

Wolfless 51

Chapter Fifty-One

Ayla

My emotions were all over the place as I entered my room to get ready for dinner. If this book didn't have any answers, what would I do? I flipped through it one more time before I went to have a quick shower. The pages were still blank.

"Really?" I huffed, throwing the book on the bed before storming off into the bathroom.

This was a nightmare. Not only am I away from my mate, but now I have nothing to show for this visit. I dragged Xander all the way here and gave him extra work for nothing.

When I was done in the shower, I braided my hair over one shoulder and stepped into my bedroom to get dressed. It was then I noticed a garment bag lying on my bed. Sighing, I went to unzip it to find a beautiful emerald green knee-length dress.

The dress had a surplice v-neckline. The long sleeves were made of a sparkly sheer fabric, which also covered the bodice. It created the look of a high-waisted dress.

I quickly got dressed and the dress fit me like a second skin. It was beautiful against my skin and hair. I found a pair of gold sparkly heels before I made my way to find Xander. I didn't bother with makeup, I was already late.

Xander was leaning against the wall as I exited my room. He was dressed in black slacks and a burgundy-colored shirt. He had a few of the top buttons undone. He looked amazing as he looked in my direction, taking me all in.

"Wow," he breathed out.

"Not so bad yourself," I smirked, and he composed himself.

"Ready?" He asked, holding out his arm and I linked it with mine.

"Not really, but I am starving," I answered and he chuckled, handing me a phone.

"Here, I thought you'd like to text Nate." I took the phone.

"Thank you," I breathed out. I noticed I had messages from not only Nate but Kaden as well. I decided to just text Nate and I'll deal with Kaden later. I'm sure he's just worried after learning about the body found.

Me: I miss you, babe. I'm just heading to dinner. I'll call later. I love you xoxo.

When I was done, I handed the phone back to Xander.

"This dress doesn't have pockets," I shrugged and he chuckled.

"I guess you can use mine." He sighed like it was this huge inconvenience.

"I'm sure there's room," I giggled, holding onto his arm as we walked into the dining room.

The table was full, like before, and everyone quickly stood up, stopping whatever conversations they were having. My grandmother stood up and met me halfway.

"Ayla," she grabbed my hands and kissed my cheeks.

"Grandmother, I apologize for my tardiness," I told her as she walked with me back to her seat.

"Nonsense, you are right on time." She smiled. Xander pulled out the seat to the left of my grandmother's. I smiled at him before he took the seat beside me. As soon as the queen and I took our seats, the rest of the table sat down.

"Now, my dear, I'd like to introduce you to Councilman Andrew's grandson, Collin." My grandmother said. That's when I noticed Councilman Andrew was sitting across from me, on the other side of my grandmother.

Collin was sitting beside his grandfather. He was younger. He had almost black hair and light brown eyes. He looked adorable in his suit. He didn't look more than sixteen.

"Collin, it's nice to meet you. I hear you're my replacement." I said, taking a sip of my wine.

"It's nice to meet you, Princess Ayla. Replacement?" He questioned.

"Yes, if I don't take the throne, then it will be passed down to you. But I am curious about your grandfather's involvement," I said, and Councilman Andrew gasped.

"How dare you?" He shouted and I looked at him.

"I see you don't know that the information about King Kaden was a lie?" I retorted and he shifted uncomfortably.

"All the reports regarding this issue will be presented to me before I leave tomorrow," I demanded.

"And how do you know they are false?" He questioned and I smirked.

"Kaden and I are old friends. He would never do what he is being accused of. I trust him completely. That is why I've decided to split the western kingdom into threes and hand a piece over to the other kingdoms." I announced. I turned to my grandmother and she had a smirk on her face.

"You have no right to hand over the kingdom!" Andrews yelled, smashing his fists down on the table.

Before I could say anything else, dinner was served. It was a seafood pasta dish and it smelled heavenly. I took a bite and had to hold back the moan that was about to escape my lips.

"What are you doing?" Xander leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"Not backing down," I whispered back.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Andrews, what is your position, again?" I asked him before taking another sip of my wine. The taste of the wine pairs amazingly with the pasta dish.

"I'm the head of the council," he growled out.

"And what is your job description?" I questioned him, before taking another bite.

"To advise the royal family and to make decisions that best benefit the people of the kingdom," he answered proudly.

"So, not a king or queen?" I asked, nonchalantly. I could see the fury in his eyes, and I just smirked.

Queen Laura told me to never back down, and I was never going to back down again. This is my kingdom and I'm not going to let these men make decisions for me or my grandmother. We need women on the council instead of all these old men.

"Grandmother, this dish is wonderful." I praised her, turning my attention to her. She watched my exchange without a word.

"Now, Mr. Andrews, your job is to advise, not to make demands of the royal family. You will treat me and my grandmother with the utmost respect from this point forward or I won't have any issue with having you arrested for treason." I told him before turning my attention to his grandson.

"Collin, how old are you?"

"I'm fifteen, princess," he answered politely.

"So, you have three years to prove to me that you can be a king to his kingdom. I trust the other two princes and King Kaden with my life. And if I feel I can't trust you, then I will split the kingdom between them. Does that seem fair to you?" I asked.

"Are you really the black pearl?" He asked and I nodded.

"And you gave us the mind link?"

"Well, the moon goddess did, but I asked her to gift the mermaids with the mind link. I knew it would be highly beneficial." He gave me a nod.

"I will do everything I can to make sure you can trust me. I will make sure I am worthy of being the king you need for the Western kingdom." He announced and I smiled at him. I could see his grandfather smoldering and I just smiled sweetly.

"Perfect, I'm glad we are both on the same page and I look forward to working with you in the future."

My grandmother reached her hand out for mine and squeezed it. I may have been this scared little girl before, but now, I was going to do everything in my power to protect the people most important to me. And if I had to take down the entire council to make sure they stayed safe, then I would.

When dinner was over, Xander and I excused ourselves. It had been a long day and mentally I just needed to sleep. But there was one thing I needed to do first.

"Could you ask your mom if she's free to see me?" I asked Xander as we walked back to our rooms.

"I'm pretty sure she's on call at the hospital tonight, why is everything okay?" He asked, worried.

"I just have a few questions. Do you think she'd have time to see me?"

We stopped outside our rooms and his eyes clouded over. I waited patiently as he spoke to his mother about seeing me. I needed to get options for birth control. I wanted to be in control of when we were to have a baby. Even though we have been irresponsible so far.

"My mom said she can see you now," Xander said, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Will you come with me?"

"I need to show you where the hospital is. And you need to ask your grandmother to accept you into the pod so we can mind link." Xander said as he led me out of the palace.

"I will ask her tomorrow before we leave," I told him.

"Ayla, I think we should wait until Nate gets back to the pack. This could be a trap to get you alone." He sighed.

"I can protect myself. And I have you. I don't want my life to be dictated by others who are hunting me. I

don't want to live my life in fear," I explained.

"Okay, but just make sure you tell him you're going home tomorrow. And I'll make arrangements."

"Thank you."

It didn't take us long to walk to the hospital. It was a beautiful evening and it was nice to be out of the palace. Even though these heels were not for walking but for looking pretty.

We both walked into the ER and were greeted by Dr. Evans. She hugged and kissed her son on the cheek before she turned her attention to me. She grabbed both my hands in hers before kissing both my cheeks.

"It is so good to see you both." She smiled.

"Thank you for seeing me," I told her.

"Anything for our black pearl princess. Now what can I do for you? Are you hurt?"

"No, I needed to talk to a medical professional. In private." I stammered out. She stared at me before it clicked.

"Oh goodness, of course. Son, take a seat and I'll bring her right back when we are done." She told him before dragging me away. I was feeling nervous about this conversation. I know she's a doctor and this is what she does, but she is still Xander's mom.

Once, we were in an exam room and the door was closed. I sat down on the exam table while Dr. Evans sat down in the doctor's chair.

"Now, Ayla, I assume this is probably about birth control or a pregnancy test, maybe?" She asked.

"Both actually. I just want to make sure I'm not pregnant and then I'd like to talk about birth control options. I'm not ready for a baby just yet." I told her and she nodded.

"Have you been using any protection?" I shifted uncomfortably.

"I'll take that as a no. It's nothing to be ashamed of. We have all gotten caught up in the moment." She chuckled.

"The bathroom is across the hall. There are specimen cups under the sink. When you are done, bring me the cup and we will test it. Then we can talk about the options." She instructed and I nodded.

When I was done, I went back to the room. I was feeling nervous about the outcome. It couldn't be

positive, could it? I handed her the cup before taking a seat again.

She dipped the pregnancy test before turning her attention back to me.

“So I would recommend an IUD. I can insert one today and it can stay for up to five years. Or there is a pill or a shot but those require follow-up appointments.” She explained.

“Let’s do the IUD then.” She picked up the pregnancy test.

“Negative.” She announced and I breathed out a breath. I was so relieved.

“Let me go get a kit. Lift your dress and remove your underwear. Place this sheet over you and I’ll be right back.” She instructed, handing me a paper sheet before she left the room.

I was glad when it was all over. The pressure and the pinch hurt like a b***h. But I felt so relieved that I would be able to control when Nate and I start a family. I knew I wanted kids with him, but not now. We still had so much to figure out.

After Dr. Evans said goodbye to her son. Xander walked me back to my room. I was ready to ditch my shoes when we reached the first set of stairs.

“Is everything okay?” Xander finally asked me.

“Yes, everything is okay. I just wanted to ask your mother about lady things.” I answered.

“Lady things?” He chuckled.

“Yeah, it was nothing and she answered all of my questions.”

“That’s good. I’m glad she could help.”

“Thank you for everything, Xander. I really appreciate everything you do for me.” I told him when we stopped outside our rooms. His was across the hall from mine.

“Goodnight.” He smiled, handing me my phone.

“Goodnight,” I said, before walking into my room. I kicked off my heels as soon as the door was closed.

I was glad to finally get some me time from the day I had. My phone chimed in my hand and I held up my phone to see a text from Nate.

Nate: I love you. We are still investigating and dealing with King Kaden.

Me: what? Kaden is there?

Nate: yeah and it's been a day with him here.

Me: I'm sorry, babe. I'm back in my room now.

Nate: I'll be able to call soon. Just finishing up. I love you.

Me: I love you.

I put my phone on my pillow before getting ready for bed. Hopefully, Nate will call me soon, I thought as I yawned, climbing into bed. I snuggled under the blanket and decided to answer the other texts I had received.

Kaden: Ayla, I don't know how you knew the victim was from my kingdom, but I'm on my way there now.

Kaden: I wish you would pick up the phone.

Kaden: I just met your father, thanks for the heads up.

Kaden: can you just let me know that you're safe, please? I'm going crazy here.

Me: Kaden, I'm safe. I'm at the western kingdom palace. And be nice to my dad. Also, I've been busy. It's been a long day.

When I was done texting Kaden, I put my phone down and picked up the book I was so desperate to find. The pages were still blank.

"Goddesses, I could really use some answers." I sighed in the empty room. I would be thankful for anything right now.

I don't remember falling asleep, but waking up is something I'll never forget.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Nate

As soon as I left the pack house after talking with Alpha Atlas, I was pushed back and almost knocked on my ass.

"Blues!" I exclaimed as she covered me in drool. Her tail was just wagging as she jumped up to get my attention.

"I've missed you too, girl. And I know your momma has." I told her, kneeling down to give her more of

my attention.

"Nate, how is my granddaughter?" Alpha Jim asked, walking towards us.

"She wasn't happy about all of this but all in all she's doing good. We've discovered so much. And as of right now, we are just waiting for her wolf to make an appearance." I told him and I heard Alpha Atlas gasp behind me.

"What wolf?" Her father bellowed. And I pushed my lips into a line. I forgot that so much had happened since I'd been gone.

"Does she really have a wolf?" Alpha Jim questioned and I sighed.

After I was done explaining everything that had happened. Both were looking at me like I had a second head. It was a lot to take in and I probably sounded crazy. Which would explain why they are looking at me like that. Both of them let out a breath.

"So let me get this straight, first she meets not only the moon goddess but the mermaid goddess. Then she was found by this king Kaden in the middle of the ocean and he turned out to be her ex-boyfriend, who she lived with. And then she blew up the chopper you were all traveling in on your way to the northern kingdom. There she was challenged by the black pearl guardian, which she won. Now scales cover her body like an armor suit. She has amazing fighting skills and she has a wolf that hasn't appeared yet?" Alpha Atlas summoned everything up in disbelief.

"She also asked the moon goddess to gift the mermaids with the mind link. And we have marked each other." I said.

"Marked?" Alpha Jim asked. I lifted my shirt to show my new tattoo.

"So it's official?" Alpha Jim questioned, looking at the tattoo and the bite mark.

"Just waiting for the full moon," I answered and Alpha Atlas growled.

"That's my daughter," he grumbled and I chuckled.

"And she's my mate. Don't you want to be a grandpa?" I teased him and Alpha Jim laughed.

"No, I don't. Now stop talking!" He growled and I smirked.

"Well, I'm sure my dad would like to be a grandpa." I chuckled and he groaned.

"Well, I'm looking forward to being a great-grandpa!" Alpha Jim exclaimed.

"Can I have a few years to just be a dad before you make me grandpa?" Alpha Atlas sighed.

"Nothing is set until she claims me under a full moon. Or she gets her wolf. Actually, I have no idea. Her wolf had made her presence known. She marked me and she growled. But this is all new to even Queen Laura, who has helped so much. The first black pearl was a half-witch. And the second was a half-vampire but he was killed by the guardian." I told them.

"Why was he killed?" Alpha Jim asked.

"He couldn't prove himself worthy. Ayla proved herself after the first challenge. And when the moon goddess offered her a gift, she asked for the mermaids to be blessed with the mind link." I explained.

"That was quite selfless of her," Alpha Jim commented.

"And how did you get the wolves on your chest?" He asked.

"Mermaids give their claims the scale over their hearts. When Ayla gave me hers, I shifted and that's what happened. Ayla's looks the same as mine now."

"That's fascinating." Alpha Jim breathed out.

"It's definitely been a journey. And now this. We haven't even been able to collect any intel on the Crimson Tide pack," I said.

"It will all calm down soon. And I can keep Bluey until you two get settled." He offered.

"Her grandmother gifted her the house that's near Alpha Matt's pack. She also gifted him the land around it so the pack could run patrol. But it will be nice to be able to relax. It was a great morning. Xander and I worked out a schedule with Alpha Matt. Ayla kicked Jonathan's ass on the training field." I chuckled.

"And yours." Duke huffed.

"It clearly isn't all work, son." My father said, coming up beside me, and clasping me on the shoulder.

"It could be less work and more play," I said, hugging my dad. I heard Alpha Atlas groan and my father chuckled.

"Atlas, you were twenty-two once. Give him a break." My dad said and he growled.

"I know, and that doesn't mean I want to know what my daughter is up to." He grumbled.

"Well, you are about to meet the guy your daughter was dating at sixteen and he was twenty-one." I shrugged. And I could hear the alpha gritting his teeth.

"Why would you say that?" My father scolded.

"To let him know it could be worse. And to push his anger towards someone else," I said, and my father sighed.

"I'm going to kill that fucker." The alpha growled.

"He's a king. And we don't know the story. Calm down. Besides, she was living on her own. She didn't get pregnant. She finished school and was working. Ayla is very responsible," Alpha Jim exclaimed.

"Fine, but I'm not happy about any of this." He growled.

"Just had to poke the alpha," my father said and I shrugged.

"Now, have you seen your mother?"

"I haven't. I've just been getting these two up to speed about Ayla." I answered.

"Both your mother and sister are home and want to see you. Let's go have lunch. Jim, Atlas, you are both welcome to join us." My father offered.

"I need to go check on my nephew and his warriors," Alpha Atlas answered.

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"I told them where to start patrol but I think your nephew is going to need a pep. He said he was up all night patrolling in his peck." My father told him.

"I'll make sure they are all ready for the night patrol. Go enjoy some time with your son before the king arrives." He growled the last part and I chuckled.

"I think I'm his favorite now."

"You're lucky I'd rather be on Duke's good side." He huffed before leaving us. My father and Alpha Jim were laughing.

"I should probably get to work since now I have more of it." Alpha Jim said, shaking his head.

"Come on Bluey," he called out, and she followed him into the peck house.

"Let's go see your mother, she's been anxious to see you. Especially, since you haven't called." He gave me a pointed look before we started to walk towards home.

"My old phone is at the bottom of the northern sea or I would have called. I just got a new phone this morning. It's just been one hell of a few days," I told him.

"That's a pretty decent excuse but she is still going to kill you for making her worry."

"Nethaniel Greyson Winters!" I heard my mother yell before I even stepped foot into the yard. I cringed at the use of my full name. She was standing on the porch with her hands on her hips. My father clasped my shoulder.

"Good luck son." He said before quickly walking up the stairs into the house. He kissed her cheek before he ran into the house, leaving me with his angry mother.

My mother was glaring at me as I reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Mom, I'm sorry. I lost my phone. I just got a new one this morning. I was going to text you but I decided to just show up instead." I explained and she huffed.

"And how is my beautiful daughter-in-law?"

"Angry that I'm here without her."

"I'm angry that you're here without her. Now come inside. Lunch is ready and I want to hear all about Ayle." She scoffed before storming into the house. And here I was thinking she was worried about her only son.

We were almost done with lunch when the phone was in my hand, telling me the king had arrived. I rolled my eyes. Yes, he's the king, but that doesn't mean he deserves my respect. This wasn't his world, it was mine.

My mother had to get back to work and Ruby decided to come along with me and head to the peck house. As soon as we arrived, King Kaden was just getting out of his SUV. I heard Ruby let out a gasp.

"That's Ayle's ex!" She whispered yelled. And Duke let out a growl.

"I mean, sure, I guess you are good looking Nete, but damn." She took out her phone and snapped a picture.

"I have to show him to Mom." She giggled, taking off towards the hospital.

"Ruby is no longer my favorite," Duke huffed.

"It's fine, son, it's not all about looks." My father said and I frowned.

"Thanks, Ded, I feel so much better." I sighed.

"Alphe Atles," I heard King Keden say, shaking my elphe's hand.

"King Keden," Alphe Atles greeted him.

"King Keden, you didn't have to come all the way down here for this," I told him.

"Always a pleasure, Nete." He glared at me.

"Bete Will, can you please show King Keden's men where we have the body? They will be taking it with them." The elphe told his bete.

"And you two follow me." He demanded. I was ready to protest as I didn't want to be around him. But the soft growl from Alphe Atles shut me up. I needed to show my elphe respect in front of our unwelcome guest.

King Keden followed behind the elphe and I followed behind him. I had no idea what my elphe was about to tell us, but I had a bad feeling about this. This has been the third body found within the last couple of weeks. The hunters know who Ayle is but I don't know why they haven't attacked her yet.

Alphe Atles led us into his office and told us both to take a seat. We both took one of the chairs in front of the elphe's desk. I was trying to keep my cool as I sat beside Ayle's ex. I knew he wanted her back.

"King Keden, it's come to my attention that you know my daughter," Alphe Atles started.

"Daughter? Who are you referring to?"

"Ayle Wetters is my daughter." The elphe announced, but if King Keden was shocked he didn't show it.

"It's an honor to meet you, Alphe. Ayle recently told me her father was a wolf. I didn't expect our paths would cross like this." King Keden said as I sat there trying to figure out my elphe's angle.

"Then you should know that I don't approve of your relationship with my daughter. She was underage. Also, this is her mate. I'm aware that Mermaids don't have fated mates but wolves do." He scolded.

"Oh, snap." Duke chuckled, coming forward to listen to the conversation.

"With all due respect, elphe. My relationship with Ayle and is none of anyone's business. Yes, she was sixteen but she was living on her own. We built a life together. I wanted nothing but the best for her." King Keden told him.

"And when you left her?" Alphe Atles questioned, and the king sighed.

"I left to protect her. I didn't handle it well, but what I did, I thought was for the best. I was running from my father. When my brother found me, he informed me our father sold our mother. I had to leave to handle the matter. I never found her and I killed my father and took over as king. And as king, I couldn't take the human claim. I did leave her with all the money I had saved up and everything my brother gave me as well. We were moving into the city so she could attend night classes. I love your daughter and I only want what's best for her." He finished and I pressed my lips into a line.

"I need to go check on my nephew and his warriors," Alpha Atlos answered.

"I told them where to start patrol but I think your nephew is going to need a nap. He said he was up all night patrolling in his pocket." My father told him.

"I'll make sure they are all ready for the night patrol. Go enjoy some time with your son before the king arrives." He growled the last part and I chuckled.

"I think I'm his favorite now."

"You're lucky I'd rather be on Duke's good side." He huffed before leaving us. My father and Alpha Jim were laughing.

"I should probably get to work since now I have more of it." Alpha Jim said, shaking his head.

"Come on Bluey," he called out, and she followed him into the pocket house.

"Let's go see your mother, she's been anxious to see you. Especially, since you haven't called." He gave me a pointed look before we started to walk towards home.

"My old phone is at the bottom of the northern sea or I would have called. I just got a new phone this morning. It's just been one hell of a few days," I told him.

"That's a pretty decent excuse but she is still going to kill you for making her worry."

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"Good luck son." He said before quickly walking up the stairs into the house. He kissed her cheek before he ran into the house, leaving me with his angry note.

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"Thanks, Dad, I feel so much better." I sighed.

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"Always a pleasure, Note." He glared at me.

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"King Koden, it's come to my attention that you know my daughter," Alpho Atlos started.

"Daughter? Who are you referring to?"

"Aylo Waters is my daughter." The olpho announced, but if King Koden was shocked he didn't show it.

"It's an honor to meet you, Alpho. Aylo recently told me her father was a wolf. I didn't expect our paths would cross like this." King Koden said as I sat there trying to figure out my olpho's angle.

"Then you should know that I don't approve of your relationship with my daughter. She was underage. Also, this is her mother. I'm aware that Mermaids don't have foster mothers but wolves do." He scolded.

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"With all due respect, olpho. My relationship with Aylo was and is none of anyone's business. Yes, she was sixteen but she was living on her own. We built a life together. I wanted nothing but the best for her." King Koden told him.

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"That's a pretty decent excuse but she is still going to kill you for making her worry."

"Nathaniel Greyson Winters!" I heard my mother yell before I even stepped foot into the yard. I cringed at the use of my full name. She was standing on the porch with her hands on her hips. My father clasped my shoulder.

"Good luck son." He said before quickly walking up the stairs into the house. He kissed her cheek before he ran into the house, leaving me with his angry mate.

My mother was glaring at me as I reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Mom, I'm sorry. I lost my phone. I just got a new one this morning. I was going to text you but I decided to just show up instead." I explained and she huffed.

"And how is my beautiful daughter-in-law?"

"Angry that I'm here without her."

"I'm angry that you're here without her. Now come inside. Lunch is ready and I want to hear all about Ayla." She scoffed before storming into the house. And here I was thinking she was worried about her only son.

We were almost done with lunch when the alpha was in my head, telling me the king had arrived. I rolled my eyes. Yes, he's a king, but that doesn't mean he deserves my respect. This wasn't his world, it was mine.

My mother had to get back to work and Ruby decided to come along with me and dad to the pack house. As soon as we arrived, King Kaden was just getting out of his SUV. I heard Ruby let out a gasp.

"That's Ayla's ex!" She whispered yelled. And Duke let out a growl.

"I mean, sure, I guess you are good looking Nate, but damn." She took out her phone and snapped a picture.

"I have to show him to Mom." She giggled, taking off towards the hospital.

"Ruby is no longer my favorite," Duke huffed.

"It's fine, son, it's not all about looks." My father said and I frowned.

"Thanks, Dad, I feel so much better." I sighed.

"Alpha Atlas," I heard King Kaden say, shaking my alpha's hand.

"King Kaden," Alpha Atlas greeted him.

"King Kaden, you didn't have to come all the way down here for this," I told him.

"Always a pleasure, Nate." He glared at me.

"Beta Will, can you please show King Kaden's men where we have the body? They will be taking it with them." The alpha told his beta.

"And you two follow me." He demanded. I was ready to protest as I didn't want to be around him. But the soft growl from Alpha Atlas shut me up. I needed to show my alpha respect in front of our unwelcome guest.

King Kaden followed behind the alpha and I followed behind him. I had no idea what my alpha was about to tell us, but I had a bad feeling about this. This has been the third body found within the last couple of weeks. The hunters know who Ayla is but I don't know why they haven't attacked her yet.

Alpha Atlas led us into his office and told us both to take a seat. We both took one of the chairs in front of the alpha's desk. I was trying to keep my cool as I sat beside Ayla's ex. I knew he wanted her back.

"King Kaden, it's come to my attention that you know my daughter," Alpha Atlas started.

"Daughter? Who are you referring to?"

"Ayla Waters is my daughter." The alpha announced, but if King Kaden was shocked he didn't show it.

"It's an honor to meet you, Alpha. Ayla recently told me her father was a wolf. I didn't expect our paths would cross like this." King Kaden said as I sat there trying to figure out my alpha's angle.

"Then you should know that I don't approve of your relationship with my daughter. She was underage.

Also, this is her mate. I'm aware that Mermaids don't have fated mates but wolves do." He scolded.

"Oh, snap." Duke chuckled, coming forward to listen to the conversation.

"With all due respect, alpha. My relationship with Ayla was and is none of anyone's business. Yes, she was sixteen but she was living on her own. We built a life together. I wanted nothing but the best for her." King Kaden told him.

"And when you left her?" Alpha Atlas questioned, and the king sighed.

"I left to protect her. I didn't handle it well, but what I did, I thought was for the best. I was running from my father. When my brother found me, he informed me our father sold our mother. I had to leave to handle the matter. I never found her and I killed my father and took over as king. And as king, I couldn't take a human claim. I did leave her with all the money I had saved up and everything my brother gave me as well. We were moving into the city so she could attend night classes. I love your daughter and I only want what's best for her." He finished and I pressed my lips into a line.

Alpha Atlas leaned back in his chair and let out a breath.

Alpha Atlas leaned back in his chair and let out a breath.

"And where does your loyalty lie now?" The alpha finally asked. I wanted to be pissed off, but if King Kaden didn't leave, I would never have Ayla.

"My loyalty lies with Ayla. Ayla is the black pearl, the beacon of hope for the mermaid race. She is everything to me and our people." He said and I growled.

"She is everything to me."

"And what is she to you and the wolves? Do you have a legend of a black mermaid wolf that will rule over the wolves?" He exclaimed and I gritted my teeth.

"Is Ayla going to rule over the four kingdoms?" Her father asked.

"Yes, there's no doubt about that. Ayla will be the bridge to help us fight against the hunters and to keep our people safe."

"And now she is a mermaid, you want her back? Is that it? Is that why you are here, King Kaden?" The Alpha questioned.

"I'm here because I care about the people of my kingdom. I don't know how Ayla knew, but the victim is from my kingdom. She was a maid in the castle. She went missing two years ago," he explained.

"Do you know who is responsible?" He asked.

"I don't. I've raided over a hundred hideouts and I've only found victims and their minions. They all killed themselves before I could interrogate them. I wish I had more answers but I don't." He confessed and the alpha nodded.

"This is the report of everything we have found. And the body will be released into your custody. If you need help with anything, just give me a call. I want these bastards killed just as badly as you do." Alpha Atlas said, handing him a folder.

"Thank you for your cooperation. My men have informed me they are ready. And Nate, remember to the wolves, she wolfless but for us, she is everything." He said before he left the office.

"What the f**k is that supposed to mean?" I growled out.

"I think you should take some time to think about all of this. She may be your fated mate, but she is worth more to the mermaids than to the wolves. It may be best for her to return to the sea." Alpha Atlas said before he left his office.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and tried to slow down the beating of my heart. The best place for Ayla was beside me and nowhere else. Even if I have nothing to offer her right now. This is just the beginning, not the end.

"And she's not wolfless. She just hasn't come forward yet," Duke scoffed.

"But what if she never does?" I questioned.

"Dude, I'm off tonight. Let's meet at the pack house and catch up. I could use a drink after the day I've had." Mitch said via mind link.

"I'm already here. I was talking with Alpha Atlas and King Kaden," I answered.

"I heard from Rudy that the king is Ayla's ex?" He said and Duke growled.

"I'm sorry, man. I'm just going to shower and then I'll meet you in the lounge." He said, before closing the link.

I found myself gripping her mark on my chest before I stood up to leave the alpha's office. Duke needed a run before I met up with Mitch or he was going to rip this entire pack house apart.

I ran into my father and alpha on the way out of the house. I didn't feel like talking, but the alpha stopped me.

"The body was found where Ayla was attacked by the rogues. They could have wolves working for them. Be careful." He informed me.

"I'll be heading back tomorrow to keep her safe. I'll do a patrol of the border, then I'll be back." I told them.

I ran towards the back tree line before stripping off my clothes. I didn't even have time to put the clothes in a neat pile before Duke shifted and took off. He didn't like the bond with his mate being threatened. And neither did I. I didn't care how the other wolves saw her. She was supposed to be ours.

Duke ran the border of the entire pack, which should have taken a few hours, in an hour. We didn't bother to stop to speak to anyone, too lost in the run. When we arrived back at my clothes, I shifted and pulled on my pants. I carried everything else as I made my way to the beta floor of the pack house. I needed a shower before I went to meet Mitch. A very cold shower since I missed my mate.

I pulled out my phone to text her before I went to have a shower and get cleaned up. I've missed her all day and have texted her a few times. I wonder if she was able to find the book she was looking for.

When I was ready, I made my way to the lounge to meet Mitch. I didn't expect the other guys to be there, but I was thankful for the food. As soon as I stepped in, Mitch handed me a glass of whiskey. The other guys were all shouting, holding up their glasses.

"To Nate, the first of us to find their mate," Mitch announced.

"To Nate, the lucky bastard that gets to f**k the alpha's daughter," Max called out, and I shook my head.

"To Nate," Everyone yelled as we all downed our drinks.

"What the hell is this?" I turned to Mitch as the others gathered around us.

"It's your 'I found my mate, so I'm leaving everyone' party." He answered, clapping my shoulder. I rolled my eyes at his dramatics. I was a few hours away.

"Another round!"

Chapter Fifty-Three

Commander Xander

I was asleep when Ayla let out a bone-crushing scream. I don't even remember what happened next as I opened my eyes to find myself in her room. She was sobbing in her bed as she ripped at her chest. I rushed over to her to find she was covered in blood.

"Ayla, what the hell happened?" I yelled out, pinning her hands above her head so she would stop

clawing herself.

“Xander, stop! Make it stop!” She screamed as she tried to get out of my grip.

“Was someone in your room?” I exclaimed as I pinned her body to the bed with mine. She shook her head. I looked down at her chest to see the damage she had inflicted.

“Ayla, what happened?” I asked her softly. She shook her head before her sobs broke out again.

“I’ll let you go, just stop clawing, okay?” When she nodded, I moved off of her and rushed into the bathroom to get a clean towel.

When I returned, she was just sobbing on the bed. She didn’t even lower her hands from where I had placed them. I held the towel to her chest before I laid down with my back against the headboard. I pulled her against me as she cried on my chest. I held the towel as tight as possible to stop the bleeding while she cried her heart out.

“Can you tell me what happened? Why are you crying?” I mumbled against the top of her head as I kissed it. I think I knew what was happening but I didn’t want to believe it.

“He’s with someone else! He’s cheating on me!” She cried in despair. I could feel her pain in my soul as I held her close.

“It hurts so much, Xander. Please, help me?” She begged, but there was nothing I could do but hold her tight.

It took her about an hour to cry herself to sleep. And through that time, I was plotting all the ways I was going to kill Nate. How dare he cheat on not only my friend but the Queen of the mermaid world? Who the f**k does he think he is?

I knew when she finally awoke, she would be a broken shell of her former self. I can feel her love for Nate when they are together. And this is going to devastate her. What the hell was he thinking?

Ayla

I awoke with a groan. My head was pounding as I tried to remember what happened last night. My breath hitched as the pain ripped through my heart. It felt like I was dying as the feeling of dread consumed me. My body felt empty as tears filled my eyes.

“It’s okay, Ayla, I’m here.” I heard Xander. He was holding me and I was lying against his chest. When the hell did Xander get into my bed?

Xander squeezed me and I couldn’t stop the sobs any longer. I felt so worthless, as Xander whispered sweet things to me. Why was I never good enough? Was the body just an excuse to go back to his pack

and hook up with someone else? What if it was Mitch's sister?

The thought made my chest twist painfully. What happened to only being with me? Was that a lie? The contents of my stomach churned and I flew off the bed and just made it to the toilet to empty my stomach.

Xander was behind me, holding my hair back as I finished. I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand before Xander passed me a damp towel, while still holding my hair off my face.

I flushed the toilet before I leaned back against the cold tile wall. I don't trust my stomach yet. Xander sat down beside me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close.

"What the hell is wrong with me?" I cried. I was supposed to be this Queen for an entire race but here I was crying on the bathroom floor over a guy. My mate. I understand why mermaids choose their mates, then they can decide before this happens.

"Nothing is wrong with you," Xander said.

"So everyone else is wrong then? How is that possible?" I exclaimed.

"Everyone is wrong. And Nate is a fool for thinking he could find someone better than you. Ayla, you are kind, caring, loving, smart, and breathtaking. And all those people didn't deserve you." He told me, squeezing me into him.

"I'm sorry, Xander." I sobbed. This was the worst pain I'd ever felt before. Dying would be less painful than this.

"Don't be sorry. I'll always be here for you." He whispered before kissing my head.

I'm not sure how long we sat on the floor, but I didn't want to get up. My entire body ached and I didn't want to face anyone. This was my worst nightmare come true.

"Are you feeling better?" Xander finally asked.

"Not really. I think I'm out of tears." I muttered.

"Let's get you up and ready to leave." He said about to move, but I gripped onto his shirt.

"I don't think I can face him." I breathed out in despair.

"Of course, you can. You are a queen. And a queen doesn't just sit there and let someone hurt her. You will confront him because you know you deserve better. Ayla, you are perfect and if he can't see that, that's on him, not you." He said with so much conviction, I wish it could have warmed my cold dead soul. But I was now an empty shell.

"Now, get up." He stood up, taking me with him. He filled up a glass with water and passed it to me before opening the cabinet. He pulled out a pill bottle before passing me a couple of painkillers.

I rinsed my mouth out before I drank down the pills. I needed to brush my teeth, but I didn't want to move off the floor. I looked at myself in the mirror above the sink and groaned.

"Have a shower. I'm going to get us some breakfast. Then we can leave." Xander said, squeezing my shoulder. I nodded and he left, closing the door behind him.

I quickly brushed my teeth and drank a few glasses of water before I hopped into the shower. But even the hot water didn't warm me. I felt so cold and the feeling of dread was all I could feel. My life just completely took a one-eighty and I didn't know what I was going to do. How can I move on from my soulmate?

But then again, how can my soulmate cheat on me? How could Nate do that to me? Was I not enough for him? I needed answers, but then I didn't think I'd be strong enough to see him. Xander said I'm a queen, but I didn't feel like a queen. I felt like the dirt he walks on. I felt like nothing.

But then again, how can my soulmate cheat on me? How could Nate do that to me? Was I not enough for him? I needed answers, but then I didn't think I'd be strong enough to see him. Xander said I'm a queen, but I didn't feel like a queen. I felt like the dirt he walks on. I felt like nothing.

"Wolf, if you could show up now, I'd really appreciate it," I whispered before I stepped out of the shower.

With a towel wrapped around me, I finally noticed the damage I had done to my chest. I had scars all around my tattoo and Nate's mark. The tattoo was untouched by the damage to the surrounding area. I ran my fingertips over Nate's mark and tears swelled in my eyes again. I was his. I loved him and he hurt me in the worst way possible. He promised me forever.

Commander Xander

After I left Ayle, I called Prince Siles and Prince Chase to let them know what was going on. I need them on board for whatever happens now. I never thought in a million years, Nate would do something like this to Ayle. And I truly hated him for breaching her.

My next call was to King Keden. I knew I was about to light an explosive but he needed to know so we could protect her. Even though I had no idea what or where we were going now. I went to confront him, to see what he had done to her. I went there to reject him, but I know Ayle. Even though he broke her heart, she isn't a revenge seeker. She would want him to be happy even though she was miserable.

"Xender?" King Keden answered.

"King Keden, where are you," I rushed out.

"I'm just about to board the plane. What happened? Did something happen to Ayle?" He panicked.

"Something has happened, and I'm not sure how to handle it. It would seem her mate cheated on her last night." I started.

"That fucker! I fucking warned him! Even just yesterday. I'm going to kill him!" He screamed into the phone.

"King Keden, I know you are angry but I need your help with Ayle. If she is turning her back on the wolves, we need to keep her safe. I don't know what Nete is capable of. I've already informed Prince Chase and Prince Siles. Now, what do you want me to do?"

"I'll meet you both at her house here. I'm just going to confront the bastard. Then we can take her to whichever kingdom she wants to go to. I don't want our queen around anyone close to Wolfboy." He growled.

"Understood."

"And Xender, take care of her." He said before he hung up. I signed knowing what a mess this has become.

I left my room to head to the kitchen to get Ayle some breakfast before we headed out. She needed to eat and I knew chocolate pencekes would help with the pain she was feeling. It was hard to see not only our queen but my friend in so much pain and being unable to help her. The only thing I could do was be a shoulder to cry on. And I pray that will be enough for her to get through this.

Nete

I was eating in the peckhouse kitchen when Alpha Atles' voice was in my head.

"Why the hell is King Keden back?" He growled.

"I have no idea. But I'll meet you at the front doors." I linked back. I stuffed the rest of my breakfast into my mouth before clearing the dishes.

I walked through the peck house and before I stepped outside I could hear shouting. I started to panic that something had happened to Ayle. I ran upstairs to the beta floor to grab my phone. I had left it to charge as I ate breakfast.

I was up late with the guys and my phone died so I was unable to call her last night. I pray nothing happened overnight to warrant another visit from Ayle's ex.

I texted both Ayle and Xender to make sure everything was okay, while I headed back downstairs to see what all the yelling was about. Why would King Keden return here?

I didn't hear back from either of them as I exited the peck house to a furious King and Alphe. Everyone was glaring at me and I had no idea what I had done.

"What the hell is going on?" I demanded.

"How fucken dare you cheat on her you piece of s**t! I warned you about hurting her!" King Keden screamed and both the elphe and Duke growled.

"Nette, what the hell is he talking about?" Alphe Atles growled.

"Alphe, I have no idea. I would never cheat on Ayle. I love her." I told him and King Keden scoffed.

"Xender informed me this morning about what happened. Whatever you did, she felt it. She is no longer safe around you and we will be taking our queen somewhere safe."

"You will not take my mate anywhere!" I growled, belling up my fists.

"I don't think you understand, as the four kingdoms, it's our job to keep the black pearl safe. So yes, she will pick a kingdom and she will rule. And no, you will not be coming with her. Honestly, I wish I could kill you for hurting someone so pure-hearted. What the hell did she ever do to you to warrant that kind of pain?" He snarled.

"I would never hurt her!" I screamed. I moved to get in his face but Alphe Atles stepped in front of me.

"You will reject her or I will rege her. And don't you dare think for a second that I don't have wolves working for me because I do. Wolves, vampires, witches. I will make your life a living hell." He growled and all I saw was red. I pushed past the elphe. But my father, Mitch, and the elphe held me back.

"You fucken touch her and I will kill you!" I screamed, my body shaking in rage.

"You no longer have a say in her life." He shouted and I fought harder against the others.

But then again, how can my soulmate cheat on me? How could Nette do that to me? Was I not enough for him? I needed answers, but then I didn't think I'd be strong enough to see him. Xender said I'm a queen, but I didn't feel like a queen. I felt like the dirt he walks on. I felt like nothing.

"Wolf, if you could show up now, I'd really appreciate it," I whispered before I stepped out of the shower.

With a towel wrapped around me, I finally noticed the damage I had done to my chest. I had scars all around my tattoo and Note's mark. The tattoo was untouched by the damage to the surrounding area. I ran my fingertips over Note's mark and tears swelled in my eyes again. I was his. I loved him and he hurt me in the worst way possible. He promised me forever.

Commander Xonder

After I left Aylo, I called Prince Silos and Prince Chose to let them know what was going on. I need them on board for whatever happens now. I never thought in a million years, Note would do something like this to Aylo. And I truly hated him for breaking her.

My next call was to King Kodan. I knew I was about to light on explosive but he needed to know so we could protect her. Even though I had no idea what or where we were going now. I went to confront him, to see what he has done to her. I went her to reject him, but I know Aylo. Even though he broke her heart, she isn't a revenge seeker. She would want him to be happy even though she was miserable.

"Xonder?" King Kodan answered.

"King Kodan, where are you," I rushed out.

"I'm just about to board a plane. What happened? Did something happen to Aylo?" He panicked.

"Something has happened, and I'm not sure how to handle it. It would seem her mate cheated on her last night." I started.

"That fucker! I fucking warned him! Even just yesterday. I'm going to kill him!" He screamed into the phone.

"King Kodan, I know you are angry but I need your help with Aylo. If she is turning her back on the wolves, we need to keep her safe. I don't know what Note is capable of. I've already informed Prince Chose and Prince Silos. Now, what do you want me to do?"

"I'll meet you both at her house here. I'm just going to confront the bastard. Then we can take her to whichever kingdom she wants to go to. I don't want our queen around anyone close to Wolfboy." He growled.

"Understood."

"And Xonder, take care of her." He said before he hung up. I signed knowing what a mess this has become.

I left my room to head to the kitchen to get Aylo some breakfast before we headed out. She needed to eat and I knew chocolate pancakes would help with the pain she was feeling. It was hard to see not only our queen but my friend in so much pain and being unable to help her. The only thing I could do was be a shoulder to cry on. And I pray that will be enough for her to get through this.

Note

I was eating in the pockhouse kitchen when Alpo Atlos' voice was in my head.

"Why the hell is King Kodon back?" He growled.

"I have no idea. But I'll meet you at the front doors." I linked back. I stuffed the rest of my breakfast into my mouth before clearing the dishes.

I walked through the pock house and before I stepped outside I could hear shouting. I started to panic that something had happened to Aylo. I ran upstairs to the beto floor to grab my phone. I had left it to charge as I ate breakfast.

I was up late with the guys and my phone died so I was unable to call her last night. I pray nothing happened overnight to warrant another visit from Aylo's ex.

I texted both Aylo and Xonder to make sure everything was okay, while I headed back downstairs to see what all the yelling was about. Why would King Kodon return here?

I didn't hear back from either of them as I exited the pock house to a furious King and Alpo. Everyone was glaring at me and I had no idea what I had done.

"What the hell is going on?" I demanded.

"How fucking dare you cheat on her you piece of s**t! I warned you about hurting her!" King Kodon screamed and both the Alpo and Duke growled.

"Note, what the hell is he talking about?" Alpo Atlos growled.

"Alpo, I have no idea. I would never cheat on Aylo. I love her." I told him and King Kodon scoffed.

"Xonder informed me this morning about what happened. Whatever you did, she felt it. She is no longer safe around you and we will be taking our queen somewhere safe."

"You will not take my mate anywhere!" I growled, bolting up my fists.

"I don't think you understand, as the four kingdoms, it's our job to keep the block pearl safe. So yes, she will pick a kingdom and she will rule. And no, you will not be coming with her. Honestly, I wish I could kill you for hurting someone so pure-hearted. What the hell did she ever do to you to warrant that kind of pain?" He snarled.

"I would never hurt her!" I screamed. I moved to get in his face but Alpo Atlos stepped in front of me.

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Nate

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"I don't think you understand, as the four kingdoms, it's our job to keep the black pearl safe. So yes, she will pick a kingdom and she will rule. And no, you will not be coming with her. Honestly, I wish I could kill you for hurting someone so pure-hearted. What the hell did she ever do to you to warrant that kind of pain?" He snarled.

"I would never hurt her!" I screamed. I moved to get in his face but Alpha Atlas stepped in front of me.

"You will reject her or I will wage war. And don't you dare think for a second that I don't have wolves working for me because I do. Wolves, vampires, witches. I will make your life a living hell." He growled and all I saw was red. I pushed past the alpha. But my father, Mitch, and the alpha held me back.

"You fucken touch her and I will kill you!" I screamed, my body shaking in rage.

"You no longer have a say in her life." He shouted and I fought harder against the others.

"I don't know what the hell you did to make her believe that I would cheat on her but I will prove you wrong!"

"I don't know what the hell you did to make her believe that I would cheat on her but I will prove you wrong!"

"Unlike you, I love Ayla. Even if it meant watching her being happy with another. I would never hurt her to prove a point. She is everything to me and our people." King Kaden retorted before looking at his phone.

"Alpha, your daughter should be arriving in a few hours. Xander is bringing her back to the house and we will decide from there." He told him, giving him a nod.

"Keep her safe." My alpha said and I stopped fighting and whipped around shocked. He didn't believe this bullshit, did he?

I would never cheat on Ayla, ever. No other woman could ever compare to her. Why the hell would others think I would cheat? That I would hurt her?

"Nate, what happened?" My father asked, and I noticed King Kaden was gone.

"Nothing. I would never hurt her. Ask Duke, do you think for one second he would let me do something to hurt her?" I yelled in desperation. I can't believe this is happening right now.

"Duke, help me!" I yelled at him and he whimpered.

"Sirs, Nate didn't do anything wrong. We were drinking in the lounge with the guys and then he went to bed. He only had a few drinks. We were celebrating him claiming his mate." Mitch defended me.

"Duke, what happened?" Alpha Atlas growled in my head.

"Nothing, I would never let him cheat or hurt her." He whimpered and I sighed.

"Then what the hell are they talking about?" He growled out loud.

"I don't know! I don't know what is happening but I'm heading there to find out. I won't let her believe I would ever hurt her!" I growled, turning around to head home when I was hit with a punch to my chest.

"Nate, how could you!" Ruby screamed with tears running down her cheeks. I balled up my fists and my father stepped in between us.

"The next person to say I cheated on my mate is a dead wolf," I yelled, storming past everyone toward my house. I need to grab all my crap and my truck. I wasn't going to let Ayla get away.

When I made it to the house, I marched up the stairs to pack everything I had come here to grab in the first place. I was going to help more with the investigation into how they were getting through the borders but Ayla was too important. I didn't care about the victims, I just needed Ayla to believe I would never hurt her, ever.

I was stuffing clothes and things into a bag when my mother appeared at the door. I looked up and she looked like she had been crying, her eyes red and puffy.

"I didn't cheat," I said through gritted teeth.

"Nate, I love you. And I know you love Ayla. Just be careful. I don't know what happened, but something doesn't feel right." She told me, coming to sit on the edge of my bed.

"So you believe me?" I gasped out. I was ready to break down. How can anyone who I grew up with think so little of me? That's probably the worst part about all of this. No one believes me.

"If you felt pain in your heart, you would think the worst." Duke whimpered.

"I believe you would never hurt her intentionally. And if you say you didn't do it, then I believe you." She said and I let out a breath.

"At least someone believes me." I finished packing everything I thought I needed and hugged my mom before heading out to my truck. This was going to be the longest drive of my life.

When I made it outside, Mitch, David, and Max were all standing around my truck. They all had a bag and Mitch stretched out his hand when I walked closer, unlocking it with the fob.

"What are you guys doing?"

"We are coming with you. And I'm driving. You are in no condition to drive. Now give me your keys and hop in." Mitch demanded. Ruby rushed at me, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"I'm so sorry, Nate. I never should have thought the worst." She cried into my chest. I wrapped my arms around her and kissed the top of her head.

"Be safe and bring her home." She said, looking up at me.

"I'm not letting her go," I told her.

Mitch grabbed Ruby's hand and spun her into his chest. If he wasn't her future mate, I would have punched him in the face, but instead, I hopped into the front passenger seat of my truck. David and Max hopped into the back and when Mitch was done making out with my sister, he climbed in behind the wheel.

My mother and sister were standing on the porch as Mitch pulled out of the driveway. I pulled out my phone to check if Ayla or Xander messaged me back but there was nothing. I was about to lose my mind. We had a four-hour drive ahead of us and I didn't know if she was okay.

I looked through my contacts to find Alpha Matt's number. At least Xander added all the numbers I might need. I hit the call button and waited with knots in my stomach until he finally answered.

"Nate?"

"Alpha Matt, have you heard from Ayla?" I rushed out.

"I only know what the warriors and Xander told me. Did you really cheat?" He growled and I had to dig my fingers into my thigh to stop myself from breaking my phone.

"I would never. I have no idea what is happening, but I would never do that to her. Is she safe?"

"Xander texted me about an hour ago to say they were on their way back here. He said to expect King Kaden, Prince Silas, and Prince Chase. Something about them taking her to one of the kingdoms. I'm not

sure. It's a mess here," he answered.

"I'm on my way back now. I shouldn't have left in the first place. I should be there in less than four hours."

"Good, I have a feeling this is going to get ugly."

Chapter Fifty-Four

Nate

I'm glad the truck was quiet the entire way. My heart was slowly breaking and I felt helpless to do anything about it. How could Ayla even think for one second I would hurt her? I'm willing to give up everything I know for her. I'd give up anything and everything for her.

"We won't know anything until we can talk to her." Duke whimpered. I've never seen my wolf so sad before. His go-to feeling was anger, but he was as desperate as I was to get to Ayla.

I directed Mitch on how to get to the house Ayla and I share. When we pulled up, King Kaden was standing with the warriors. My warriors. This was my home and he wasn't just going to walk in there and take over. Before Mitch had parked the truck, I jumped out and tackled the king to the ground.

All hell broke loose as I fought to land as many blows as possible. All I saw was red as we rolled on the ground, both trying to get the upper hand. Duke was growling and snarling in my mind. Anger replaced the sadness he felt just moments ago. I, on the other hand, have been raging since before I left the pack. And King Kaden's face was going to be my outlet.

When we were finally pulled apart, my guys were holding me back while Alpha Matt stepped in between us. He wasn't my alpha and he couldn't command me, but I respect him as Ayla's uncle and my alpha's brother.

"Nate, calm down." I heard Prince Chase say.

"I will not! This is my home with Ayla and he will not just step in here and make demands of her." I growled. And Prince Chase sighed.

"I was rooting for you Nate, why the f**k did you have to prove me wrong," Prince Silas said, shaking his head. I didn't even notice the two of them were even here.

"Whatever you all were told is a mistake. I would never hurt her, ever! Now, instead of blaming me for something I didn't even do, how about we find Ayla and figure this out?"

"It could be magic?" Prince Chase said, and I stopped fighting to get free and looked at him.

"Witches?" I questioned and he nodded.

"If Ayla's mother was able to break the bond with her father, then there is probably a way to treat the bond." He answered.

"What!" Alpha Matt exclaimed and I cursed. We hadn't told them that Ayla's mother was still alive.

"Oops," Prince Silas cringed.

"Melody broke the bond?" Alpha Matt turned his attention to me.

"Melody is alive and yes, she broke the bond with Alpha Atlas to run away with her lover. Please don't say anything to your brother. I know Ayla wanted to tell him." I sighed and he was stunned.

"Well, f**k!" He mumbled, running a hand down his face.

I looked over at King Kaden and was surprised to find him deep in thought. I managed to get a few good blows in. His lip was split in two places and his jaw was forming a nice black bruise. I didn't even feel any of his blows, and I still don't feel any pain, even though I'm sure he hit me.

I was thankful when Ryan came rushing over to us. I knew I could trust him.

"Nate, are you alright?" He asked me. I nodded.

"Did Xander leave you in charge?" I asked him, and his eyebrows furrowed.

"Well, technically, you would be in charge. As the black pearl's mate, all the warriors fall under your rule," he answered, and King Kaden scoffed.

"I'm in charge. I out rack all of you. And I don't trust he will have Ayla's best interest anymore." He retorted and all I wanted to do was hit him again.

"King Kaden, with all due respect, Ayla officially joined the Western Kingdom this morning. So everyone in our kingdom is under her rule. And with Nate being her mate, he is the one we will be answering to." Ryan confirmed and I couldn't help but smirk. I knew I liked this guy.

"We can deal with who is in charge later. Ryan, what did you find?" Prince Chase interrupted.

"I didn't find anything. They should be back by now. Xander texted me before he left. I've been calling but there's been no answer." He answered and my heart sank.

"Nate, can you track Ayla's phone?" Mitch asked me. The thought never would have crossed my mind. If her phone was on, I could use the find my phone app.

I whipped my phone out and found the app. Ayla, Xander, and my phone were all listed in the app. Thank the goddess, Xander thought about setting this up. I clicked on Ayla's phone, which had a green dot beside it, meaning it was on. It showed it was in the middle of the ocean.

"Can I see?" Ryan asked and I handed him my phone. He looked at it and his face showed confusion and my heart sank lower. Something was wrong, it had to be.

"It shows they are only an hour out but the dot isn't moving," Ryan said, and I looked over his shoulder.

"Go back and click on Xander's phone. I have both of them listed in mine," I told him. He did what I said but the dot wasn't moving.

"If Xander is that close, you should be able to mind link him, Ryan," I said and he shook his head.

"I haven't been able to reach him. I know I should be able to but I can't." He said, and I really started to panic.

"I haven't been able to reach him. I know I should be able to but I can't." He said, and I really started to panic.

"Ryan, go out there with a few warriors and check out the area and also see if you can find the phones," I commended.

"I'll go with them," Prince Chase volunteered. Out of all the mermaids here, Prince Chase and Ryan were whom I trust the most.

"Don't worry, Nete, we'll bring back the princess and you can clear up whatever happened. I know you wouldn't hurt her." Ryan told me, clasping me on the shoulder.

"I'm trusting you both to bring them back safely," I said, and they both nodded.

"There could be a pod of something there. You know how much Princess Ayle enjoys swimming with the animals." Prince Chase said, trying to reassure me. I pray to the goddess he was right.

"I hope that is all this is," I told them.

"What do we do now?" David asked me.

"Now we wait," I said before the first wave of pain ripped through my chest.

My mark started to burn with fury as the pain brought me to my knees. I don't remember anything that was happening around me as the pain intensified. I knew something was wrong with Ayle as black dots

covered my vision. If I screamed out, I couldn't hear anything but the pounding of my own heart. My world spun until there was only darkness.

I awoke with a start, sitting right up. My body felt like I had been hit by a truck and I groaned with every movement.

"Nette, thank the goddess, we thought you died," Mitch exclaimed. He was sitting beside the bed I was lying on.

Looking around, I was no longer outside, now I was in a hospital room. I had an IV in my arm and electrodes attached to my now bare chest. David and Max were also in the room with me.

The heart monitor started going crazy as I started to remember what happened. Ayle was missing and they went to find her and Xander.

"Ayle?" I asked, ripping the electrodes off my chest. The beeping was giving me a headache. I also ripped the IV out before trying to stand up from the bed.

"They didn't find her or Xander. They did find the bag with the phones and a few broken pieces. We don't know where she is," Mitch explained. I stood up only to fall back onto the bed.

"Nette, you've been out for hours. You died. Your heart actually stopped beating. Take it easy." Max said, and I shook my head.

"I need to get to Ayle." I breathed out, my body was covered in sweat. I've never felt this terrible in my entire life.

I rubbed my chest and felt something fall into my hand. I thought it was an electrode I had missed until I looked into my hand. I let out a gasp. This can't be possible.

The piece Ayle had given me crumbled into my palm. I looked up and the others were looking at me in horror. I stumbled into the bathroom and choked on my breath. Her bit mark had faded and the wolves were almost gone. The moon was in my hand.

"Duke, what the hell is happening?" He didn't give me an answer. He was just whimpering and whining. My chest twisted painfully. Could she have died? Did I just feel her death? How can that be?

"Nette," I heard Mitch call out. All of them were looking at me through the door.

"Could she have died?" I choked out. I shook my head, not wanting to believe it.

"Nette, don't think like that. We will find her." David said.

"What else can break the bond?" I screamed, before slamming the door. I didn't want them to see me

breek down.

“f**k!” I bellowed, punching my fist through the well.

“Duke, is that what we felt?” I cried, sliding my back down the door. I rested my elbows on my knees as I broke down into sobs.

“I don’t know,” Duke whined, before leaving me to suffer alone.

What the hell was I going to do now?

Ayle

After Xender forced me to eat some breakfast since I didn’t feel like eating anything. I found my old phone and my mother’s necklace, which I had left here. I stuffed both, along with my new phone, into a waterproof bag before heading down to see my grandmother. I needed to join the pod so I could use the mind link with the others. I wonder if I could join each kingdom so I could mind link with all of them.

Then we were heading home. The thought brought tears to my eyes as it was supposed to be my home with Nete. Everything was supposed to be us against the world and now it was just me, again. I should have expected things to end this way but I was hoping my luck would have changed. I was hoping the bond would make him love me, but I was just fooling myself.

We met my grandmother by the waterfall and she let out a gasp when she saw me. I knew I looked like a mess. Red puffy eyes from crying and tear-stained cheeks. Nothing was going to help make me look normal today, or maybe ever.

“I haven’t been able to reach him. I know I should be able to but I can’t.” He said, and I really started to panic.

“Ryon, go out there with a few warriors and check out the oreo and also see if you can find the phones,” I commanded.

“I’ll go with them,” Prince Chose volunteered. Out of all the mermaids here, Prince Chose and Ryon were whom I trust the most.

“Don’t worry, Nete, we’ll bring back the princess and you can clear up whatever happened. I know you wouldn’t hurt her.” Ryon told me, closing me on the shoulder.

“I’m trusting you both to bring them back safely,” I said, and they both nodded.

“There could be a pod of something there. You know how much Princess Aylo enjoys swimming with the animals.” Prince Chose said, trying to reassure me. I pray to the goddess he was right.

"I hope that is all this is," I told them.

"What do we do now?" Dovid asked me.

"Now we wait," I said before the first wave of pain ripped through my chest.

My mark started to burn with fury as the pain brought me to my knees. I don't remember anything that was happening around me as the pain intensified. I knew something was wrong with Aylo as black dots covered my vision. If I screamed out, I couldn't hear anything but the pounding of my own heart. My world spun until there was only darkness.

I awoke with a start, sitting right up. My body felt like I had been hit by a truck and I groaned with every movement.

"Note, thank the goddess, we thought you died," Mitch exclaimed. He was sitting beside the bed I was lying on.

Looking around, I was no longer outside, now I was in a hospital room. I had an IV in my arm and electrodes attached to my now bare chest. Dovid and Mox were also in the room with me.

The heart monitor started going crazy as I started to remember what happened. Aylo was missing and they went to find her and Xonder.

"Aylo?" I asked, ripping the electrodes off my chest. The beeping was giving me a headache. I also ripped the IV out before trying to stand up from the bed.

"They didn't find her or Xonder. They did find the bag with the phones and a few broken scales. We don't know where she is," Mitch explained. I stood up only to fall back onto the bed.

"Note, you've been out for hours. You died. Your heart actually stopped beating. Take it easy." Mox said, and I shook my head.

"I need to get to Aylo." I breathed out, my body was covered in sweat. I've never felt this terrible in my entire life.

I rubbed my chest and felt something fall into my hand. I thought it was an electrode I had missed until I looked into my hand. I let out a gasp. This can't be possible.

The scale Aylo had given me crumbled into my palm. I looked up and the others were looking at me in horror. I stumbled into the bathroom and choked on my breath. Her bit mark had faded and the wolves were almost gone. The moon was in my hand.

"Duke, what the hell is happening?" He didn't give me an answer. He was just whimpering and whining.

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"Note," I heard Mitch call out. All of them were looking at me through the door.

"Could she have died?" I choked out. I shook my head, not wanting to believe it.

"Note, don't think like that. We will find her." David said.

"What else can break a bond?" I screamed, before slamming the door. I didn't want them to see me break down.

"f**k!" I bellowed, punching my fist through the wall.

"Duke, is that what we felt?" I cried, sliding my back down the door. I rested my elbows on my knees as I broke down into sobs.

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Then we were heading home. The thought brought tears to my eyes as it was supposed to be my home with Note. Everything was supposed to be us against the world and now it was just me, again. I should have expected things to end this way but I was hoping my luck would have changed. I was hoping the bond would make him love me, but I was just fooling myself.

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"Don't worry, Nate, we'll bring back the princess and you can clear up whatever happened. I know you wouldn't hurt her." Ryan told me, clasping me on the shoulder.

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We met my grandmother by the waterfall and she let out a gasp when she saw me. I knew I looked like a mess. Red puffy eyes from crying and tear-stained cheeks. Nothing was going to help make me look normal today, or maybe ever.

"Ayla, sweetheart, what happened? Is everything okay?" She exclaimed, rushing over to me.

"Ayla, sweetheart, what happened? Is everything okay?" She exclaimed, rushing over to me.

"I don't want to talk about it." I stammered. I didn't want to break down again and I could feel the lump forming in my throat.

"Okay. It's okay, sweetie. I'm here whenever you want to talk. Let's get this over with so you both can head home." She said, running her hands up and down my arms.

"Grandmother, are you sure you'll be safe here?" I asked her, concerned for her safety. I pissed off some powerful people yesterday.

"Ayla, I have my own personal guard who watches over me. I trust them with my life." She reassured me.

"She's right. I wouldn't leave if I thought her life was in danger." Xander said, and I nodded.

"Okay, now what do I need to do?" She grabbed my hand and turned it palmed up. She pricked my ring finger with her ring before doing it to herself. As soon as her blood touched mine, I could feel the connection. I let out a groan as everything came rushing all at once.

I built up the wall for the mind link but my head was now pounding even harder than it was before. I felt like I was going to be sick as I stumbled on my feet and my grandmother and Xander steadied me. My grandmother let go, but Xander still had an arm wrapped around my waist.

"I'm sorry, Ayla. I know it can be a lot. I'm so glad you decided to be a part of the kingdom." She told me with a smile on her face.

"Thank you, grandmother, for everything," I said before wrapping my arms around her. I was really going to miss her and I made a mental note to keep in touch more often.

"Now, you both should get going. You have a few hour trips ahead of you." She said before kissing my cheek. I nodded before Xander led me over to the stairs that led down to the beach.

My heart was pounding in my chest as we walked closer to the ocean. I don't think I'll be able to do this. I love Nate. And even without the bond, I would have loved him. Maybe it's because I didn't grow up with the notion of having a mate bond. Nate was everything I wanted in a partner. So I thought.

As soon as my feet touched the water, I stopped. Taking a few deep breaths, I pulled out my mother's necklace. The one I worked so hard to keep safe because it was all I had left of her. I cared more about

this stupid necklace than she ever cared about me.

I held it between my fingers for a few moments before I threw it as far as I could into the open ocean in front of me. I hate it. And I hated her. All of this could have been avoided if she had been just honest with me in the first place.

I didn't realize I was crying until Xander brushed away a tear on my cheek. I looked at him and he gave me a small smile.

"I know this has to be difficult, and I'm here for you. Whatever you need." I took his hand as we waded into the tide. As soon as we were far enough out, I let go of his hand and dived in.

I made sure to fight the shift, so I could learn how to control it longer. You never know when you'll be in the water and be unable to shift.

The shift was painful and it did nothing to help with the pain in my chest. Usually, seawater helps heal us, but I think I'm beyond help. I wonder if you could die from a broken heart?

"Ayla?" Xander asked through the mind link, nudging me with his shoulder. I didn't know how long we had been swimming, as my mind was racing with everything and nothing. I don't even remember when we got this far away from the kingdom.

"Xander?" I said back through the link. It took me a second to figure out how to find him.

"Everything will work out. It may not be what you are hoping for, but in the end, everything will be how it was supposed to be," he said. I just nodded. I don't think I'll even last that long. I physically felt like I was dying. Maybe it's the lack of sleep and food, but if I had to live the rest of my life with this feeling, I wouldn't want to live.

I jumped when Xander grabbed my hand and pulled me to a stop. He looked around in a panic, but I wasn't sure why. I didn't feel anything, but then again my body was numb. Before he could say a word, a net surrounded us.

I let out a scream as the net sent a shock through my body. My body trembled as the electric current forced its way through my body. Xander grabbed me before whipping me around. He let out a scream before pink blood diluted the water around him. All I could taste was metallic blood around me.

"Xander," I screamed as he slumped against me. I was sinking as I tried to swim against the net and hold onto Xander.

"Xander, wake up!" I pleaded as I swam harder, but it wasn't enough. I couldn't even see the wound or wounds on him, all I could see was the pink blood around us.

All I remembered was sinking before something hit my head so hard, my vision went black and all I saw

was darkness.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Ayla

I awoke with a groan. My head was pounding, and I fought the urge to empty my stomach. I was lying on something cold and hard now and I was no longer shifted. I was on my stomach as I opened my eyes slowly. The light in the room was blinding and I clamped my eyes shut.

What the hell happened? And where were we? We? Xander! My eyes shot open and I pushed myself up to look around the room. All the pain I felt earlier was replaced by panic as I found Xander lying a few feet away from me, covered in pink and red blood.

I crawled over to him and pushed my ear against his chest to make sure his heart was still beating. I can't lose him. I heard his heart pumping but it was slow. I sighed in relief that he was still alive and I could save him. I bunched up the skirt of my dress and pressed it to the opened wound on his chest. If I had to guess, it just missed his heart.

He let out a groan as I applied more pressure to stop the bleeding. I needed him alive. I just lost Nate and I couldn't lose Xander as well. I heard footsteps and heavy boots on the concrete. They were getting louder and my heart started to race. I was afraid to turn around to see who it was. The boots stopped and my body broke out in a cold sweat. I finally looked around and we were in some kind of cell. Whatever happened out there, we were kidnapped. Trapped by the people who were now standing behind me. Please Wolf, please wake up!

"It's good to see you again. Even if you do look like shit." My blood ran cold as ice as the familiar male voice rang out through the cell.

I whipped my head around, regretting my decision as my head began to spin and my vision blurred. When my eyes refocused, I was face to face with someone I never thought I would see again. Maybe at a mall in the city, but never on the other side of the bars Xander and I were now trapped behind.

"And you still can't keep your hands off of Xander, even with a mate." He smirked.

"Jordan?" I breathed out in disbelief.

"Ayla?" He mocked. I was speechless as I stared at him, leaning against the bars of the cell. How can Jordan be involved in all of this?

"By the look on your face, I can see you're confused." He chuckled.

"So much beauty, but little brains." He sighed. He signaled for a guard to open the door. I didn't even notice there were more people down here with him. I was just so shocked that Jordan could be a part of

all this.

He was a terrible boyfriend, but I never thought he was capable of doing anything like this. He was never cruel or outright mean to me. Maybe that's why I never thought he could do something like this.

Jordan stepped into the cell with a woman following behind him. I crawled back and blocked Xander behind me as best I could. Jordan always believed I was too close to Xander.

"Always protecting the weak. Xander can't protect you and neither can the rest of the mermaids." He shook his head. He snapped his fingers and two men stepped in and marched over to us.

"No, Jordan, please, stop!" I yelled. One of the men picked me off the ground and the other was going after Xander, who was still unconscious.

"Jordan, please, I'm begging you. I'll do anything you want me to, just don't hurt him, please," I cried out, tears running down my cheeks. I fought to get away from the man gripping me.

"Stop," he commanded as he tapped his finger on his chin.

"Anything?" He smirked and I knew what he wanted as his eyes trailed my body. My heart sank but I would do anything to keep Xander alive. He was all I had left.

"I promise. Please just don't hurt him. Please. He has nothing to do with this." I pleaded with him.

"Would you give up the bond with your mate to save his life?" He asked me.

"Yes," I answered without hesitation. Even if Nate didn't break me, I couldn't let them kill Xander. The bond could be restored but life could never be brought back.

"Interesting. You give up the bond with your soul mate for him?" Jordan questioned, pointing at Xander's lifeless body. I freed my arm from the man holding me and rushed over to Jordan.

"Please, I'm begging you. I'll give you anything you want. You want my body, have it. My scales are yours. Take my life, if that's what you want, but please let Xander go." I cried, gripping his shirt. I knew he was going to take those things, but I'd do anything to bargain for Xander's life.

"Ayla, answer me this. If Xander was standing where I'm standing and I was lying where he was, would you beg for my life?"

"Ayle, answer me this. If Xander was standing where I'm standing and I was lying where he was, would you beg for my life?"

"Of course, I would. I don't hate you. Our relationship didn't work but I would never do anything to

heppen to you.” I answered him honestly. I would never want anything like this to happen to anyone.

“Then I guess I can let him live until the boss gets here. You’ll have to convince him to let him live longer, but I will keep him alive for the next few days.” Jorden said, taking my cheeks into his hands.

“Thank you,” I breathed out.

“Now, let’s get this not-so-fun part over with,” he announced, and I shivered.

“What?” The woman stepped closer, her hand glowing green. She was chanting something but I couldn’t understand what she was saying. As soon as her palm touched my neck, I let out a scream.

My legs gave out but Jorden grabbed my waist and twisted my body away from his so my back was pressed up against his chest. The burning sensation continued to consume my body and I couldn’t breathe. Black dots clouded my vision until the pain became too much and then I saw nothing.

Jorden

My blood started to boil as Ayle begged for Xender’s life. He was always too close to her. It didn’t matter what I did, or how good I was to her, she would always go to him. Our relationship was good in the beginning and the sex was some of the best I’d ever had, but she was always so independent.

I was used to women throwing themselves at me. I never had to work hard to get laid or to get the women to do what I asked, but Ayle was different. Her presence demanded attention when she entered the room. I didn’t find out until later that Xender was a mermaid. It made me suspect Ayle was one as well. Why would a mermaid be hanging this far away from the ocean if he wasn’t protecting someone?

Never in my wildest dreams did I think she would be the black pearl the boss was so desperate to find. I joined the hunters because they paid well and I was able to pay for my schooling. I never thought I would be in the inner circle with the boss. He even started the hunters back in the day.

I told her I would keep Xender alive only because she answered my question honestly. I knew Ayle was a good person. She was always jumping in to help others. I never understood why, but now I know it was because she was to rule over an entire race.

I ordered Skylie, the witch in my crew, forward and she worked her magic to break the bond tying Ayle to her wolf mate. I didn’t expect to learn her father was a wolf and an elf as well. I knew black pearls were hybrids, but I thought human not wolf.

Before Ayle collapsed in my arms, her dress burst into dark purple flowers. Black scales covered her body like armor and Skylie gasped out beside me. How could this be possible? I thought as I stared at her in awe. She was willing to give up everything for the men lying on the floor unconscious. I snarled as I looked down at him, Ayle still in my arms.

"She's beautiful," Skylе breathed out, touching the black and purple scars.

"Jorden, the boss' order was to keep her unharmed and untouched." Colt reminded me, and I pushed my lips into a line.

"The only way to keep her happy is to keep him alive. If we kill him now, we risk her hurting herself. Is that something you'd like to explain to the boss?" I retorted.

"He did have beautiful scars. We could desecrate him after the boss gets what he wants." Skylе chimed in and I sighed.

"If I know Ayle, and I do, she will bargain for his freedom. Even though I want nothing more than to kill him." I growled out the least part.

Her scars reopened back, exposing her naked flesh. I pushed my finger into her now bare back to make sure she was still breathing.

"Good, we didn't kill her." I breathed out.

"If we are lucky, it killed her instead. I noticed his mark on her neck," Skylе said.

"Go get her some clothes," I told her before looking at the two other crew members.

"And both of you out," I commanded. Both of them rolled their eyes but obeyed. Fucken scum. Being a hunter doesn't attract the most decent people.

Skylе came back into the cell and helped me dress Ayle in a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt. I noticed she had lost some weight. Her body was a lot firmer than I remembered. I could feel myself getting hard just looking at her delicious body.

"Ayle, answer me this. If Xonder was standing where I'm standing and I was lying where he was, would you beg for my life?"

"Of course, I would. I don't hate you. Our relationship didn't work but I would never want anything to happen to you." I answered him honestly. I would never want anything like this to happen to anyone.

"Then I guess I can let him live until the boss gets here. You'll have to convince him to let him live longer, but I will keep him alive for the next few days." Jorden said, taking my cheeks into his hands.

"Thank you," I breathed out.

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"What?" The woman stepped closer, her hand glowing green. She was chanting something but I couldn't understand what she was saying. As soon as her palm touched my mark, I let out a scream.

My legs gave out but Jordan grabbed my waist and twisted my body away from his so my back was pressed up against his chest. The burning sensation continued to consume my body and I couldn't breathe. Black dots clouded my vision until they became too much and then I saw nothing.

Jordan

My blood started to boil as Aylo begged for Xonder's life. He was always too close to her. It didn't matter what I did, or how good I was to her, she would always go to him. Our relationship was good in the beginning and the sex was some of the best I'd ever had, but she was always so independent.

I was used to women throwing themselves at me. I never had to work hard to get laid or to get a woman to do what I asked, but Aylo was different. Her presence demanded attention when she entered a room. I didn't find out until later that Xonder was a mermaid. It made me suspect Aylo was one as well. Why would a mermaid be hanging this far away from the ocean if he wasn't protecting someone?

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"Jordan, the boss' order was to keep her unharmed and untouched." Colt reminded me, and I pushed my lips into a line.

"The only way to keep her happy is to keep him alive. If we kill him now, we risk her hurting herself. Is that something you'd like to explain to the boss?" I retorted.

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"Of course, I would. I don't hate you. Our relationship didn't work but I would never want anything to happen to you." I answered him honestly. I would never want anything like this to happen to anyone.

"Then I guess I can let him live until the boss gets here. You'll have to convince him to let him live longer, but I will keep him alive for the next few days." Jordan said, taking my cheeks into his hands.

"Thank you," I breathed out.

"Now, let's get this not-so-fun part over with," he announced, and I stammered.

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Skyla came back into the cell and helped me dress Ayla in a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt. I noticed she had lost some weight. Her body was a lot firmer than I remembered. I could feel myself getting hard just looking at her delicious body.

"What should we do with the other one?" She asked, pulling my attention away from Ayla.

"What should we do with the other one?" She asked, pulling my attention away from Ayla.

"Nothing," I said, lying Ayla down on the floor.

"Nothing? And if he dies?" She questioned and I sighed.

"Fine. Dump some sea water on his wound and get him a sheet. Nothing too comfortable. He's only alive because of Ayla." I told her. She nodded and left the cell while I watched the prisoners. I was going to be paid well for delivering Ayla to the boss. He's been waiting a long time for the chance to rule over the oceans.

Skyla came back a few moments later. She dumped some water on Xander before covering his body with a sheet. She then covered Ayla with one as well. I'm glad she thought about getting one for Ayla but I didn't voice it.

All my morals went out the window after the boss told me what she was worth. And it's not like he was planning on killing her. The plan was to rule the seas as her mate. She may not be happy, but she won't be dead.

Commander Xander

My entire body ached when I finally came to. I was cursing myself for not having warriors with us. I shouldn't have thought I could protect her myself. And now I had no idea what kind of danger we were in. I can't believe how stupid I acted.

I listened for a few minutes to my surroundings before opening my eyes. The room was dark, almost black with only a little light coming in through a small window. I groaned as I rolled over. My shoulder and chest on my right side were pounding to their own beat. I was also covered in a thin sheet.

I rolled onto my left side to see Ayla lying close by. She was also covered in a sheet but wasn't wearing her dress. I stumbled up to my knees and crawled over to her. I pushed my ear into her chest and let out a breath as I felt her heart beating.

"I am so sorry, Ayla," I whispered, taking her into my arms. I fault her.

Looking her over, I saw no blood, so I tried to wake her. I shook her gently for a few moments but she didn't open her eyes. I slid across the floor towards the wall so I could lean up against it. I placed Ayla against my chest and her legs over mine, so she was straddling me. Then I took both sheets and covered us as much as possible.

"I promise I'm going to get you out of here alive," I mumbled, kissing her forehead.

A bang had me jolting awake. I wrapped my arms tighter around Ayla, looking around in a panic. I don't remember falling asleep.

"Jordan?" I exclaimed in disbelief when my eyes met his. How the hell was Jordan here and why would he have us locked in a cell?

He was leaning against the bars with a smug expression, as I looked at him in shock. I was not expecting this. I checked everyone who I hung around with first and he came up clean. Not so much as a parking ticket.

"Still chasing the one thing you can't have?" he chuckled, shaking his head.

"Jordan, what the hell is going on?" I exclaimed.

"Has she woken up yet?" He asked instead. I looked down at her and brushed the hair off her face. Tears stained her cheeks.

"What did you do to her?" I yelled, gripping her tightly.

"I can't very well give her to the boss with that wolf's mark on her neck, could I?" He said, giving me a pointed look. My heart sank, and my stomach twisted painfully.

I didn't want Ayla to ever have to go through something like that. I was hoping the mess with Nate was just one big misunderstanding, but now, there was no bond.

"You broke the bond?" I breathed out.

"My witch did. And the only reason you are still alive is that she bargained for your life. She was ready to give me anything. Her body, her scales, and her life, as long as I saved yours. You're alive for now, but the boss isn't as merciful as I am to that pretty face of hers. I'll be back in a few hours to check on her. Enjoy this time with her, Xander. The boss will be here soon," he said before leaving. I could hear his

boots and then there was nothing but silence.

"I am so sorry, Ayla," I cried, burying my face into her neck. The pain she must have endured. I was the one that was supposed to protect her but she was willing to give up everything for my life.

My stomach twisted painfully with guilt. Ayla didn't deserve any of this and I pray the guys will find us before she is claimed by this boss of Jordan's.

"If we get out of this alive, I promise I will be better."

Chapter Fifty-Six

Nate

I'm not sure how long I sat in the bathroom of the hospital room. I was lost in my grief. Why would they have killed her? Or maybe she had to kill herself to protect me. My stomach and chest twisted painfully at the thought of her hurting herself for me. To protect me.

"Duke, do you know what happened?" I begged him to tell me something, anything.

"Her wolf didn't come forward. So I don't have any answers for you." He whimpered.

I've never cried this much in my life and the tears just wouldn't stop flowing. I didn't even know a person could cry this much. My heart felt like it was broken in my chest and I didn't want to live the rest of my life without her. No one should ever have to live without their mate, the other half of their soul.

"Nate?" My father was in my head. Had enough time passed for my father to be here?

"She's gone, Dad," I cried in despair.

"Son, have a quick shower. I know you're in pain but we have news. Please just hear us out." I could hear my father's desperation.

"What news, she's gone?"

"Just get ready, and everything will be explained." He said before he closed the link.

There's no news they could tell me that would change the gaping hole in my chest. But I got up off the floor and turned on the shower. I didn't bother to look in the mirror since I knew I looked like a mess. And I didn't want to see my now bare chest.

I stripped off my pants before hopping under the cold water. It cooled my hot skin, I shivered as goosebumps covered my body. I knew I was forever going to be cold. I failed her and now she is gone.

I stepped out of the shower, not wanting to go anywhere, but back to bed. My entire body ached but it was nothing compared to the emptiness I felt.

I walked out of the bathroom, into the hospital room with a towel wrapped around my hips. The room was now empty but there were clothes on the bed for me. After getting dressed, I opened the door to leave to find Mitch waiting for me.

He was about to say something but I held up my hand to stop him. Nothing anyone said was going to make me feel better and I didn't want their pity. Everyone was going to move on and be happy while my happiness was stolen. My life was never going to be the same.

I followed Mitch as he walked through what looked like Alpha Matt's pack house. The hospital must be in the main building. I just wanted to go home. Back to the bed Ayla and I once shared. To our room, where our scents still mingled, like they were always supposed to.

Mitch opened a door and it led to a lounge. Looking around, my father and Alpha Atlas were sitting around with the others. My father stood up but I held up my hand. I knew if he said anything or hugged me, I would break down. And that wasn't going to help anyone.

"So, what's the news that couldn't wait?" I said, my voice rough.

"I can't believe you're alive," a female voice said. I didn't notice she was sitting beside King Kaden.

"Uhm, thanks."

"He did die but the doctors got him back," Mitch confirmed, standing beside me.

"Nate, this is Zoe. She's a witch associate of mine." King Kaden introduced me.

"Okay, and what does she have to do with any of this? No offense," I asked.

"None taken," she said, standing up, she walked to stand in front of me.

"Do you mind?" She asked, looking up at me.

"What?" I questioned. Her scent hit my nose and I resisted the urge to gag. It wasn't Ayla's and it disgusted me.

"I need to see your mark," I hesitated, but I pulled up my shirt. I knew my marks were gone.

She reached her hand up to touch me and I stepped back. I didn't want anyone to touch me. She gave me a look before lowering her hand.

"I need to touch it, to feel the magic that was used. I believe a witch broke the bond. It will help us find

her.” Zoe said and I just looked down at her.

“You think she is still alive?” I breathed out.

“May I?” She pointed at my chest and I nodded.

As soon as her skin came into contact with mine, her eyes turned white and her hand glowed green. It was eerie watching her, but I couldn’t look away. I could feel everyone’s eyes, watching us. When Zoe let out a gasp, I jumped back and Mitch caught her before she fell.

“f**k,” she gasped, leaning against Mitch.

“Zoe, what did you see?” King Kaden asked, pulling her away from Mitch.

“The bond was broken. She’s still alive.”

“That’s not possible. Nothing can break a mermaid claim.” Alpha Atlas exclaimed, and I pushed my lips into a line.

“There is a way, Alpha. Ayla wanted to tell you this but there’s no point in hiding it. Melody is alive. She broke the bond with you. A mermaid needs to give their claim the scale over their hearts and consummate under the full moon. If both aren’t complete, the bond can be broken,” I explained.

“What?” He yelled, balling up his fists.

“And you can also break that bond, but it almost always leads to their death. It’s a barbaric act, one my mother went through.” King Kaden said.

Alpha Atlas sat back down and placed his head in his hands. This is not how I wanted him to find out about Ayla’s mother.

“Wait, you said she was alive? Someone broke the bond?” I rushed out, looking at Zoe. She nodded.

“It’s not easy and you should be dead. I’m surprised she is still alive. Not only were you both marked with the wolves but with the mermaids, even though it wasn’t complete, both bonds together would have been stronger than most.” She explained and I let out a breath, as hope filled me.

“Don’t be relieved just yet. Whoever has her is willing to risk her death to break the bonds. She is still in imminent danger.” She said. But that just infuriated me. My sadness was replaced by an anger I’d never felt before. I was ready to shift and rip this world apart until I found her.

Alpha Matt excused himself and I sat down beside Alpha Atlas. I was probably the last person who would be explaining things about Melody to him, especially right now. But he did have the right to know.

He didn't get the chance to learn anything about the mermaids.

"I'm sorry about Melody. Ayla wanted to be the one to tell you." I sighed.

"I found her after I left Ayla. I was looking for my mother but I found hers instead. She's living in the northern kingdom." King Kaden explained.

"So I wasted fifteen years and she could have just broken the bond?" He growled.

"She ran away with her lover. She left Ayla with no one so she could live the life she wanted," Prince Silas said, and I glared at him. Great, now we have another furious person in this room. And an alpha at that.

"King Kaden, you better keep Melody in your kingdom because if I ever see that woman again, I will kill her." The alpha growled and my father sat down on the other side of the alpha.

"I'm not going to pretend to know how you are feeling, Atlas, but right now we need to find Ayla. She is alive but we don't know for how long she will stay that way. The plan has always been for her to kill herself if she couldn't kill whoever was after her. We need to find where she was taken." My father said. And right on queue, Alpha Matt walked back into the room.

"We have a lead." He announced, placing photos on the coffee table in front of us.

"What are these?" I asked him, picking them up. A few men were loading up a crate onto the back of a truck. There were holes drilled into the wood crate and when you looked close enough you could see the shimmer of a scale.

"Scales?" I breathed out.

"And that's not all," he pointed at the back of the truck and there was pink blood.

"That fucker is Alpha Gavin, so he can not deny his involvement. He was there when they were loading up crates of scales and there was mermaid blood in the back of the truck. His truck." Alpha Matt explains, pointing at one of the men.

"Nate, I want blood," Duke growled in my head.

"Could he be working with the hunters?" I asked Alpha Matt as I handed the photo to Alpha Atlas.

"I'm not sure. This just proves that he has been hunting them. And his pack members would have been at the mate ball in Atlas' pack," he answered.

"The hunters knew about Ayla being the black pearl. I don't think this alpha would have found that information on his own. He has to be working with the hunters," King Kaden said.

That confirmation was all I needed to get up from my seat and storm out of the room. The alpha was going to tell me where my mate was being held before I killed him. I was almost at the exit of the house when Mitch grabbed my arm.

"Nate, where are you going?" He breathed out.

"I'm going to get that fucker to tell me where my mate is!" I yelled.

"Okay," Mitch said, and I whipped around.

"Okay? You aren't going to talk me out of this? Tell me how irrational I'm being. Or we need to come up with a plan." I furrowed my brows.

"If it was Ruby, would you try to talk me out of it?" He asked.

"I'd be there with you," I told him.

"So, let's go get your mate." He said, clasping my shoulder. I looked back and both alphas gave me a nod.

"Just don't tell your mother." My father said, walking up to me.

"Or Ruby," Mitch chuckled. I gave them both a nod before I spun around and walked out of the pack house. Duke was growling in my head. He's been ready for this kind of challenge for a long time now.

As soon as I stepped outside, Ryan and the other warriors were waiting for us.

"Nate, it's good to see you alive," Ryan exclaimed.

"It's good to be alive. We are heading into Crimson Tide territory. We have proof they are involved with the hunters. I won't blame any of you for staying behind," I told them.

"Ayla?" Ryan asked.

"We believe she is still alive and they most likely know where she is being held. We don't have much time. They broke the bond so she could be bonded to another." I said.

"Where do you want us?"

"Pick a wolf and team up. But remember, the alpha is mine."

Ayla

I've never been in this amount of pain, as I tried to open my eyes. Every cell in my body was screaming at me, but it was the pain in my chest that burned the most. They broke the bond with Nate and now I felt empty. I thought the pain was unbearable before, but nothing could compare to the loneliness I was now consumed with.

Xander was now awake and drawing circles on my back as he held me against his chest. I was so thankful he was alive, but I couldn't find the energy to be excited, to move. So, we just sat there in silence, as we held on to each other and I willed the tears not to fall. I did this to protect Xander, to keep him alive. And now I am going to have to live with this pain until I see Nate again.

But what if he doesn't want me now? What if breaking the bond gives him a second chance and he moves on with her? I started to sob as the thoughts of him with another filled my head. He cheated on me, didn't he? I should hate him. Be thankful the bond was broken, but I miss him so much. I miss his touch, his kiss, his scent.

"It's okay, Ayla. I'm going to get us out of here." Xander whispered, snuggling closer if that was possible.

"I miss him. I know I shouldn't but I do." I sobbed and he squeezed me.

"You love him. Love just doesn't go away because he hurt you." He said.

"What's going to happen now?" I mumbled. My body was trembling but I wasn't cold.

"Well, now we have to wait until the boss gets here and claims his prize," Jordan said, and both Xander and I jumped. I didn't even hear anyone coming.

"And who is this boss?" Xander growled out. I didn't even bother to look over my shoulder at Jordan. It didn't matter who the boss was or who was even involved in all of this.

Nothing mattered now but keeping Xander alive. And hopefully, I can kill this boss, but if not, I will kill myself so he can not claim me. I refuse to be another victim. I will take him out or die trying.

"Someone who has been waiting a long time for the birth of the black pearl. Ayla, I didn't realize you were also a princess of the Western Sea. Never thought I'd date a princess and a goddess." He chuckled and I could hear Xander gritting his teeth.

"Xander, don't look at me like that. There's still time before the boss gets here to take her for a spin. He'll kill you when he finds out, but at least you'll get a taste of her." He teased.

"Is this some kind of joke? Does Ayla's life mean nothing to you?" Xander yelled, and I looked over my shoulder to see Jordan shrug.

"The boss wants to claim her not kill her. She may not be happy, but he's not going to hurt her," he

retorted.

“Jordan, is this about money? Do you need money?” I asked, sitting up with a groan.

“Slow, take it easy,” Xander whispered, resting his forehead against mine. I fought through the pain and looked at Jordan.

“Ayla, we both know the kind of money he is paying me isn’t the kind of money you have.” He answered.

“My grandmother is the queen of the Western kingdom. She is worth over two billion dollars. And do you not think the other three kingdoms wouldn’t pay for my safe return as well? Jordan, you don’t have to do this. I can pay you whatever you want. Get you whatever you want.” I pleaded with him. He stared at me for a moment with an unreadable expression. I was praying he would help us. If he did, I would get him whatever he wanted and never see him again. I would let him live for helping us.

“There’s some food and water,” he said, pointing to the floor.

“You should eat, Ayla. I know he’ll want to have you the moment he gets you alone.” With that, he turned around and left. I slumped my head against Xander’s shoulder.

“f**k,” I breathed out.

“I will get you out of here,” Xander promised. I sat back and looked at him.

“No, I will get you out of here. I will do everything I can but I won’t let him claim me. And I won’t let you be killed.” I told him. And he took my cheeks into his hands.

“They are coming. They have to be. I called all the kingdoms before we left the western sea. They will be here.” He said, kissing my forehead. I snuggled back into him.

“I hope they get here before the boss.”

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Nate

I didn’t waste any time marching in the direction of the Crimson Tide pack lands. As soon as I hit the border, I was stopped by two of their patrolling wolves. My look said it all as they both took a step back. Duke let out a growl and my muscles ripped as my anger bubbled to the surface.

“Get Alpha Gavin here now!” I demanded. Both of them gulped, their Adam apples bobbing.

In most cases, I wouldn’t come off this aggressive but we didn’t have time for chit-chat. Ayla was in

danger and I was going to do whatever I could to get to her before she did the unthinkable.

It didn't take long before a young male wolf ran up to us. Did the alpha really send his underage son to handle this threat?

"We could use him as bait," Duke growled in my head.

"Alpha Matt, what seems to be the problem?" He asked him.

"Our problem is with your father, not you." Alpha Matt answered him.

"Okay, and what's the problem? He's in a meeting right now." He said, confused.

"Mindlink him now, and tell him if he doesn't want his son to be torn apart, he will get his ass to the border," I growled and he blanched. His eyes immediately clouded, telling me he was mind-linking someone. I wasn't going to kill him but he didn't know that.

"Whatever has happened, I'm sure we can talk about it," he said when he was done mind-linking.

"He knows where my mate is, there is no fixing this. He has been kidnapping and killing her people. I'm done talking, kid. If he doesn't show up in ten minutes, I'll rip this entire pack apart and everyone in it." I growled. He and the two warriors looked at each other. I could smell their fear. They knew I wasn't making empty threats.

Finally, after a long ten minutes, the alpha finally appeared with a few of his men. I heard my alpha growl and I wondered if he knew more than just the alpha.

"I'm here, now what is the problem that could be solved with a phone call, Alpha Matt," he said, annoyed. Duke growled and everyone froze. I was using all my strength to hold him from shifting.

"If you tell me where the hunters are holding Ayla, I won't kill you." I snarled and the fucker smirked.

"All of this is over some piece of ass mermaid?"

"Dad, he said she's his mate." His son said and he scoffed.

"Mermaids don't have fated mates."

"She's my daughter," Alpha Atlas said, stepping forward to stand beside me.

"And I smelled that fucker all over my daughter the night of the Mateball." He bellowed, pointing to one of the men. Good, I'll get to kill that fucker as well.

"If you don't tell me where my mate is, I'll just kill you and take over your pack." I threatened.

"Son, you aren't even an alpha."

"I don't have to be, to kill you," I told him before I let Duke take control and he shifted. All of the alpha's men and his son stepped back as Duke snarled at the alpha. I could see the fear in the alpha's eyes as he watched in horror at how big my wolf was. Duke wasn't a normal wolf and he didn't have a normal mate.

"Matt, we can talk this through." He stammered, not taking his eyes off of me.

"It's too late for that now." Alpha Matt said before all the other wolves shifted.

The alpha shifted and Duke started to circle his prey. Duke was almost double the size of the alpha he was about to take down. It didn't even seem fair and if I didn't have Ayla to worry about, I'd let him submit. But that wasn't the case. He was going to die for his crimes against the mermaids. And then I'm going to kill the fucker who touched my mate.

Duke lunged at the alpha's dark grey wolf and he tried to run away from us. He knew he was going to die for his human's mistakes. Duke took off at full speed and caught him in an instant, jumping on his back and sinking his teeth into his neck.

The wolf let out a howl before his body went limp beneath us and he collapsed to the ground when Duke shook his head, snapping his neck. It was a quick, easy kill and Duke let out a howl to the sky. He was now the alpha of the pack.

Everyone shifted back except for Duke, who stalked over to the alpha's son. I could see tears in his eyes as he looked at his father's lifeless body. I felt guilty for killing his father, but not the alpha who killed countless mermaids.

The mind link snapped into place with my new pack and Duke found the link to the son.

"I didn't want to have to do that but he left me no choice. You'll understand when you find your mate."

He looked at Duke for a moment before he gave him a nod. The only other body was the one who Alpha Atlas accused of touching Ayla. I was glad that fucker was dead and Duke let out a growl at his lifeless body.

"Wish I could have killed him myself."

"Nate, we should head to the pack house. He could have records of where he held them." Ryan said.

"I don't understand, records for what?" The alpha's son asked.

"Devon, we have proof of your father's involvement with the descaling and murdering of mermaids."

Alpha Matt answered. And the young alpha gasped.

"That's not possible. I see them all the time in the bay. Why would they stay if my father was killing them?" Devon retorted.

"Bay? This bay?" Ryan questioned. And he nodded.

"Nate, you head to the pack house. We'll check the bay. If mermaids are involved, that could be how they were able to get so close to Ayla and Xander." Ryan said and Duke nodded.

Duke took off towards the pack house with the other wolves following him while the mermaids went to the bay to find the mermaids. If there really were mermaids working against their own people, they would be put to death.

When we arrived at the pack house, the members were all standing, waiting for their new alpha. They would have felt his death and the link forming with us. This was going to be a change, not one I'm ready for. How did I go from barely having a pack to being the alpha of one?

"This is who we were always supposed to be. Now, go find our Luna." Duke growled before forcing me to shift. Mitch threw me a pair of shorts and I pulled them on before addressing my pack.

"Alpha Matt, what is the meaning of this?" A man stepped forward.

"Take it up with the new alpha," he shrugged. And the man looked at me.

"I'm only going to ask this once, who knew about the alpha's involvement with the mermaids?" I yelled out. I wanted to give them a chance to come forward before I started commanding people. I need to find Ayla now.

"I did, sir." A man stepped forward.

"And who were you to the previous alpha?" I demanded.

"Delta, sir. I was commanded by the alpha to deal with the mermaids." He answered.

"Commanded, against your will?" I questioned and he nodded.

"I told over for my father. He was already involved. If I had known, I never would have taken over the position when my father was killed." He explained. I could tell he was telling the truth.

"Do you know where the hunters will keep them?" I asked, and he nodded.

"Is there anyone else?" I called out.

"I can point them out?" He shrugged.

"I want them to step forward. The hunters have your Luna and if she dies because any of you withheld information, I will kill you." I promised.

"I can help find her," another man came forward.

"Good. Mitch, David, and Max take all ranking officers into custody until they swear loyalty to me. Alpha's let's go raid his office. And you two follow me." I commanded, pointing at the two that stepped forward.

A woman stumbled forward out of the crowd with a man trying to grab her. I held up my hand to stop the man. I wanted to hear whatever she had to say. This was my pack now and I didn't want to rule with an iron fist. I only killed the alpha because he wouldn't tell me where they were keeping my mate.

"Alpha, sir," she stammered.

"Alpha Nate." I introduced myself.

"Alpha Nate, what will happen to the rest of us?" I could tell there was something else bothering her.

"Is that really what you want to ask?" I asked her and she sighed.

"No. Why would the hunters have your mate?"

"She's a mermaid and not just that, but a princess of the western sea," I answered and she gasped.

"Fated?" I nodded.

"You were blessed with a mermaid as your fated mate. Alpha Nate, you are your wolf must be extraordinary to be blessed with such a mate. I, Melanie May, swear my loyalty to you, Alpha Nate," She bared her neck in submission. I watched as all the other wolves did the same.

My heart swelled with pride as I watched my pack. Even Devon had bared his neck to me. This is not how I expected today to go, but I'm glad they can all see that I had to do what I did to get to my mate. This was all for Ayla and I won't let her down.

"Thank you, Melanie. And thank you, everyone. As soon as I get my Luna back, I'll be more prepared to take over the pack." I said.

"Don't worry about us, Alpha. Go find our Luna." Melanie said, smiling at me. I gave her a nod before rushing into the pack house.

The delta led the way to the office of Alpha Gavin. The office was in disarray, with papers scattered everywhere. This was going to take too long.

"What are your names?" I asked the two newbies.

"Cooper," the former delta answered.

"Christian, Alpha," the other one answered.

"Christian, can you find the files we are looking for?" he nodded and went over to the bookcase.

"Cooper, why don't you give me the rundown on all the ranked members of the pack?"

"Well, I was the delta. Alpha Atlas killed the gamma. And Christian is the former beta," he explained.

"I killed that fucker for touching my daughter." the Alpha growled. And Cooper raised his hands.

"Eric wasn't a good man," Cooper told us.

"He was sent there to find out who your daughter was, Alpha. I'm sorry. I didn't want to be a part of any of this." Christian said, handing me a file.

"We can discuss all of that after we find my mate," I told them, opening up the file.

The file was full of photos of men and women. There were also photos of bodies, scales, and a list of people who bought them. There was also an order for the black pearl mermaid. The price for them was five hundred million dollars. I don't think they knew if she was male or female. Whoever it was, was just looking for whoever the black pearl was.

"Do you know these people?" I asked them. I handed a photo to Cooper before handing the file over to Alpha Atlas.

"That's Jordan, Faith, and Kai. They are part of the hunters. Alpha Gavin was paranoid about the hunters and made sure to have some dirt on them," Christian answered.

"Jordan?" I said out loud. There's no way it could be the same Jordan, could it?

"Where's King Kaden and Zoe?" I questioned.

"Nate, what's wrong?" Alpha Atlas asked me.

"Ayla dated a Jordan after King Kaden," I told him.

My father entered my new office with King Kaden and Zoe following behind him. Alpha Atlas must have

mind-linked him.

"Zoe, can you manipulate the bond to make a person believe their mate cheated?" I asked her. King Kaden scoffed and Zoe grabbed his arm.

"If you can break the bond, you can manipulate it. It's not easy, but it can be done," she answered.

"Now, do either of you recognize any of the people in this photo?" I passed them the photo I had passed to Alpha Atlas.

"I know the witch. Her name is Faith, she is very powerful," Zoe said.

"I don't think I recognize them, why?" King Kaden asked, still looking at the photo.

"Jordan is the blonde one. Ayla's ex was also a Jordan." I told him.

"And you don't know what he looks like?" he questioned.

"I never met him. I think he was one of Xander's friends, but I'm not sure," I told him.

"Check Xander's phone, he could have pictures of the three of them. Or go through his social media. There has to be a picture of that guy somewhere." Zoe said.

"Zoe, can you go find Xander's phone while we figure out where they might be keeping them," I said.

"I'll try to find something personal of Xander's as well. It will help me track him." She said. King Kaden grabbed her arm before she rushed out of the office.

"Ayla has a necklace from her mother. If we can find it, that would give us the best chance of finding her," he said.

"I haven't seen the necklace in some time. I think she left it at the palace." I told them.

"Is there anything she might have that would be as personal as that necklace?" Zoe asked me and I shook my head.

"The only other thing would be her dog, Bluey." I shrugged.

"Is her dog here?"

"No, why?"

"If you can get the dog here, I might be able to track her. We don't usually track using living things, but it

might be the only way." She explained.

"I'll get Jim to bring Bluey here. It will take a few hours," Alpha Atlas told her.

"In the meantime, I will see if this Xander has anything and I'll find his phone," Zoe said before she left the office. Alpha Atlas left the office to contact his father about bringing Bluey here. She might be our only hope of finding Ayla.

"Alpha, this is a map with all the locations marked on it. This is where all the pickups happen or meetings." Christian said, bringing my attention back to our search. He laid out a map that covered the desk.

Looking at the map, there were over a dozen places marked. We didn't have time to check them all. And we didn't even know what we were walking into. I growled out in frustration. This was going to take too long. We need to find her now.

"There are too many places to check. Where would be the most logical place to hold her?" I asked the two.

"I'm not sure. Besides being your mate and a princess, is there anything else about her?" Christian asked, and I growled. He paled and looked at Cooper.

"I meant no disrespect. But the rarer scales were held at different locations than the more common ones," he clarified.

"She's the black pearl," I sighed and they both gasped, before pointing at the same spot on the map.

"The boss, Dante, has been looking for the black pearl for decades. Some say even centuries," Cooper said.

"Centuries? No one can live that long." I questioned.

"He's a vampire. It's rumored he started the hunters to seek revenge on the mermaids. No one seems to know why, but he pays well for any information regarding the black pearl. He even has a five hundred million dollar reward for anyone to bring him the black pearl," he explained.

"Vampires? Why am I just hearing about them now?"

"Vampires haven't been a threat to the wolves in centuries, since we signed the treaties. Most packs only teach about vampires if there are vampires around their packs. But we can usually smell them." Alpha Matt said, and I sighed. Just more s**t I was going to have to learn, along with everything else.

"f**k," I yelled, punching my fist into the wall.

"Nate," my father exclaimed.

"No, this is taking too long. We need to get to her now." I screamed out, pulling my now bloody fist from the wall. Just then, Zoe ran back into the room, waving a phone around.

"I found him." She announced. Walking over to me, she showed me a picture of Xander with a bunch of other guys. They seem to be at a bar or club. I didn't see Ayla, but I did recognize one of the guys Cooper confirmed to be Jordan.

"Xander knows Jordan," I growled, balling up my fists. If he was involved in any of this, I would rip him apart.

"Son, he could just know him from living in the city. Do you think Xander would hurt Ayla?" my father said.

"Then why would he have let his friend date her? It was his job to protect her. To check all the people who were around her. She had been dating a hunter for almost a year and, you're telling me, he didn't know. He should have known." my voice rose with every word I spoke until I was shouting.

"Jim is on his way with Bluey," Alpha Atlas said as he entered the office.

"Good. Zoe, you will wait here for him to arrive. We will keep in contact, and if this location doesn't pan out, then it's up to you to find her." I commanded and she nodded.

"Nate, where are you going?" My former alpha asked me. I pointed to the spot on the map that Cooper and Christian pointed to.

"We are going to go find Ayla."

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Ayla *trigger warning*

Xander moved me off of him to collect the food and water for us. I didn't feel like eating. I should have been worried about meeting this boss of Jordan's, but I couldn't force myself to feel anything but emptiness. The saying 'you never knew what you had until it's gone,' rang true.

I felt weak and pathetic sitting here, wallowing over someone who I know cheated. The pain wasn't the same as before. Before, it was quick and took my breath away. This pain was deep and everlasting as it twisted my soul until it broke. I don't understand why he would do that to me. Why would he want me to feel such pain?

And here I was, crying over a bond that broke me but I craved it. I craved everything about Nate. I never wanted anyone as much as I wanted Nate, and now I may never have him again. I'm not sure why I

thought I had Xander or even Kaden. Maybe I needed a backup plan for when Nate truly saw me. The moment he realized he could never love me.

I'm so broken, I couldn't even trust the people I loved more than anything. I was so afraid of loving him, just to have him leave me. I don't think I could handle another heartbreak. Why the goddesses thought I was perfect for this, I'll never know. I'm no princess or black pearl.

How can I inspire others? Save an entire race, when I can't even inspire or save myself? I was nothing, and one day soon, the goddesses will come back and take it all back. The dark thoughts just kept coming as I thought about what might happen.

"Ayla, please eat." Xander pushed against my shoulder with his, pulling me from my thoughts.

"I'm okay," I whispered, wrapping my arms around my knees.

"Please, just drink some water?" He pleaded, holding out a bottle of water.

I took the bottle and took a long drink. I was thirsting but I didn't care to drink more. I always had to be this strong, independent woman, even when I was still a teen and I just didn't have the strength anymore. If the world fell apart, does it really matter? Is there anything to live for anymore?

I heard heavy footsteps, and I didn't even bother to look up when they stopped. I knew everything was about to change.

"Xander, stand down," Jordan commanded. I heard Xander growl as he stood up beside me.

"Ayla, come to me." He demanded. I sighed before standing up, stumbling as I tried to get my footing. This was the first time I was standing after the breaking of the bond.

"Don't," Xander warned me, as he steadied me on my feet.

"I made a deal," I told him before I walked over to Jordan. My stomach twisted as I watched him, watching me.

Jordan twisted the lock on the cell door, opening it. He pulled me against him before slamming the door shut. My skin crawled from his touch and I had to remind myself I was doing this to keep Xander alive. He was trained in this. If anyone could escape, it's him.

"Good girl," he purred against my ear.

"Stop, take me instead!" Xander yelled, grabbing me through the bars. He pulled me away from Jordan, gripping me tightly. I brought a hand to his cheek and he leaned into my touch.

"Don't do this, Ayla," he begged.

"It's okay, Xander. When you get out of here, promise me, you'll live the life you always wanted." I told him with tears in my eyes. His grip tightened, as tears built in his eyes.

"Ayla, please?" he whispered.

"I love you, Xander. Please tell everyone how much I love them." I cried, unable to hold myself together. This felt like a final goodbye as Jordan pulled me out of Xander's grip.

"Be good. I won't hesitate to kill him." Jordan hissed in my ear as he gripped my arm painfully. He dragged me up the steps leading away from the cells. I could hear Xander yelling behind us.

Moments later, he pushed me into a room and closed the door behind us. Looking around the room, there was a bed, a table, and two chairs. It wasn't anything special. Jordan came up behind me, grabbing my throat with one hand while the other gripped one of my breasts, painfully. Scales cover my body as I let out a gasp.

"You owe me, Ayla. Now, get rid of the scales." Jordan growled in my ear. Tears pricked my eyes, as his grip tightened like a vice. If I didn't do this, he would kill Xander.

I took a deep breath and willed the scales to disappear. It took a few more breaths but the scales finally vanished, leaving me naked.

"Such a good girl," he purred against my neck.

"Please, don't do this, Jordan," I pleaded.

"If you go back on your part of the deal, I will as well. And I know you don't want poor Xander to die." He taunted me and I gulped. I shook my head and he cupped my core.

I didn't make a sound, and I willed the tears to stop falling. He will never know how much this will affect me. It's just a body, he will never have my soul. I can get through this, like everything else.

He pushed me towards the bed and I stumbled, falling half off the bed. He undid his belt before stalking over to me and throwing me on the bed, onto my stomach. Jordan grabbed me by my ankles and pulled me down the bed closer to him, before smacking my ass hard. I could feel the marking forming as he leaned over me.

"If Dante asks, you came onto me. Got it?" He growled, nipping my neck. I nodded. He readjusted himself behind me and I closed my eyes waiting for this all to be over.

"I'm here, Ayla. Breathe." A voice whispered in my head. I thought I was going to burst into sobs. I wasn't alone.

"Relax and let me take control." The voice said. I whimpered as Jordan entered me harshly.

"Please, help," I begged the voice. It felt like my mind was pushed further into my skull, as the pain from what was being done to me, faded until I felt nothing.

Jordan's grunts pulled me back to my reality, and I gasped when he smacked my ass again. I held in my tears as I heard him doing up his belt behind me. I wasn't going to break yet.

"Now, go shower and get dressed." He demanded before he left the room, slamming the door behind him. I heard him lock the door.

I slid off the bed, crumbling into myself, as I tried to control my sobs. How did I ever care for such a monster?

"Ayla, go wash his scent off." The voice said.

Getting up was difficult as my core throbbed. Once I was standing, blood rushed down my thighs. I stumbled to the bathroom to get myself cleaned up. Once the shower was hot, I climbed in and let the sobs out. I scrubbed my skin raw with my nails, trying to rid myself of the feeling of his body against mine.

"Ayla, I'm Kaia, your wolf. I wish I could help more, but with the bond breaking, I'm very weak." My wolf whispered, and my heart broke for her.

"I'm just glad you are here. You have no idea how much I need a friend right now." I cried.

"We will get through this together. And you were never alone, Ayla. You will always have Nate and Duke." She mumbled before I could no longer feel her.

I sat under the hot water and sobbed until the water ran cold. I didn't want to move. I didn't want to have to do this alone. I know my poor wolf is heartbroken, but I needed her.

"I'm still with you, Ayla. I'm just resting. I will need my strength when we face Dante. I'll always be with you. Now get dressed and show these fuckers why you are the black pearl."

"Okay," I whispered. Hearing her words was just what I needed to get out of the shower and get dressed. I needed to face them. I had to be strong for my family and my people.

As I was drying off, the bleeding between my legs had stopped. I was still sore but it was more manageable now. My poor wolf was working overtime, even in her own pain. If my wolf can do all this for me, then I will get her back to her mate. To our mate.

I wrapped the towel around myself before entering the room again. The witch from earlier was sitting

on the bed with clothes folded on her lap. She stood up from the bed and walked towards me.

“Did he hurt you?” She asked, handing me the clothes. I stared at her for a moment before shaking my head. She didn’t need to know what he did to me.

I took the clothes she offered as she watched me. I knew she didn’t believe me. I could see the blood on the sheet of the bed.

“Get dressed and knock on the door when you’re done. I’ll be waiting. The boss is almost here.” She said before she left me alone.

I let out a sigh as I placed the clothes on the table. I say clothes, but it was a medium-length maxi dress and a pair of flats. They didn’t even give me underwear or a bra. I rolled my eyes as I pulled on the dress. It was tight and I felt like my breasts were going to spill over the neckline. With all these men here and they couldn’t find anything bigger and not a dress.

I went into the bathroom to look at myself in the mirror as I dried my hair the best I could. I had dark circles around my eyes and it looked like I hadn’t slept in days. But I don’t think my looks matter, I’m wanted because I’m the black pearl, not because I’m Ayla.

After fixing my breasts in this black dress, I put the flats on before I knocked at the door. My stomach twisted painfully as I waited for the witch to answer. In minutes I was about to be face-to-face with this Dante character. The boss of the hunters.

“You got this, Ayla. You are stronger than you know.” Kaia whispered. I took a few deep breaths before the door opened and the witch was staring at me.

Without a word, I followed behind her as she led me to the boss. I can do this, I said to myself over and over again, hoping I’d finally believe those words.

We walked up to a double door with two burly men in suits watching the doors. They were both wearing sunglasses so I couldn’t see their eyes. After a moment, one of them opened a door and the witch pushed me through the doorway. I stumbled but composed myself quickly. I needed to show I was brave even if I didn’t feel it.

A man was sitting behind a large oak desk, and Jordan was sitting in one of the chairs in front of it. The man had black hair, shaved short on the sides and longer on top. He was pale and had the most intense ice-blue eyes I’d ever seen. When his eyes met mine, it was like he was looking into my soul. He felt familiar, even though I don’t remember ever meeting him before. And I would have remembered those eyes.

“Finally,” he breathed out and goosebumps covered my body.

"Before we get to the thing at hand, Jordan has informed me of the debt you paid to him for keeping the other mermaid alive. Is this true?" He commanded. I looked at Jordan before looking back at the boss.

"Yes, sir. Xander has nothing to do with this." I answered, sounding braver than I felt. I clasped my hands in front of me to stop them from shaking.

"And do you love this Xander?" He asked, nonchalantly.

"He's my best friend. And if you let him go unharmed. I'll do anything that you ask of me." I said, and that seemed to pique his interest.

"Anything can be many things. Are you sure this mermaid is worth that?" His voice demanded.

"Xander's life is worth that and so much more to me. Please, let him go?" I pleaded. The boss leaned back in his chair and watched me intently. My stomach twisted painfully and I broke out in a cold sweat as I waited for him to answer. I was just about ready to fight when he finally answered.

"Very well. Jordan will release the prisoner, unharmed. She paid her debt to you, so I believe she is trustworthy."

"Sir, he will come back for her," Jordan exclaimed, but he brushed him off.

"And we will deal with it when the time comes. Now both of you leave." He commanded. Jordan and the witch bowed their heads. Jordan gave me one last look before he followed the witch out, closing the door behind them.

"Ayla, I've been waiting for you for a very long time," he said, as he stood up from his chair. I gulped as he stalked toward me.

"Sir," I stammered.

With every step he took towards me, I took a step back until my back hit the wall and he was now standing over me. His eyes locked with mine, as my chest heaved. He took a step closer, pinning my body against the wall with his. There was no more room between us.

"You will call me Dante, and you will claim me." He purred, running a finger down my cheek. I bit down on my lower lip to hold the gasp about to escape from his touch.

"Dante, why do you want me to claim you?" I whispered, looking up at him. His hands gripped my hips as he leaned his head down, his lips against my ear.

"I love the way you say my name," he purred, pushing his crutch against me.

"I don't understand, why do you want me?" I asked, my hands on his chest, trying to push him. He didn't

budge, which I'm not surprised. He was at least a foot taller than me and he was bulky with hard muscles.

He let out a sigh against my neck, and I whimpered as his fingertips dug into my hips, harder. I shouldn't have opened my big mouth but I wanted to know who Dante was and why he was looking for me. I needed answers before my death. He pulled away and looked down at me.

"How much do you know about the black pearl legend?" He asked.

"I know, the first was a witch/mermaid and the second was a vampire/mermaid but he was killed because he couldn't prove himself worthy," I answered. He growled and I froze. He glared down at me with murder in his eyes, and my entire body trembled under his stare. I pushed myself as close to the wall as possible, trying to create some distance between us.

I flinched when he rested his forehand against mine. He let out a sigh and his grip softened. My heart was racing and I thought it was going to beat out of my chest. I've never felt fear like this before.

"I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to scare you." He mumbled, kissing my forehead.

"I didn't mean to upset you," I whispered. He took ahold of my cheeks and forced me to look up at him.

"I was worthy of being the black pearl. It was the goddess who took everything away from me." He said and I gasped.

"That's not possible."

"I'm a vampire. The goddess may have taken the mermaid half of me, but I survived because of the vampire blood running through my veins. And now, I will finally rule over the seas with you, the black pearl by my side."

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Ayla

I stared at Dante, stunned by what he had just told me. How the hell can someone live as long as he has? I know nothing about vampires. And now I was faced to face with one. And he wanted me to mark him so he could rule the seas beside me. I'm sure he wants to rule the seas and keep me prisoner.

"You're incredibly sexy when you're thinking," Dante purred, pulling me from my thoughts as he kissed my neck. I dug my nails into his chest as I held in a moan.

I don't know why my body was reacting this way. I should be terrified, pushing him away and demanding that he never touch me, but I couldn't. His touch excited me.

"I can smell your arousal, Ayla. And f**k, does it smell delicious." He groaned against my ear, pushing his hardened length against me. Goosebumps covered my body.

The door was thrown open, causing me to jump. Dante held me tighter as he let out a groan.

"Sir, I'm sorry to disturb you. But Jordan and Veronica are dead and the prisoner escaped." He informed him. I gasped.

"Good, get the car ready. We are leaving." Dante ordered.

"Yes, sir," the man said before he left the room.

I could feel Dante's eyes on me as I stared at the door stunned. Jordan is dead and Xander escaped. He gripped my chin, forcing me to look up at him.

"Are you okay?" He asked softly.

"I don't understand," I breathed out.

"I could smell your blood, Ayla. He made you bleed and no one hurts what is mine." He growled.

"That was your plan all along?" I gasped and he nodded.

"Your friend just saved me a whole lot of money." He grinned. But I was still stunned.

"No one is ever going to hurt you again." He mumbled, kissing my forehead.

"Now, come, the car is waiting." He took my hand in his and led me off of the office.

"And where are you taking me?" I panicked. He stopped in his tracks and looked back at me.

"Home."

Home? And where is this home? I had a feeling I was never going to see Nate or my family again. And since I had no idea what vampires could do, I didn't know how to kill one. Is it a stalk to the heart, like in all the books, or is that something made up? Werewolves don't just shift under a full moon.

My mind was racing as I was pulled out of the house and onto the porch. I let out a gasp at the scene in front of me. Jordan and the witch's body lay on the ground, covered in blood. My body started to shake as tears filled my eyes. Hearing it and seeing it with your own two eyes was so different.

Dante stepped in front of me, blocking the scene as he barked orders to his men. He wrapped my arms around his neck before picking me up with his hands on my thighs. I wrapped my legs around his waist.

"Keep your face against my chest, baby." He whispered. I buried my face against him, no longer wanting to look at the horrific scene.

"Get this place cleaned up and then move out." Dante, demanded as he walked with me in his arms. My body was shaking and I couldn't contain it. I was going into shock and after the few days I've had and what Jordan did to me, I was about ready to break.

All of this was just too much, and I began to sob against Dante's chest. I thought he would be angry but instead, he whispered sweet words and kissed my temple. He was so caring and I didn't understand how this man could be such a monster to others, but so sweet to me. He even had Jordan killed for touching me. But was it because he believed I was his or was it simply because he hurt me?

Dante placed me down and I pulled away to notice he had placed me in one of the vehicles. I slid over and he climbed in beside me. Wrapping an arm around my shoulders, he pulled me against him.

"Airport," he said, and I snapped out of my daze.

"Airport?" I stammered.

"You don't think I'd live in a place like that, do you?" He chuckled.

"Uh-no," I shrugged and he squeezed me. I sniffled and took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry you had to see that." He mumbled, kissing my temple.

I nodded and closed my eyes. I felt like the weight of the world was on top of me, suffocating me. Everything that happened today has just been too much to handle. I'm just thankful Xander was able to get away. I knew he had killed Jordan.

"Ayla, get some rest. We are going to need it." Kaia whispered.

I let my mind wander to Nate, as another man held me close. I hope he was okay and I pray to the goddesses he will get a second chance.

Nate

The drive to the location felt like a lifetime as we finally pulled up to our meet-up point. We were about an hour south of the location. The plan was to shift and run the rest of the way there. I knew it would be heavily guarded if Ayla was being held there. I just pray we weren't too late.

Alpha Matt stayed behind to handle my pack while I was here looking for Ayla. I brought the former beta and gamma with me. They could be of use since they knew who these people were. King Kaden also sent his witch, Zoe, with us. Prince Chase, Prince Silas, and King Kaden all went back to their kingdoms to get their warriors ready. This was going to be a war and one we couldn't afford to lose.

Looking at the map on the hood of my truck, I was explaining the plan one more time before we headed out. Nothing could go wrong if we planned on getting Ayla out alive.

“Zoe, you ride with Max. Everyone else, pick a partner. Alpha Atlas, you are with me. We will spread out, staying to the south. The wind is to the north of us and will carry our scents to the south. Stay with your partner so either Alpha Atlas or myself can mind link. Now, is everyone ready?” I asked, looking around at everyone.

“Let’s go get my daughter.” Alpha Atlas growled and I nodded.

“Zoe, grab the bag. If anything happens, we will meet back here.” I told them. All of them nodded and Zoe grabbed the bag carrying extra clothes and water.

Duke was growling in my head as I waited for everyone to shift. I knew Duke would make it there in no time but I needed to stay with the group. I had to make sure they were safe as well. My skin rippled as the need to shift took over.

As soon as Duke forced the shift, he took off, with the others struggling to keep up.

“Duke, slow down. We can’t do this alone. We have no idea what we are walking into.” I scolded him and he huffed.

“Mate is in danger. I’m done waiting.” He growled and increased his speed. There was nothing I could do to slow him down. I was just as eager to get to her, but I didn’t need to rush in there and get her killed. I had to think logically as much as I didn’t want to. I wanted nothing more than to rush in there and rip everyone apart for even thinking they could lay a finger on my mate.

We may not share a bond anymore, but she was still mine. I didn’t reject her and she didn’t reject me.

We came upon the building faster than I expected. It was in the distance. I shifted back and hid behind a tree, getting down low. I could see a few vehicles and a few men standing around outside.

The place looked like a small house. It didn’t look like much, but with all the men standing around and the expensive vehicles, I knew we were in the right place. Why would they be here if someone important wasn’t here?

It didn’t take long before Alpha Atlas came up beside me, watching the scene. I was trying to determine how many men they had and where would be a good surprise point. Before I could formulate a plan, Xander was pushed out of the front door with Jordan walking behind him. I had to hold Duke back from growling to not alert the others to our location. A woman stepped out behind Jordan from the house.

“She’s the witch,” Zoe whispered beside me. I almost jumped last in my sea of emotions at seeing this

piece of s**t. I wanted nothing more than to rip him apart.

Xander started shouting and I wish I could hear what he was saying. He was furious and then all hell broke loose. Xander broke his wrist restraints before punching Jordan in the face. The witch started to glow green but Xander stabbed her in the neck before turning his attention back to Jordan.

Everything was happening so fast that I didn't even see what he stabbed her with. She fell to the ground, blood spilling from her neck. I heard a crack and turned my attention back to Xander and Jordan. Xander had broken his neck before tossing his lifeless body to the ground.

None of the other men moved toward Xander as he took off in our direction. The men stayed grounded at their spots, which was unusual. Why wouldn't they want to avenge their comrades?

Xander didn't see us as he ran past us a few meters away. He was running in the direction of the vehicles so I wasn't worried. We will catch him.

"I sent Mitch to get Xander." Alpha Atlas whispered to me. I nodded, my eyes looked at the scene by the house.

The door opened once again and a tall man with dark hair walked out, dragging Ayla with him.

"Go to mate," Duke growled. I was about to move but Alpha Atlas stopped me.

"Be rational, he's a vampire." He whispered.

"How?" I whispered yelled. He just pointed to his nose. I didn't know what a vampire smelt like but Ayla's sweet scent hit my nose as the wind blew and my heart skipped a beat.

I watched as she stopped in her tracks. She looked horrified as she looked at the scene in front of her. Her body started to tremble. I didn't expect the man who was pulling her outside to pick her up and carry her to one of the vehicles.

"He is touching our mate!" Duke snarled and I could feel my fury bubbling to the surface.

The man was barking orders before he slid into one of the vehicles with Ayla. Some of the men jumped into other vehicles and took off with the vehicle holding Ayla. While others started to clean up the bodies.

"We need to follow the vehicles," I whispered to Alpha Atlas.

"That could get her killed. After they leave, we will head inside to collect evidence." He whispered back.

"I can't just let them take her." I gritted my teeth. I was starting to shake as my anger and frustration grew. I was growing impatient. I needed to get to Ayla.

"We need to talk to Xander. If we rush in there, they could alert their boss and he might hurt her. I know this is hard, Nate. She is my child and I want nothing more than to rush in there and kill everyone. But we need to be patient," he whispered firmly.

It seemed like the men took forever to leave. Every minute felt like hours. Xander finally arrived at my side and when I looked over at him, he looked like s**t. Whatever happened, he must have taken the brunt of it.

"You okay?" I quietly asked. He looked at me for a moment before shaking his head. My heart fell into my stomach. Whatever he had to tell us was not going to be good.

As soon as the last vehicle pulled out, I let out the breath I was holding in. I needed to get in there to find where they were taking her. I needed to get to her before she followed through with her plan. I knew since we were no longer bonded that she wouldn't hesitate.

"Xander, what happened?" I asked him. And he looked at me. Before he answered, he punched me in the face.

"What the f**k?" I turned back to him, rubbing my jaw.

"That's for fucken cheating on her, you bastard! What the hell is wrong with you?" he yelled. And I shook my head.

"It was magic." Zoe chimed in. We all looked at her and she was looking at the sky. I forgot that we were all naked, except Xander.

"What do you mean magic? Nate, who is this?" he exclaimed.

"Magic can be used to manipulate the bond. I'm sure they did it to make the bond weaker. Breaking a bond is not an easy task," Zoe explained.

"Damnit." He bellowed.

"What?" Alpha Atlas asked, standing beside me. Xander was cursing and mumbling to himself.

"I couldn't minklink with Ayla when Jordan dragged her away. I don't know what happened. All I know is that after some time, Jordan came down to the cells and dragged me outside. He said Ayla had agreed to the boss's terms and I was being released." He explained.

"Then why did you kill him? You were being released." I questioned.

"Because I know that fucker touched her!" Both Alpha Atlas and I growled.

"Nate, this is bad. She believes you don't love her. She is going to do whatever it takes to keep us safe." He rushed out.

"Who's the boss? I know he's a vampire." Alpha Atlas questioned him.

"I don't know. I didn't meet him." Xander sighed.

"But they broke the bond, meaning he wants to mark her. I don't know anything about vampires." He growled.

"They bite their mates, like werewolves. But they also drink each other's blood." Zoe said, still looking at the sky.

"Xander, how long does it take for scales to grow back?" I asked him, panicking.

"About a week. Why?" He questioned before his eyes went wide.

"We only have a few days before the scale over her heart is back and she can claim him. How long do we have until the full moon?"

"Ten days. We have ten days to find her." Alpha Atlas said.

"f**k," I yelled. I needed to get to her now. I can't let another man claim her. Duke was whimpering in my head.

"Let's go check out the house. Hopefully, they made a mistake and left important information." Alpha Atlas said, clapping my shoulder.

I entered the house with Alpha Atlas, Xander, and Zoe. I immediately followed Ayla's scent. It first led me to an office. There was nothing but furniture in the room. Then I followed it into a bedroom. The bed was stripped down but there was a pile of sheets on the floor. As soon as I picked up the sheet, Duke let out a murderous growl. I heard the others coming running.

All I saw was red as I looked at the sheet. There was Ayla's blood and I immediately knew what had happened to her. And there was no mistaking the scent of her blood.

The others entered the room and all of them cursed.

"Who the f**k did this?" Alpha Atlas screamed. He was shaking with rage.

"Jordan. I can smell his cologne." Xander said through gritted teeth.

"It's a good thing that fucker is dead because I want nothing more than to rip him apart," I growled,

dropping the sheet.

Zoe came forward and picked up the sheet, inspecting it.

“What is it?”

“Is this just her blood? If it is, I can track her.” She said. I smelled the sheet again, my claws growing from my fingertips as Duke fought to come forward.

There was another scent mixed with her blood and just the thought of another man inside my Ayla brought forth this fury I’d never experienced before. If I was furious before, I am murderous now.

“It’s tainted, leave it,” I growled, storming out of the room and then the house. I needed to get some air. The weight of everything that was happening was crushing me. She must have been so scared and I wasn’t there to protect her.

“Nate, this isn’t your fault.” I heard Xander say.

“No, it’s yours! Why the f**k were you traveling without any warriors?” I screamed. He looked at me with guilt.

“I don’t have an answer. I was trying to get her home. She was devastated after feeling whatever she did. She just wanted to go home and I was afraid she would just leave if I told her to wait.” He shook his head.

“There is no point in pointing out the blame. Right now, we need to focus on getting Ayla back. Let’s head back to the vehicles so we can get back. Dad and Bluey will be there by now and Zoe can try to track down Ayla.” Alpha Atlas told us.

I sighed, looking back at the house. There was nothing left in it. It was a dead end to Ayla’s location and we were running out of time. I just hope she keeps herself alive long enough for us to find her.

Chapter Sixty

Ayla

My head was pounding as I came to. I wasn’t sure where I was now, but I was no longer being held by Dante. That was a relief. I’m not sure why I was ever that weak.

I heard muffled voices but they went quiet as I whimpered, trying to open my eyes. The light caused my head to pound harder, and the feeling was making me nauseous. Did I hit my head? I was trying to remember as I sat up, squinting as I looked around.

“Baby, how are you feeling?” Dante was now beside me. I had been lying on a couch and there were

seats around me. I think I was on a plane. I jumped when Dante placed his hand on my bare thigh.

"It's okay, baby. It's just me." He whispered.

"My head hurts," I whimpered. Dante moved to sit behind me and pulled me down against him.

"Ezekiel, get some painkillers," Dante called out, and I whimpered again.

"I'm sorry, love." He whispered, kissing my temple.

My skin crawled at his touch but I was too weak to fight. I was torn between being left alone with my demons and being afraid to be alone with them. But I didn't want Dante. I would never want him like I crave Nate.

"My queen," a man's voice said. I squinted, as I looked up to find a man standing over me. He had a bottle of water in his hands.

He handed me a couple of pills and a bottle of water. I drank down the pills and the entire bottle of water and I still wasn't satisfied. But I decided against asking for another bottle.

Dante took the bottle from me and handed it back to the other man. He then lowered me back so my head was now in his lap. I always had to be nice to men I disliked while working with Mr. Ferguson, so I was just going to have to put on my best face if I wanted to get out of this alive.

"Feeling better?" Dante asked, playing with my hair. I nodded against his thigh.

My body started to shiver uncontrollably, even after Dante placed a blanket over me. I was trying to think of nothing so I wouldn't break down. This wasn't the time or place for me to let my emotions get the better of me.

"We are almost home try to get some sleep," Dante said. He had one hand in my hair and the other one was drawing circles on my hip.

"Ayla, get some sleep. We are safe for now." Kaia said before I drifted off to sleep.

King Kaden

I was in my office with my brother, trying desperately to come up with a plan. I had heard from Alpha Atlas and it wasn't good news. They were heading back and, hopefully, Zoe would be able to track Ayla using Bluey, her dog.

I was about to lose my s**t. I should never have left but I knew I needed my army. We all did. Ayla is to rule over all of us and we need to be able to fight and protect her.

I was furious with Xander, but then I also knew how stubborn Ayla can be. She would have found a way to get back home on her own and then we really would have lost her.

Looking over maps, I slammed my fists against my desk before I started to pace my office. Nothing was adding up. I didn't know where to start. I was desperate to get to her. Her father informed me what Jordan had done to her and that Xander had killed him. The thought of her going through something like that broke my heart.

"Kaden, calm down. You can't help her if you don't have a clear head." My brother scoffed. I punched my fist through the wall as I let out a scream.

"Don't tell me to calm down, Kai! She needed me and I wasn't there for her again! You may not understand, but I still love her!" I yelled at him, my heart pounding against my chest. I pulled my now bleeding knuckles from the wall.

He just stared at me. There was nothing he could say to make this situation any better. My phone rang on my desk and I sighed before I went to answer it. I was praying for good news but I had a feeling things were about to get worse.

Looking at the screen, the caller's ID was an unknown number. My heart rate spiked thinking it was Ayla who was calling me. Maybe she was able to get away.

"Hello?" I rushed out, answering the call.

"Is this King Kaden?" A man asked.

"And who is this?" My heart sank.

"My name is Ezekiel. I'm calling on behalf of my boss. Details of a meeting being held between all the mermaid kingdoms and the King and Queen of the seas are set to happen two days from now. Do you confirm your presence?" He asked me.

"You have Ayla? Who the hell is this boss?" I yelled.

"I can't confirm any of the details. I will send over the details of the meeting. If you are not present, your kingdom will be forfeited." He told me before he hung up.

"Kaden, what's wrong?" Kai asked me, worried. I looked at him, still shocked.

"Get the army and meet me at Nate's pack. I'll meet you there." I demanded before I ran out of my office.

I made it to the shores of his pack in record time. I just grabbed a bag with some clothes before

throwing in my phone. I could buy anything if I needed it. The most important part was to alert the others. I knew they were going to try to track her but I hadn't heard anything yet.

I was met on the beach by a few wolves. I held up my hands to let them know I wasn't a threat.

"Get Alpha Nate. I have news about Ayla."

Alpha Nate

As soon as one of my patrolmen was in my head informing me that King Kaden had arrived with information about Ayla, I ran out the door. I didn't realize Xander had followed me until I arrived at their location. I was losing my mind over all of this. Zoe wasn't able to track Ayla and Xander had told us she threw the necklace into the ocean before they left.

"King Kaden, do you know where Ayla is?" I rushed out. Xander came up beside me. He shook his head and my heart sank.

"We should talk in your office." He said, looking at my warriors. Everyone here was loyal to me. While waiting on the others, I was speaking to everyone. I couldn't just put my pack on hold as I looked for Ayla. And to be fair, I don't even know where to look now. I was completely useless, so I made myself busy to keep myself sane.

I motioned him to follow before I made my way back to the pack house where my new office was located. It's hard to believe I'm an alpha now, but I'd give it all up just to have Ayla back. I'd give up my own life if it meant she was safe.

"We will get her back. We have, too. I can't live without her." Duke whined.

"Me too, buddy," I knew exactly how he was feeling. Life wasn't worth living without her. I didn't want another mate. I just wanted her. And I was kicking myself for not fully claiming her. If I had, none of this would have happened.

As soon as we were in my office, I didn't wait for the door to close. I was too anxious to hear what he knew.

"Start explaining?" I demanded as I paced my office.

"I was contacted by a blocked number. I thought it was Ayla but it was a man named Ezekiel. He was calling on behalf of the King and Queen of the seas." He started. I cursed and started to pull on my hair as I paced faster.

"And what did he want?" Xander asked.

"There will be a meeting in two days to discuss the future of the kingdoms. He wouldn't tell me if Ayla

was there or not, but I'm assuming she is the Queen of the Seas." He sighed.

"Now, who the f**k is this king?" I growled, unable to hold in my fury.

"I don't know but someone has to know who runs the hunters. He's not a ghost." Xander said.

"Did he say anything about the location?" Xander asked King Kaden while I paced angrily around my office.

"He said he would send all the information to this number. I don't know when." He pulled out his phone and shook his head.

"Nothing yet."

"So, what do you think is going on?" Xander questioned.

"I think he is going to use Ayla. The people love her because she is the black pearl. None of the kingdoms are going to allow her to get hurt. And this Ezekiel did say, if I didn't attend this meeting, I would forfeit my kingdom." He explained.

"Did he threaten Ayla?" I asked him. I didn't care about the kingdoms. I just wanted Ayla back.

"He only said, King and Queen. Never her name. He wouldn't answer me when I asked about her." He said. I slumped in the chair behind my desk, pinching the bridge of my nose. I felt completely defeated.

"Alpha, there's Prince Chase, Prince Silas, and Queen Andrea here on the beach." The same patrolman mind linked me.

"Send them up to the pack house," I told him before closing the link.

"The other kingdoms are here," I announced to King Kaden and Xander.

"They must have received the same call. Prince Chase and Prince Silas' parents will be going to the meeting. But they must have come to help." Xander told us.

"I have my brother bringing the army. And I have all my associates out looking for information on who this boss could be. Someone somewhere has to know something." King Kaden said.

All the other kingdoms had reported getting the same phone call from this mystery man, Ezekiel. And all of them were sending warriors this way. I did convince them that half of their army should remain at home. This could all be a trap. This way, we can move in on Ayla's location and still have the kingdoms protected.

Even though we still didn't know where they were holding her. I wish I could feel her emotions. To at least know if she is hurt. This not knowing was killing me inside.

I had rooms made up for the princes and Xander took Queen Andrea back to Ayla's house. King Kaden was also staying at the pack house. His brother should be here tomorrow afternoon with their men. Mitch, Max, and David were all getting my warriors ready. I'm glad I have them here. They've stepped up to help in any way they could. I couldn't focus on anything but Ayla.

Alpha Atlas went with his brother back to his pack while we waited for news from any of our sources. Xander also had men in the bay to hopefully catch a mermaid that had been working with Alpha Gavin. They may be our only lead.

Xander was explaining that mermaids without a pod won't have a mind link, so hopefully, we can surprise them with that. I don't think they would be dumb enough to allow phones wherever this meeting is being held. I want to add all of them to my pack to see if they will also get the link with me. I needed to be there to save her. This was all my fault. If I hadn't hesitated to claim her that first full moon, they wouldn't have been able to break our bond.

I was about to break down when I heard a knock on my office door. I've been sleeping here since a room and bed are just too lonely without Ayla. I've also been drinking more than I ever have. It's the only thing that dulls the pain in my chest.

I wiped the tears from my eyes and sniffled before telling the person to enter. I wasn't surprised when Mitch opened the door, stepping into my office. He took one of the chairs in front of my desk.

"Nate, I would ask how you are holding up but I can see it's not well." He sighed. I shot back the remaining whiskey in my glass.

"This is all too much. We have no idea where she is or if she is still alive. What if she killed herself? What if she doesn't think I'm coming to save her and she does the unthinkable?" I exclaimed, before resting my head in my hands, my elbows on my desk.

"I'm not going to tell you I know how you feel because I don't. But we are all here helping you. And I know the worst part is the waiting. Two days is a long time to wait to hear if she is dead or alive. But your pack needs you right now. I always knew you were more than just a beta, Nate. Even before you shifted into Duke. And right now, Ayla needs the level-headed Nate, not the over-aggressive Alpha Nate. We will find her alive but you need to get your head in the game," he said, before standing up and leaving my office.

I've been trained for this my entire life. What to do if your Luna goes missing? But I never thought about how it would be if my mate went missing. Or in this case, kidnapped. There was no preparation for the emotions I was feeling.

"Look up vampires. Maybe there is something there," Duke suggested.

“And what if I don’t find anything, then I have just wasted my time.” I snapped.

“It’s better than sitting around drinking. You are doing nothing but wallowing and our mate needs us now more than ever. We need to do something. At least learning about vampires will help us kill the bastard that took our mate.” He growled.

“Fine!” I yelled, smashing my palms down on my desk. I stood up from my chair and rushed over to the bookshelves in my office. When I didn’t find anything, I left to find the library. I needed to find something that would help us. I can’t just sit here and do nothing. But where would I even start to look? I have no idea who we are dealing with and if he is running the hunters, then I know he has power and money.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I searched the internet. Now many rich men with dark hair with an assistant named Ezekiel could there be? I still went to the library as I looked through pages of searches. I sat down on one of the couches, engulfed in my phone. There has to be a record of this fucker somewhere.

And then I found it. Clicking on the article, his face popped up. ‘Dante Valentino and his partner Ezekiel Sinclair buys new office building downtown’, the headline read.

“Bingo, Motherfucker!”