair that the taps on my window startled me.

“Whoa!” I yelped, jerking my head towards the window covered with curtains. Tightening the towel around my body, I sauntered towards it. The tapping continued and persisted, doing nothing to quell the anxiety pooling in my stomach. Who or what was demanding my attention? Sucking in my breath, I threw my covers open to see the culprit.

It is...an owl?

The white owl sat on the outside window ledge, peering at me with its large golden eyes. I cock my head to the side, arching a confused eyebrow. Weren't wolves' natural predators to the owl? What is it doing here? Once I opened my window, the white owl flew in, settling on top of my vanity, eyes still glued on me.

“Um... hello?” I asked, keeping a good enough distance from it. “May I help you?”

It stared in silence.

“You know I could eat you, right?”

It still stared.

“Not much of a hooter, I see.” I chuckle at my joke, hoping it would move, but it didn't. It just sat there, watching me with big innocent eyes. “You know, the window is right here...you could fly out at any time.”

It does nothing. I groan. This was ridiculous. Was I about to change into my dress with an owl staring me down?

Yep.

Sighing, I rummaged through my closet for my strapless bra and matching panties and dressed for the ceremony. I could hear excited commotion throughout the packhouse and smell the overwhelming mixture of different perfume up and down the hallway, making me gag.

Seriously! She-wolves don't need this much perfume!

I turn my back to the owl, stretching out my curls to their maximum length. The soft texture of my hair cracks opens a smile on my face. I slip on my flats before slipping on my dress. The top part hugged me at every curve. No matter how small they are. I was filling out my clothes the more I gain weight, something I couldn't do in my worst state.

Smoothing out the flowy bottom, I turned to face my visitor only to see it gone.

"What the..."

"*Hoo!*" I spun around to see the owl on the bed right next to my hip.

"Gah!" Yipping in fear, I fell on the ground, flat on my ass. It hooted as if it was laughing. This damn bird liked to joke, huh? Rolling my eyes, I hop on my feet once more, rubbing my sore rear.

"Hilarious," I say sarcastically. I take the jewelry from my vanity, placing each in their respective places. I place clip-on rose earrings on my earlobes. "It's not nice to surprise people like that. I could have squished you if I fell the wrong way!"

The owl hooted once, flying on my vanity once more. The bird was now closer than ever, less than a foot away from me. Oddly enough, the longer I look at it, the less scared I am. My overall deductions of this weird bird were that...it was cute. Its golden eyes peer into my brown, conveying a silent message.

I don't know what it's trying to say, I don't speak owl!

But I felt something. A familiar warmth. The owl hopped closer to me and nuzzled its round head into my palms. Breaking out into a smile, I run my fingers through its feathers. Soft, it tickled my heart. I feel like I know this owl, or the energy it's giving off. But from where...?

"You're cute," I whisper to it, relishing in its soft hoos. "Are you a male?"

It made a sound like a disapproving grunt. "Um, female?" She gave a lighthearted chirp, happy at my answer.

"I guess I should give you a name, then," I shot the bird a small smirk. "I have a feeling that I'll be seeing you around often."

The owl hooted in happiness, hopping a little dance around my vanity. However, my necklace chain got caught up in her foot, falling backward. I untangled the chain around her tiny foot, gently sitting it upright. She shook her feathers, making me giggle.

"Hmm." I looked at the owl for a while. "You're white, like snow. But you came out on this full moon night. I remember in a book I read in elementary schools of diverse cultures having different names for the moon. Hmm." A name finally popped into my mind. "I shall name you...Diana!"

She hooted happily, satisfied with the name choice, "Diana, it is then!"

My phone chimed a soft tune, buzzing next to the table lamp. I quickly walked over and looked at my screen to see a reminder that the ceremony will start in five minutes. Hooking my necklace around my neck, I shot a smile at Diana.

"I hope you don't mind Diana, but I need to finish up some makeup and head down to the ceremony. Maybe, another day, we can chat."

Diana chirped, flying towards my window. I waved goodbye as she gave me one last look and flew deep into the night.

After her departure, I took in my reflection in the mirror. For the first time, I didn't topple over and cry. The person reflecting at me was beautiful. That person was me. Grabbing a tube of neutral pink lipstick, I apply a generous amount on my lips before applying mascara. I was not risking anything with eyeliner.

But I felt natural. I felt beautiful. I feel like myself. Halima the slave no longer stared back at me from the mirror. It's Halima the woman.

Putting on the last touches of makeup, I take my cell phone and my small purse and head towards the assembly hall. The palpable ambiance of happiness and anticipation was so thick that I could grab onto it. Many pack members were already inside. I place my hands on the double doors, taking in a deep breath to calm myself.

It's time for Artemis and me to join them. Our new pack. Our new home.

Our new family.

Chapter 23 – The Bonding

“Being a family means you are a part of something very wonderful. It means you will love and be loved for the rest of your life.” – Lisa Weed

Third Person

Halima pushed open the mahogany double doors, taking her first steps into the Garnet Moon assembly hall. Immediately, she was overwhelmed by the boisterous volume of excited conversations muddling in the energetic atmosphere. Her deep brown eyes scanned the hall from the stage to the last tables, everything decorated with some shade of blue and silver, reminding her of Selene's aesthetic months ago. Unlike the

decorations, every member dressed in an assortment of colors that would rival the rainbows after a rainy day. For once, she was taking part in an event versus working behind the scenes. It made her happy yet scared at the same time.

“How long are you going to stand there?” Artemis asked impatiently. The human didn’t hold the same amount of excitement her wolf did.

“I don’t know where to sit! Every seat is taken!” Halima retorted, clutching her glittered purple purse tighter. She was nervous. She was in a room full of happy strangers while she stood awkwardly. However, in a flash, her eyes spotted the Alpha table near the front, noticing Luna Lyra waving her down with a beaming smile. Relief rushed over her like a hurricane as she trotted towards the table. Immediately, Halima was engulfed in a hug from Lyra, embracing her face against her bosom, almost suffocating.

“Mija, you look beautiful!” Pulling the girl out of the hug, Lyra cradled her cheek. She wore a deep red dress that complimented and hugged every curve she had, her hair neatly curled to perfection rested on her back and her gold jewelry jingled with every movement she made. “I’m so happy you’re able to join us.”

Heat flushed in Halima’s brown cheeks from being called beautiful. She wanted to reject that statement but couldn’t find the words to say so. A squeaky “Thank you.” were the only words that escaped from her embarrassment. She took a quick look around the Alpha table to see the mated couple, Anthony and Alesia, in matching ensembles of white and blue, Lyria dressed in a simple yellow two-piece dress, and Nikolai adorning a black suit with a red tie that matched his mate’s attire. They all look like the picture-perfect, powerful family and she felt like an awkward bird that fell into the wrong territory.

“You look lovely.” Nikolai rose out of his seat to give the girl a hug which she gratefully accepted. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m alright,” Halima replied with a curt nod. “This is the first passage ceremony I’ve taken part in, so I’m curious to see how it goes.”

“There is nothing much to it,” Lyria commented. “People say a few things, bonding happens, we eat, and then we have a bonfire—the best part of the celebration! You have to come to that.”

Halima beamed with excitement, expecting a good night. “So, where do I sit? I don’t see an empty seat anywhere.”

“I think two people already made a spot for you.” Following Alesia’s line of sight, the girl spotted Jacqueline madly waving her down, patting a chair next to her while Dwayne pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration.

It made sense, Halima had Beta blood, so she should sit at the Beta table. Bidding the Alpha family goodbye, she walked towards her designated seat. Jacqueline leaped to hug her, yanking her down to her chair.

“You came!” Jackie cheered. “Now the entire pack is here!”

“I’m not part of the pack, yet. You know this!” Halima corrected. “But, I’m glad to be here, anyway.”

“You know,” Dwayne spoke, glaring at his sister. “You should have a little more dignity. You’re about to become this pack’s Beta. Waving like a madman would draw the wrong attention.”

“No one likes a stiff neck.” Jackie shrugged, smoothing out her black dress. “I can do my job and have fun at the same time.”

Dwayne rolled his eyes. Halima chuckled and looked to the adults at the table, Violet and Alan Seals. She met Alan a couple of days ago when he was finishing up a meeting with Alpha Nikolai. She liked him and admired his firmness with his children. Especially Jackie when she goes off the rails.

“It looks like my products are doing your hair justice.” Violet smiled proudly. “Your hair is lively and growing well.”

“Yes, and I can’t thank you enough for it.” Halima felt proud that her hair was finally getting itself back to normal. With the amount of abuse it endured, she thought it was hopeless. But, with Violet’s help and expertise, it had become healthier in two months than it had in years. Plus, the smell of the products brought her boundless joy. Her eyes darted to the stage where the elders finished setting the ritual table, chalices, and ceremonial daggers. She noticed a pure white chalice and dagger for the passing Lunaship. “What are they for?”

“The passage ritual.” Beta Alan explained. “We pass the torch through blood, so our Moon Goddess recognizes the new successors.”

“Ah.” Halima didn’t recognize the items as an integral part of the ceremony, but it interested her.

“Speaking of which, it looks like it’s time to begin the ceremony.” Beta Female Violet pointed out as Nikolai and Lyra rose out of their seats. Beta Alan and Gamma Ahmed followed shortly after to join their Alpha and Luna on stage, preparing to take a step down from their legacies.

Halima was in awe as she bore witness to the passage of power right before her eyes. Used to being on the sidelines, not by choice, it made her heart swell to take part in a once-in-a-lifetime ceremony. She watched Anthony assume the role of Alpha, Alesia assumed her role as Luna, Jacqueline and Dwayne as Co-Betas, and Ali as the new Gamma. She could feel Selene watching over the sacred ritual, giving her blessings for the new generation. It made her happy to the point a lone tear fell down her cheek. Artemis, deep within her, was elated at the sight, ecstatic to be a witness to her new friends assuming their rightful roles.

Thundering applause and ear-piercing cheers erupted throughout the assembly hall. Each member feeling their bond grow stronger and that new, young blood would lead them on the path of righteousness. Garnet Moon was a powerful and formidable pack, their power was not to be trifled with foolishness. It took a great deal of strength, courage, and honor to lead one of the most powerful packs in America. Halima saw her friends in a new light, a light cast by the Moon Goddess herself. She joined in on the applause, grinning with pride. They will lead with greatness. She could feel it deep within her heart.

But the ritual was not over yet. Unbeknown to Halima, there was something else planned for the second part of the ritual that involved her. Anthony, now Alpha Anthony, walked towards the podium and used the power in his Alpha voice to calm the pack down of their mini celebrations.

“We are not done yet, my friends.” Alpha Anthony announced, grasping at Luna Alesia’s hand lovingly. “There is one more thing that must be done before the Great Feast. Many of you have come to us for aid, for a home, and we welcomed you with open arms. Whether you were born into Garnet Moon, or have joined ritualistically, you are family. We all are composed of many species and we work harmoniously together to strengthen and better this pack. Our strength does not lie in our numbers, but in our honor and compassion for one another. But not everyone here is bonded with us, and we need to change that.”

His eyes turned to Halima, sitting next to Beta Female Violet at their table. “Halima Lane, would you please come to the stage?”

“**WHAT?**” Both she and Artemis screamed internally. Anxiety racked her body, her heart raced and sweat accumulated around her body. Glancing a pleading look at Violet, the girl a prideful and loving smile, as if she knew what was about to happen. Halima felt dozens upon dozens of eyes focused on her, making her the center of attention—the role she hated the most.

“Go on, dear,” Violet whispered, grasping her hand. “The Alpha is waiting.”

“I don’t think I can do this...”

“Here.” A pale hand stuck out to her, warm and inviting. Halima looked up to see the girl the hand belonged to. Golden, curly hair cascaded down her shoulders, eyes electric blue, skin void of any blemishes, and in a deep blue dress that hid every curve underneath its veil. Glancing back at Violet once again, she took the blond’s hand, allowing her to gently pull her up on her shoes.

“It isn’t so bad.” The girl whispered to her as they approached the stage. “This is a very special time, and you’ll see why.”

“Um...okay.”

“I’m Sapphire.” The blond smiled. They both walked up the steps to the group of high-ranking werewolves. “I hope we can become friends.”

“Sure!” Sapphire left Halima to them, bowing to her Alpha politely before returning to her seat. Everyone wore wide smiles, which made the girl arch an eyebrow. “What’s going on here, everyone?”

“Well, I was informed a couple of days back that you want to join Garnet Moon,” Anthony spoke.

“That’s right.” Halima nodded.

“Well, we will make it official. Tonight.”

Halima gasped, jumping at the crowd clapping for her. Her eyes swelled with unshed tears that threatened to fall when Jackie encompassed her in a hug. She expected the bonding ritual but didn’t expect it to happen on the night of the passage ceremony.

“I-I couldn’t!” She shook her head. “Tonight is your night. I don’t want to take that away from you.”

“You’re selfless by default, an admirable trait.” Alesia giggled, cradling one of Halima’s hands in her own. “You aren’t taking attention away from us. We’ve done our part. It’s time for yours.”

Everyone except Halima and Anthony took a step back, to give them enough room to complete what they must do. Anthony raised his right hand that now donned the Alpha Ring, and his left gripped the ceremonial dagger. It’s such a big step for Halima, but she was ready to leap. Swallowing down her fears, she took her spot in front of the Alpha and raised her right hand to match his stance.

“Halima Zira Lane.” Anthony began. “Your request to join the Garnet Moon Pack has been accepted and acknowledged. By standing here today, you will honor the pack as your own. You are to pledge your loyalty to Garnet Moon, stand for and with your fellow pack members, and honor your community with your heart and soul. Upon joining, you will be bound to all of Garnet Moon and proudly wear your Pack Mark with honor and humility. You and your wolf will be family, and with family you honor yourself. Do you accept?”

With all the confidence she could muster, she gave a firm nod. “I accept this honor and pledge my allegiance to Garnet Moon from now to the day I pass.”

She winced when Anthony cut through her palm, but the pain quickly subsided. After cutting his palm, the two joined hands and squeezed, their blood intermingling as it dripped in the Alpha Chalice.

Immediately, Halima could feel the livelihood of Garnet Moon flow through her veins. She felt connected with every pack member, each welcoming her into their family. The blood bubbled and misted into silver wisps, rising into the clear air.

Selene had accepted their offering.

Chapter 24 – The Family

“In family life, love is the oil that eases friction, the cement that binds closer together, and the music that brings harmony.” –Friedrich Nietzsche

Third Person

Halima felt a burning sensation on her chest, right above her heart. The sensations outlined something, but she couldn't tell what it was. It was only then when her eyes maneuvered to the slightly exposed chests of the women on stage does, she realizes what was happening.

She gained her new Pack Mark. The eye of a wolf blending with an upright crescent moon.

The sensation subsided, and the cuts sealed on both palms, leaving behind no more than a small scar. Beaming with pride, Alpha Anthony placed his hands on Halima's bare shoulders and squeezed.

“Congratulations, and welcome to our family.”

Squealing with pure excitement, Halima leaped and hugged Anthony as tight as she could. Tears spilled from her eyes like waterfalls, her words of gratitude repeating in his ear like a broken record player. It wasn't long until the others joined in on the hug, recognizing how this was the first step of Halima regaining the happiness she had lost long ago. The pack members, unable to withhold their applause, broke out into cheers. Their family got a little bigger and the night richer.

Everyone had an enjoyable time during the Great Feast. Everyone ate to their fill and mingled with one another. Halima still was eating light foods such as salad and pasta but was slowly progressing to heavier foods like meat and rice. The broken bond with Zircon Moon faded forever, never to return.

Her life ended at Zircon Moon, but her new life's beginning was with Garnet Moon.

Fire licked the black sky, and laughter decimated the silence of the redwood forest. The bonfire was up and running, celebrations preparing to last deep into the night. To Garnet Moon, fire was symbolic of purification, rebirth, and hope. Many members tossed things into the fire that they wanted to release. It could be items they held onto but couldn't any longer, breaking ties with toxic loved ones, or wanting to start anew. Music played loudly, and many folks danced with their mates while children danced around the fire.

"Hey Hali, are you coming?" Jackie spoke through her newly acquired mind-link.

"I'll be there in a minute!"

Halima was in her room, admiring the pack mark above her left breast. She was officially a Garnet Moon Pack Member, and she couldn't be happier. Weight rolled off her shoulders the moment she was bound to her new family, the old one shriveling up and dying in the abyss of darkness. Artemis howled in delight with her new family, feeling like a full wolf already.

"Now, there is just one more thing to do." She spoke to herself. Rummaging through her closet, she pulled her old dress from the plastic bag. The slave dress. The only item of clothing she wore and brought here from the excrement she called her old pack. Halima wanted to get rid of it meaningfully, to make sure no one casts their eyes upon such a disastrous piece of cloth again.

And tonight, she had the answer on how she would do that.

Walking back to the enormous yard where the bonfire was burning bright as the North Star, Halima took her seat next to the new Beta Twins. Her raggedy dress rested in her lap. Her eyes scanned the little party, watching everyone dancing and singing. “So, where’s our Alpha and Luna?”

“They took off for a run in the forest,” Jackie smirked, waggling her eyebrows. “Their wolves need some alone time.”

“God, I better not hear one howl from them for this entire night!” Dwayne complained, drinking from his beer bottle. “Why did you bring that thing down?” He gestured to her dress.

“I’m going to get rid of it,” Halima explained. “This is the only thing I have that ties me to Zircon Moon. To my old life. I want to destroy this thing with no one having the chance to dig it up again.” Her brown eyes look to the full moon casting its glow upon her. “I want to heal. I want to move on. And to do that, I have to do this.”

Standing, the curly-haired girl walked towards the enormous bonfire, burning powerfully. It bathes her brown face in its ethereal orange light, reflecting itself in her dark eyes. With a single toss, Halima threw her dress into the fire. She watched the fire eat away at the dirty fabric, charring from filthy white to black. The scent tickled her nose. This simple act was symbolic of her chains, and her chains were and would forever be broken. Her eyes went back to the moon, smiling as if Selene was watching her at that very moment.

“This slave has revolted. And she’s free.” She whispered into the air, closing her eyes while the cool breeze licked at her bare arms.

Never again would she ever kneel. Never again would she be forced into servitude.

She was happy. She was loved.

She was liberated.

Halima - One Week Later

Life was good.

I've finally reached the normal weight for a werewolf. After consulting with Dr. Nava and Dr. Johnson, they've decided that it was safe for me to shift. I couldn't wait until I could finally let Artemis out on the run she craved for years. A smile crept up on my face as I thought about it.

I head to Alpha Anthony's office after he requested my presence via mind-link. I wondered what he wanted. From the tone of his voice, it sounded urgent. Jogging up the stairs, I made my way to the office door and firmly knocked.

"Come in." I hear. Upon opening the door, I see the entire Guerrero family sitting around the desk. Huh. What could be so important that it concerns the entire family? "Halima. Have a seat, please."

Quirking an eyebrow, I took a seat in the chair that directly situates me in the middle of the Guerrero semi-circle. "Would anyone mind telling me what's going on? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, dear. You did nothing wrong." Lyra shook her head quickly, her lips straining to hide a smile. "There was something we all want to show you."

I cocked my head to the side. "Oh? Okay. What is it?"

Nikolai handed me a manilla folder. "Please, look inside and let us know what you think."

I'm confused, but I take the folder. Opening it, the first sheet I notice was my file for Garnet Moon. It had my picture, birthdate, height, weight, and so on. There were several more papers clipped to my file, and I flipped through them. But when I got to one particular sheet, my entire world froze.

Three letters in bold black stare back at me with the power to shake me to tears.

'Report of Adoption'

I couldn't speak. I couldn't move. My eyes darted around the Guerrero Family, who all were staring at me with anticipation. They wanted me to say something, but I lost my words. Do they want to adopt me? They really want me to be a part of their family?

"We know it's quite a shock." Anthony began. "But we've been planning this for a while. We know about your story and are saddened to hear that you never got the family you deserved. And we wanted to change that."

"So..." Lyra spoke. "We want you to be a part of ours. You'll be our daughter and Anthony and Lyria's baby sister. You are already a part of Garnet Moon, and we thought we'd help make that extra step to bring you closer to us."

"And I always wanted a younger sister," Lyria spoke up, excited. "There is so much I can teach you!"

"And we can help you get back into school." Nikolai mentioned. "We can enroll you in online classes so you can catch up on work, and you can choose if you want to go to college."

"Let us be the family you always wanted," Anthony spoke with confidence. But above all, love. Love for me. "All we need is your consent, so we can make it official."

One tear. Two. Four. Rivers. My tears dripped from my chin to the sheets in my lap. I was so overwhelmed with emotion that choked sobs erupted from my throat. I couldn't concoct a coherent sentence, so I nodded. Vigorously. I dropped the folder and leaped into Lyra's arms with a hug, crying my entire heart out.

I got it. I finally got it! I got my family—a new family! A family that would love me, protect me, and support me. I didn't know how much love I held for them until I opened that folder. All I could do was cry and finally reply once my sobs allowed me to.

“Yes. I would love to be a part of your family!”

After that, everything felt like a dream. My happiness cloaked me like a thick blanket, bathing me in its warmth. Feeling that all familiar itch, I left the packhouse and ran into the forest as fast as I could. The wind blew through my curls, stroking my face as nature welcomed me into her home.

I stripped out of all my clothes and began the long-awaited shift. It was painful, considering I haven't shifted in years, but I welcomed it with grace. My bones cracked, my face lengthened, and my teeth sharpened. In under a minute, I had shifted into a white wolf.

Artemis. My Artemis.

We took off into the woodlands, paws pounding the pavement with every step. Artemis's joy oozed into my own as I took the backseat while she explored the world that was withheld from her. Her white coat danced with the wind, cooling her as her heat built up with her exercise.

We're in the place we always wanted to be. All the pieces fell into place, molding perfectly into a picture of beauty and hope. Selene was right, we had a better life waiting for us. All we needed was the chance and the courage to take it.

Artemis let out a mighty howl. A howl that rocked the roots of the trees and echoed through the woodsy air. It was a howl filled with hope for life. Hope for both of us.

Hope for our future.

Chapter 25 – The Future

As long as I am breathing, in my eyes, I am just beginning.” - Criss Jami, Killosophy

Kiya – Five Years Later

Life was good. Five years ago, I never thought I’d be in the position I am now, loving life. It was a dream I believed I could never reach.

But I did.

After my adoption, I changed my name. With the desire to keep my past in the past, I felt it was necessary to abandon the name Halima Lane, for that identity held too much pain for me. Adopting the surname of my parents, my name was now Kiya Guerrero, meaning ‘Righteous Warrior’.

I have a wonderful family that treats me well and sees the best in me. I have an amazing group of friends and my pack had been nothing short of supportive. Every single person I hold close to my heart pushed me to do my best. I credit them for helping to cultivate me into the strong woman I am today.

I am a rising Junior pursuing my major in Child and Adolescent Development at San José State University. College was one hell of a trip but being surrounded by many people was a world I’ve come to appreciate.

As for my position in the pack, I was now a Delta, a rank reserved for the top five highly skilled warriors of the pack, each in charge of specific training specialties. I was the adopted daughter in the Alpha family, but I wanted to work for the things I want. The desire to be a strong werewolf stuck with me since my bonding to the pack. I refuse to be weak and spoiled. I wanted to earn my keep and I wanted to help defend the pack from the plethoric threats we've received over the years, including what I used to be, rogues.

Under Gamma Ali's leadership and the oh-so flamboyant Delta Galen's training regimen, I crawled up the ranks within two years. I fought hard and trained harder in the training specialties which included, but were not limited to hand-to-hand combat, weapon warfare, and wolf battle. Garnet Moon cultivates warrior wolves for a good reason, and I wear my title with pride and honor. I specialize in hand-to-hand combat.

Alpha Anthony and Luna Alesia rule over Garnet Moon, successfully honoring the legacies of the Alphas and Lunas before them. Now a married couple, they have a two-year-old daughter, Ximena.

My niece was cute as a button, minus the constant drooling she does. I was still waiting for the day she could finally pronounce "Auntie", or Tia in Spanish. But for now, I was all right with the drooling and baby babble. At least I knew she is happy to see me when she scampers my way. Anthony was strict and domineering with his members, yet a select few see the softer side of him. Alesia was still a kick-ass Luna with power coursing through her veins, but she was an absolute mushy mess with her husband and daughter.

My parents have been taking advantage of their retirement. Since the pack establishments generate enough money, they planned an overseas vacation twice a year together. They have been to every continent at least once, except Antarctica. Once, they took me with them on a trip to Paris, France. I've obviously never been, but I immediately fell in love with the French culture.

I have so many photos saved from that trip and gained ten pounds from croissants alone. I couldn't help it; they were full of buttery goodness!

As for Lyria, my big sister, she found her mate. He was Alpha Dimitri from the Thunder Moon pack in Southern California and she was living there as their Luna. I miss her terribly, but I knew she is doing well. I might expect another niece or a nephew soon!

Dwayne and Jacqueline were still at each other's throats, as expected with twins. Both had found their mates around the same time, a phenomenon no one expected. Dwayne's mate was Olivia, a she-wolf from one of our allied packs, Twilight Dusk. As the daughter of a warrior, she was more than ecstatic to mate with Dwayne, considering they mated the first night he was there. It wasn't long until she moved to our pack.

Jaqueline's mate was Abigail, who she met in one of her college classes. She was a human, an international student from Nigeria, and loves Jackie with every fiber of her being. They graduated together last year, and Abi moved into the territory shortly after. It took her parents a while to realize that their daughter was gay and mated to a werewolf, but they gave their blessings. Abigail was one of the few humans in our warrior army, trained under both Delta Galen and Delta Darien.

I also got closer with Sapphire, the she-wolf I met five years ago during the passage ceremony. Born into the pack, she is a year older than me at twenty-three. She was smart. We go to university together, although she is a senior, she was already in college by the time I completed my accelerated high school courses online.

As a Chemistry major, I often see her making compounds and other unique things when motivated by her curiosity. she was responsible for developing the Anti-Spray, which helps disguise our scents whenever warriors and Deltas were deployed for missions. I wouldn't say she was nerdy, but her intelligence isn't to be underestimated.

As for me? Besides being a Delta, I've recovered mostly from my past. Why mostly? Well, there were some days it liked to creep up on me and ruin my day. I still see Mayra, although my sessions were now once every other week. I decided to not go on medication for my PTSD and depression, but it might change in the distant future.

My connection with Artemis was as strong as it has ever been, and we're both living the good life without mates. However, I was in a brief relationship with Gamma Ali until we decided it would be best if we stayed as friends. He found his mate, Zainab. I was thrilled for him and they look cute together.

While my connection to my wolf was strong, so was the connection to my goddess. Three years ago, however, I discovered that I had added perks alongside being Selene's avatar on Earth. Training to be a Delta was tough, but on one particular day, it was the hardest session I've ever endured. Under the scorching rays of the sun-drenched in sweat, I've had moments where I wanted to give up, that I wasn't meant to be a strong wolf. Self-doubt gnawed at me and wouldn't stop until I surrendered to its frothy jaws.

A male warrior was giving me a tough time, flinging taunts and insults whenever I landed hard on the grass. Normally, the banter was all in playful fun, but the intent behind his words was malicious. His ego was inflated, and he made sure to remind me with every kick and punch he threw. Coming from a background where I was constantly told I was worthless made the impact of his insults reach my heart. For a moment, I almost reverted back as the pitiful, beaten-up slave.

But something happened.

An unknown power awakened inside of me, flooding my veins with vivacious energy threatening to burst from underneath my skin. I thought it was my confidence shining through, but the sensation took on a supernatural feel. Power burst from me, shining brilliantly whilst I was

behind its moon-colored shield. The sun and moon were rivals, but the moonlight-like power outshone the berating sunlight.

And it blinded the foolish werewolf. Accidentally. It was then, later that evening when I went to sleep did Selene reached for me and told me what that incident meant. It turns out that I have supernatural powers and abilities related to the moon, including the manipulation of moon energy. Not only am I the rarest wolf in existence, but I also have superpowers. According to Selene, many creatures on earth serve as avatars for a specific god or goddess, and one benefit of that was sharing their powers over what they command.

The new revelation terrified me at first because it's a foreign phenomenon I didn't think was possible, but it was all smoothened out when I met Phoebe.

Phoebe is a witch who lives in Garnet Moon and is the avatar of Hekate, the Goddess of Magic. Mysterious, but quizzical and intelligent, the woman swooped in and taught me all I needed to know about avatar information and the management of my powers. She became my personal trainer. With her help, I was trained in controlling my newfound abilities and trained in the art of moon magic.

Dangling around my neck is an upright crescent moon necklace carved out of the selenite crystal, a gift from her. It had helped me keep my abilities under control as a physical barrier, so they don't go haywire with my fluctuating emotions. I haven't fully mastered my abilities, so they were more on the unstable side. With Phoebe's guidance and wisdom, she had helped curb that worry.

But, having a lot of power at my disposal is frightening. I hope that one day, I'll have total control over them without hurting anyone.

Today was a sunny day on New Brighton State Beach. College kids and teens alike run toward the cold ocean with surfboards or with their friends, basking in on this glorious day. The powdery sand twinkles underneath the sun and the water glitters with magnificence. I walk along the beach dunes with Sapphire at my side, both of us in bikinis with wraps around our waists with our towels underneath our arms. Sapphire in blue and I in striped white, our pack marks fully exposed. It's funny that the humans believe it's just a normal tattoo, but the other wolves at our university knew better.

Ignoring the sharp whistles and woos from both human men and werewolves around us, we found a decent spot to lay our towels down to relax. Children shrieked in excitement all around us, building sandcastles or catapulting themselves in the cool sea.

"It's a gorgeous day, isn't it?" I ask Sapphire in awe, laying on my stomach. The cool breeze licked at my skin, gently cooling my furnace-like body down. I heard a soft shuffle beside me, I turned my head to see Sapphire resting on her elbows.

"Yeah, it is. It's nice." The blond replied without enthusiasm, eyes cast on the glittering sand. Her blue eyes had that far-away look that meant she was in deep thought about something. Smiling, I poked her shoulder.

"We're out of school for the summer. It's a joyous occasion! No final exams, no irritating professors, no deadlines..." I retorted. Sapphire will graduate next semester while I have a couple more years left to go.

"Yeah I know, but that's not what I meant." She whispered, tossing me a knowing look.

Propping myself on my elbows, I gently smile and pat her shoulder. "Are you still thinking about Emil?" Emil was a human man Sapphire had a crush on. They met during one of her analytical chemistry classes, and she fell instantly head-over-heels. Given that she was an unmated

female, I understand her disappointment when she revealed to me that Emil was traveling the world after graduation. He graduated this semester.

A deep part of me wishes they could be mates, but that doesn't seem to be the case.

"He is the envy of all recent graduates, I bet," I joked, adding a chuckle. "Not everyone has the opportunity to travel the world after graduation."

"The entire summer is such a long time. I won't be able to see or talk to him for four months." She whined.

"You'll survive. Besides, you have a mate out there, somewhere. Once you find him, Emil would be nothing but old news."

She rolled her eyes, her hand searching for her phone in her purse. "You're not good at this love sympathy thing, are you?"

"Not at all, but I try my best."

Sapphire quirked an eyebrow as she glanced at her phone screen. "Did you pack your things before we came here?"

"I did." I turned myself on my rear end and sat up. Sapphire and I rented an apartment together near campus, paid for by Anthony. We were due to go back home for the summer. "Why? Are Darien and Galen here to pick us up?"

"Darien texted me to say they are about an hour away," Sapphire muttered, squinting at her phone. "They're also bringing food."

"Sweet!" I hop on the soles of my feet, gently kicking up sand.

“I’ll race you to the waves!” In a flash, Sapphire bolted towards the water. “Hey! No fair!” I screamed, running after her. We both dove deep into the water and made fools of ourselves for a good half hour.

After the beach, we took a taxi back to our apartment. Our clothes and other items were packed neatly in our multiple suitcases, ready to be transported back to pack territory. Living in an apartment with your best friend is great, but I miss home. I couldn’t wait to see baby Ximena again and spend the entire summer with her.