

Wolfless 61

Chapter Sixty-One

Alpha Nate

I called everyone to my pack this morning. After everything I'd found out about Dante, I didn't get any sleep. I'd been gathering as much information as possible. And there's no way I'll be able to sleep until I have Ayla safely in my arms.

I was in the kitchen, drinking my third cup of coffee when King Kaden, Prince Silas, and Prince Chase entered. I didn't need to call them, since they were already staying in my pack house.

"s**t, did you get any sleep, Alpha Nate?" Prince Chase exclaimed, sitting down at the kitchen island.

"You can just call me Nate. And no. I found a lead. I called everyone else and they should be here shortly." I told them.

"Then just call me Chase. I think at this point, there's no need for titles," Prince Chase said. I gave him a nod.

"Okay, Nate, what have you found?" King Kaden asked. I pushed my lips in a line. This is the one person who I want to use my title.

"I'll explain everything when everyone gets here, Kaden. Have you heard from your brother?" I asked him, and just saying his name like we are friends made me want to gag. This fucker has been with my mate and I want nothing more than to punch him in the face.

"He should be here in a few hours. They are going to set up in the bay," he confirmed.

"My father has men on their way as well. He is sending his special forces, as per the demands of my mother. She threatened to kill him if he didn't do everything he could to save Ayla." Silas chuckled.

"My dad is also sending men. We should have almost a full army with our men and yours," Chase said.

"You didn't say any of this to Ayla's mother?" I questioned Kaden. I didn't need her showing up here. Ayla was adamant about not having her mother in her life.

"I didn't say a word to her." He answered and I nodded. Good. I don't need to bring her home to that disaster. She's been through enough.

"Nate, what's going to happen to Ayla and you?" Chased asked me.

"What do you mean?" I c****d an eyebrow and he sighed.

"I mean since the bond is broken. Wolves rarely mark anyone who isn't bonded to them." He clarified. Duke let out a growl.

"Ayla will always be mine. With or without the bond. As soon as I mark her again, the bond will reform." I told all of them, firmly.

"And what if you found your second chance mate?" Kaden questioned.

"There is no second chance, there is only Ayla," I said, looking him dead in the eyes. The bond was broken, not rejected.

Not long after, Alpha Atlas and Alpha Matt marched into the kitchen. I could see that neither one of them got much sleep last night. And I can't blame them. I didn't sleep at all.

"And we won't sleep until we have Ayla back," Duke grumbled.

"Nate, have you found Ayla?" Her father bellowed. All the mermaid royalty sitting at my kitchen island looked at me.

"I didn't find her," I said and all of them let out a breath of disappointment.

"I found who has her." I finished and all their eyes snapped at me.

"You know who has Ayla?" Kaden exclaimed and I nodded.

"I'll explain everything when the others get here."

"Or you can tell us now." Alpha Atlas growled. He was pacing the kitchen.

"Dante Valentino," I told them, handing Alpha Atlas a photograph. It's the same man we saw yesterday with Ayla.

"I don't understand, how did you find him?" He questioned.

"The person who runs the hunters would have to come from money. We didn't have a name, but we did have Ezekiel's. I found both of them along with this picture."

"And if Dante is a vampire, he could live for centuries." Alpha Matt chimes in.

"But that doesn't explain why he would want the black pearl. And if he is as old as you suspect, wasn't the other black pearl alive?" Silas asked.

"I can't answer that. All I know is who he is. I couldn't find anything about his personal life, only his business ventures." I told them.

"Then what's the plan?" Alpha Matt asked.

"We could give Mr. Valentino a call?" I shrugged.

"Or we could find out where his office is."

"I can do that. I have associates everywhere," Kaden said. I opened the file and pulled out a list of his companies. I couldn't locate where Dante resides, but hopefully, Kaden can.

"Do you think this Dante would be at the office if he had Ayla?" Silas sighed.

"No, but this could give us someone close enough to him to know where he would be," Kaden answered him.

"I'll get a friend of mine to search for all of his properties. There has to be one where he would hold Ayla." Alpha Atlas told us before pulling out his phone.

Queen Andrea rushed in with Xander close behind her. I could see the panic on her face. She also didn't look like her well-groomed self. She was wearing jeans and a sweater, with her hair pulled back into a low ponytail. She looked like she had aged ten years overnight. I can't blame her. I know all of us look like s**t.

"What have you found?" She pleaded with me. Since everyone was here, I handed her the file on everything I had on Dante Valentino.

I let them go through all the information before I processed to explain my plan. If we can find out where they are having this meeting, then we can prepare our warriors and surround the area. I just pray he hasn't marked her yet.

"Nate, I'll get my best men on this. I'll also have my father contact someone who can help unearth anything else about Dante Valentino." Xander informed me.

All at once, a few dings rang out throughout the kitchen. Everyone pulled out their phones, but Kaden's growl and Queen Andrea's gasp alerted us it was their phones.

"What is it?" I rushed out.

"It's a location and a time to meet for our meeting tomorrow," Kaden growled.

"It's about an hour north, up the coast." He informed us.

“What time do they want you to meet them there?” I asked and he looked up at me.

“Noon. I have a feeling this is just a meet-up point. I don’t think he’d be stupid enough to let us know beforehand where he was holding Ayla.” He said. I looked over at Queen Andrea, she looked like she was about to burst into tears. Her body was trembling as she tried to hold herself together.

“Andrea?” Alpha Atlas’ voice was soft. She put up her hand and closed her eyes.

“I am truly sorry for the pain my daughter caused you and Ayla. I never raised her to be so heartless. But I can’t lose Ayla. I’ve lost my claim, my daughter, and soon my kingdom. But I’d hand over my kingdom if it means Ayla is safe.” With the last of her words, her dam broke. I was stunned when Alpha Atlas embraced her.

“We will get her back. And you don’t have to apologize for your daughter. She did give me Ayla. And I failed her just as badly as Melody did. After the bond broke, I didn’t look back and should have.” He confessed to her.

“Both of you will be happy to know that I killed the mother fucker who touched her.” Alpha Matt said and all eyes snapped at him.

“My mother said during her investigation into Ayla that after she ran away the body of the man was found,” Silas recalled.

“I went looking for her after I confirmed with Dad that she wasn’t in the pack with you, Atlas. When I knocked on the door, that piece of s**t answered. I asked about Ayla and he smirked and made a comment about her body.” Alpha Matt explained.

“Ayla will be grateful you had her back. She felt terrible that she left, leaving the other children to live with that man. Hell, if he were alive I’d torture that fucker for years to pay for what he did to her. I’m sure she wasn’t his only victim.” I told him.

“I’ll protect her with my life.” He confessed.

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“We all would,” Xander spoke for all of us.

“Nate, what’s the plan now?” Chase asked me.

“I’m going to go check out the meet-up spot. I want to lock down the area before they move in. I also want to make sure we don’t spook them. None of our warriors will move until we had confirmed the location of Ayla. This could all be a trap.”

"I'm going with you. We should take a few warriors just in case. Then, tomorrow at noon, we'll follow them to Ayla." Alpha Atlas said, and I nodded.

Let's head out."

Xander

The guilt I was feeling over Ayla being taken was all-consuming. I never should have put her in that position. I'm a commander for f**k sake and the move I made was a rookie mistake. A mistake that may cost my best friend her life.

As soon as the meeting in the kitchen was over, I went outside to make some phone calls. I needed to call my dad and ask him to look into Dante Valentino and then I was going to give my ex-army buddy a call. He's retired now and we work together at the fire station. He was in the special forces, so hopefully he knows someone who can help.

Pulling out my phone, I called my dad first.

"Xander, it's good to hear your voice. Your mother called me with the news. Is Ayla with you?" He rushed out after picking up the first ring.

"Ayla is still missing. I need you to find out anything and everything you can about a man named Dante Valentino. He's also a vampire. He's the one who has been running the hunters and has Ayla. The kingdoms are set to meet with him tomorrow at noon." I explained and he sighed.

"I'll do everything I can. Give me a few hours and I'll call you back."

"Thanks, Dad."

"And son, I'm glad that you are safe." He told me before ending the call.

I searched my contacts before I found the name I was looking for. I haven't spoken to anyone from the fire station since I abruptly left. I pushed call and held the phone up to my ear. With every ring, my anxiety grew.

"Xander?" His surprised voice filled my ear.

"Cam, I need your help." I rushed out. He let out a sigh.

"I know I left without a word, but this is about Ayla," I pleaded.

"Is she still dating Jordan?" He asked and I growled.

"No. It's a long story but they broke up and then he hurt her. She was then taken by a guy named Dante Valentino. I needed everything you can find out about him."

"Okay, I'll see what I can find out from my sources. I'm only helping because this is Ayla and you sound really panicked." Cam sighed.

"Cam, I'm sorry I left. I had no choice. There's a lot you don't know about me." I told him.

"I'll see what I can find out."

"And Cam, we are on a time limit. We need the information now." My voice was an urgent plea.

"Give me an hour." He said before ending the call.

After speaking with Cam, I started texting and calling all the warriors I knew who were loyal to me and the Western kingdom. I needed comrades I trusted to help bring Ayla home. I'm sure Dante knows about Nate, and him being a wolf. And then he knows Ayla is a mermaid. It doesn't matter if he has her in the middle of the ocean or the middle of the continent. We will have the advantage everywhere. This has to be what the goddesses were telling us. Ayla will always be protected, no matter where she is. Now I just pray we can get to her in time before she loses all hope.

Chapter Six-Two

Ayla

When the plane jerked, I sat up, my body protesting every movement of my aching body. My head was still pounding as I looked around the plane. I jumped when a hand was wrapped around my upper arm.

"It's okay, baby. The plane just landed. We are almost home." Dante's voice was calm but I was anything but. I fought the urge to shiver as his hot breath blew against my ear.

I didn't know what was going to happen and I was terrified. He may be all nice and sweet now, but I don't know how he will be behind closed doors. I was so relieved King Kaden wasn't a monster. I never figured there would be one. And now that I was face to face with him, I didn't know what to do. I wasn't trained for any of this.

I wrapped the blanket around me tightly as Dante took my hand and led me off the plane. A few vehicles were waiting for us. But it was the castle in the distance that caught my attention. I was in awe. This place was beautiful.

Lush green forest surrounded the runway. The castle looked to be hundreds of years old. It was a dark grey, and it was hunting under the glow of the setting sun.

Dante tugged on my hand when I stopped to look at my surroundings. I followed obediently beside him.

There were men around the vehicles and the runway. And they all had weapons. There was no way for me to fight my way out of here right now.

“Patience Ayla. When the time is right, we will strike.” I heard Kaia.

“And what if he claims me before then?” My body started to tremble. It wasn’t cold here, it was still quite warm but my body felt frozen and my heart was numb. I missed the safety of Nate.

Dante pulled me against his side, wrapping an arm around me. That was the last thing I wanted, but I didn’t want to anger him.

“I will never let him claim us, trust me,” she whispered.

Ezekiel opened the back passenger door and Dante helped me climb into the back of the vehicle. At this rate, I wish I blew up the plane when we were in the air. But I have a feeling it was Dante who was talking to me that day in the chopper.

Dante climbed in beside me, as Ezekiel took the front passenger seat. As soon as the vehicle started moving, my stomach churned. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the cool glass of the window beside me. I should be getting the lay of the land to organize my escape but I couldn’t fight through the urge to empty my stomach.

“How are you feeling?” Dante asked me, placing a hand on my bare thigh. This damn dress was too short and the blanket only covered my shoulders to my hips.

“Dizzy,” I whispered.

“I’ll have a doctor look at you when we get to the house.”

“Thank you.” I didn’t lift my head or nod. I just quietly expressed my gratitude. I’ve worked with enough powerful men to know that their egos need to be stroked.

I decided to play along until I had the opportunity to kill. I can buy some time by playing the damsel in distress. Powerful men love having a woman hanging off of their every word. I can do this. I can fake this.

When the car came to a stop, I opened my eyes and looked out the window. A gasp left my lips as I looked out into the garden in front of the castle. Everything was in perfect bloom. And I could hear water fountains. There were fairy lights all along the hedges, making this place magical as the sun set behind the trees in the distance.

“Whatever you don’t like, can be changed. This is now your home as well, Ayla.” Dante rested his chin on my shoulder, his cheek against mine.

"It's perfect." I breathed out.

"Almost as perfect as you," he purred. I turned and smiled, playing the part I must.

He surprised me when he pressed his lips against mine. I gasped and he pushed his tongue into my mouth. I locked away everything of who I was before that moment. I needed to be strong if I was going to do what I needed to save my people. I just have to remember that this is all an act.

I moaned as he licked my bottom lip before pulling away. My tongue licked over the spot his tongue was just seconds ago as I looked into his eyes. I could see his lust.

"I can't wait to f**k you until you forget your name," he purred, kissing up my neck to my ear. He ran a hand up my thigh dangerously close to my p**y. My body tingled from contact and I had to force myself to remember who this man was. He was not my Nate.

"But first, let's get you checked out." He told me, before kissing my forehead. I gave him a nod before he helped me out of the vehicle. Ezekiel was waiting for us to exit the vehicle.

"The doctor is waiting in your wing." He informed Dante.

"Good. Have dinner sent to our room." He ordered and Ezekiel nodded.

As Dante led me through the castle, his arm wrapped around me, holding me to his side, I gave myself a pep talk. I can do this.

"Ayla, it's okay." Kaia comforted me.

"Can he sense you?" I asked her. I knew nothing about vampires. I know other wolves would be able to sense her.

"No one can sense me. Mermaids smell like humans and my scent hides behind it. They won't know about me until I make myself known."

"Thank the goddesses for that," I told her.

"It will all work out, Ayla. I need to rest." She said before retreating to the back of my mind. Her presence was faint and my heart twisted painfully. The breaking of the bond with her mate hurt her deeply. Hell, I'm pretty sure it almost killed me.

I can't break down until I have done what I need to do. I can't leave this world knowing a monster like Dante is still living. He may be acting sweet, but I know it's an act. He was once a mermaid and now he is taking out his anger on people who didn't even hurt him. I will not stand by and let it happen. I'll kill him or I'll die trying.

I was so lost in my thoughts I didn't pay attention to the castle around me. I'm supposed to be planning my kill and escape, but instead, I'm giving myself a pep talk again.

The double dark oak doors now in front of me were opened by two men standing on either side of the doors. Looking around, the place was lowly lit. Everything was done in crimson red and black. I shivered at the darkness. The colors would hide blood nicely.

Dante's room was no different than the colors in the hallways. But everything in his room was laced with a touch of gold. The room was modern with a living room with black leather furniture centered around a large fireplace. There was also a bar area with glass bottles of alcohol lining the glass shelves above a counter with an expensive espresso machine. There was also a mini fridge and a wine fridge located underneath the counter.

"There's a study through there," Dante pointed to a door on the other side of the room.

"This is Dr. Paul." Dante introduced me to a man standing by another set of double doors.

"How are you feeling, my queen?" The doctor asked me, holding out his hand for mine. I gulped as I placed my hand in his. He lifted my hand to his lips, placing a kiss on the back of my hand.

"My queen has been feeling some dizziness and has been complaining of a headache," Dante answered the doctor's question, before leaning in.

"She was also assaulted by a man who is now dead." His voice was a low growl. The doctor's eyes snapped at mine with a look of pity. Tears welled in my eyes. I don't remember the event as Kaia came forward but I know what he did to my body and my wolf endured it all.

"Come, my queen. I will get everything checked and then you can bathe before you rest." The doctor said before opening the door to the bedroom. When I hesitated, Dante wrapped his arm around my waist.

"I'll be with you the entire time. Everything will be okay." He kissed my temple before he led me into the room.

"How long has it been since you last ate?" Dr. Paul questioned me as Dante sat me on the bed.

"I don't remember," I mumbled. Dante growled, causing me to jump, but he didn't say anything.

"How about fluids?"

"She had some water and a few painkillers on our flight here," Dante answered. The doctor brought out a light before checking my eyes.

"I believe your headache and dizziness are caused by your lack of food and water. Take in small amounts to start." He said and I nodded.

"My queen, can you please change into a robe?" He asked, and I began to tremble. Dante took hold of my hands on my lap.

"There's one in the bathroom for you, my queen." He helped me to stand and led me over to another door.

The bedroom was just as elegant as the living area. There was a bed that was so much better than a king that sat in the middle of the room. All the windows were covered in black curtains with the walls a crimson red. One side of the room was lined with bookshelves full of books with a chaise placed beside a massive stone fireplace. The room was still dimly lit but maybe it's a vampire thing. Or is that sunlight?

Stepping into the bathroom. Everything was done in dark marble. The floors and the sink counter were done in dark grey marble with gold flakes. The cabinets were black and the shower was made of dark stones. The only white in the bathroom was the tub. It was located on the far side of the room placed beside a window. The gardens were all lit up with fairy lights. The sun had now set.

"I'll run you a bath after the doctor is finished with his exam," Dante informed me and I nodded.

"Now, let me help you out of that dress. I underestimated the curves of your delectable body." He purred, turning me to face him. He was standing in front of the door, blocking the doctor's view.

I tried to swallow but my throat became thick as I looked anywhere but at Dante. He gripped the hem of the dress and began to move it above my hips.

"Ayla, look at me." Tears burned my eyes but I turned my head to look at him. His eyes were searching mine.

"I'm sorry, he did that to you. I should have been there sooner to protect you. But I will never hurt you. I've been waiting a long time for my queen to arrive." His voice was soft.

"Can you forgive me?" His voice was a plea and I tried not to show my shock at him asking me to forgive him. This man was a monster, but right now he was pleading with me. I could see the regret in his eyes. I nodded when my voice failed me.

"Thank you, my queen." He mumbled, kissing my forehead. I stared into his eyes as he lifted the dress up and over my head.

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His eyes never left mine as he reached back beside him, grabbing a fluffy black robe off a hook beside the door. His eyes never trailed my body as he wrapped the robe around me. I slipped my arms in and he tied it around my waist.

"This isn't the time to truly appreciate your perfection. When you are feeling better, I want to take my time exploring every curve." He purred against my ear before leading me back out into the bedroom.

My stomach twisted painfully when the doctor asked me to lie down on the edge of the bed with my knees up. Having this done was bad enough without having someone else watching. After taking a deep breath, I did what he asked.

I heard him put on a glove and when he touched me, I hissed out in pain.

"I'm sorry, my queen. The area is bruised and I noticed there was some bleeding. I will get some painkillers for you and some seawater. The salt water will help you heal faster." He said, removing his head from between my legs. I closed them, touching my knees together.

"How long?" Dante asked the doctor as I lay there, awkwardly.

"My king, I can't answer that question. There is quite a bit of inflammation on the outside. Anything right now would cause her nothing but pain," he answered.

"Okay,"

"I know you are anxious to claim our queen but she needs time to heal." Dr. Paul said.

"I'll leave everything in the living room. My queen, bathe and get some rest. Also, try to eat something." The doctor's address to me was sympathetic. He truly believed I was his queen. But I don't know if he's a mermaid or a vampire. With my wolf being so weak, I can't smell any more strongly than before.

I squealed when Dante lifted me off the bed and began to carry me to the bathroom. I was watching the doctor leave and didn't notice him moving closer. He let out a chuckle.

"Let's get us in the bath and then I can feed you." He smiled. I smiled back as I willed myself to keep this act up. I can't fall apart now.

Dante placed me down on the counter in between the two sinks before walking over to turn on the faucet for the tub. I was watching out the window when he came back over to me, standing between my legs.

No words were shared between us as he wrapped his arms around me. I rested my head on his chest as I continued to gaze out the window. The half moon was rising over the tree line. The full moon was fast approaching and my heart twisted painfully in my chest. I was going to claim Nate forever under that full

moon. My emotions became lodged in my throat as I fought back my tears.

A ringing of a phone echoed through the bathroom. Dante cursed before pulling out a cell phone from the front pocket of his trousers. He looked at the screen before meeting my gaze.

"I need to take this." He said before answering the call.

"Give me a second." He told the caller. He placed the phone down before moving to shut off the faucet. He then came back over to me and lifted me off the counter before helping me out of the robe.

"I'll be back in a moment," Dante told me as he helped me into the tub. Dante's eyes never left mine until my body was fully submerged in the water. He leaned down and kissed my forehead before he left the bathroom, leaving the door open.

The hot water felt amazing on my aching muscles. I needed to relax. I knew the others were safe and I was safe for now. I just needed to play this game until the right moment arose so I could strike Dante down.

I was still staring at the moon when Dante entered the bathroom again. I'm not sure why but I felt more calm as more of the moon's light shined through the window, kissing my skin. The calm was short-lived when Dante climbed into the tub behind me. I instantly sat up as my heart pounded in my chest. I can do this. I chanted to myself, over and over again.

Dante wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me back against his chest. I could feel him against my lower back and my body began to shake.

"It's okay, my love. I would never hurt you. I want you to enjoy the pleasure I give you before I mark you as mine." He mumbled, kissing my shoulder. His voice was so sincere, I almost believed him. Almost.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, leaning back against him. He rested his chin on the top of my head.

"My love, why are you apologizing?" He asked me, worried.

"I shouldn't have let him touch me but I was so worried about my friend. I'm sorry." I cried. I guess I can play a convincing victim. He wrapped his arms around me tighter as he lowered his chin to my shoulder.

"I've been waiting a long time for you. And now that I've found you, I can wait a few more days to claim you. I want you to enjoy me, as much as I know I'll enjoy you."

Chapter Sixty-Three

Ayla

I awoke the next morning to an empty bed. I was grateful to have a moment alone as I gave myself the

necessary pep talk I'll need to get through another day in this hell. Even if Dante was nothing but caring, he still wasn't my Nate. He's the only one I want to do all these sweet things for me. And I pray that the pain I felt the night I spent in the Western kingdom was all a lie. I pray it was all a misunderstanding and he loves me as desperately as I love him. If I can't have Nate, I don't want another man. Even without the bond, my entire heart and soul crave him.

After our bath last night, Dante kept his promise to feed me. The doctor also left me some painkillers and a bottle of seawater. After pouring some of the water on my painful core, I drank the rest of it. Mermaids need seawater like humans need oxygen. And after the bottle was empty, I felt better. My core still ached but my headache had cleared.

The door to the bedroom opened, pulling me from my thoughts. I sat up and stretched as Dante walked over to the bed. He insisted on holding me all night and I was too tired to protest. Besides, I needed him to believe I was all for this relationship.

"My love, how are you feeling?" He asked, sitting beside me on the bed. I crossed my legs and hissed as pain shot up through my core. My breath lodged in my throat as I tried to breathe through the pain. Dante wrapped his arms around me as I unwrapped my legs and willed the throbbing to settle.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have crossed my legs," I mumbled, breathlessly.

"You have nothing to apologize for. But I am surprised at how much you've warmed up to me." He chuckled and I looked at him. Great, he can see through my acting.

"What do you mean?" I asked, playing innocent.

"You did have a mate." He gave me a pointed look. I sighed, moving a hand to his thigh. He looked down but quickly looked back up. I didn't have to force the tears into my eyes as my core still throbbed.

"He cheated on me. I felt it. I should be thanking you for taking me away from someone who never loved me." I told him as sincerely as I could while holding down the bile that was threatening to come up. His lips broke out in a huge grin as he believed the lie I had just spilled.

"You have no idea how happy you've just made me." I grinned back at him. I may be looking at Dante, but I was thinking about Nate. Nothing about Dante will ever make me smile like this.

He rested his back against the headboard beside me and pulled me to his side. I closed my eyes and rested my head against his chest. I can do this, I repeated in my head.

"Dante, can I ask you a question?" I hesitantly asked him. I didn't want to piss him off, but I had so many questions about vampires.

"Anything, my love." He leaned down and kissed my temple.

"How do vampires claim?" He leaned down. I could feel his hot breath against my ear.

"First, you drink my blood, and then I bite your pretty little neck." He purred, running his fingertips up my neck.

"And all of it done in the heat of passion between souls." He finished.

"And you can go out into the sun?" I blurted out and he chuckled.

"Yes, vampires can go out into the sun. We also don't get affected by diseases. If you are a vampire, you are immortal until you are killed." He explained.

"And it was your mother, who was a mermaid?" He let out a sigh as he drew circles on my back.

"I killed my father after he killed my mother. He was the reason I was stripped of being the black pearl." I gasped. Lifting my head off his chest, I looked up at him.

"I'm so sorry." I cupped his cheek with my hand. He turned his head and kissed my palm before leaning into my touch.

"It was a long time ago. And now I have you." He kissed my palm again.

"Thank you for trusting me enough to share that with me." I smiled. He pulled me back into his chest and kissed the top of my head. I'm sure I looked like a hot mess. Dante fed me after our bath and then I went right to sleep. I was so tired after I had eaten.

"Now, how are you feeling?" He asked, after a few minutes of silence.

"I'm okay," I answered and he squeezed me.

"Good, our guests should be arriving soon. And you need to start getting ready." He said and I snapped up to look at him.

"Guests?" I stammered.

"We will have dinner in a few hours with our supporters," he confirmed.

"Dinner?" I asked confused. He chuckled.

"Yes, my queen. You slept for almost twenty-four hours. It's almost dinner time again."

Before I could say anything, a phone started to ring. Dante sighed before pecking my lips.

"Go get ready and I'll be back soon." I nodded and he kissed my forehead before standing up from the

bed. He didn't answer the phone until he was closing the bedroom door behind him.

I let out a sigh. I wish I could get out of here, but at least I was able to get some sleep. I do feel better even if my core still has a slight throb now. I just had to remember not to sit cross-legged.

I carefully climbed off the bed and headed to the bathroom. As I suspected, I looked like a hot mess. My hair was everywhere and I still had dark circles under my eyes. Groaning, I started the faucet in the tub. I needed a hot soak to help with the anxiety growing in the pit of my stomach. How could we possibly be having dinner with others? And so soon. I've been here for a day and now I will face Dante's supporters. And with all the people around, how was I going to kill Dante and escape? I wish I had been trained for a situation like this.

When the tub was full and the bathroom was steamy, I stripped off Dante's shirt he gave me to sleep in. I'm glad he also gave me a pair of panties. I noticed some blood when I stripped my panties off. I must have ripped a scab when I crossed my legs.

"If that fucker was still alive, I'd force the shift to rip him apart," Kaia growled as I climbed into the tub.

"He's dead now and we will heal. I'm sorry you had to come forward." I knew this was going to affect her more than me. I felt the pain but she took the trauma.

"I'll be better once I have Duke back." She whimpered and my heart broke for her. I know how she is feeling. I miss Nate. I miss our bond and how he made me feel complete. No one could ever replace Nate in my life.

"If we had more time, I'd join you." Dante purred from the door. I jumped, not hearing the door open. The water swooshed around me and my heart pounded in my chest. I clenched my chest as I turned to face him.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he chuckled.

"It's okay, I should have been paying attention." I breathed out.

"As much as I would love to stand here and enjoy the view, you have to start getting ready. Everything you'll need can be found in the drawers by the sinks. And I laid out a dress on the bed for you." He smiled, walking over to me. He leaned down and kissed my forehead.

"I'll be back soon to escort you to dinner."

"Thank you," I smiled, looking up at him.

"f**k, you make it hard to restrain myself," he purred, leaning back down. His lips were against my ear.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled. He gripped my chin gently as he forced me to look at him.

"What he did to you was not your fault. You have nothing to apologize for. I won't take you unless you are fully healed. I would never want to hurt you." He said with so much sincerity, I almost believed him. I underestimated how good of an actor Dante was. He deserves an award.

"Thank you, Dante. I appreciate your kindness." I said, matching his sincerity with a smile.

"Only for you baby. Now get ready." He peaked my lips before he stepped out of the bathroom. I sighed when I heard the bedroom door close.

"You also deserve an award. Wow." Kaia praised my acting skills.

"Thanks, but now I have to act around other people," I grumbled.

I got out of the tub and hopped into the shower. I needed to wash my hair if I was going to make myself pretty. I needed to sell this facade to a room full of people. Just the thought of others believing I would be interested in Dante makes my stomach churn.

I finished my shower after my extensive pep talk. I can do this, I repeated to myself to stop the nerves from twisting my stomach. I can do this or I'll die trying.

When I was dry and the black fluffy towel was secured around me, I walked over to the sinks. I found a hair dryer and a curling iron. I also found a drawer full of makeup and a brush with hair ties.

This is something I would find incredibly sweet if it was Nate who had thought of it. But since it was Dante, I knew he was manipulating me into believing he cared. He's had enough years to master the art of manipulation and deceit.

When I was finished drying my hair, I curled the ends before pulling it back into a high ponytail. I then curled some hair to frame my face. Then I applied some eyeliner and some red lipstick. I didn't need a full face of makeup.

"We got this," Kaia whispered as I looked at myself in the mirror.

"We got this," I repeated to her before I left the bathroom to get dressed.

On the bed lay a red slip dress. It had a cowl neckline and a plunging open back. I sighed, knowing I wouldn't be able to wear a bra with this dress. I went into the closet to get a pair of panties and a pair of black heels. The dress is beautiful, but red isn't my color and I would rather be wearing it for Nate.

I was admiring myself in the mirror when the door to the bedroom was opened. The dress fit perfectly and it fell just below my knees. I was surprised by how confident I felt in something that left little to the imagination. It may cover my body but it was tight and my back was on full display.

I watched from the mirror as Dante approached me. He was dressed in an all-black suit. And if I didn't know he was the devil, I would think he was devilishly handsome. He wrapped his arms around my waist and buried his face into my neck.

"Gorgeous." He purred against my neck.

"You look pretty handsome, yourself." I felt him smile against my neck at my words.

"Let's get downstairs before I decide to keep you all to myself." He mumbled before pulling me with him to the bedroom door.

"Only a few more days, and I'll be all yours." I purred and he spun me into his chest.

"Only a few more days." He repeated my words before crushing his lips to mine. He licked my bottom lip to deepen the kiss. As much as I hated the way he tasted, I granted him access. I needed to sell this and I could wash my mouth out.

I was left breathless when he finally pulled away and rested his forehead against mine. I gasped when he bucked his hips against me. I could feel how ready he was for me and I had to force down the shiver running through my body.

Dante led me through the castle with a hand on my lower back. Most of his hand was on my bare skin since the back of the dress was exposing my entire back, down to my ass. I tried to calm my nerves by looking at all the paintings and statues as we walked. The hallways were dimly lit, casting an eerie glow throughout the place. I would not want to walk alone through a place like this.

"We keep the lighting low to help preserve the paintings. Most of them are quite old," Dante said.

"That makes so much sense now." I turned to him and smiled. I'll feel even more guilty when I burn this place to the ground.

I could hear the chatter as we came upon massive double oak doors. My hands began to tremble and I clasped them together in front of me. I can do this.

I could hear the chatter as we came upon massive double oak doors. My hands began to tremble and I clasped them together in front of me. I can do this.

"Don't be nervous, my queen. Everyone already loves you." Dante mumbled, kissing my temple. I gave him a small smile before nodding.

Two men standing on either side of the doors, stepped forward to open the doors for us. My heart rate

sped up as I looked around at all the faces at the bottom of the stairs. Dante led me into a grand ballroom and we stood on the top of a grand staircase.

Crystal chandeliers hung on the high ceilings with massive painted glass windows surrounding the room. The floor was down in a decorative design with black and gold stones. This room was truly beautiful. It's a place I would imagine holding a wedding reception. But I felt like I was walking to my death as I took hold of the stair railing. With Dante's hand still on my back, we walked down the stairs in silence. All eyes were on us as I scanned the faces, praying someone I knew had infiltrated the party.

My blood started to boil as I noticed some of the council members of the western sea and also a few heads of our military. I wasn't surprised to see Andrews here, but I was taken aback to see his grandson, Collin. He was supposed to be proving his loyalty to me to gain the Western kingdom. And now I was kicking myself for not getting those reports before I left.

As soon as we stepped off the stairs, Dante stopped me.

"Gentleman, our queen, the black pearl." He announced before taking a hand and kissing the back of it. Looking around, I didn't see any women in attendance. Great, there is no way I can slip away now.

Everyone began to clap as we moved through the crowd. Everyone was congratulating us and kissed my hand. A smile spread throughout my face even though I was slowly dying inside. With all these eyes on me and having members of the Western kingdom here, I was quickly losing my composure.

"Not yet, Ayla. Breathe." Kaia reminded me.

"King Dante, it's good to see you again." My skin crawled when Andrews stepped forward with his grandson.

"Andrews, always a pleasure. And this must be Collin?" Dante asked him, after shaking his hand.

"King Dante, it's a pleasure to meet you." Collin shook his hand, while I was struggling to keep the smile on my face. I wanted to slap both of them for betraying my grandmother.

"You look lovely, my queen." Andrews turned his attention to me. He brought my hand to his lips and I had to hold down the bile ready to spill. Everything about this man gave me the creeps.

"My queen," Collin bowed his head. I gave him a tight smile, trying to keep the anger I was feeling from bubbling to the surface.

"The kingdoms are planning to arrive here tomorrow evening," Andrews asked Dante, as I stared at Collin trying to read him.

"Yes, and that's when we will take all the kingdoms over. We need leaders in line who we can trust." Dante said, and my head snapped to his.

"That would kill hundreds of people. My people." I blurted out.

"And that is the sacrifice that will be made to ensure our royalty," Dante said nonchalantly, but he squeezed my hand in warning.

"My king, there has to be another way. If we go in killing, the people will never trust us." I pleaded with him.

"Please excuse us," Dante growled before pulling me along with him. He didn't even wait for an answer. I could feel his fury even though he was smiling and nodding to everyone we walked by.

When we made it to the far side of the room, men opened up doors for us and Dante pulled me in. He waited until the doors were closed behind us and we were standing alone in a study. I froze when Dante turned his now glowing red eyes to me.

"Dante, I'm sorry," I stammered out as he stalked towards me. I backed up until my back was digging painfully into a bookcase.

"Let me make one thing clear, Ayla. You may be the black pearl, but this is my kingdom. You can change anything in this castle. Your job is to please me. Everything that pertains to the ruling of this kingdom is none of your concern. You are to look beautiful by my side. I'm I clear?" His voice was deadly serious. I have no doubt he will kill me when he gets what he wants.

"And don't forget, I can take you right here, without giving a f**k about hurting you. Do you understand?" He yelled, wrapping his fingers around my neck. I gasped as my black and deep purple scales covered my body.

"f**k, you are lucky you're sexy." His hot breath hit my ear. I let out a whimper. I didn't mean to look weak, but I was starting to panic.

A commotion coming from the other side of the doors pulled Dante's attention away from me.

"Now!" Kaia roared in my head. My fingertips tingled and before I knew what was happening, my claws were buried deep into Dante's chest.

He groaned as he looked down at my hand still buried in his chest, and then his eyes raised to mine. Blood started dripping from his mouth as I twisted his heart, beating against my hand. I watched as life left his eyes before pulling my hand back, removing his heart with it. Dante's body collapsed at my feet, in front of me. His heart fell from my hand.

I'm not sure how long I stood there, looking at Dante's body. I can't believe I just killed someone. Panic started to set in as my body shook violently and I fought the urge to empty my stomach.

But fear gripped my entire being as the door handle began to turn. There was no way I was getting out of here alive. Not with Dante's blood on my hands. I couldn't move as the door was thrown open and I clasped my hands over my mouth to hold back my gasp. How is this happening?

Chapter Six-Four

Ayla

When Collin rushed into the room, I'd never been more surprised in my life. His eyes roamed over Dante's body before they locked with mine. I could feel the tears running down my face as he approached me slowly. He raised his hands in the air to show he was no threat, but I didn't know who to trust.

"My queen, I'm not here to hurt you. And I promise to explain everything to you once we are safe." I almost forgot he was only fifteen. He was acting so much braver than I was.

He took my hand and led me around the body. He pulled me against his side and I was surprised at how tall he was. Even in heels, this fifteen-year-old towered over me.

"I don't understand." I stammered as my body shook.

He didn't get a chance to answer as the doors were thrown open and Ezekiel rushed in. He stopped in his tracks as I watched his eyes find Dante's body. His face turned into a sneer as he pulled a gun from his back waistband.

"You will die for your betrayal!" He screamed, his eyes locking on mine.

Ear-piercing gunshots echoed around me before there was nothing but darkness.

Alpha Nate

I've been camped out at the meet-up point all night. If anyone tried to secure the area, I would know about it. I sent for more warriors after Alpha Atlas and I secured the area last night. Now we had warriors all around the area as we waited until noon.

I tried to get some sleep when the sleep deprivation became too much and my head felt it would explode.

It was still early in the morning, the sun was barely rising. I was sitting on the ground with my arms resting on my knees as I watched over the spot Ezekiel instructed the royals to meet. Kaden and Queen Andrea were waiting with Alpha Atlas. The other two kingdoms hadn't arrived yet but they still had hours until the meet-up time. Every minute felt like hours and an hour felt like days. My mind was in overdrive, thinking about everything that could be happening to Ayla.

"We will rip them apart," Duke growled in my mind.

My first thought is to make sure she is safe and then I'd kill anyone and everyone who has laid a finger on her.

I'm not sure how much time had passed when Alpha Atlas sat beside me. I kept staring at the exact spot, hoping Ayla would manifest. I needed her to be okay.

"Xander is still running down a few leads. And my guy was able to get a hold of every property Dante Valentino purchased. So far, everything has just been condos in cities." He informed me. I gave him a nod.

We sat in silence after that. Everyone was working from every angle and calling in every favor they had to find Ayla but nothing was getting us any closer to finding her. I felt completely useless. How am I supposed to lead a pack, when I can't even keep my Luna safe?

"Do you think Ayla's okay?" I murmured and he sighed.

"Ayla is strong and smart. If there is a way for her to get out of this, she will. Have faith in her." He clasped me on the shoulder, squeezing it.

I was trying to have faith, but with every minute that passed without finding her, I was losing hope. I needed her to be okay. Just the thought of her dying, twisted my chest so tight I could barely breathe. I can't find out she's alive just to have that hope snatched away.

"Nate!" I heard Kaden yell. I was about to tell him to keep his voice down but the next words out of his mouth had me rushing to my truck.

"They found Ayla!" Alpha Atlas was running beside me as we made it to my truck in seconds.

"Where the hell is she?" I demanded.

"Ryan just called me, he couldn't get ahold of you." He said, and I forgot I left my phone in my truck last night. Duke was patrolling the area last night.

"And?" Alpha Atlas asks him impatiently.

"She's at your pack, Nate. I don't know all the details but she was immediately taken to the hospital." Kaden rushed out.

"Mitch, get everyone. We need to head back to the pack," I mind-linked before I climbed behind the wheel of my truck. Alpha Atlas jumped in before I took off. It was a two-and-a-half-hour drive but I was determined to make it there in less than an hour.

I picked up my phone on the center console and hit the recall button on all of Ryan's missed calls. The phone rang through the speakers in my truck.

"Nate, finally." Ryan sounded like he was catching his breath.

"What the hell happened?" I demanded.

"Ayla showed up in the bay with my brother Ryker. Queen Andrea had asked him to stay with Councilman Andrews after his altercation with Ayla a few days ago at dinner. Turns out Andrews was one of Dante's supporters." He started and my knuckles turned white as I gripped the steering wheel.

"Ryker knew something was up when Collin, Andrews's grandson, came to him for help. They planned to have warriors follow them."

"That doesn't explain why Ayla was rushed to the hospital?" I growled.

"Ayla was shot before Ryker and Collin were able to get her out. She was immediately rushed into the operating room and we haven't heard anything about her condition. They took her back about ten minutes ago." He sighed.

"When you get news, you call me." I ended the call.

Ryan never called back by the time I pulled in front of my pack house. My sole focus was getting back there as fast as possible. My mind was a spiraling mess with every scenario that could have happened that led to Ayla being shot.

When I threw the truck into park, other vehicles pulled up behind me. Without paying them much attention, I jumped out of my vehicle and ran into the pack house. There was a small hospital wing located on the main floor. I haven't had time to set foot in it until now. The waiting room was small with a desk on the far side of the room. There were also double white doors beside the check-in desk. The room was painted white and chairs lined the walls. The room was full of waiting warriors. Ryan stood up from his seat and rushed over to me with an older-looking vision of himself. I assume that's his brother Ryker.

"What do you know?"

"We don't know anything about her condition so far, but Ryker can explain what happened. Well, most of it. We don't know how she killed Dante or if he hurt her." I growled as my rage began to surface.

"Nate, breathe. I know this is hard." My father grabbed my shoulder. I didn't even notice he was in the waiting room. He stayed behind with Alpha Matt.

"Nate, my name is Ryker. I'm a personal guard to Queen Andrea. I was assigned to keep tabs on

Councilman Andrews. Soon after Ayla and Xander left the kingdom, his grandson, Collin, approached me. He didn't know the details but he had a feeling something was about to happen," Ryker explained.

"And where is Collin?" I demanded.

"Here," I was taken aback when a teenager stepped out from behind Ryker. He can't be older than sixteen.

"Collin, I know there's more to this story, but right now all I want to hear is how Ayla ended up shot," I told him and he nodded. Tears swelled in his eyes and he cleared his throat.

"When Ayla and Dante were talking to my grandfather about starting a war. Ayla was very forward with Dante. He dragged her away. That's when I mind-linked Ryker. We needed to strike before something happened to her. My warriors started a commotion and I snuck away to get Ayla. Dante was already dead when I entered the room." He stopped, struggling to get the words out. Ryker clasped the young man's shoulders, while he took a few deep breaths and wiped his eyes.

"I was trying to get her out of there when Ezekiel entered the room. When he saw Dante on the floor with his heart ripped out, he raised his gun. Ayla shielded me with her body." He stammered, the dam breaking. He was just a kid and I know why Ayla would protect him. It wasn't easy to swallow, but I would have done the same.

"That's when I rushed in and killed Ezekiel," Ryker finished.

"Collin, what is your relationship with Ayla?" I asked him and he sniffled, wiping away his tears.

"I was to take over if Ayla refused to be queen. I was next in line for the Western kingdom. At dinner, before she left, she told me I needed to prove myself or she would split the kingdom three ways between the other kingdoms. My grandfather had been grooming me for the position since my father died. I didn't want the position, but when the black pearl herself asked me to prove myself, I knew I couldn't go along with my grandfather's plan."

"How old are you, Collin?"

"Fifteen, sir." He answered.

"What you did for Ayla is admirable," I told him.

"But I got her shot?" He questioned, his voice cracking and my heart twisted painfully.

"You did what you could. And that's all anyone could ask. Mitch, can you get everyone settled into their rooms." I turned to find him standing with the group that followed me. He gave me a nod. Just then, the double doors opened and a male doctor rushed out. His eyes only showed pity as he looked at me. My heart sank.

"Alpha Nate, I'm Dr. Wilson." He introduced himself.

"How is Ayla?" I demanded, my voice cold. Hearing details of the events distracted me, but now, my panic was once again rising to the surface.

"Alpha Nate, Luna Ayla arrived with three gun wounds. All entered through her back. One was a throw and threw with minimal damage. The other throw and throw nicked her right lung. And the third one is lodged in her heart." I didn't hear anything he said after that as I dropped into the closest chair, resting my face in my hands.

"Alpha Nate, we are doing everything we can to get the bullet out and to repair the damage. I will update again when I have more news." The doctor informed me before I heard him walk away.

"Alpha Nate, we are doing everything we can to get the bullet out and to repair the damage. I will update again when I have more news." The doctor informed me before I heard him walk away.

My mind was racing with everything I'd been told. All of this can't be happening. It has to be a nightmare.

"Why the hell would you bring her all the way here if her condition was so severe?" Alpha Atlas bellowed. I looked up to see Collin crying and Ryker trying to form an answer before sighing.

"As soon as we got Ayla into the water, she struggled to shift. I let her go and a pack of great white sharks surrounded her. I've never seen great white sharks work together. They are not pack animals. But the biggest one in the group grabbed Ayla between his teeth and took off. The other sharks swam alongside the big one, protecting them. I've never heard anything like this happening and if I didn't see it for myself, I wouldn't have believed it. We didn't know where we were going until I could reach Ryan through the mind-link. Only when we were close enough to shore did the sharks move and the big one released Ayla." Ryker explained.

"Xander said seawater helps mermaids heal. Why didn't the water heal her?" I demanded, standing up from my seat.

"It will heal, but with wounds like hers, it is slow. We aren't like wolves," he answered.

"f**k," I yelled, punching my fist through the stone wall. I pulled my hand from the wall just as Xander was rushing into the room.

"Where's Ayla?" He demanded. I didn't answer. I just took a seat again with my face in my hands.

Duke was whimpering in my head as I willed myself to stay hopeful. Ayla can pull through this, she has

to.

"She'll pull through," Xander said, pulling me from my thoughts. Looking around, the waiting room was now empty with only Xander sitting beside me.

"Where is everyone?" I sighed.

"Mitch and the others went to get rooms ready for everyone. And Alpha Atlas stepped out to phone his mate. Alpha Matt went to check on patrol. He wanted to increase it, just in case.", he explained.

"Did you find anything?"

"Let's just worry about Ayla. Everything else can wait."

It felt like days before Dr. Wilson came out of the double doors again. I stood up from my seat, along with Xander, Alpha Atlas, Alpha Matt, and Kaden. Everyone else was resting. Poor Queen Andrea hasn't stopped crying, according to Xander. This was a nightmare for all of us.

"Doctor," I nodded.

"Alpha Nate, we were able to remove the bullet and stopped the bleeding. But she fell into a coma. She had lost a lot of blood. We are giving her another blood transfusion and hoping to bring her blood pressure up." I let out a breath.

"She's alive." I breathed out.

"Yes, Alpha. It was a touch-and-go there for a bit but we managed to get the bleeding to stop. But after we had her all stitched up, we did a final assessment. We were more concerned about the bleeding when she arrived," he explained.

"What did you find?" Xander asked him. My tongue became thick and I was unable to speak.

"She has some bruises on her cheek and neck. We also found swelling and bruises in various stages of healing in her vagina." He confirmed my worst fear.

"f**k," Xander yelled out. The room echoed with the growls of our wolves.

"How long ago?" I asked him.

"It's hard to say, but I would say a few days ago. We checked her for anything foreign and we are waiting for the results. They are just moving her to a room now. With her in a coma, she required a breathing tube. I'm hoping after a few days spent healing, she'll wake up." He said.

As soon as he walked back through the doors, I threw my fist into the wall again, reopening all the cuts

from before. I was beyond furious. My blood was boiling, demanding blood for what they put Ayla through.

"It's all my fault." Xander broke down as he sat. And all I wanted to do was blame him, but he wasn't the one who did that to her.

"At least you got to kill him," I growled out.

A nurse walked out the doors and whimpered. With all the anger I was feeling, I had let my aura slip out. She was forced to bare her neck to me in submission. Taking some deep breaths, I managed to rain it back in.

"Alpha Nate, Luna Ayla is now in her room. Will you please follow me?" She motioned for me to follow her.

Anxiety and guilt twisted my stomach tighter with every step I took toward Ayla's room. I've been training to be a beta my entire life but nothing could prepare me for what I saw as I entered her room.

Chapter Sixty-Five

Alpha Nate

It's been three days since Ayla fell into a coma. I haven't left her side. Everyone has come to visit her and her room looks more like a floral shop than a hospital room. The guilt has been overwhelming since the moment I saw her hooked up to all the machines. But seeing her skin grey and deep purple bruises on her cheek and neck put into perspective what she had gone through.

She was no longer on the ventilator and her skin was now bright with life, but her eyes still didn't open. Her bruises are healing and every day, Xander comes in to soak her bandages in seawater to increase the healing. I feel useless as I watch Ayla sleeping. I've been holding her hand, praying she will just open her eyes.

I was deep in thought when Xander came in. The kingdoms had launched an investigation, returning to the scene where Ayla was being held. Xander and all of his warriors from before the kidnapping stayed behind to protect Ayla. I wasn't taking any chances. We didn't know who was still alive or who else would want to harm her.

Alpha Atlas had to head home since Luna Thea was approaching her due date. Alpha Jim and my father went with him. There was nothing they could do here but wait. Alpha Matt comes every day to see her since he lives so close. Even Bluey is staying with Xander.

Then I have Max and David still here to help run the pack in my absence. Mitch had to go home since Ruby was being needy. I do understand though. I almost lost Ayla and I knew Ruby was feeling anxious. She texts me every day to check up on both of us.

"Why don't you go have a shower and I'll ask one of the nurses to help me change Ayla's bandages." Xander finally spoke. I looked up at him.

"Even though this room smells like a flower shop, I can still smell you." He chuckled and I groaned.

"How's the investigation going?" I asked, changing the subject.

"King Kaden is hell-bent on taking down the remaining hunters. And all the kingdoms are still ripping apart the house where he had Ayla. They still haven't found out why he wanted Ayla so badly. From everything we know about him, he's a vampire. So why would a vampire want Ayla?" He answered.

"Would he have been able to change her?" I questioned and he shook his head.

"She's already a mermaid and a wolf. And without being able to change her, she would eventually die while he would keep on living." He said and I sighed.

"The only one who would be able to answer that would be Ayla."

"Really, though. Go take a shower and get something to eat. I'll sit with her until you get back."

"I won't be able to relax if I leave this room," I told him.

"Then just go have a shower in the bathroom here. The nurses and I have to change her bandages. And then, after, I'll get you something to eat. Ayla would hate that you weren't taking care of yourself." He gave me a pointed look. I sighed before standing up and grabbing the bag my father packed me off the couch.

I started the shower before texting Max and David to check on the pack. There was so much still happening with my takeover and going through all this Hunter business.

While stripping off my clothes, my phone dinged on the counter by the sink.

David: everything is good Nate. How is Ayla?

Me: still not awake.

Sighing, I hopped into the shower. Duke hasn't said a word to me in the past three days. I just hear him whimpering and whining for his mate.

I let the hot water run over my stiff body for a few minutes. I've been sitting and sleeping in the same position for days. Once my body started to relax, I started to wash. Xander was right, I was starting to smell. And I hope Ayla likes beards, mine's growing thicker by the day.

While rinsing off, my heart rate increased as I heard the frantic beeping of the machines on the other side of the door. The water was still running as I ran out of the bathroom, barely grabbing a towel that hung by the door. Xander had moved to the side of the room while a few nurses and doctors attended to Ayla.

“What the hell happened?” I yelled, rushing over to Ayla. Her body was shaking and her lips were turning blue.

“We don’t know, we were changing her bandages and she started to seize.” Xander rushed out, panicked.

“Nate, mark her now! If you don’t, she will die!” Duke demanded. Without asking questions, I pushed a doctor out of the way and pulled down the collar of her gown. Duke came forward as I sunk my teeth into her neck.

Her seizing stopped as soon as I ran my tongue over the mark to seal it. Looking down at her, she whimpered before her nose scrunched up. A moment later, all the frantic beeping had slowed down to normal and Ayla was sleeping peacefully again.

I fixed the towel wrapped around my waist before leaning down and kissing her forehead. This woman was going to be the death of me as my heart pounded in my chest and my breathing was harsh.

“Nate, I don’t know what happened. We were changing the bandages on her back. Wait, did you mark her?” He asked, looking at her neck.

“Duke told me too. He said if I didn’t, she would die,” I told him, flopping back in my chair. I took her hand in mine.

“She seems to be stable now, Alpha Nate. We are going to run some tests.” A doctor informed me. I gave him a nod. A nurse took some blood before they left the room.

Xander placed my bag on the floor beside me. Before he left the room. I just needed a moment with my mate, alone. I went into the other room for five minutes and she almost died. Grumbling, I pulled on a pair of sweatpants before discarding the towel around my waist. I pulled on a shirt before taking my seat again.

I leaned forward, placing my head beside her hip as I held her hand.

“I can’t lose you,” I whispered, bringing her hand to my lips.

I woke with a groan, my neck and back stiff from my sleeping position. Tingles moved from my scalp, down my body to my toes. I squeezed my hand to find I was no longer holding on to Ayla’s. My eyes snapped open and I found Ayla’s beautiful eyes staring down at me. She had a small smile on her lips as

she ran her fingers through my hair.

"Please, don't let this be a dream." I rushed out, moving to sit beside her on the bed. I cupped her cheeks and rested my forehead against hers.

"Please, tell me this is real. That you're real?"

"Nate," her voice was barely a whisper and it was rough.

"Let me get you some water," I told her and she gave me a nod. I hit the call button beside the bed before turning my attention back to my mate.

"Are you in any pain?" I asked her. She held up her hand, giving me a so-so.

"I'll make sure you get something for the pain," I said, kissing her cheek. Tingles covered my skin where hers touched mine and I've never been so grateful for someone to be awake. This last week has been hell without her and then when I got her back, I almost lost her again.

I heard a nurse enter the room and she let out a gasp. Without lifting my head, I asked the nurse for a glass of water for Ayla.

"Right away, Alpha Nate. I will also inform the doctor about our Luna," The nurse said before leaving us. Ayla gave me a look before I answered her.

"You are now the Luna of the Crimson Tide pack. Duke and I killed the former alpha when he wouldn't give us details about the hunters." She cupped one of my scruffy cheeks before rubbing her nose against mine.

"Are you okay?" She stammered, her voice catching in her throat.

"I'm more than okay, baby. I have you. I didn't expect to get a pack but I needed to find you. But you found me." I said and her eyes narrowed.

The nurse came back in and handed me a glass of water before checking Ayla's vitals. I held the glass with the straw up to her lips. She drank the entire glass before the doctor walked into the room.

"All Luna's vitals look good," she informed the doctor.

"Luna, it's good to see you awake. How are you feeling?" He asked her.

"Sore," she rasped out.

"I'm sorry about your voice. When you were being intubated, it was fast as you were fading quickly. It can bruise your vocal cords. It should be better in a few days," he explained.

"It's okay, thank you." She whispered and I squeezed her hand. The doctor pulled up the chair Xander usually sits in and sat down.

"I know this is hard but we found lacerations and swelling." He didn't get to finish before Ayla had tears running down her face.

"I just wanted to let you know that all the tests came back negative. Are you experiencing any pain in the area?" He asked her, his voice was gentle. She wiped away her tears before shaking her head.

"Okay, my dear Luna, I'll let you get some rest. I'll have some food sent in for you. Take it slow. And please drink more water. It will help." A nurse came in and handed him a syringe.

"It's something for the mild pain you are feeling. And if your numbers are still good by tomorrow morning, we'll get you unhooked and walking." He informed us before pushing the clear liquid into her IV line.

"There's a lot of flowers," Ayla grumbled quietly and I chuckled.

"I'm not the only one who has missed you. But I have been missing you the most." I said, kissing her cheek. She smiled.

"I missed you." She whispered.

"Nate," she rasped out, her eyes filling with tears.

"Can you just initiate her into the pack so our poor mate doesn't have to use her voice?" Duke scolded me.

"Ayla, I want to bring you into the pack so we can mind-link. That way you don't have to keep trying to speak." I told her and she nodded.

"Ayla Waters, will you do me the honor of being my Luna of the Crimson Tide pack? To protect and love our pack members." She smiled and nodded her head.

"This might hurt as the mind-link is formed. I cut my palm with my claw before pricking one of her fingers. She winced, but I mixed our blood together with the finger along my cut. As I felt the tug of the mind-link to her, I lifted her finger to my lips and licked the blood. My palm was already healing.

"It wasn't as bad as the first time that happened." She giggled in my mind. I wrapped my arms around her neck and squeezed her tight. She hissed but she wrapped her arms around me.

"I'm so glad that you are awake. You have no idea how scared I was thinking I would never see you again."

"Nate, what happened the night when you went back to your pack?" Her voice filled my head. She sounded worried. I pulled away and rested my forehead against hers again. I watched as she rolled her bottom lip between her teeth.

"Nate, what happened the night when you went back to your pack?" Her voice filled my head. She sounded worried. I pulled away and rested my forehead against hers again. I watched as she rolled her bottom lip between her teeth.

"I would never cheat on you, Ayla. I love you more than I've ever loved another being. The same witch who broke our bond manipulated the bond." I answered her.

"I'm so sorry, Nate. I thought the worst." She cried, tears running down her cheeks and I was quick to wipe them away.

"I understand, baby. I would have thought the worst if I had felt that. Our bond would have been too strong to break so they had to give you a reason to doubt it. I thought you died when the bond broke. I almost died when they broke the bond."

"I'm sorry for all of this. I feel like everything was my fault." She sobbed, and I held her close.

"None of this was your fault, baby. And you can explain everything to me when you are ready. I'm just so happy that you are awake." I told her.

"I have my wolf," she whispered through the link.

"What?" I took a big whiff and I couldn't smell a wolf. To me, Ayla smelt human.

"Her name is Kaia. She woke up when I needed her the most. She says I will always smell human."

"She awoke when he," I couldn't say his name or the act. My blood was boiling with just the thought of him brutalizing her.

"It's my fault he did that. I had to save Xander." She confessed, digging her face into my chest.

"Please, don't hate me." She cried, her tears soaking through my shirt.

"I could never hate you. What he did wasn't your fault. And I hate that you feel like you had to endure it to save someone's life. I should have been there to protect you." I told her, as I held her as tightly as I could. She still has three bullet wounds that need to heal.

"Ayla, why hasn't your wolf healed you?" I asked her. She pulled away and looked at me.

"The breaking of the bond made her weak. I don't think she was supposed to come forward until I marked you under the full moon. But she fought to come forward so she could take the trauma of what he did to me." she told me through the link and I watched as her lips started to tremble.

"She protected you when I couldn't. I'll be forever in her debt." I told her out loud, as I pecked her lips. She gave me a small smile before leaning her head back on the pillow. She closed her eyes as her hand rested on my thigh. She hissed as she moved her shoulders to get comfortable.

"How are you feeling?" I mumbled, kissing her forehead.

"Tired, and my shoulders and back feeling stingy." She answered. The mind-link was proving helpful in her condition.

"You were shot protecting Collin," I said, and her eyes snapped open. Panic filled her eyes as she gripped my thigh.

"He's okay. Dante and Ezekiel are both dead. The kingdoms are investigating. I need you to focus on just getting better. I also marked you again, so hopefully, that will help your wolf." I told her, and her hand immediately went to her neck. She whimpered as she traced her fingertips along the fresh mark.

"Why would you mark me again without having all the information?" I didn't expect her question, as I looked down at her. Her eyes couldn't meet mine.

"Do you love me?" I asked, turning her head so she would look at me.

"More than anything. But you are too good for me, Nate. I'm broken." Her whisper filled my mind as tears filled her eyes.

"Baby, you might believe you are broken, but I don't see it. Anyone who knows the real you doesn't see it. You are perfect, my perfect and I will spend the rest of our life together proving just how perfect you are."

"Thank you" she mouthed as I cupped her cheeks, wiping away her tears.

Ayla jumped when the door to her room was pushed open. The heart monitor beeping increased as her breathing became rapid.

"Nate, I brought you something to eat," Xander said, and I waited for him to notice Ayla awake.

"Her heart rate is elevated. Did something happen?" He asked, looking at the screen.

"Nothing to report," She rasped out as best she could. His eyes snapped to Ayla's as she watched him. I chuckled when his mouth hung open, and he was stunned into silence.

"Hi, Xander," she reached out a hand. He took it gently as it was the one with her IV and knelt on the floor beside her bed.

"Ayla, you have no idea how relieved I feel. How are you feeling?" Xander breathed out.

Ayla was using the mind-link to answer his question. Usually, I would have been jealous, but Xander has been nothing but helpful. I know he cares about her and as long as he respects that boundary, I'll be able to hold back Duke.

"We may have to pee on her." He grumbled. And I snorted. Ayla and Xander were both looking at me when I ended the chat with my wolf.

"Duke said something ridiculous," I shrugged. Ayla smiled, squeezing my thigh. She closed her eyes before she yawned.

"Baby, I think you should eat something first," I told her, but she was already asleep.

"She's awake." Xander breathed out, more to himself.

She's finally awake.

Chapter Sixty-Six

Alpha Nate

"How long was she awake for?" Xander asked me. He was sitting across from me, watching as Ayla fell back asleep.

"Maybe an hour. The doctor was already in to check on her," I answered.

"I have so many people to call but I don't want to move. We can't be having the same dream, can we?" He questioned. I was just as stunned as he was.

"I was thinking the same thing." I patted my pants just to realize I had left my phone in the bathroom earlier.

I got up and walked into the bathroom without taking my eyes off of my sleeping Luna. I still can't believe she woke up. Walking back to my side of the bed, Xander passed me a bag.

"It's lunch." He said before I could ask him. I've only eaten over the last few days when the pain of my stomach eating itself became too much.

"Thanks," I told him, taking my seat. I pulled out a sandwich before taking Ayla's hand again. I'll text everyone when I'm done.

"Did she say anything about what happened?" He finally asked. I know the guilt for what Jordan did to her was eating him up.

"She said her wolf came forward and took the trauma of what happened. I don't know what she said to you, but she doesn't blame you, Xander. She did what she did to protect you." I told him and he leaned forward, lowering his head.

"Xander, I feel just as guilty. I never should have let her go anywhere without me." I sighed.

"And the book she was looking for was blank." He mumbled.

I completely forgot about the book Ayla went there to find. The one that was supposed to be full of answers for her.

"What do you mean it was blank?"

"She believes she found the right book but it was no longer glowing blue like before. But all the pages were blank. Even alone, words didn't appear." He said but avoided looking at me. He sniffled down his emotions.

"So even before all of this, she didn't get any answers?" I sighed, squeezing her hand.

"She may have gotten some from Dante but nothing that we found." I blew out a breath. After everything she's been through, she deserves answers.

My phone dinged telling me I had a new message. Looking at the screen, Ruby's name popped up.

"Have you texted anyone about Ayla?"

"I haven't. We probably should. There's a lot of people to message." He answered.

"I want to call her father first. I think he should be the first one to know.

"I think that's best." I kissed Ayla's hand before I headed into the hallway to give Alpha Atlas a call. I could see Ayla through the small window of the door.

When his call went straight to voicemail, I called my father, who answered on the first ring.

"Nate, what's wrong? Did something happen to Ayla?" My father rushed out.

"Dad, where's Alpha Atlas?" I asked him, calmly.

"Luna went into labor. He's with her," he answered.

"Then can you please tell him Ayla woke up? I wanted to be the first to tell him the news. She woke up about an hour ago. But she is sleeping now." I told him.

"Thank the goddesses. I was hoping for good news but I was expecting bad news." He breathed out.

"I don't blame you, Dad. It was touch and go there for a bit. Can you let Alpha Atlas know the good news when you see him? I know he's busy with his mate, which I understand, I wouldn't be answering my phone either." I chuckled.

"Hopefully, that day will come soon enough. I'll let him know. And give Ayla our love when she wakes. I know your mother and sister are anxious to see her."

"With her sibling being born and I know she would love to meet Rosie. As soon as the doctor gives us the okay to travel, I'll bring her for a visit." I told him.

"I'll let them know the good news. And how are you doing, son?" He asked and I sighed. I was watching Ayla sleeping.

"So much better." I breathed out with a smile on my face.

"Good. And things will only get better from here." After we said our goodbyes, I texted David and Max to let them know the good news. As soon as I sent my last text, my phone started to ding with messages from Rudy and my mother.

I was just replying when Max, David, and Ryan came running up the corridor towards me. I finished my message before turning my attention to them.

"Is it true?" Max breathed out while the other two nodded their heads.

"I wouldn't lie about something like that. She was up but now she is sleeping." I told them. I could see them all physically relaxed.

"Thank the goddess, now you can get back to work," David said, and I chuckled.

"I should probably find myself a beta."

"You may need to get two with all the work you have to do and with Ayla still recovering. Maybe ask Xander for his help. We could always teach him while we are here." Max offered.

"It may be a good idea to have the mermaids guarding Ayla initiated into the pack. That way we could all work together, but I will need a wolf beta as well. Any suggestions? All of you have spent the most time with my pack." I asked them.

"Honestly, both Cooper and Christian would be a great choice. And then you have Ryan here. He's been a great help with all of this as well. Nate, you have some great pack members here. I wish I could stay." Max said.

"I don't think Alpha Atlas will let any of you go, but thanks. I really appreciate everything all of you have done for me, Ayla, and the pack." I told them.

"And I'll take all of them into consideration. The doctor said if Ayla's numbers stay stable she can be unhooked tomorrow. Maybe that means I can get back to work," I told them.

"Alpha, how is our Luna doing?" The doctor asked, walking up to us.

"She's sleeping," I answered.

"I didn't think it would take long before the pain medication took effect. I just want to let you know the results of the blood work we took earlier. She suffered from a blood clot. I'm not sure how, but when you marked her, it helped heal her." The doctor informed me.

"You remarked her?" Ryan exclaimed.

"You remarked her?" Ryan exclaimed.

"Duke warned me if I didn't, she would die. And when Ayla woke up, she told me she had her wolf." I told them.

"That would explain why she healed so quickly after you marked her. Your mark strengthened her wolf. And once she fully marks you, she should be able to shift. In theory. I've never had a wolf/mermaid patient before."

"I don't think there has ever been one with both, so this is all new to all of us."

"She will probably be out for a couple of hours if you have work to get done alpha. All her numbers are back to normal. Now it's just a waiting game for the wounds to heal." The doctor said.

"So, she can go home?" I asked, eager to get Ayla upstairs into our suite. It would be nice to lie beside her and not hunched over in a chair.

"I would like her up and walking, but let's see how she is feeling when she wakes. No promises."

"I could just carry her upstairs," I said, and they all chuckled.

"I know you would Alpha, but let's see how she feels." He said, before leaving our little group.

"Alright, you three should get back to work. And I'll start going through some of the emails." I told them when they were about to protest, since I haven't set foot in my office since we raided it to find information on the hunters.

"Good, the paperwork is killing me," David whined.

"I'll get Xander to help, so you can start training him. Ryan, why don't you shadow Max? And then, when Ayla is stronger, I'll pick a beta and gamma." They all gave me a nod, before I entered Ayla's room, closing the door behind me.

"Did you call everyone?" Xander chuckled as I took my seat beside Ayla.

"Luna Thea went into labor so I called my dad. Then, when I texted Ryan, David, and Max, they felt the need to come and check on her. I was in the hallway talking with them. Also, the doctor informed me that blood clots were responsible for her earlier episode." I explained.

"But everything is okay now?" He questioned, his voice laced with concern.

"Everything looks good. If she is feeling strong enough to get up and walk when she wakes, I can take her home." I told him, I couldn't help but smile, taking her hand in mine.

"Also, I'd like you to shadow David with all the paperwork he is taking over."

"Why? Is he having a hard time keeping up with it?" He asked, looking confused.

"I want him to teach you how to be a beta. I think having a wolf and a mermaid by my side will help protect Ayla."

"Nate, I'm not worthy of that position. I almost got her killed." His voice was full of regret.

"You killed the bastard who hurt her, who used your life to manipulate the situation. And she trusts you with her life. I know she's safe with you, as much as I hate to admit it."

"Was that a compliment?" He smirked.

"Don't let it go to your head."

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Ayla

After falling asleep during my conversation with Nate and Xander, I was surprised to learn I could go

home if I got up to walk. I was more than eager to get home and sleep in Nate's arms. And the beeping of the monitor was driving me crazy. After eating some soup and a bun, a nurse came in and unhooked everything. I felt free once all the tubes were removed from my body. After she was done, Nate came back to help me take my first steps. First, he wrapped a long robe around me and then I laced my arm around his. I was unsteady at first and quickly winded. My chest became tight with the quickness of my pulse. I felt weak but I didn't give up, even after I was left breathless, clenching my chest.

The doctor gave me orders to rest and eat but ultimately said I could go home, which I learned was upstairs. He told Nate to mind-link him if anything happened. He would also come check on me in the morning. He also changed my bandages before Nate picked me up and carried me up to our room. I groaned when his arm rested under my shoulders. I must have been shot somewhere along there. I could see the two that passed through but I couldn't see the one that lodged in my heart.

Nate and I had the top floor of the pack house. I would prefer the house my grandmother gave me, but as long as I have Nate, this place will do until I can build something closer to the ocean for us. It's more like a penthouse. There was plenty of space. There was a kitchen with a dining room and a grand living room with a massive TV hanging above a fireplace.

Branching off from the living area, there were two hallways. One led to more rooms and the other was the master suite. I was in awe when Nate stepped into the room. There was a king-sized bed in front of a fireplace with a TV hanging above it. There was a corner bookshelf with a window seat that looked towards the ocean.

The bathroom was my favorite place. There was a huge shower with a few different shower heads, his and her sinks. But the jetted tub in the corner had me wishing I could soak. A nice hot bath would feel heavenly right now. But instead, I had to settle for a shower with Nate. Not that I'm complaining about him being naked. Honestly, it feels like a lifetime since we were intimate. I know I'm in no position for intimacy right now, but the tingles I feel from where his skin touches mine, have my mind wandering to all our intimate moments.

"Stop, Ayla," Nate growled against my neck. I knew it was a demand since I could feel his thick erection against my backside. His commanding growl did nothing to tame my inner vixen. It only made her demand more attention.

"Baby, you need to rest. I don't want to hurt you." The worry in Nate's voice had me reeling in my horniness. I don't need him to feel guilty for hurting me. I've just missed his touch, his scent, and the safety he provides me.

"I'm sorry, Nate. My wolf is demanding I claim you." I turned in his arms as we stood under the water together.

"I'm not going anywhere. And you need time to heal. This is also killing me, but I also don't want to hurt you. I want you to enjoy it as much as I will." He said, rubbing his nose against mine.

I hissed as I raised my arms, wrapping them around his neck.

"I love you, Nate." I breathed out. He gently pulled me closer, and our bodies flushed.

"I love you," he whispered before his lips touched mine. The kiss was soft and intimate as we claimed each other. I knew without a doubt, I loved this man more than anything. Wherever he was, that's where my home was. Nate completes me, in a way I never thought another human being would. And I'll be forever grateful I didn't lose him that day our bond was broken.

When Nate was satisfied I was all clean, he wrapped me in a warm fluffy towel before walking me out of the bathroom and over to our bed. He asked someone to bring us some dinner. When I had eaten my fill and he had given me some of the pain medication, the doctor had given me, it was time for bed. I lay with my head on his chest as he wrapped an arm around me as tightly as he could.

"Ayla, I forgot to tell you earlier, but I called your father after you fell back asleep. Luna Thea went into labor today." I would have sat up to look at him if the throbbing in my back hadn't just calmed down.

"Is she okay?"

"I haven't heard anything. I asked my father to tell him the good news about you. I wanted him to be the first to know you were awake." He told me, kissing my head.

"I will call him in the morning." I yawned before snuggling closer.

"Nate, how did I end up here?" I asked him.

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"I remember killing Dante and then Collin came into the room. I don't remember anything after that, so how did I end up here?" I answered.

"Collin and Ryker, Ryan's older brother, brought you here. Well, more like got you into the water and a pack of sharks swam you to the bay outside the pack." He said.

"What?" I questioned. What sharks?

"You protect Collin from being shot. I don't like it, but I understand because of his age. I also know he is supposed to take over as king of the Western kingdom if you decline the throne. But anyway, his grandfather was a supporter of Dante's and he had a bad feeling, so he recruited Ryker's help. Ryker is a personal guard to your grandmother. So when they saw you at the party, they knew they needed to get you to safety. Little did they know how strong and independent you are. You killed Dante and then when Collin was trying to get you out, Ezekiel shot at you both and you took the shots. Ryker came in and killed him. So when they got you to the ocean to take you to the western kingdom, sharks surrounded

you and swam you here.” My mind was racing by the time Nate finished.

“I was with some of the others waiting at the meet-up point. Ezekiel had contacted the kingdoms with instructions to meet. When I made it back here, you were already in surgery.” His voice was sorrowful as he kissed my head again. I threw a leg over him and I squeezed my arm draped over his waist.

“I was with some of the others waiting at the meet-up point. Ezekiel had contacted the kingdoms with instructions to meet. When I made it back here, you were already in surgery.” His voice was sorrowful as he kissed my head again. I threw a leg over him and I squeezed my arm draped over his waist.

“All that matters is that we are all safe. And I killed Dante because I couldn't let him kill off the kingdoms. He wanted me to submit to him and I wouldn't allow that to happen. I was never going to sit by and watch him tear my oceans apart.” I told him.

“Ayla, did Dante tell you why he was doing all of this in the first place? We found where you were being held before Dante took you. I even witnessed Xander killing Jordan. But your father knew Dante was a vampire.” Nate asked me.

“Dante told me he was the black pearl before me. He was stripped of his mermaid and left for dead because his father murdered his mother. The goddess didn't trust a vampire to rule over the seas. So, after Dante lived, he waited until the next black pearl was born.” I could hear Nate's heart pounding against my ear and his jaw ticking.

“This was all caused because of a hundred-year-old grudge? Dante wanted what was taken from him and you were the pawn to get it,” he growled.

“Did he touch you?” I could feel his aura threatening to suffocate me. His body went rigid below me and he was hot with anger.

My heart twisted painfully as I climbed on top of him. I was left panting and my body throbbed with fury, but I needed to comfort my mate. I rested my forehead against his as he gripped my hips.

“He didn't touch me there. He forced me to kiss him and play this game of happy couple. Until I refused to let him kill my people. And that's when Kaia came forward and we killed him. I'm so sorry, Nate.” My voice cracked as tears rolled off my cheeks onto his. He cupped my cheeks before lifting his lips to mine.

“I'm not mad at what you had to do, baby. I'm furious someone was touching what is mine. You are mine, forever and always. I should have been there to protect you.” I pecked his lips before moving down and snuggled into his chest. My body was exhausted and my muscles ached from holding myself up.

“It's all over now,” I breathed out, kissing his chest. He wrapped his arms around me as I snuggled into

him. I was straddling his waist as I laid on top of him. His body was warm against mine as I listened to his heart. This moment felt surreal as I breathed in Nate's scent. I never thought I would get this chance and now that I have it, I'm never letting him go. I need him like I need air. With Nate rubbing my back, and his steady heartbeat against my ear, it didn't take long before I felt myself falling asleep.

"Get some sleep, beautiful," Nate whispered, kissing my head. I pecked his chest before I fell into a peaceful sleep.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Luna Ayla

I woke with a groan. My body ached and my throat was throbbing. I should have used the mind-link while talking with Nate last night, but it sounded better. Now I'm paying for it. Nate wasn't in bed and I sat up, looking around our room. I knew he had to be around here somewhere. I'm sure he has lots of work to do, now that he is an alpha.

"A very sexy Alpha," Kaia purred.

"Stop. He won't touch us until we are healed." I huffed.

"Then jump him. I want my mate." She whined.

"And I don't? But the doctor said we needed to rest." I reminded her and she growled.

"We can rest after we claim what is ours."

"Kaia, you don't have to worry about Nate cheating on us. He marked us to save us." I reassured her. She grumbled before retreating. I understand her frustration. I don't feel the same without my mark on Nate, but we have to wait.

Sitting up, I found a bottle of water, pain meds, and my phone on the nightstand closest to me. I smiled at Nate's thoughtfulness. I took a couple of pills with the bottle of water before I picked up my phone to call my dad. I wanted to make sure Thea and my sibling were okay.

I held my phone up to my ear and listened to it ring, finally his voice answered.

"Ayla?"

"Hi, Dad. How are Thea and my sibling doing?" My voice was raspy but it was better than yesterday.

"Oh, sweetie. I'm so happy you are awake. Will gave me the news yesterday but I've been so busy with Thea and your baby brothers." He said and I smiled.

"Brothers?" I exclaimed.

"Thea gave birth to twin boys yesterday. Aspen and River." He said with pride.

"And she is doing well?" I asked, unable to hold in my excitement.

"All three of them are doing great, sweetie. How are you feeling?" He asked me.

"I'm out of the hospital but I'm still sore and easily winded. My wolf woke up." I told him and he gasped.

"You have a wolf?"

"Her name is Kaia," I said.

"That's wonderful, sweetie. I can't wait to see you and to introduce you to your siblings. Rosie is so mad she got brothers and not a sister." I giggled.

"And I'll be the best big sister that little girl ever had."

"I'll send you pictures." He said before I heard a baby start to cry.

"I know you are busy. Give everyone my love, especially Thea. I love you, Dad."

"I love you, sweetie. Take it easy." We ended the call and I couldn't wipe the smile off my face. Not only do I have a little sister, but I now have two baby brothers.

My phone chimed in my hand, it was a photo of my baby brothers. Both of them were sleeping bundled up. They have dark hair like our dad. I was already in love as I stared at the newborns. I felt giddy as I climbed off the bed and got ready to go find Nate.

When I was dressed, I headed out of our apartment. I let out a groan when I realized I would be walking down the stairs. I forgot we were on the top floor of the pack house. I was so excited to be getting out of the hospital and exhausted to remember Nate carrying me upstairs.

By the time I stepped off the last stair, I was exhausted again and my chest twisted painfully as it pounded in my chest. I was covered in sweat as I tried to control my breathing.

"Your heart and lung need more time to heal." Kaia scolded me.

"And you want me to claim our mate when I can't even walk down the stairs?" I exclaimed.

"I would rather die being f****d by our mate than by you walking downstairs." She retorted.

"Or you could heal me faster?" She huffed before returning to the back of my mind.

I didn't realize I had an audience until I raised my head and took a deep breath. A few pack members were looking at me with concern. I could feel more heat going up my cheeks. I must look pathetic.

"Luna, are you okay?" A man asked with worry.

"Oh, yeah, of course," I told him, brushing off his concern.

"Do you know where Alpha Nate is, by chance?" I asked him and he pointed to the front door.

"He's outside talking with a few of the warriors." I thanked him before I opened the door to find my mate standing with a few men in the driveway. I groaned as I saw I would have to walk down more stairs.

Nate must have heard me because he turned around and looked at me.

"Ayla, what are you doing out of bed?"

"Finding you," I called out as I mentally prepared myself to take the few stairs I had left.

"Why didn't you use the mind-link?" He teased and I pushed my lips into a line.

"First, because that would have been too easy, and second, I needed to get out of the house. But why the hell don't we have an elevator?" I exclaimed as I made it to the driveway. Nate met me there as I tried to catch my breath.

"Didn't the doctor say you needed rest?" He asked, pulling me against his chest.

"Maybe, but to be fair, it's good to get up and move. But again, why the hell don't we have an elevator?" He chuckled and kissed my lips.

"I'll put it on my list." He mumbled against my lips.

"Good, because you are going to carry me up them," I grumbled.

"Anytime, baby." He said and I snuggled into his chest, almost forgetting why I came down here in the first place.

"Did you hear the good news?" I exclaimed, looking up at him, my chin resting on his chest.

"What good news?" He questioned.

"Thea had twin boys. River and Aspen." I told him, letting go, I pulled my phone out of my pocket to

show him the photo my father sent. He spun me and pulled me back into his chest. He wrapped his arms around my waist and rested his head on my shoulder as I showed him the photo of my brothers.

"They are so chubby." He cooed and my heart swelled.

"My dad said everyone was doing well but Rosie wanted a sister, not two brothers." I chuckled.

"She already has the best sister." He kissed my cheek.

"Ayla!" I heard my name being yelled. Nate turned with me still wrapped in his arms. Xander was jogging up toward us. He must have just been in the water. I couldn't help but smirk as all the female wolves stopped to take him in.

"What are you doing up? You should be resting," he scolded me with a smirk.

"I'll rest in a little bit. I want to see and meet the pack." I told him. Nate let me go and Xander pulled me in for a hug.

"I'll rest in a little bit. I want to see and meet the pack." I told him. Nate let me go and Xander pulled me in for a hug.

"You are never allowed to do that again. I've aged ten years." He whispered and I giggled.

"With all eyes on you, I would say, the females like them mature."

"I missed you." He laughed.

When we pulled apart, I told him all about my newborn brothers. I was so proud of them and I couldn't wait to go visit soon. I just needed the all-clear from the doctor, even though Nate's mom is a doctor. I would be fine even if we left today.

"Wuna," I heard a squeal before, I was almost knocked back. I looked down to find a little girl with her arms wrapped around one of my thighs.

"Violet, you have to be gentle," a woman said, approaching us.

"Ayla, this is Melanie May." Nate introduced the woman. She was beautiful with her long blonde hair and bright blue eyes. My chest rumbled and I knew it was Kaia.

"Sorry, my wolf is a little temperamental." I apologized, shaking her hand. Xander and Nate were snicking behind me.

"No need to apologize, my wolf still growls at other women who look at my mate." She chuckled.

"And this beautiful little girl must be Violet," I looked down at her and she was looking up at me with her big blue eyes. I thought I was going to melt. She was a tiny version of her mother.

"I got you a fower," she held up a dandelion that was smashed, but it was so thoughtful.

"Awe, thank you, sweetie." I took the flower.

"I was going down to the beach, would you like to walk with me?" I asked her, as I kneeled in front of her, trying not to show how much pain it caused me.

"Mommy said we can't go to the ocean right now cause of the sarks." She pouted. I looked at Xander and he shrugged.

"They won't hurt you if you are with me," I told her with a smile, and her little face lit up.

"Mommy, can I go?" She ran up to her mother, while I held up my hand for help. Nate helped me up and I swayed before my head stopped spinning.

"Ayla, you need to rest," Nate said as he held me up.

"I'm fine, and the water will do me some good," I told him. My entire body was throbbing but I knew the ocean water would help heal me.

"We can go together," I heard Melanie say before another squeal rang out. Violet grabbed my hand and pulled me along as we walked towards the beach.

"Thank you, Luna. She has been so excited to meet you when we told her our new Luna was also a mermaid."

"I wove mermaids." Violet giggled.

"I don't think I'll be able to shift today, but when I can, I'll take you swimming," I told her and the squeal that left her lips had me cringing.

She was talking so fast, I had no idea what she was saying as she rushed beside me, pulling me along with her.

"I like seeing you with a child," Nate purred in my mind. I turned my head to see him and Xander following behind us. I smiled at him. I wasn't ready for my own kids just yet, but how could I say no to this little cutie?

Chapter Sixty-Nine

Alpha Nate

Watching my mate walk hand in hand with a little girl from our pack caused my heart to swell with love. I knew Ayla was hurting but she sucked it up to walk this little girl down to the beach. It must be all this baby talk. From seeing Ayla's newborn brothers to seeing her with Violet. There was no doubt in my mind who I wanted to have my pups. Ayla was a natural when it came to kids. And I couldn't wait to see her holding ours.

"Ayla's always been good with kids," Xander said, as we both walked behind them.

"Really?" I asked. I'm not surprised. Ayla has always seemed like a caring person. I just figured this was caused by all the babies.

"She has also seemed more comfortable around kids. Even if we were just at the mall, kids would always come up to her. It's like they knew she was safe," he explained.

"She does have the aura around her, doesn't see. She makes you feel safe," I said.

"I'm not sure how she does it, but even in the worst of situations, she makes you feel safe. Even if for only a few minutes," he confessed. And I agreed. I feel like anything is possible with her by my side.

I watched as Ayla stepped into the swell of the waves hitting the beach. As soon as the water touched her, there was an explosion of purple flowers. When the flowers settled, Ayla was standing with her hair now in waves down her back, instead of up in the messy bun she had been sporting. Her dress was no longer the same as before. A sheer black lacy covered her body, only turning a dark, almost black purple, covering her breasts and her intimate areas. The dress was still off the shoulders, exposing my mark on her neck and her wolf tattoo. And instead of just one flower behind her left ear, she was now wearing a crown made of the same flower.

I was in awe when she turned to face me. Her eyes were done in a smokey black and her lips were a deep purple.

"Our beautiful mate," Duke purred, and I was left speechless.

Violet's squeals brought me back to reality. I forgot we had an audience as I was so lost in my mate.

I watched as Ayla kneeled in front of Violet, who was wearing the biggest grin. Ayla pulled the crown of flowers off her head and placed it around the little girl's neck.

"Mommy, I'm a princess," she squealed. Spinning around.

"Always, baby girl. We should go show Daddy," Melanie said.

"Awe, but I want to stay with Wuna," Violet pouted.

"I promise, when I'm all better, I will take you for a swim. As long as it's okay with your mommy and daddy." Ayla told the little girl, who turned to look at her mother with her big blue eyes.

"Who could resist that face?" Duke chuckled.

"We better not have a baby girl." I teased.

"I want a mini version of our mate." He pouted and I chuckled.

"Fine, but you know all the boys.." I didn't get to finish because Duke let out a growl.

"I will kill them all."

"Don't get ahead of yourself, she needs to fully claim us first before we can think about having babies," I told him.

"Ayla, are you okay?" Xander's voice pulled me from my conversation with my wolf. Violet and Melanie were no longer standing with her.

Ayla was still kneeling but her breathing had become labored and I could hear her heart pounding in her chest.

"Ayla?" I rushed over to her with Xander by my side.

"I feel weird," she said, shaking her head. That's when I noticed the skin on her arm rippled.

Xander grabbed my arm when a wave consumed her, moving around her body.

"What the hell just happened?" I yelled.

"I don't know. All we can do is wait for the ocean to do its thing." He answered, but he was also panicked.

It felt like a lifetime before the ocean receded. I fell to my knees when the ocean revealed a mesmerizing black wolf. The color of her fur was the same color as Ayla's scales.

"She shifted," I breathed out.

"Beautiful," I heard Xander.

"Mate," Duke purred in my head. Kaia sat down and looked at us. Her violet eyes glowed brightly.

Duke was trying to force the shift until she abruptly shifted back. Ayla was left naked on her hands and knees, panting as she tried to catch her breath. It took a moment before her dress covered her body again.

"Ayla," I rushed to my feet and kneeled in front of her. She leaned back on her heels.

"f**k, that hurt like a bitch." She grumbled.

"Baby, why would you shift?" I questioned, taking her cheeks in my hands.

"Kaia wanted to heal me faster but I needed to shift. She is very impatient waiting to claim you." She groaned and I chuckled.

"How are you feeling?" But before she could answer, she stumbled forward, against me.

"Ayla?" Xander kneeled and shook her shoulders.

"She's okay. Shifting for the first time is no joke."

I moved her in my arms and I pulled back the bandage that covered her chest. Xander gasped as we watched the wound we could see fully close.

"Is it normal for a wolf to heal faster after their first shift?" He asked me.

"Having your wolf will speed up your healing, but I never noticed I would heal faster after I shifted into Duke. Just having your wolf should help you heal faster." I answered, picking her up in my arms as I stood up with her.

"But she's okay?" He pressed. I knew he was concerned. I would be as well if I didn't know that shifting for the first time took a lot out of you. And then her wolf was healing her. She was going to be out for probably another day now.

Walking back to the pack house, Ryan rushed towards us.

"What happened?" He rushed out, looking around us for the threat.

"She shifted," I said, and he looked at me with wide eyes.

"What?" He exclaimed. Just then, Max and David came rushing over.

"She just shifted, she's okay," I reassured them.

"Nate," Ayla whispered, her eyes still closed as she rested against my shoulder.

"Baby," I kissed her forehead.

"Baby," I kissed her forehead.

"Why do I feel like I was hit by a truck?" She mumbled.

"Your first shift is always the worst," I told her, trying not to chuckle.

"I really don't like her," she groaned, before snuggling back into me.

"It will get better, Luna," Max chuckled.

"I'm starving," she murmured before her breathing evened out and she was sleeping.

"Does she do that often?" David asked.

"Yep," Xander and I said in unison, causing us both to laugh.

"I'll get the snacks," he said, before walking into the pack house.

"And I'll put her to bed," I called out to him.

"Are you sharing her?" David asked and Duke growled. David paled as both Max and Ryan snickered.

"Got it loud and clear," he held up his hands as I glared at him. Duke was grumbling, wanting to rip his throat out.

"Way to poke the big bad alpha," I heard Max chuckle as I walked into the pack house carrying Ayla.

"Man, that wolf is scary," I heard Ryan, and I chuckled.

"Damn straight I'm scary," Duke growled. And I shook my head.

Ayla cupped my cheek with a hand, pulling my attention down to her. She still had her eyes closed but she had a smirk on her lips.

"I wouldn't share you either," she whispered, and I kissed her palm. She let out a giggle.

"Your scuff tickles."

"I can shave. I didn't want to when you were in the hospital," I told her, as I pushed our door open.

"I like you rugged," she purred and my c**k twitched, pushing against the zipper of my jeans.

"Baby, you need to eat and you need to rest. As much as I can't wait for you to claim me," I mumbled against her neck as I laid her down on the bed with me hovering above her.

"Kaia is so impatient." She grumbled, and the scent of her arousal hit me like a ton of bricks.

"And you aren't?" I chuckled and she opened her eyes to look at me.

"Maybe, but I'm kind of scared it will hurt." She confessed, tears filling in her beautiful eyes.

"We can take it as slow as you need, or you can just mark me for now. There is no rush, baby. You've both been through so much." I told her, before leaning down and capturing her lips with mine.

"Thank you, Nate," she smiled up at me when I broke the kiss. A knock on the door interrupted the moment.

"That must be Xander with your snacks. I can hear your tummy grumbling." I chuckled.

"I think my wolf is trying to kill me." She groaned as I went to answer the door.

After grabbing the snacks from Xander, I took everything back into the room for Ayla. She was already passed out, sleeping like a starfish in her dress. She didn't even have the strength to change. I placed everything on a side table before covering her up with a blanket. I leaned down and kissed her forehead.

"I love you, baby."

Chapter Seventy

Alpha Nate

I left the food on the bedside table and a note for Ayla to mind-link me if she awoke. I needed to get some work done and I knew she'd be out for a while after her shift. And as much as I wish I could lie in bed with her, it was still early in the afternoon. And I still needed to pick my beta's and gamma's. Also, we needed to go over everything the kingdoms found during their raids. And I'm sure I still have a ton of people to contact since Ayla woke up.

I walked into my office to find Max and David both going over some paperwork.

"Shouldn't you be with your luna?" Max questioned.

"She's asleep. And I know I have tons of work to get done." I told them, sitting down on the couch in my office.

"Or you could just go lie beside your mate?" David said.

"So now you don't want my help?" I furrowed my eyebrows. They were just bitching I didn't do any work and now they want me to leave.

"If we need you, we will call you," Max said, and I gave them both a pointed look before I stood up from the couch.

"Fine, but I don't want to hear either of you bitch." I told them before I left my office.

"We will later." I heard David chuckle before I closed the door behind me. I just shook my head as I climbed the stairs to the alpha floor.

Honestly, I didn't want to work anyway. I just wanted to be with my mate but I know I've passed off my responsibilities for long enough. I'm an alpha and I'll need to learn how to not only take care of my pack but my mate. Life was simpler when I believed I would be a lone wolf and it would just be me and Ayla.

"But now she has a wolf. She deserves to have a pack and a pod. She deserves to have the family she craves." Duke chimed in.

"She deserves the world. With everything she's been through. And she's still this sweet, loving person." I smiled, thinking about how lucky I was with her.

"And she is all ours." He purred as I walked into our bedroom.

Ayla had tossed the blanket and was now sleeping on her side with the slit of her dress dangerously high on her hip. It was open and her long legs and the swell of her ass were on full display.

"Damn," I mumbled as I took off my clothes. Wearing only my boxers, I climbed on the bed behind her. I ran my fingers up her leg and the sparks and tingling brought my body to life. My d**k was already hard from just seeing her, but now it was painful as I kissed her shoulder.

I should have gone to work instead of torturing myself like this. It's felt like a lifetime since I was buried deep inside her and she was screaming my name in ecstasy. Ayla let out a moan as she rolled her hips, her ass grinding into my c**k. I groaned as I gripped her bare thigh.

"Nate," she gasped, rolling towards me, my hand sliding into her wet s*x.

I buried my face into her neck, fighting the need to claim her again. f**k it's been too long, and her arousal has me losing control. Her hand covered mine, pushing my fingers into her wet folds, she gasped as I growled against her neck.

"Please, touch me," she breathed out. She held my hand firm as she rolled her hips, grinding my fingers into her clit. Her moans and gasps were music to my ears as she took what she wanted.

I lifted myself and stared down at her, she licked her lips and I knew I wasn't going to be able to resist her. But I didn't want to hurt her. I didn't want to overdo this and her not be fully healed. The guilt of what happened twisted my stomach painfully.

Ayla took hold of my cheeks and pulled me down, crushing my lips to hers. I growled when she licked my bottom lip. She pushed her tongue into my mouth, tasting every inch as I tasted her. Ayla was my addiction and I craved everything about her. To have all of her.

I pulled away, sat up, and leaned back on my heels. I was sitting on one of Ayla's legs as she sat up on her elbows. She looked up at me and I could see her confusion.

"Nate?" She whispered. She reached up and ran a hand down my bare chest. She bit her bottom lip as tears filled her eyes and she looked away.

"f**k, baby, I'm sorry. I'm not rejecting you." I breathed out. I cupped her cheeks, forcing her to look at me while I rested my forehead against hers.

"I don't want to hurt you," I mumbled.

"I trust you. I know you would never hurt me." She whispered before pressing her lips against mine. All my restraint broke as I ripped open her dress. Flowers covered us and the bed, as Ayla gasped, not except my forcefulness. She threw herself back onto the bed as I ran my hands down her now naked body.

"Alpha," she moaned. I growled as I cupped her swollen breasts. She gasped as she rolled her p***y against my thigh. Her warm wetness coated my thigh and I moved both my legs in between hers. I slid my thumb between her folds to play with her clit as I removed my boxers.

Her gasps, moans, and cries of pleasure had me barely holding myself together. After kicking off my boxers, I kissed my way up Ayla's body. Her hands were instantly in my hair as I sucked and nipped her hot skin.

"f**k, alpha," she gasped and I smirked, kissing between her breasts. She gripped my hair, holding me to her chest as her back arched off the bed. I gave both her n****s the attention they deserved, sucking, nipping, and flicking them with my tongue as Ayla became a breathless mess.

I kissed my way up her chest to my mark on her neck. I settled myself between her legs, feeling the heat of her core against my d**k. f**k, I shivered as I looked down at my mate.

"Baby, if anything hurts, you tell me," I told her. She nodded.

"Ayla?"

"Yes, alpha," she moaned, pushing her hips up. My c**k slid into her wet folds.

"f**k, baby," I hissed, trying to hold myself together.

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"Please, alpha." Ayla gasped, rolling her hips.

"f**k, I love it when you call me alpha." I groaned, coating my c**k in her wetness. I position my tip at her entrance before resting my forehead against hers.

"If at any time this hurts, you tell me," I told her. She nodded, biting her lower lip. I knew she wanted this but I also knew she was nervous.

Her eyes never left mine as I slowly thrust into her. Ayla gasped as her nails dug into my shoulders.

"Baby?" But she kept nodding. She was incredibly tight and the only thing keeping me from coming was the thought of her in pain. After our bodies became flush, Ayla finally let out the breath she was holding in.

"I'm okay, Nate."

"Do you need to stop? Baby, if this is too much, we can stop. You don't need to feel guilty. You can just mark me without the mating until you are ready." I told her softly, rubbing my nose against hers.

"I'm okay. Please don't stop," her voice was more of a plea. I slowly rolled my hips and her gasps turned into moans as I picked up the pace. I watched her carefully, looking for any signs she was in pain and hiding it. I wanted her to enjoy this. Even though I was so worried about her, I forgot about my own pleasure.

f**k, she felt so good, and everything about us felt right. She began rolling her hips to meet my thrusts and we were both lost in the feeling. I knew she was close as her nails dug into my shoulders harder and her moans became louder. Her walls clamped down around me, almost stopping my thrusts. Before she could scream, she pulled me down, took my weight, and sunk her teeth into my neck. I groaned as I released deep inside her. Her orgasm milked me for everything I had.

I shivered as goosebumps covered my body when she licked over her mark, sealing it. Ayla flopped back onto the pillow as I hovered above her. She looked up at me and her eyes were violet, her wolf front and center.

"Better," I breathed out before my lips covered hers.

"So much better," she gasped, as I rolled off her, and pulled her against my side. She rested her head on my chest, throwing her leg over mine. I could feel the bond click into place as her emotions bled into mine. I finally felt like I could relax. I felt whole. Everything was right in my world. I had Ayla and our bond was now closer to being complete.

"I love you," she mumbled, kissing my chest. She snuggled in close before her breathing evened out and she was asleep.

"I love you, baby, so much," I kissed the top of her head.

I covered us up with a blanket and chuckled at all the flowers around us. I'll have to remember to do that again now that I'm less worried about hurting her. Who needs a bed full of rose petals when I have a mermaid?