

Letters Sent To Eternity

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Chapter 331

“My father is pushing them to keep tabs on me. I don’t think Richard poses any real threat. Sebastian seems distracted for reasons I can’t quite figure out, and Jeff—he’s far too eager for my liking. He’s never shown any interest in me or my training before, and suddenly he’s all in. No offense, but I doubt it’s just because Ben’s here now. He’s been oddly curious about what we’re researching and tracking, even though he could easily just tag along. Something about him feels off. I don’t want him anywhere near me or Junior. I think Richard senses this too—he keeps coming up with excuses to pull Jeff away from our group.”

As we stood there, Ben pointed toward an overhang nearby. To me, it just looked like a perfect spot for cliff diving. “Look over there,” he said. “At the base, there’s a grove of trees. Can you make out what’s beyond them?”

Now that he’d drawn my attention to it, I couldn’t unsee the hidden opening in the cliff face, concealed by the trees. If I wanted to hide something secret, that would be the ideal place to stash or exchange it.

Without hesitation, we all started heading in that direction.

“Elara! Ben!” Junior’s voice called out from behind us, causing us to shift course.

This kid has been so eager to work alongside us. He’s sixteen—young and ambitious, much like I was at his age—desperate to prove himself early on. We don’t have all the facts about his father’s death. I can’t bring myself to ask his mother about it, but I doubt it was just a straightforward attack or being outnumbered. The deeper we dig into this rogue problem, the more tangled it becomes. His mother wants him trained but also recognizes that he’s an impulsive teenager. She’s asked us to gather information before involving him directly, not wanting him to rush headlong into danger unprepared and emotionally vulnerable. Ben and I exchanged a glance. We’d come back later. This place was only a twenty-minute run from Junior’s pack house.

The territory here reminded me a lot of mine. The patchy forest surrounding the vast lake grew thicker the further we moved from the water’s edge. Some trees were starting to bud early, though they’d likely pull back once the frost hit tonight. The evergreens carried a fresh, inviting scent that made me breathe a little easier. I loved being out here, and so did my wolf.

We reached his packhouse quickly, and it couldn't have been more different from mine if it tried. While my ancestors built a grand manor fit for a Jane Austen novel, Malcolm Jr.'s great-grandfather had constructed his home from the ground up, with his own two hands. Each log bore grooves and indentations from hand tools, carefully fitted together to create a seamless structure. It was stunning against the backdrop of dense woods, making me want to tear down my own house and build a replica. My family's legacy felt more pompous and self-important. My grandfather and father had made some changes over the years, but only to rooms that needed to serve a specific function. They both believed in preserving the history, but to me, it felt like an endless contest of one-upmanship, giving off an off-putting vibe.

The outdoor spaces at my home were my favorite. My mother and grandmother had done a remarkable job softening the ostentatious manor with plants, cozy seating, fire pits, and other welcoming touches. In contrast, Junior's home radiated warmth just by existing.

"Elara! Ben, how are you?" Luna Samantha greeted us cheerfully. "Jaxon, Devon, Chance—hope you all had a good run. Come inside. I've got lunch ready, and I prepared rooms just in case this storm turns out worse than expected. This winter isn't going down without a fight," she added with a giggle at her own joke.

"Luna Samantha," I began.

"Please, call me Sam," she interrupted with a smile.

"Sam," I agreed, giving in. "Ben and I will join you shortly." She gave me a knowing look, which I chose to ignore.

"Jax, can you and Dex and Chance fill her in on the rogue activity? See if anything matches what they've been experiencing."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, walking off without looking back. Chance hesitated, though.

Ben gave him a subtle nod, perhaps a silent instruction through the mindlink. Chance didn't argue; he just followed my guys inside.

I turned to Ben, took his hand, and we began retracing our steps back the way we came.

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Chapter 332

16 – Ben

Her fingers curled tightly around mine, and without hesitation, I found myself trailing behind her, utterly captivated and yet conflicted. My heart pounded so fiercely it felt as though it might burst from my chest, a wild mix of affection and frustration swirling inside me. Every inch of me seemed to be under her spell. I shook my head slightly, attempting to free my hand without causing a scene, especially with so many familiar faces still watching us closely.

“Just come with me,” she whispered sharply, her voice low and urgent. “This is the only way anyone will let us walk away unhindered. Everyone in my pack knows we’re mates—it’s the worst kept secret—and if we appear to be working with the bond, they’ll back off. Then we can search the way we need to.”

“Elara, stop. This isn’t safe,” I insisted, trying again to pull my hand free. We should be far enough away by now, I thought. But she held on tight, leading me deeper into the dense forest. “Elara, wait. Please, wait!” I said more forcefully, planting my feet stubbornly and retracting my arm until she stumbled back against me. “We need backup. This isn’t something we can handle alone.”

“What we really need,” she replied, her voice trembling with urgency, “is to find out what’s inside that cave. Since you all arrived, no one’s been attacked, but how long will that last? I can’t count on you being here forever to keep threats at bay. What happens when you leave? Jeremiah and Rayna will need your full attention soon enough.” Her words tumbled out quickly, her breath hitching as she tried once more to pull me forward. “Please. Don’t fight me on this. Help me get answers so we can get out of here fast. I’m not trying to argue.” She tugged harder on my hand, refusing to let go. “Please,” she repeated, using the mate bond to her advantage, her voice softer but insistent. “I’m not running away or hiding anything from you.” Her grip tightened, and my wolf surrendered, allowing my legs to follow her lead. “I’ve done everything you asked for my own safety. Help me keep my pack safe.”

This time, I stopped resisting and let her guide me forward. I thought that once she realized I was coming willingly, she’d release my hand, but instead, she intertwined our fingers, and the pulse of the bond thrummed strongly between us.

“What did you mean when you said, ‘Jer and Rayna will need me one hundred percent soon?’” I asked quietly, turning her words over in my mind.

“My wolf and I sensed that Rayna might be pregnant when they were here last. It was faint, which means she’s just barely started, but her scent has definitely shifted. Once Jeremiah finds out, he’ll lock her away for sure.” She giggled, the sound light and infectious, sending a warm rush of pleasure through me. “You and your alpha have something in common—locking away what you care about to keep it safe.”

“I’ve never tried to lock you away, Alpha. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t,” I said, a teasing smile tugging at my lips.

She smirked. “I seem to recall being stuck in the house for a whole week with you as my guard.”

“You broke your leg! What was I supposed to do? You wouldn’t rest properly to heal. Even Dev obeyed the rest order and was up in two days. It took us threatening you for two days straight just to keep you in bed, and even then, we bribed you with hourly updates of ‘still walking in the woods.’”

“Speaking of,” she interrupted, steering us back to the matter at hand, “we’re close. I’ve got four of the five scent trails right out here.” We were roughly half a mile from the waterfront

now. The scents were faint, but her alpha senses were sharp. I could detect them too, now that I was focusing.

“Whatever you do, don’t split up. I want you in my sight at all times. Understand?” I warned, locking eyes with her. I caught a flicker of excitement in her gaze at my command. She loves control, but sometimes I sense she wouldn’t mind handing it over to me for a little while.

“Understood,” she replied firmly.

We pressed onward, descending the slope toward the cliff face. The scents grew stronger but followed a straight line, which was unusual. I had never known a wolf in the forest to move in such a direct path, let alone five moving side-by-side.

“Got it!” she exclaimed suddenly.

“What?” I asked, quickening my pace to catch up.

“Only one of these scents is real. The others are masking it.”

“How can you tell?” I asked, intrigued as I watched her work. I knew this was the moment she would focus all her senses, tuning out everything else around us. That was my role—to watch and protect.

“This one here,” she said, pointing subtly, “has a natural undertone. It’s a female scent, but the others are perfectly flanking her. That’s unnatural. Plus, they have a chemical undertone. The scent has been preserved very well and is being released near her to make it seem like a group is moving through here, but it’s just her.”

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“Does the trail lead all the way to the cliff face?” I ask, glancing back at Elara. She shoots me a look that clearly says, *Are you serious?* I can’t help but grin—a genuine smile that’s been absent from my face for far too long. “Just checking,” I reply casually. She lets out a soft, amused sigh and pushes onward.

When we reach the grove, every scent trail but one fades away. She was right—it belongs to a female, someone about our age. If she’s a rogue, she’s a fresh one. Her scent lacks the usual sickly sweetness of decaying compost that typically clings to rogue markers. And she doesn’t smell like she belongs to any pack either.

“There,” I say, pointing to a narrow crevice in the rock face. Elara could slip through it easily, but I’m going to have to squeeze myself in. The opening is tight, barely wide enough for a person.

We move forward quietly, senses sharpened, alert for anyone watching the entrance. Maybe she thought the numerous scent trails she left behind would act as a deterrent,

keeping the cave safe from intruders. Or perhaps there are more hidden listening devices. We still haven't figured out the full extent of that mystery. Since our initial discovery, I've only found one more. Whoever planted them must have realized we uncovered their operation, left one more as a test, then either gave up or got better at hiding them.

"Ready?" Elara asks, glancing back at me.

"After you," I say.

"For once, you're not going to argue with me? Usually, you make me wait while you scout, sniff, investigate, and stall. Now you just want me to lead us into the unknown?" She sounds half amused, half incredulous.

"Yeah," I reply with a smile. This time, she returns it.

Elara slips through the narrow opening, stifling a laugh as I struggle to follow her. My broad frame gets snagged, and I can feel my shirt tear in a couple of places. When we finally make it inside, I know I'll be nursing scratches and bruises on my arms and legs later. But before I can dwell on that, a sharp, acidic smell hits me like a punch to the face. It's a preservative scent, reminiscent of the pickled vegetables Luna Beth makes from her garden.

"What the hell is all this?" Elara whispers, her voice barely audible.

"Whatever 'this' is, it's been going on for a while," I say, scanning the rows of shelves packed with supplies. There are jars filled with powders and bottles containing colored liquids, all meticulously labeled—not with words, but with strange symbols. "Someone's covering their bases," I mutter under my breath.

"But what is it all for?" she asks, stepping closer to a table arranged with surgeon-like precision.

Just then, my comm crackles to life. "Ben, we've got some information," Chance's voice comes through.

"What's going on, Chance?" I reply.

"Three of Junior's teens have been found dead over the last six months. No signs of an attack. And two more went missing just last week."

"Thanks for the heads-up. We're heading back now."

"Don't rush! Luna Sam told me to give you more time, but I figured you should know."

"You made the right call, Chance. Appreciate it."

Elara and I exchange a look, then speak together, "We have to go."

“It’s good to see our people are on the same page—even willing to defy Sam,” she chuckles. “Should we be worried about leaving our scents all over the place in there?”

“Too late for that now,” I say. “Maybe it will keep whoever’s using the cave away for a little while.”

“Or maybe they’ll just pack up and move somewhere else.”

I grab a vial filled with one of the colored liquids from the desk, and Elara picks a small container of powder. Without a word, we both know we’re going to have these tested.

By the time we get back to Junior’s packhouse, the temperature has plummeted sharply as the cold front we’ve been anticipating finally arrives. We haven’t seen snow in nearly a month, but now it’s coming down thick and fast, turning the world outside into a whiteout.

“You two look like you had a blast. Sort out a few things, huh?” Jax’s teasing tone breaks the silence, a smirk playing on his lips.

“Fuck off,” Elara snaps, her mood souring with the first flakes of snow.

“I’d love to, but apparently, you’re the only one allowed to be grumpy,” he laughs again.

“Cut it out. We went to check the cave and found something,” I step in, defending her.

“Well, looks like you’ll be staying the night,” Luna Sam announces, breaking the tension. “Ben, Elara, I’ve got you in the guest room at the top of the stairs on the left. Let me show you. Malcom, can you take their warriors to their rooms?”

“Together?!” Elara chokes, surprise evident in her voice. Luna Sam looks puzzled.

Like I did earlier in the woods, I take Elara’s hand, intertwining our fingers, and gently pull her behind me as we follow Luna Sam. She was the one who wanted to emphasize the mates thing to get some space from everyone else—there’s no turning back now.

I lean close and whisper to the still stunned Elara, “It’s not like we haven’t played this game before, Alpha.”

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17 – Elara

Today, he was completely vulnerable around me—bare and open in a way that made my heart race. He treated me with a tenderness I hadn’t expected, and for the first time in what felt like forever, I caught him smiling at me. That smile ignited something fierce inside me. Now, as his fingers entwine with mine, the electric charge between us feels almost tangible, like sparks flying in the air. This can’t be good. My defenses against him are crumbling faster than I ever imagined possible. He’s been playing his role perfectly, almost like my

dad's men should take notes on how it's done. He's been shuttling between his own pack, mine, and Junior's, a constant presence in all our worlds. At first, I welcomed the distance—it gave me space to remind myself I didn't need him. But by the time the second round of sharing him with others came around, my wolf inside me rebelled. She had enough, and before I even realized what was happening, I found myself begging to go with them to Red Fang. Then, earlier today, I pulled my little mate stunt, catching him completely off guard—justified, of course—but now I know he's plotting his payback. The question is: how much longer can I hold out? My wolf has abandoned me, celebrating wildly in my mind that he made the first move and took my hand.

He leads me into a dimly lit room; the only light comes from a single bedside lamp casting a soft, warm glow. "I hope this is alright. I know new mates prefer their privacy," Luna Sam says with a knowing smile. My throat tightens, words disappearing before they can escape.

"This is perfect, thank you, Luna Sam," I manage to say, my voice barely above a whisper.

The door clicks shut behind us, and suddenly Ben pulls his hand away like it's burning. I'm left standing awkwardly in the middle of the room, caught between the heat radiating from him and the invisible barrier I know I can't cross—not until this whole mess is resolved.

"I'm going to shower. Luna Sam left some clothes for us," he says, and just like that, he's gone, taking his warmth with him.

"Get a grip, Elara," I murmur to myself, shaking my head as I move toward the bed where the clothes are neatly folded.

Suddenly, a voice shatters the fragile calm.

"Elara! Your mother's been attacked!"

"Dad?! What happened?" Panic surges through me like a tidal wave.

"She was out checking on some of the younger families before the storm hit. She came home fine, but then she started convulsing. The healer is with her now."

"I'm coming!" I say, heart pounding.

"No! Your mother would be worse off if she knew you were traveling in this weather. Wait it out. She's stable for now. There's nothing you can do yet."

Warm hands grasp my shoulders, grounding me. "What's wrong? I can feel your panic from across the room."

Without thinking, I slump forward, resting my head on his shoulder. For the first time in what feels like ages, a tear slips down my cheek. "My mother was attacked. Dad said she was checking on people before the storm, came back fine, then started convulsing," I whisper into his shoulder, noticing the goosebumps rising on his skin.

"What makes your dad think she was attacked?" he asks gently.

“I’m not sure. That’s just what he said.”

“Ask him.”

I pull out my phone and call, “Dad... Why do you think Mom was attacked? If she was fine when she came home, wouldn’t that suggest something else?”

“We’ve been tracking everything for a while. Austin’s attack confirmed my suspicion that someone’s trying to scare us. There are a lot of theories, but the healers found high doses of wolfsbane mixed with other chemicals in her blood. She’s unconscious, so we don’t know if she ate or drank anything while she was out, but that’s our best guess. We’ll have more answers once she wakes.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I know Ben’s there with you, but keep him close. I don’t trust anyone else.”

“We have Jax and Dev too.”

“Keep an eye on them. They’re like brothers to you, and I know they’re supposed to protect you, but if someone got to your mother, they could be vulnerable too.”

“Hey... talk to me. What’s he saying?” Ben asks softly.

I share everything my dad told me, including the part about keeping Ben close. It stings my pride a little, but I understand. Pride won’t save me if I’m careless. I say all this while nestled against Ben’s neck. He had just stepped out of the shower, wrapped only in a towel, but right now, my swirling emotions leave no room for anything else.

“Link Dev and Jax. Give them a heads up. We need to speak with Luna Sam. I don’t think she or Junior are behind this, but they might be victims too. Whoever ‘they’ are, it seems they want access to the water. Your packs border it almost entirely on this side. Another problem is the two-mile stretch of forest west of your lands—that’s neutral territory. We need a way to investigate without causing a scene.”

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Ben insisted that I take a shower before we went to see Luna Sam, and I only agreed when he threatened to drag me in himself. My wolf growled softly in protest, and I warned him that if she didn’t get her act together, I’d be sleeping in a different room tonight.

Guiding us through the familiar corridors of the packhouse, I retraced our previous steps, following Luna Sam’s scent like a thread leading me forward.

“Where are they getting this from?” Luna Sam’s voice was low and filled with worry. “We’ve searched every inch of our territory. How is this still being distributed without our knowledge?” I knew Ben caught every word too, his jaw tightening beside me.

We turned the corner and stepped into her office. “What’s going on, Luna Sam?” I asked, letting the unease in my voice show, but I cloaked it with my aura—there would be no lies or half-truths here. Junior wasn’t present, but Beta, Gamma, and Delta sat around, their faces grim. “What are you hiding from Malcom?”

She sighed heavily, her shoulders slumping in resignation. “He’s not ready to hear this yet. It’s too personal.” Her words left me frustrated; I hated being kept in the dark, especially when it involved Junior.

“What exactly is ‘this’?” Ben’s voice was calm but firm, standing close beside me.

“We’ve had two more pups die from overdoses,” she admitted quietly.

“Overdose? Of what?” I asked sharply. It’s notoriously difficult to harm us. Our senses can detect poisons in food or drink, and we heal from injuries at an incredible rate.

“Our teenagers have been getting their hands on something—or more likely, they’ve been given something unknowingly. We don’t know for sure. But when they come to the clinic, they’re completely out of their minds. The last two were caught mid-change. Their bodies couldn’t decide which form to take, which means their wolf was affected as well. They foamed at the mouth like rabid wolves, growling and snarling nonsense, sometimes spewing random words.” Her description sent a chill down my spine.

“Why can’t Junior be told about this?” I asked, my voice tight with anger. If my father kept something this serious from me, especially during my transition, I’d be furious.

“One of them was his girlfriend,” she said quietly.

I froze. Girlfriend? Junior had a girlfriend? He wasn’t old enough to have chosen a mate yet—was he planning to? The thought unsettled me deeply. Even as I wrestled with my feelings, I knew I was being hypocritical. I wasn’t rejecting my own mate; I just needed to put the pack’s safety first for now. “He won’t take the news well,” Luna Sam continued. “I’m afraid he might react impulsively.”

“How many more?” Ben’s question was steady, probing for every detail. His expression was unreadable, but I could tell he was absorbing everything, preparing to make sense of it all.

“Eight in total. Always two at a time,” she replied.

“Why didn’t you tell us sooner?” Ben’s voice carried a sharper edge now.

“We only had one incident before you arrived last time. The last three have happened since,” she said, her tone tired but stubborn.

“You should have informed us after the second incident, especially now that it’s affecting those close to Junior,” I said, struggling to keep my snarl in check. Luna Sam flinched slightly, but I wasn’t going to back down. Had she not considered the implications? The moment she mentioned ‘girlfriend,’ that was my immediate concern—and judging by Ben’s tense stance beside me, it was his too. If she had let us know earlier, maybe we could have

done something to help. Junior, Jeremiah, and I are young, yes, but that doesn't mean we're naïve. We're willing to work together now that this crisis has pulled us all in. To make sure she understood how serious this was—and to show her I trusted her—I shared a bit about my own mother. “We could be facing a similar problem, or maybe something entirely different. Every time we think we've solved one piece, another mystery pops up, and I'm tired of the missing links.”

I sank into the small couch against the wall of her office, and Ben settled beside me. “Have your healers been able to determine what they overdosed on?” I asked her, glancing at Ben. We needed to exchange everything we'd learned today, no matter how grim.

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18 – Ben

Luna Sam's expression was one of utter defeat, her shoulders slumped as if the weight of the world pressed down on her. Elara, on the other hand, prowled restlessly like a wild animal trapped in a cage, her pacing sharp and anxious. Junior sat frozen, stunned by the gravity of what we'd just uncovered. Around the room, our warriors stood silently, each absorbed in their own thoughts, while I felt numb—emotionally paralyzed. It was the only way I could remain steady without breaking something in frustration. Outside, the storm still raged fiercely, trapping us indoors for the time being. Once it abated, we'd be able to move again.

I had already updated my Alpha and Jeremiah on everything we'd learned today, and Elara had done the same with her father. It turned out that all the alphas were aware of the situation, though none had been forthcoming until now.

Perhaps it was because we'd been so consumed with training and school, or maybe we'd simply been oblivious to the darker currents swirling beneath the surface, but it was shocking to realize that drug overdoses among teenage wolves, while rare, were not unheard of. Someone had discovered how to combine human recreational drugs with certain herbs that triggered euphoric effects in us, much like they do in humans. The problem was that these herbs suppressed our natural healing abilities, allowing the drugs to take hold. If the concoction was off—if too many suppressive herbs were included—the wolf could overdose, leading to the devastating consequences Luna Sam had witnessed firsthand.

I never imagined wolves could even take drugs, let alone experience their effects. The realization made me feel foolish and uninformed. How were we supposed to lead when we were blind to such dangers? Elara and Jeremiah shared my anger when the alphas confirmed the drug problem. It was a trend that waxed and waned, but now it was spiraling out of control, and no one could find the source. They'd managed to eliminate a few dealers, but the crisis persisted. We needed to identify the head of the snake and sever it.

“Okay, walk me through this again,” Elara broke the heavy silence, her voice sharp with urgency. “Who stands to gain the most if multiple packs are wiped out by these drugs?” Her restlessness was evident in every movement—she needed to act, to do something. None of us could sleep; the weight of the situation was too heavy. We might as well stay together and hash it out.

“That’s the tricky part,” Luna Sam replied, rubbing her face wearily with her hands—the first sign of exhaustion I’d seen from her. “Different groups have different motives. The witches would expand their territory. They think humans and wolves have too much already. Vampires would lose the control we exert over them if we were weakened. The fae tend to keep to themselves and avoid other species, but even they have vulnerabilities when it comes to humans. It would be advantageous if we were out of the picture. The common thread, in my mind, is humans.”

I cleared my throat, my voice rough and low from disuse. “What about us?”

Heads turned sharply toward me.

Elara echoed, “What about us?”

I pressed on, needing answers no one else dared to ask. “Who benefits the most if all three of our packs are taken out? Which group, pack, or Alpha gains the most from this?”

The room fell silent as everyone exchanged uneasy glances. Luna Sam’s face flickered with something unspoken, but she remained silent.

“It’s late. You all need rest if we’re traveling tomorrow. Get some sleep,” she finally said, dismissing us.

“She’s hiding something,” Chance muttered under his breath. “Maybe someone’s threatening her or Junior because we’re getting too close to the truth.”

“What do you want us to do?” Chance asked, looking to me.

“For now, nothing,” I answered. “Just prepare to travel. She’s right—we’ll need our strength if the snow sticks around. Elara’s mother was attacked or poisoned, and I know Elara wants to get back to her. I’ve already put Jeremiah on alert. As soon as we can, we’ll head to Black Claw, get Elara safely back with Jax and Dev, then return home. I need to talk to the Alpha and Jeremiah before we make any moves.”

“Goodnight, Luna Sam. Junior,” I said, standing and offering my hand to Elara. She shot me a look that clearly said she didn’t need my help.

I didn’t move. She could be stubborn with anyone else, but I knew better. Ignoring me, she stood up and brushed past with a frustrated huff. Whatever I’d done this time, I had no clue. Still, I followed her to our room. I needed her—desperately—but tonight, I knew I wouldn’t get anything from her. I would make sure she got home safe, and then Chance and I would leave at the earliest opportunity.

Once inside, Elara headed straight to the bathroom, and moments later I heard the shower running. Perfect. We were both clearly avoiding each other. I grabbed a pillow and an extra blanket from the foot of the bed, then made a spot on the floor. Hopefully, I could fake sleep well enough to dodge any more conversations.

We each managed only about four hours of restless sleep. I knew Elara was worried sick about her mother and her pack, and I was equally anxious about my friends. If someone had gotten to Luna Emilia, then Beth and Rayna were in danger. With Rayna pregnant, we couldn't afford to take any chances. I needed to get home.

Neither of us slept well. I spent much of the night listening to Elara's frustrated sighs and shifting as she tried to get comfortable. My wolf urged me to join her, to offer comfort in the face of her distress, but I shut that down immediately. Now was definitely not the time for mate-bond nonsense.

As dawn's light filtered through the window, we silently agreed to stop pretending we were rested. We rose and began to prepare for the day, still avoiding any conversation. We took turns in the bathroom, each of us lingering longer than necessary, then paced the bedroom restlessly. The tension was suffocating. Because we'd fled in a hurry, we hadn't brought anything to distract ourselves—no phones, no books, no devices.

When the silence became unbearable, I stepped to the door and slipped out without looking back. I needed space or I was going to lose it.

An omega had set out breakfast, and I grabbed a sandwich before stepping onto the porch. The storm hadn't been as fierce as I'd feared—mostly wind whipping the snow into a frenzy, creating the illusion of a blizzard. The snow was wet and already melting in places. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen weather quite like this before.

Then a thought struck me—Luna Sam had mentioned witches. Could they be behind this strange storm?

I swallowed my sandwich in two quick bites and headed back inside, finally feeling like I could take action.

"Luna Sam!" I called out.

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19 – Ben

Elara was far more upset that I made sure she got home safely before swiftly taking Chance and leaving, than she was about the fact that I was leaving at all. Honestly, I'm not shocked by her reaction. We've both kept our distance throughout the day. I'm nowhere near high enough in the pack hierarchy to be a meaningful mate to her, and Kennedy's face still flashes through my mind every time I'm near Elara for too long. It's as if my subconscious

refuses to let me forget my first love. My head aches from the tension, and with so much to do, I shove Chance into the SUV and drive off without looking back.

The ride home is quiet, the weight of unspoken thoughts hanging in the air between us. Once we pull into the driveway, Chance quickly heads off to check in with Jason and Tommy, working on a new patrol plan that now includes searching for drugs, potions, herbs, and anything else suspicious lurking around. The tension is palpable.

I step into the Alpha's office where Jer and Rayna are hunched over a stack of books, deep in research. "Have you found anything?" I ask, my voice low but urgent.

Jer looks up, weariness etched into his features. "The only thing we're certain about is that these drugs aren't a new problem..." Rayna starts.

"But no one's ever been caught," Jer finishes grimly.

I glance at Rayna, my future Luna, bracing myself for the argument I know is coming. Jason has seemed distracted every time he's accompanied me to Black Claw, and I haven't had the chance to watch him here. Meanwhile, Jer has been acting like this whole situation isn't as serious as it is. With Rayna's arrival, Kennedy's departure, the underground attacks on multiple packs, and now Rayna's pregnancy—our future—it's no wonder none of us are ourselves. We don't need more stress.

"I'm not staying in the packhouse," Rayna says sharply, cutting me off before I can finish.

"No, you're not," I repeat, my voice steady but firm. "But Elara's mom was attacked and hospitalized yesterday..." The words hang in the air.

"What?!" Rayna gasps, her eyes wide—but she's not looking at me. She's staring at Jer. Great. We're both screwed. Jer hadn't told her, probably trying to shield her from more worry, but now she's going to be even more furious when none of us let her out of our sight or out of the packhouse.

"I won't be confined to the house," she snaps. "I've dealt with situations like this before, following my brother around. People try to kill him all the time." She waves me off, but inside, my stomach twists painfully. That's what Kennedy's been enduring? Being targeted and attacked every day?

Jer raises his hand, calling for a pause. "Let's table this for now." We need to find a solid reason to keep her here, where she'll be safe. Hopefully, we'll come up with an excuse that satisfies her soon. "Dad agrees with you and Luna Sam—the weather has to be the work of witches. They've done this before, usually casting a spell around their lands that creates a mist, disorienting anyone who's unexpected or unwelcome. The snow isn't sticking this time, but it happens every time you travel between the three packs, Ben." He finally meets my gaze, and I see the exhaustion in his eyes. I've been away too long this time. He needs more support. I'm going to have to talk to Jason about stepping up.

"They could be aiding whoever is moving the drugs or the ingredients for them. You said you found a workshop?"

“Something like that,” I reply. “It was barebones, but stocked with plenty of ingredients. Elara and I divided what we found so all our healers can work on it together. That’s where I’m headed next.”

“I’m coming with you,” Rayna declares.

“No, Luna, please...” I begin, but she cuts me off.

“I’m not the Luna yet, Ben. Stop trying to butter me up. I trained in the hospital, remember? I can help with the things you found, and if I go, I’ll be supervised. It’s a win-win, a compromise.”

I take a step toward her, opening my mouth to argue, but she speaks again before I can.

“Keep in mind, Kennedy told me all the ways to sneak out of the packhouse undetected...and I can suppress my aura and scent. Either let me help willingly, or I’ll force my presence in other ways—and no one has time for those games.” She raises her eyebrows at me, daring me to argue. Jer looks utterly useless, like a guppy flapping its gills in front of her.

I swallow hard, knowing this fight is far from over.

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“Alright,” I say firmly, locking my gaze on her. “But know this—you’re under my watch every second. The moment I lose sight of you, you’re done. You’ll be back here, no questions asked. If I have to carry you myself, I will. I don’t care how much you throw a tantrum. You’ll even pee with supervision, understood? We can’t risk anything—not for you, not for the pack’s future.” My eyes narrow as I hold her in place, and though she glares back, I can tell she’s itching for a fight. Honestly, I think she just enjoys arguing for its own sake sometimes. Probably because Jer never says no to her. I add, “By the way, your scent’s changed again. What’s going on?”

A sly smile tugs at her lips, reminding me of Kennedy when she’s plotting something. “Well, it’s not just one pup this time,” she says, her hand gently resting on her belly. “There are two.” She strokes the curve of her stomach tenderly before drifting over to Jer, who presses a soft kiss right where her belly button lies.

“That’s my cue to take my leave,” Jer says, glancing at his watch. “Luna, I’ll be down in ten minutes. We’re heading to the clinic. Be ready.” Neither of them even look my way. I sigh, rolling my eyes, then turn away to shower and change for the day.

When we step into Doc Jensen’s lab, Rayna’s reaction is immediate and sharp. “What died?” she asks, her voice tense.

I take a moment to scan the room. The sterile scent of antiseptic hangs thick in the air, making it difficult to pick out any other odors.

“That would be the heart and liver of a rogue we found near the border between our territory and Malcom Junior’s. The poor thing was foaming at the mouth and in the middle of a change—kind of like what you all have been describing lately. I wanted to run some tests to figure out what might be in his system.”

“Will these help, Doc?” I hold out a small vial of clear liquid and a container holding a white powder.

Doc Jensen peers over his glasses, curiosity lighting up his face. “What have you got there, Benjamin?” He probably doesn’t care much about the specifics—he just loves the thrill of a new puzzle.

“I was hoping you could tell us,” I explain. “Elara and I found these in a cave along the waterfront belonging to her and Junior’s pack. The place was stocked with all kinds of stuff, but nothing was labeled in a way that made sense to outsiders. There were tables and workstations, but no clues about what they were making or using these for. Can you help us figure it out?”

He grins broadly. “I thought you’d never ask, my boy!”

Twisting off the black cap from the vial, he takes a cautious sniff but keeps his expression neutral. Suddenly, Rayna covers her nose and mouth, her knees wobbling slightly. I step forward quickly, ready to catch her if she falls.

“What are you smelling, Luna?” I ask, concern sharpening my tone.

“It’s like acid burning my nose hairs,” she gasps, struggling to stay upright. “I feel dizzy.”

“This isn’t good. We’re leaving.” I move to guide her toward the door.

“Wait!” Doc Jensen steps forward, his eyes wild. I halt, positioning myself between him and Rayna. “Can you still smell it with the cap on?” he asks.

Rayna nods, her face pale.

“And the powder—can you smell that too?”

Another nod.

“They both smell like preservatives,” she says, squinting as she tries to focus. “The liquid is acidic—kind of like vinegar. The powder is sweet.”

“You’ve been a huge help,” Doc Jensen says, clearly energized. “That narrows it down. I’ll have an answer for you within the hour, Benjamin.” I give a brief nod, then gently push Rayna toward the door, eager to get her out of the lab’s oppressive air.

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“We’ll run another round in two hours. Get some rest.” I called out to the five warriors standing before me. Their groans echoed my own exhaustion, and I could sense their frustration simmering beneath the surface. Yet, I remained unmoved. My mother lay trapped in a coma, and the weight of that reality pressed heavily on my heart. The healers had been forced to sedate her because every time she opened her eyes, she was lost in a torment of madness—screaming, thrashing wildly, clawing at her hair with frantic hands. Her eyes, wild and vacant, saw nothing of the present world. Whatever horrors her mind conjured transformed my gentle, loving mother into a fierce, uncontrollable storm of violence and despair.

My father was a shattered man, barely holding himself together. I had now taken on all of his duties, the burden of responsibility settling squarely on my shoulders. He couldn’t leave her side—not even for a moment. His distracted state made him a danger to himself and others. I turned away, hoping to steal a few moments of rest myself, but first, I needed to check on him.

Jax, Dev, and I had been rotating the tasks of bringing him food and fresh clothes each day. The first time I tried to step away for a quick shower in the healers’ locker room, he fought me fiercely, unwilling to leave her even for five minutes. Eventually, I managed to move them to a maternity room equipped with a full bathroom and other necessities, so he could care for her more comfortably. Now, we lock the door firmly, barring anyone from entering unless he’s present. He’s taking no chances with his mate’s fragile state.

My wolf senses agreed, but they kept sending me images of Ben—his face flashing in my mind like a silent plea for me to reach out. He had only been gone for two days, yet this time, her reaction to his absence was far more intense than before. Ben had his own pack to tend to, his own Luna who might be facing threats of her own. His Alpha, too, could be under pressure. Neither of us had the luxury to be distracted by the bonds of mates right now.

When I finally returned to the pack house, Melanie, one of the omegas, was waiting for me at the door. She held two bags in her hands, her expression unreadable yet urgent.

“Melanie, thank you for putting this together,” I said, reaching out to take the bags. But I should have known better.

“No way, Alpha Elara,” she said firmly. “Go upstairs and take care of yourself first. Dinner’s already on the table. Or, if you prefer, you can use your dad’s office to freshen up. I’ll bring clothes and food to you there. But under no circumstances am I letting you wander around like a worn-out zombie while you’re trying to look after everyone else. I’ve already sent the other boys to do the same.”

“What about Richard, Sebastian, and Jeff? Are you making them eat and shower too?” I snapped, not meaning to be rude. Melanie had been incredibly helpful these past few days, but fatigue was gnawing at my patience and manners alike.

“Yes, I have,” she replied without hesitation. “Not to the extent you and your friends have pushed yourselves, but they know better than to run themselves into the ground. You’re good to no one if you’re exhausted and distracted. In fact, you become a liability—and I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what someone is counting on. Your father is locked away with your mother, so he’s out of the picture for now. His team is split between guarding them and watching over you. And you’ve been thrust into a role you only just started preparing for. Someone wants you to fail, and I refuse to let that happen. So, get yourself to that office. I’ll bring you food and clothes. You can even nap on the couch if you don’t want to make it all the way to your room, but you will rest.”

Her voice held the same firm kindness that my mother used to have. A small smile tugged at the corners of my lips, and I saw her return it. “Go. Trouble will still be here when you wake up.”

I nodded silently and headed toward my father’s office—my office now, I supposed. Out of habit, I scanned the room for any hidden devices or bugs. Paranoia was creeping in, but since Ben uncovered the motherload of surveillance a few months ago, I’d found two more. So much had happened since the Silver Crescent guys first came to visit.

As I showered, changed, and ate on autopilot, my mind drifted to Ben’s deep chocolate brown eyes. He was so serious most of the time, his thick brows furrowed as he concentrated on whatever task was in front of him. I imagined the feel of his closely cropped hair beneath my fingers, and the spicy scent that clung to him—the perfect blend of heat and raw masculinity that soothed me like nothing else.

This solitude was the only time my wolf and I allowed ourselves to dwell on our mate. He was the calm in the storm, the one who could ease us into rest despite the chaos surrounding us. No one else knew about these stolen moments of thought. Some had guessed Ben was my mate, but I never confirmed or denied it. I simply changed the subject and moved on. With my parents in no state to contradict me, and Jax and Dev understanding why neither of us was ready to claim the other, I didn’t want to face questions about why I let him come and go without sealing the bond, or why he hadn’t claimed me yet. There was too much at stake right now to fuel the rumor mills.

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Melanie’s gentle knock on the office door stirred me from a restless doze. “Come in,” I mumbled, still groggy as I pushed myself up from the couch. I had no clear memory of drifting off, which only confirmed how exhausted I truly was—like a weary zombie barely holding it together.

“Jaxon and Devon are waiting outside for you,” Melanie informed me with a teasing smile. “They wanted to make sure you’re decent and, quote, ‘in a good mood’ before stepping in.” She punctuated her words with a playful wink and air quotes.

“Come on in, you big softies!” I called out, trying to sound more lively than I felt, as the door creaked open slightly. Melanie gave me a nod of encouragement before slipping past my nervy friends. “What’s going on, guys?” I asked, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

Devon’s voice was sharp, cutting through the quiet. “You said two hours, but it’s been three. We just wanted to check on you.” His words made me jump, and I suddenly felt the weight of their concern. “Relax,” he added quickly, noticing my tension. “We’ve got a patrol out there, checking in every half hour. So far, nothing unusual. You need to rest—none of us are invincible.”

Jaxon stepped closer, his hands gripping my shoulders firmly, preventing any protest. “New rule,” he declared, eyes serious. “No one, not even you, gets to pull more than two shifts back-to-back. We’re getting sloppy and weak, and we can’t afford to miss crucial details because we’re too drained to care. Understand?”

A part of me wanted to snap back, to challenge him—ask who the real alpha was here. I wanted to lash out, to hunt down the bastard responsible for this nightmare that had taken my mother and so many others in our pack and beyond. The urge to scream, to break something, surged inside me. But I swallowed it down, locking that fury away in a dark corner of my mind. That rage was reserved for when we found the culprits. Then, they would face my full wrath.

Suddenly, my phone buzzed with a message from the patrol. “Alpha, we’ve got another one.”

“Another what?!” I demanded, heart pounding.

“Another dead kid,” the voice reported grimly. “He’s not one of ours, but he was carrying something. Looks like one of the glass bottles he had broke. I’m not touching him, and you’ll probably want to bring a healer to figure out how to get him out safely.”

“On it,” I said immediately, adrenaline kicking in.

Then another alert came through. “Patrol found another kid.” Jaxon and Devon snapped their attention to me. “This one’s a mule. The bottle he was carrying broke and exposed him. Can you get a healer and figure out how to transport him?”

I met Jaxon’s gaze. “If the bottle broke and exposed him, I don’t want anyone else coming into contact. Devon, you’re coming with me. We need to identify this kid. Steven confirmed he’s not one of our teens.”

They both nodded, and without wasting a second, we were out of the office, moving quickly toward the main doors.

“Jaxon, wait!” a voice called behind us as we reached the exit. Melanie was there, holding out some bags. “Take these to Alpha David, please.”

Melanie was one of our top Omegas for a reason—she anticipated what the Alpha family needed without hesitation or fuss. She thought independently, doing her job with quiet

competence so the rest of us could focus on ours. Jaxon accepted the bags without a word, and together we set off once again, the weight of the night pressing down on us as the hunt continued.