

Letters Sent To Eternity

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Chapter 391

53-Ben

Elara didn't utter a word as I slid into the driver's seat of the SUV. I had expected the witches to insist on walking through the woods, hoping to track down the magic that was being wielded against us, but instead, their focus was fixed on the locations where bodies had been discovered—places we needed to investigate first. So, we drove on in silence. I told myself the witches were simply absorbing their surroundings, concentrating deeply, but the atmosphere inside the vehicle was thick with unspoken tension. It didn't feel aimed at either Elara or me specifically, yet it was as if they already sensed what awaited us—the sights, sounds, scents, and even the emotions we would encounter once we arrived.

I caught Elara's subtle glance; she'd noticed it too. The witches seemed to communicate without words, almost telepathically, much like how Jeremiah and I linked minds through our wolves. I found myself curious about the nature of their connection. Perhaps it was the close bond between the three of them. Jeremiah and I had often understood each other without speaking, and it made me wonder how the witches managed it. Speaking of Jeremiah, I realized I should call and check on him and the pups. It still felt surreal that my best friend was a father now—almost as unbelievable as Kennedy stepping into her role as Luna and bonding with a wolf while still human.

My thoughts were interrupted when Brianna's voice cut through the quiet. She didn't shout—her tone was low and captivating, almost hypnotic—but it was enough for me to slam on the brakes as if she had yelled. "There," she said, pointing between Elara and me toward a cluster of trees visible through the windshield.

I glanced at Elara, but all I saw were ordinary trees. This wasn't a place I remembered from when I first arrived. Still, I knew the witches had been struggling with this for a long time—long before Jeremiah and Alpha James had gotten involved. Maybe they'd discovered a body here as well.

"Nothing I recognize. Do you see something we don't?" Elara asked Brianna, her eyes fixed on the spot Brianna indicated.

Brianna answered with a question of her own. "Where is this on your map?"

Elara took a slow, deep breath, her Alpha instincts battling with her hunger for answers. She hated being ignored, and I fought back a smirk at the familiar stubbornness. "It's just shy of

halfway between our northern border and the waterfront on the western edge of our territory. Red Fang lands begin about a mile that way,” she said, gesturing west. “Our pack patrols cover the neutral zone in between.”

Brianna exchanged a brief, meaningful look with Marietta, which I caught out of the corner of my eye in the rearview mirror. Without a word, they both climbed out of the vehicle, and Elara followed closely behind before I could even ask what was happening. I hurried to pull the SUV over and park. Jax and Dev did the same, and we plunged into the dense underbrush, pushing through thick branches until we found the three women gathered tightly around something on the ground.

A sharp, acrid smell hung in the air, and I could feel the weight of something heavy pressing down around us, but I couldn’t see what they were focused on.

“What is that?” I asked the guys, but they just shrugged, seemingly as clueless as I was. The women didn’t even acknowledge me. When I tried to step closer, an invisible barrier stopped me cold. It was like Elara, Marietta, and Brianna were trapped inside a glass dome. What the hell was going on? I raised my fist to knock, forcing myself to stay calm. I didn’t know these witches well, but neither my wolf nor I sensed any immediate danger from them. Elara wasn’t alone in there, but maybe she was only inside because she was with them. Maybe they were the key to getting her out—and every part of me ached to have her free, right now.

I knocked again, harder this time, but still no response.

“What the hell is happening?” Jax asked, his voice thick with concern, mirroring my own unease.

“No clue,” I admitted. “We were heading to the first place a victim was found when Brianna suddenly pointed here, jumped out, and the three of them took off without a word. Now I can’t get through whatever this is.” I pressed my palm against the invisible wall, pushing gently. “She’s not alone, but I don’t like that none of us is in there with her.” I muttered the words, unsure if they could hear me.

Jax and Dev tried pushing against the barrier too, and from the way their hands curved, it was clear the barrier formed a dome around the three women. The three of us circled the strange enclosure, watching the women inside. They were all clustered over something I still couldn’t see, their movements so small and deliberate that if I wasn’t paying close attention, they might have seemed frozen in place.

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After enduring twenty agonizing minutes, I finally reach my limit. I don’t care if it annoys her—I have to know what’s happening. “Elara?! Can you hear me? What’s going on?” I call out, my voice trembling slightly but trying to stay steady. Only silence greets me. I hold my

breath, counting one heartbeat, then another. “Elara!” I force calm into my tone, fighting the rising panic.

Suddenly, her voice cuts through the quiet, sharp and frustrated. “What? We’re in the middle of something, and the three of you are just standing there. This isn’t easy, and your help would be appreciated, but none of you seem willing to step up.”

I blink in disbelief. “What do you mean? We can’t get to you. Since we arrived, the three of us have been huddled together.”

“No, you haven’t. We’ve been trying to dismantle this damn totem while you all lounge around the cars, waiting.” Her words sting.

“Elara... I’m right behind you. You’re trapped inside some kind of bubble or barrier. We’ve been trying to reach you for half an hour.” My voice is urgent.

“Ben, we’ve been at this for nearly two hours, and you haven’t even moved from the cars.” Her tone is sharp, almost accusing.

“What?!” I shout, stunned.

“What what?” Dev asks, confused. I repeat what she said.

“Elara, you haven’t been in there for more than thirty minutes. I only lost sight of you briefly when the three of us jumped out of the car. And since when have we ever minded our own business? None of us would just stand by and let you do all the work. What totem are you trying to take apart? I can’t get any closer. Can you turn around and look at me?”

She glances over her shoulder, but not directly at me—her gaze drifts off toward the SUVs we arrived in. Annoyance radiates from her, clear as day.

“Whatever you’re seeing, it’s not me. Ask Brianna and Marietta what they see. I’m right behind you. Please, just tell me what’s going on. Clearly, some kind of magic is messing with us.”

Her silence stretches on, too long and heavy. My wolf is restless, itching to burst through whatever barrier holds her. I tell Jax and Dev about my plan to charge forward, but before I can move, a purple-white glow begins to shimmer around the women in front of us. Instinctively, we step back, shielding our eyes. They still appear to be huddled over something.

“Must be some kind of frozen image,” I mutter.

“So what the hell is happening now?” Jax asks, stepping closer to me.

“No clue,” I reply, eyes locked on Elara despite the blinding light. “But get ready to grab them. They either dismantled something or triggered something.”

“Why does it feel like the second option?” Dev asks, his voice tight. “This whole place is making me sick.”

I nod grimly. The light flickers, making it hard to focus. I hear a crackling noise, like ice cracking on a lake as winter thaws. “It’s coming.”

“What’s—?” A sudden sound, like gravel tumbling, is followed by a flash of purple light. I try not to blink, but my eyes betray me.

The next thing I feel is a sharp tap on my face—not gentle at all. “Hey! Sleeping beauty. Get your ass up.” I look up into a pair of dark green eyes. “We have some things to discuss. Your napping isn’t helping.”

I groan, rubbing my temples as I sit up, my head spinning. I glance at Jax and Dev to see if they’re down too, but no luck—they’re busy talking with the witches. “Why am I the only one on the ground?”

“No idea. You were out cold when we got back here.”

“Where did you go?” I ask, sitting up straighter despite the dizziness.

“We had to separate the pieces of the totem left here. Something about control and compulsion. To break it, we needed to create space between the elements so Brianna could counter the hex with a spell. We’ll have to return and place other hexes to keep dispelling it.”

“That still doesn’t explain why I passed out and no one else did.”

Brianna’s calm voice cuts through. “It’s your incomplete lie to Elara. She’s a conduit for the magic here, and there’s a lot of it.”

We both look at her, stunned. How does she know about our mate bond?

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Chapter 393

54 – Ben

I tried to sit up, but a fresh wave of nausea crashed over me, making me grit my teeth in frustration. Seriously, what kind of Beta am I if I can’t even withstand a brief surge of magic—magic that my mate seems to wield effortlessly? The thought gnawed at me, stinging my pride.

“Just sit still for a moment, Ben. The feeling will fade with time,” Brianna said, her tone measured and formal. But instead of calming me, her words only seemed to make the nausea worse.

“What can I do to stop this from happening again?” I snapped, fixing my gaze solely on her. I left out the part about my mate still struggling to accept the bond between us, which apparently meant I had to get used to being tossed around by magic like a rag doll.

“We’ll consult with some of our members and find a solution,” Brianna assured me. “For now, though, you’re safe. But we do need to set protective wards here to prevent anyone from coming back to fix the rift we caused.”

“Can you stand, Baby Beta?” Marietta asked, her eyes locked on me. I couldn’t tell if her expression was laced with judgment or genuine concern. My ego couldn’t handle that condescending nickname for more than a couple of seconds, so I forced myself to my feet without a word. I handed the keys over to Elara silently—there was no way I could drive feeling like this, but no one else was going to say it. Without looking at anyone, I slid over to the passenger side of our SUV.

The women talked about what had happened the entire way back to the clearing where our coven was based. I tried to follow their conversation, desperate to understand what had gone on inside that sphere of light, but my mind was fogged and distant. I knew they probably expected me to share what Jax, Dev, and I had experienced, but I was too lost in my own thoughts to join in.

I must have looked like I was sulking because I stayed in the truck when the rest of the team got out to find some of the older coven members. What use was I here against magic? She didn’t need my protection—or rather, I couldn’t protect her from magic. Suddenly, a paper cup was pressed under my nose through the open window. The scent was earthy—grass, dirt, and a mix of herbs. I wrinkled my nose and leaned back, eyeing Marietta with suspicion.

“It’s not poison, Baby Beta,” she said, amused. “Though I’m glad to see you have some healthy self-preservation instincts. Some people, when they first learn about magic, try to fix everything with a few herbs and a wave of the hand.”

“Does it even work like that?” I asked, curiosity sneaking into my voice.

“No, it doesn’t. See? I knew you were smart.” She smiled knowingly. “Now drink this. It’ll help with the aftereffects.”

“Do you know exactly what happened to me?” I asked, ignoring the ‘Baby Beta’ jab. I wasn’t in the mood to argue about it, and honestly, I didn’t even understand what had triggered the whole thing.

“Exactly? No. But I have a suspicion.”

“Are your suspicions usually right?” I pressed.

She gave me a small, cryptic smile, clearly not one for straightforward answers. She often spoke in short sentences or riddles, and I suspected she enjoyed being a little frustrating.

“Walk with me, Baby Beta, and drink. It’ll help,” she said, already turning away.

I rolled my eyes but climbed out of the truck, sniffing the concoction again. “What is this? It smells like the mud pies we used to make in the backyard as kids.”

“Kids have a natural knack for kitchen magic,” she said, watching me closely. “They aren’t jaded by the world and trust their instincts.” Her gaze made it clear she expected me to drink it. I didn’t get the sense she meant any harm, but the smell still made me cringe.

“If I drink this, will you explain what happened?” I bargained as I followed her toward the camp.

“I was going to tell you anyway,” she replied. “You both need to understand what happened—or at least what we think happened. And I don’t like repeating myself.” She nodded toward my untouched cup. “It’ll help with the aftereffects. Now sit.” She gestured to a chair beside Elara, who held a similar cup and was sipping hers cautiously. Judging by her grimace, it probably didn’t taste any better than mine smelled.

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I sit quietly, taking slow sips of the bitter liquid, doing my best to keep a neutral expression. The taste is far worse than its faint, unpleasant smell, but as the lukewarm potion slides down my throat, a wave of calm washes over me. The queasiness that had been gnawing at my stomach begins to fade, replaced by a surprising sense of ease. A soft sigh escapes my lips, and I’m certain the witches nearby catch it. Brianna is more discreet about her satisfaction, but Marietta wears a smug grin that’s impossible to miss. I can’t resist returning her smile—credit where it’s due. She was right; this concoction actually helps.

“Alright, we’re drinking your mud soup mix,” I say with a half-joke, “so now you have to tell us what happened. The guys and I saw the three of you huddled around something we couldn’t even see. Then it glowed purple and exploded, and next thing I know, I’m waking up on my ass, getting smacked in the face, and hearing a witch call me a baby Beta.” I raise my eyebrows, looking at each of them in turn. “When I mind-linked Elara, she thought I was lounging by the SUV, but I was actually right behind her. How does something like that even happen?”

Both witches inhale deeply, then exhale slowly, their eyes scanning the room. It’s not the kind of look that screams “save me” to any of their coven members. Instead, it’s the expression of someone searching for answers but resigned to the possibility that they won’t find them.

Marietta fixes me with a steady, intense gaze. It’s not hostile—more like she’s studying me, trying to figure something out. I can’t tell exactly what she’s searching for, but I meet her stare and wait patiently, all the while reluctantly sipping the foul-tasting brew.

“The term isn’t meant as an insult,” she finally says, “but rather a recognition of your youth. Compared to us, you’re still a baby. You’ve only just stepped into your role and been mated. So much has happened to you in such a short span, and yet you’re managing to thrive.

Your body and mind are still young enough to be influenced by the enchantments placed around this pack.”

I glance at Elara, the silent question lingering on my lips, but before I can speak, Marietta continues.

“My knowledge of your lore is limited, and I understand even less, but I believe your age—somewhere past twenty or twenty-one—is significant here. That’s the key to the answers we need. Every victim we’ve heard about was nineteen or younger. The same goes for the wolves found with narcotics. You fall within the usual victim age range, so your body was affected by the magic we discovered.”

“That’s the only distinguishing factor we can identify for both of you,” Brianna adds, her tone formal and stiff. “I’m sorry we don’t have more concrete answers right now. We’re consulting as many elder coven members as possible this evening to gather more information.”

Elara speaks up next, her voice tired but steady. “You and your coven should come eat with us at the house. We can discuss everything over dinner. Now, can you explain to Ben what we found? I know you told me, but I don’t think I can retell it accurately.”

Marietta is the first to respond. “The herbs we discovered are designed for memory suppression and control. They make it difficult for those affected to remember their actions or the reasons behind them. It’s the beginning of manipulation. These herbs were placed on top of a symbol—one we won’t draw, show, or even describe. It’s dark magic that strips a person of their free will.” Her face twists with disgust. “The ritual involved candle wax from a sacrifice. There were also stones and binding talismans. Again, we won’t provide further details. This kind of ritual should never be performed, and I refuse to share information that could allow it to be repeated.”

Her anger is palpable, breaking through her usual calm and composed demeanor. The magic she wields—the kind that heals and protects—has been twisted to harm, and it enrages her deeply.

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Chapter 395

55 – Elara

Growing up, our home rarely saw many visitors. Occasionally, a few Alphas and their entourages would pass through, but we never hosted grand gatherings or large-scale events. I wasn’t sure how I’d feel about having so many people under one roof, yet surprisingly, it’s quite pleasant. I find myself lingering at the edge of the expansive dining hall, where Melanie and her Omegas have arranged several long tables. The sight is comforting. They’ve relocated my parents’ table to the head of the room, positioned perpendicularly to the others, where Brianna, Marietta, Jax, Dev, Ben, and I are seated. It truly feels like a proper communal dining space.

“I saw that,” Jax growls quietly beside me.

“What are you talking about?” I don’t budge from my spot but glance at him sideways.

“You started to smile. I caught it before anyone unfamiliar with you did, but it was definitely there.”

“Shut up, asshole.” That’s all I can manage. I won’t deny it—not to Jax or Dev. They’ve been through everything with me, and pretending otherwise would be an insult to their intelligence.

“So, where’s your boy? I’ve noticed he hasn’t been glued to your side all evening.”

“What do you mean? He sat with me at dinner. We don’t have to be inseparable all the time. Not every mate is attached at the hip like you and Dev.” I suppress the urge to shift uncomfortably.

“How’s he handling the magic thing? I got the impression he wasn’t thrilled about being the only one affected by what happened today.”

“Would you be, if you were in his shoes?” I turn to face him directly. “He’s trained just as long as we have for his role, and he’s good at it. Maybe a bit overbearing, but that’s probably because he comes from a larger pack. And then to get here, expecting a smooth transition, only to have his ass handed to him by some unknown, uncontrollable force? I’d be pissed too. And now, he’s stuck here.” I hope that last part doesn’t sound as whiny out loud as it does in my head.

“What do you mean ‘stuck’? He came here of his own free will,” I try to interrupt, but Jax keeps going. “He chose to be part of this pack,” I attempt to cut him off again, “And he follows your orders, even when he disagrees. His loyalty is with you, no matter how hard you try to push him away.”

“I’m not—”

“Bullsh*t!” He scoffs, but it stings—not the words themselves, but the feeling of denying the truth. “He’s as stubborn as you are, and he’s not going to run off with his tail between his legs. But every man has a breaking point. Don’t push him past it. You don’t want to know what that feels like.”

“How would you know?” I glance back at the crowd, avoiding his darkened gaze. I know he won’t answer. Something happened shortly after we were old enough to find our mates. Neither Jax nor Dev ever talk about it, not even to me, but I know it strained their mate bond for a long time.

“I’m not sure where Ben is at the moment. And as for the magic, Brianna and Marietta have spoken to their coven members. The best theory we have so far relates to his age. He’s the only one of us under twenty-one.”

“Speaking of that... how do you feel about being a cradle robber?” Jax laughs as he jumps out of my reach. I swing a playful punch, but it’s wild and misses. “I mean, you’re five years

older than him.” Another swing and dodge. I’m not trying to hit him—that would cause a scene—I just want him to shut up. “But I can see it. He does act older than you.”

Before I can retort, Marietta interrupts in her formal tone, “Elara, can I steal you away from your very physical conversation?”

“Sure.” I turn to Jax, “Behave. And keep those thoughts to yourself.”

I walk with Marietta over to where Brianna is seated at the head table. Ben arrives shortly after, accompanied by another coven member—Jesse, I think his name is.

Once we’re all settled, Brianna begins.

“We sent scouts out after today’s incident. Here’s what we know for certain: there are seven areas heavily imbued with magic along the border between your pack and Red Fang. Your suspicion that the rogues are using that part of neutral territory appears to be correct. We believe there are more conduits along your other borders, but that central zone was their main focus. You mentioned a cave at the water’s edge—we’d like to examine that as well.”

“How do these magic areas or bundles work?” Ben asks, clearly frustrated with the slow, methodical explanation. I’m sure Brianna intended to get to that.

“Think of them like modern cell phone towers,” Brianna explains patiently. “They’re central points emitting signals in a radius around them. These signals overlap to provide the widest coverage possible. The shadow markers create a network over your pack lands, masking movement, sounds, and scents. Have you ever lost contact with any of your patrols?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Maybe Jax and Dev know more—they’ve been handling patrols while I deal with Beta, Gamma, and Delta issues. Why?”

“I’m wondering whether the markers are general or specific. If they’re general, then anyone stepping into the protected zone becomes untraceable. If they’re specific to the rogues, I’m curious how such a wide net was cast without anyone noticing or sensing a shift in energy. Magic always leaves a trace for those willing to pause and feel.”

“Would you like to visit the cave tomorrow?” I ask, hoping to solve that mystery and prove that Ben and I aren’t losing our minds.

“Not yet. We need to dismantle these markers first, and that could take some time. The one we found today was hidden but not well, which suggests it was one of their earlier ones.”

We spent the rest of the evening discussing the pack borders and the likely locations of the shadow markers. I went to bed utterly exhausted, but for the first time in a long while, I felt a surge of confidence in our plan.

I didn’t even argue when Ben came in and settled onto my couch. The couch isn’t uncomfortable, but I know I should offer him a spot in my bed since he seems determined to stay close at night. Still, that feels too intimate for me right now. I just can’t. As I drift off to sleep, my mind and my wolf wrestle with the complicated necessity of mates.

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Chapter 396

56 – Elara

Weeks have slipped by in a relentless blur of work, each day blending into the next without pause. Now, in a rare moment of solitude, I sit at my desk, eyes fixed on the map before me. The surface is dotted with new shadow marker locations we've recently uncovered, each one a grim reminder of the dangers lurking just beyond our reach.

A heavy sigh escapes me, laden with frustration. We've dismantled at least a dozen of these cursed markers, yet they keep appearing like an endless tide. Within our pack, only Ben seems to bear the brunt of their influence. I wonder if it's something about his age, or perhaps the fact that this isn't his original pack, or maybe an entirely different reason altogether. But we can't afford to wait idly for his birthdays to pass just to test these theories.

I know it frustrates him deeply—that helpless feeling of being a liability when he wants nothing more than to protect us. To compensate, he's taken on other responsibilities within the pack. He's implemented a rigorous training program for all our teenagers, now mandatory for everyone. On the surface, it's about teaching them self-defense; beneath that, Ben's real motive is to observe the youngsters most affected by this silent assault on our pack. He watches closely, hoping to detect any shifts in their personalities or, worse, if some vanish altogether.

In addition, he's begun working alongside Sebastian and Richard. They've been released from house arrest and now assist with training within the pack. Despite their involvement, I still struggle to trust them completely. I'm not ready to send them out on patrol or let them work directly with me. The wound of betrayal runs too deep. Their failure to foresee the threats against the Alpha and Luna cost my parents their lives. While I know logically it wasn't entirely their fault, emotionally it feels like it was. Ben understands this too, but he also knows sitting idle isn't an option. So, ever the dutiful Beta, he's taken them under his wing, filling every waking moment with purpose, trying to make up for his inability to shield me from this magic.

If I were in his position, I might feel the same way. Yet, I can't deny that I appreciate the distance between us right now. I find I'm able to focus more clearly when he isn't hovering nearby. The only problem—one I'd never admit aloud—is that I suspect we'd solve these problems faster if he were here with me. I'm learning from Brianna and Marietta, but progress feels slow, almost sluggish. My mind sharpens when he's around, and I hate the contradiction that stirs inside me.

We've settled into an unspoken agreement: maintain just enough distance to honor our human comfort zones, but stay close enough for our wolves to keep a quiet connection. It's the best compromise I can manage at the moment. My pack depends on me, and I need to figure this part out on my own. I have to prove that the Alpha blood coursing through my veins is enough—that I don't need a male by my side to protect and lead them.

I don't want to reject Ben. That truth settled in my heart long ago. What I do resist is the idea of his brooding self swooping in like a white knight to rescue me from every problem.

The sudden creak of my door pulling open drags me from my tangled thoughts.

"Ben?" I call out, surprised but not entirely displeased.

He steps inside, eyes wide, breathing uneven. "You weren't answering. I thought something might be wrong."

"Nope!" I reply, my voice higher than I intended, betraying my calm facade. "Just going over all this," I gesture toward the map. "We've been at it for way too long, and it feels like there's no end in sight." I rub my hands over my face, exhaustion weighing heavy. "Did you need something?"

He blinks, shaking his head as if trying to clear a fog. I notice he's more distracted than usual, and I silently wonder what's on his mind. "I want to take Sebastian and Richard to Red Fang. It's been nearly a month since I checked in with Junior. I think it's smart to send a few coven members to search for shadow markers there as well. We need to confirm whether his pack is being targeted, and figure out how far the Ember and Ash covens' influence reaches. Otherwise, this nightmare will never end."

I nod, having had the same thought myself. We haven't heard much from Malcolm Junior lately, and I assumed he was settling into his role and didn't require our help. Maybe he hasn't reached out because Ben has always been his point of contact. I must have taken too long to respond, because Ben quickly adds more details.

"All the training sessions are covered, so they'll continue while I'm gone. The pack is in a good place right now. Every business owner has what they need, and the coven is bringing in new, beneficial ventures. Coven members have started working alongside pack members, and the relationships are healthy and strong. Since it looks like they'll be here for the foreseeable future, I've begun discussions with builders about plans for a more permanent setup for them. Preliminary designs are being drawn up now for you to review."

Of course, he has everything under control. A flicker of irritation flares inside me—why hadn't I done this already? But the truth is, I simply haven't had the time. My focus has been on defending the pack from this magical assault, and honestly, I can't do both. My wolf admires his thoughtfulness; I suspect he's just bored and avoiding me.

"Elara?" Ben steps closer to my desk, breaking through my reverie.

"Uh, yeah, sorry. I'm just tired. This magic stuff is draining." I manage a small smile.

"Sounds good. When do you plan to leave?"

"We're aiming to go tomorrow, but if you need us to stay—"

"No! Everything's stable here. We seem to have reached a status quo. Go check in with Junior and report back. Talk to Marietta and Brianna; they can pair you with the right people to track any magic in Junior's pack quickly." He nods and moves toward the door.

Before he leaves, I blurt out, “Just... check in every day.” His eyes snap to mine, surprised by my sudden vulnerability. I don’t know why I said it, and now I can’t take it back or pretend I didn’t. To spare me from sounding needy, he simply nods again and exits.

I lean forward on my desk, resting on my forearms. What is wrong with me? He’s not leaving for good, and probably won’t be gone more than a couple of days. Still, the phrase echoes in my mind—‘check in every day’—a soft, girlish whine repeating over and over. Great. Now I’m mocking myself too.

I push back from the desk and decide to go for a run. Maybe I can find Jax or Dev to spar with. I need a physical challenge to shake off this restless feeling. I’m such a dumbass.

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57 – Elara

“Make sure you give him a big hug and tell him how much you missed him while you were away,” Jax teased as we stepped back into the packhouse. For the first time in weeks, I felt thoroughly exhausted—but in the best way possible. Jax had clearly understood exactly what I needed, and he hadn’t held back. Dev was out on patrol with Owen, one of the male witches in the coven, so it was just Jax and me for now. Even though I felt good, I wasn’t about to let him get away with mocking me. I swung my arm back toward his face, more playful than angry, but if he didn’t zip it, we might have another round.

“You want more of this, baby Alpha?” he taunted, skipping ahead down the hallway toward our wing. A few coven members were scattered about, but I wasn’t in the mood for an audience, and Jax seriously needed to learn when to keep quiet.

“I’m not sure you could handle any more, Delta. You already look like you got dragged through a mud puddle. Your mate’s going to be disappointed,” I shot back.

“He’ll only be mad because he didn’t get to join in,” Jax said with a grin. “Next time, you should fill me in on your full plans. Maybe we could do a double date night.” Then, laughing, he darted away from me again. “You know we wouldn’t mind sharing your big broody beefcake.” This time, he took off at full speed, and I chased him down the hall.

I only slowed when I realized he’d opened my door—and I didn’t need to look inside to know Ben was there. His scent was strong and soothing, calming my nerves instantly. If I pushed Jax any further, he’d embarrass me in front of Ben. I growled quietly, torn between putting Jax in his place and risking Ben waking up, or letting Ben rest peacefully, unaware of the last two hours I’d spent talking about him nonstop.

In the end, I decided it was better to let Jax gloat for winning this round than risk him knowing how deeply I felt for my mate—feelings I wasn’t ready to admit out loud. Thank the Goddess Ben was asleep when I entered; it spared me from another awkward conversation where I might have said something needy or ridiculous. As I headed to the bathroom for a

shower, I noticed his packed bags nearby. My wolf stirred restlessly, wondering aloud if Ben would wake us up before he left early in the morning.

My dreams were chaotic and fragmented. I only knew they were dreams because my mother appeared beside me, offering advice about the whole magic, witch, and dying teen situation. My emotions were a whirlwind—my heart pounding with panic, then settling into calm relief, then flaring with anger, and finally drowning in sorrow. Just as I feared I wouldn't wake from the dark nightmare, a warm sensation began at my toes, licking upward, wrapping around my arms and finally enveloping my head. My lungs drew in a long, needed breath as I shot upright, eyes wide and scanning the room in confusion for a brief moment.

"You were whimpering. Are you okay?" That deep baritone voice sent another wave of warmth through me.

"Uh... yeah... just worried about the kids here," I blurted, scrambling for an excuse. "It always has my wolf and me dreaming of the worst-case scenarios." I rubbed my face, avoiding his gaze—the one person who somehow managed to quiet the panicked thoughts that I was failing at my job. "When are you guys leaving?" I shifted, trying to sound casual as I moved to get out of bed and get dressed. Truthfully, I just wanted to hear his voice before he disappeared for who knew how long. I hated how much I felt the pull of my mate, but I couldn't deny it any longer. I wanted to solve this witch and rogue problem so I could finally have time to really get to know Ben, without all this chaos in the way.

"I'm meeting Sebastian, Richard, Owen, and Damon for breakfast downstairs... if you want to join us and hear the plan," he said, his feet shuffling as I pulled a shirt over my head. Somehow, changing clothes mid-conversation had become a comfortable, if strange, habit between us—probably the least awkward thing we did together right now. We exchanged quick summaries of our plans as we got ready, then prepared to go our separate ways.

"Yeah, I probably should know what you're planning, just in case Junior needs information, or..." I let the sentence trail off, unwilling to voice the worst possibility. Just in case something goes wrong, we'll know where to look.

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"Yeah, that sounds good. I'll meet you downstairs—Sebastian's here," I say quietly, nodding without meeting her gaze.

The door clicks shut behind her, and I immediately berate myself once more. It's the same routine every single day. I still don't understand what he wants from me, and our conversations never go beyond the bare minimum. I can't tell if he's giving me space out of respect or if he's slowly pulling away. My wolf offers no clarity either. She's restless, frustrated that we haven't marked or mated with them yet. As Ben becomes more integrated into the pack, her territorial instincts flare up more fiercely. Every female who glances at him sparks a fierce protectiveness in her, like she wants to tear them apart.

I inhale deeply, trying to calm the storm inside me. We can get through this. We can endure a little longer. I have to. I need to shield my pack, to solve this mess on my own terms. Only when I've done that can I allow myself to have my mate.

Grabbing my thick, unruly auburn hair, I yank it into a ponytail. It's coarse and stubbornly straight, leaving me with only a handful of styles that actually work. I let out a frustrated huff as I catch my reflection one last time before heading downstairs.

The packhouse has become a lively hub. The coven members have settled in comfortably, and some of my pack have started joining them. Mealtimes are bustling and sometimes a little overwhelming, but I've grown to love the noise and energy. I overhear excited chatter about training successes, children shouting about new discoveries in the woods we maintain for their play, and shopkeepers swapping stories about the rare tourists who wander through. I wonder why my parents never encouraged this kind of community gathering. It's incredible, and I feel like I'm learning more about everyone now than I ever did visiting shops, schools, or training grounds one-on-one.

I spot Ben, Richard, and Sebastian seated across from two other men who must be Owen and Damon. I've met most of the coven, though there aren't many of them. I mostly work alongside Brianna and Marietta.

I approach the table just as their conversation winds down. "...to warn Luna Sam, just in case he's dealing with the same issue," I catch the last fragment.

Curious, I take a seat next to Jax at the head of the rectangular table. "Who has the same problem with what?" I ask, drawing all their attention. Ben is the one who answers.

"I'm worried about Junior," he explains. "He's younger than me, and if this magic threat affects anyone under twenty or twenty-one, he could already be struggling with it—especially if it's active on his territory." He pauses, then continues, "We've been monitoring his patrols regularly, set up by Jason and me, but we haven't seen or heard from Junior himself. That's not necessarily alarming—he's strong, smart, and has Luna Sam to guide him—but given the current situation..."

"You don't want to take any chances," I finish for him. They all nod in agreement. "I can link to Luna Sam and give her a heads-up, if you haven't already."

Ben nods again. "Jason will be joining us soon. Rayria and Jeremiah are settled at home with a good routine for the twins. Luna Beth has fully embraced grandma mode, so he can be spared. Jason and Tommy have both been working with the Dark Moon elders to gather information. He might have something useful."

"That sounds promising. Remember to check in daily. There are too many variables right now, and I want to make sure everyone is accounted for at all times. If anything unusual happens, use the mind link. No matter how big or small, every piece of information helps." They all agree, and I rise to fill my plate.

There. That was my way of justifying yesterday's needy, 'call me every day' moment.

My wolf chuckles softly inside my mind. “See? You sound just like Jax.”

I smirk inwardly. “You sound an awful lot like him, you know.”

“Maybe he and I are on the same page about your mate. You don’t have to shut him out, you realize that, right?”

“I’m not shutting him out! He’s as much a part of this pack as I am. Didn’t you hear him giving directions and making plans that don’t even involve me? I know he’s good at this—that’s why he basically has free reign.”

“So why not mark him as your mate if he’s that trustworthy and valuable?”

“You know why.”

“Your ego might just get you both killed, you know that?”

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Chapter 399

58 – Ben

Don’t let your eyes follow her as she walks away. Don’t watch her go. Don’t watch her leave. The phrase echoed relentlessly in my mind, a desperate attempt to silence the wolf inside me, who was stubbornly twisting it into a plea: “Walk away with her.” That conversation we just had—it was the longest, most meaningful exchange between us in what felt like forever. Usually, she gives me nothing but clipped, one-word answers, her gaze fixed firmly on anything but me. My wolf insists I should be patient, give her space and time. But my rational mind suspects she’s trying to figure out how to reject me without hurting either her wolf or mine once all this is over. I don’t think she harbors any real resentment toward me—besides the fact that I’m a man. She’s still hung up on that whole female alpha thing, but I’m pretty sure I’ve shown her I’m not interested in claiming that title. I don’t want it; the warriors know it too. It’s her birthright, not mine. I’d stand by her side willingly, but someone—maybe a whisper of magic—has planted the idea in her head that if we’re connected, I’ll somehow steal the pack and the alpha status from her. Maybe I’m not the only one affected by this magic after all.

We agreed to take vehicles instead of running, just in case we need to transport more than just ourselves. Yesterday, I reached out to Junior but got no response. I tried again before we left, then contacted Luna Sam. I left messages for both, but decided we’d head their way regardless of whether they were expecting us or not.

The entire drive I’m on edge, anxiety gnawing at me. I wish I could just run, let my wolf loose, and burn off the restless energy twisting in my gut. Why aren’t they answering? Neither of them is the type to go completely silent without a reason. I also called Jason. I’m still adjusting to this new pack, but it’ll be good to see a familiar face.

Everything outside looks normal as we drive—the forests are quiet, the roads empty. Nothing seems out of place to explain the unease settling in my chest. But that feeling doesn't fade. I'm also trying to process the magic we're dealing with, so I fill Damon and Owen in on my strange reaction to the magic used against us—though I'm sure they've already been briefed by their leaders. It's comforting that they don't interrupt or dismiss my explanation; instead, they listen carefully and ask thoughtful questions about what I'm experiencing.

As we cross from the neutral lands that separate Red Fang and Black Claw into the Red Fang forest, a sharp headache hits me, followed by nausea.

"Yeah, there's magic here too," I groan, pressing my fingers to my temples to ease the pounding and taking deep, slow breaths just like Brianna taught me. She warned me not to fight the magic but to use the pressure as a guide, a compass to find the source of the pain. "We're close. If you want, we can stop and check if these markers are the same as the shadow markers we've been finding back home," I say, voice rough.

"Let's stop," Damon agrees. "It'll give us more information to present to the Alpha of this pack when we meet." The formal tone the witches use used to throw me off, but now it feels natural—even when it comes from coven members closer in age to Elara and me. "Brianna's told us what to look for. This will help us understand the similarities or differences in the magic casting here," Damon adds, his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

I nod and direct him toward the source of the discomfort. When my head starts to spin and my vision blurs at the edges, I signal him to stop. "I can't go any further, or I'll just be a burden instead of a help. You go ahead and see what you find. I'll stay here." I draw a deep breath, fighting the queasy feeling in my stomach that threatens to spill out onto the forest floor.

"Don't be ashamed of your connection to the threat," Owen says with a reassuring smile. "You've saved many lives because of it. We all have our roles to play. Not everyone can be the hero all the time."

"Did you just crack a joke?" I mutter, leaning back against the seat and closing my eyes, focusing on steadying my breath. "Go on, take my phone," I wave it at them. "Send me what you find, and I'll be your go-between. I'm going to try Junior and Sam again too."

"Yes, Beta," they reply in unison. There it is—the shift into formal titles the moment we start talking about pack or coven business. I've noticed they do this mid-conversation sometimes, switching from casual talk to official terms. It's fascinating.

They only explore for about five minutes before my phone buzzes nonstop with texts—pictures, detailed explanations of the elements and placements, and descriptions of the magic they detect. They don't hide a single detail from me, and I appreciate their honesty. Like Elara, I wasn't trained in magic, but I'm genuinely eager to learn. They even let me pass information along to Elara, Brianna, and Marietta, instead of sending it all at once. I'm not sure if that's by instruction or because they think it'll help me absorb it better—maybe both. Either way, I respect how seriously they take my role as Beta.

Either this shadow marker is particularly stubborn, or they're both new to dispelling its magic, because they end up spending a full hour out in the forest.

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59 – Ben

After nearly twenty minutes passed without any word from them, I found myself stepping out of the car, battling the rising nausea and mental exhaustion just to search for any sign of their whereabouts. It soon became clear that they had triggered some kind of powerful energy burst that immobilized both of them completely. Thankfully, the effect faded after a while, allowing them to reach out to me again, which instantly heightened my alertness. This meant one of two things: either someone was watching our every move, or the trap was designed to alert a third party that their wards were being tampered with. Either way, I kept my senses sharp, moving cautiously closer to the marker.

Just like with Elara and the first marker, I spotted Owen and Damon kneeling over something motionless. Even with my enhanced vision, the distance blurred the details, but I knew they were right there, working diligently despite the illusion suggesting otherwise. The magic wasn't completely blocking our communication; I could still exchange texts with them, which was a small relief.

Suddenly, a flash of purple light struck my eyes, momentarily blinding me. When my vision cleared, they were standing right in front of me. "Honestly, I'd love to go into that thing with you guys someday. Being stuck on the outside is killing my nerves," I joked, hoping my laugh sounded genuine. "At least this time, I managed to get a video to show you what I see from out here."

"Let's check inside the car," Owen suggested. "I agree with you—it definitely felt like some kind of alarm or warning system for whoever's behind this."

Without hesitation, I followed him inside. The oppressive pressure eased slightly as we moved. "What do you mean 'whoever'? I thought your coven leaders knew exactly who's responsible for all this," I asked, curiosity and concern mixing in my voice.

Owen glanced warily into the surrounding forest before whispering, "I'm pretty sure it's her. But she's not as clever as you might think. Not that she lacks intelligence—she's sharp—but she doesn't have the patience or foresight to think things through. She never cared about the consequences of her spells or workings, only what would serve her in the moment. That's probably why so many of your wolves are dying while working for her. She didn't consider how the magic would affect them, only that they could help her get what she wants. That makes her even more dangerous."

Perfect. We were dealing with a psychopath who had no regard for anyone else's life. As we continued driving toward the Red Fang packhouse, I made a mental note—and a quick

note in our text thread—marking the rough coordinates of where the nausea hit me hardest, so we could revisit those spots later.

“At least your aversion to the shadow makers is good for something,” Owen joked, breaking the tension.

“Shut up,” I shot back as they both laughed. “But seriously, do you think it’s just because of my age that I’m feeling this way?”

“We’ll have a better idea once we meet your friend,” Damon replied, his voice coming from the rearview mirror. “You said he’s younger than you, right?”

“Yes. But what if he’s under a spell? I probably should have asked that before we left,” I admitted, a knot tightening in my stomach.

“You’re lucky Brianna thought of that,” Damon said. “We’re prepared to help break any spells cast on Red Fang’s Alpha or any other members who might be affected. But are you ready to fight alongside him if he sees you as the enemy?” He trailed off, and I understood the implication. Could I handle going up against a friend, even if it meant one of us might not make it out alive?

Another half hour passed before the Red Fang village finally came into view through the thick trees. “Does anyone else think it’s odd that we haven’t seen a single patrol or warrior on our way in? Is this normal here?” I asked, unease creeping into my voice.

“No, I was thinking the same thing,” Owen replied quietly. “We should have encountered someone as soon as we crossed the borders. Usually, there are people milling about, but the main street looks deserted—like a ghost town. Stay alert. The magic is definitely here; I can feel the pressure building again.”

“Do you want to follow the trail or head straight to the packhouse?” Damon asked.

“Let’s go to the packhouse first. I need to see how deep this goes. It might just be Junior affected, but Luna Şam could be involved too. I don’t want to wander around if everyone’s been turned against us,” I said firmly.

“Got it. Lead the way, Beta,” Damon said, falling into step behind me.

I gave directions that took us slightly off the main path, keeping us away from the village center. If we were the enemy, I didn’t want Junior to get any warning. Soon, the log cabin-style packhouse appeared ahead, and Owen whistled appreciatively.

“Now that’s a packhouse. No offense to your Alpha, but this place feels way more intimidating. Less ‘compensating for something small’ energy, and more ‘mess with me, I dare you,’” he joked, and I laughed along with him. I didn’t care much for the Black Claw packhouse either, but it was home, and I was grateful to have it.

“There should be warriors here too. Let’s enter cautiously and assume an ambush is waiting,” I warned, stepping out of the SUV.

“That’s why you’re going first, my friend,” Damon said with a grin as he followed me inside.

We moved through the living room, where everything seemed normal and in place, but the air felt stale, heavy with old scents—maybe weeks old. It was clear no one had passed through here in a long time. I followed the faint trail of scent down a hallway beyond the kitchen until I found a door left slightly ajar. Luna Şam’s scent was stronger here.

“They’re down here,” I called over my shoulder. “Give me a head start, just in case. Then you can follow. Stay ready for anything.”