

# Letters Sent To Eternity

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Chapter 401

60 Ben

A faint, muted light filters up from somewhere deeper in the basement, casting long shadows across the narrow staircase. The silence is almost complete—no creaks, no distant voices. That’s to be expected; most packhouse basements are soundproofed carefully. They don’t want to unsettle the Omegas with the harsh noises of an aggressive interrogation. I’m trailing the faint but distinct scent of Sam and Junior, the only fresh odors in this otherwise stale, cold space. Behind me, about five steps back, I can hear Owen and Damon’s footsteps, steady but cautious.

At the bottom of the stairs, I find myself in a root cellar—a simple, utilitarian room designed for practical storage of food through the winter months. The walls are lined with plain doors, each likely leading to separate compartments. Suddenly, a scuffle behind the door farthest from me catches my attention. My heart races as I nearly sprint toward it. Junior is in trouble—I can feel it deep in my gut.

When I swing open the door, the sight before me stops me cold. Luna Sam sits slumped on a cot, her back pressed against the cold wall. Her head tilts upward, eyes closed, as if lost in some distant, painful memory. She looks utterly worn down—disheveled in a way I’ve never seen before, not even during the hardest times of mourning for her mate. But my gaze quickly shifts away from her to the cage nearby, where a snarling, feral wolf paces restlessly.

“Junior?” I whisper, barely daring to breathe. Damon and Owen flinch beside me, as if the name itself carries weight. “What happened to you?” I ask, though I don’t expect an answer.

Junior’s wolf is a pitiful sight—matted fur, raw and mangy from repeatedly ramming himself against the unyielding silver bars of his cage. His eyes, normally a warm chocolate brown, blaze a terrifying crimson, filled with pure rage. The wolf stalks back and forth, muscles tense, as though wrestling with some inner torment.

“He’s been like this for a month,” a hoarse voice murmurs behind me. I turn to see Luna Sam leaning forward slightly, exhaustion etched deep into her face. Her hair is greasy and tangled, pulled back in a messy knot, and dark circles shadow her eyes.

I approach her slowly, trying to push past the growling beast behind me. “Sam, what happened?” I ask gently, noting that she doesn’t respond to the lack of formality in my tone.

She inhales deeply, then lets out a shaky sob. “I don’t know. They were out patrolling and came back fine. But the next morning, he woke up... different. Angry. Ready to fight anyone who crossed his path.” Her voice breaks as she continues, “I had to send the staff away because it wasn’t safe. He’s too strong—unnaturally strong.” A low, guttural growl from the cage confirms the wolf’s agreement. Whatever this is, it’s not Junior anymore. His wolf is in control, but something else seems to have taken hold of it. It’s the only explanation that makes sense.

“Where is everyone else? Why aren’t there warriors here with you? Why didn’t you call for help?” I ask, my concern deepening.

Her eyes, heavy with sadness, meet mine. I see the helplessness there, raw and unguarded. “We don’t know what this is,” she says softly. “All the warriors who were with him during the patrol have been checked out, but he’s the only one suffering from this... affliction.” She struggles to find the right word. “I don’t know if it’s contagious. I couldn’t risk it spreading, so I sent everyone away for their own safety.” A tear slips down her cheek, tracing a silent path of sorrow.

“And you? Who’s looking after you?” I kneel down before her, feeling a surge of protectiveness I didn’t expect. This Luna, so strong and composed before, now looks fragile and small. My Beta instincts kick in hard—I want to shield her from this nightmare, but I’m not sure how.

“Hey, Ben,” Owen’s voice breaks through my thoughts. “Are you picking up anything on your shadow marker senses?” I glance over my shoulder, momentarily forgetting they were there.

I pause, tuning in to my own senses. “No,” I say after a moment’s thought. “I’m fine right now. Why?”

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### Chapter 402

“There’s something else in there with him,” Damon said, his voice low and tense. “I can feel it. Someone must have known he’d be locked up here. That’s why he hasn’t healed. The packhouse itself holds no magic, but...” He raised his hands, pressing against an unseen barrier beyond the silver bars. “It’s overwhelming in here. We have to get him out.”

“No!” Luna Sam sprang up, her eyes wide with alarm as she moved to block Owen. “You can’t do that. He’ll run. We’ve tried everything, and two of our warriors were badly hurt just getting him inside.”

“Ma’am, with all due respect,” Owen said firmly, “he’ll die if he stays any longer. I’m surprised he’s lasted this long. He’s being poisoned by magic.”

Luna Sam staggered, her knees nearly giving way, and I caught her before she fell. “What?” she gasped, her voice trembling.

“We have a lot to discuss,” I said softly, “but first, we need to focus on Junior. Call some warriors and your healers. Make sure no one under twenty-one is involved.” She glanced at me, her eyes searching. “That’s the only rule we have right now. Even I’m feeling the effects. Sebastian and Richard are finishing their patrol and will join Owen and Damon shortly. They’re witches from the Verdant Coven, currently assisting Black Claw with a magic problem that seems to have spread into your pack as well. Like I said, there’s a lot to talk about. Let’s head upstairs. I want a healer to check on you first, then we’ll get Junior out. This won’t be easy to watch, and I can’t have your motherly instincts interfering—no offense.” I half-supported her as we made our way to the stairs.

Before we ascended, I asked Owen and Damon if they had everything needed to contain whatever was affecting Junior. They nodded grimly and began their preparations. Luna Sam and I moved upstairs.

Passing through the kitchen, I grabbed two glasses of water for her. She drank both quickly, and color slowly returned to her pale face. I wanted to get her some food, but more than that, I needed to keep her as far away from Junior as possible while they extracted him from the cage. He was going to resist fiercely, and they’d have to subdue him—something that wouldn’t be easy. I decided to wait for Sebastian and Richard to arrive so I could share the information carefully and give further instructions through the mind link.

“This is the worst I’ve seen so far,” I told them quietly. “You’ll have to restrain him so Owen and Damon can do their part. Use whatever’s necessary to keep him still—silver cuffs, even breaking his legs if you must. He’ll heal. I’m keeping Luna Sam in her room until I get the all-clear from you.”

“Yes, sir,” came their voices in unison.

“They’re going to have to hurt him, aren’t they?” Luna Sam’s voice cracked as she leaned against me, tears threatening to spill.

“Maybe a little,” I admitted, trying to keep my tone hopeful. “He’s gotten so strong lately. This might be the only time I regret how much training we put him through. Let’s get you upstairs. You need to rest. He’s going to need you after this. We don’t know what’s going on inside his mind right now. He might not even realize what’s happening to him, but I’m afraid he’s trapped inside his own head—and that can break even the strongest leaders.”

She hesitated for a moment, then allowed me to guide her to her room. I waited quietly in the hallway as she showered and changed. When she finally let me back in, she wordlessly led me to a couch and climbed into her own bed without a word. I stood watch silently, ready for whatever was coming next.

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### Chapter 403

I realize that this segment of the series feels a bit fragmented. Originally, I hadn’t intended to share Ben and Elara’s story quite so soon. However, due to the series’ growing

popularity, the GoodNovel team requested an earlier release than I had initially planned. I'm still discovering who these characters truly are as I write, and they've proven to be far more intricate than anyone I've created before.

Recently, my family endured a loss, and my attention was understandably focused on supporting my husband and children through that difficult period. Their well-being took precedence over everything else during those days.

Now that we've managed to find some stability and begin returning to our normal routines, I am hopeful to catch up on my writing and resume my usual publishing rhythm. I'm deeply grateful to all of you for your patience and for sticking with me through this time of change and adjustment. Your support means the world.

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### Chapter 404

#### 61 – Ben

Hours had slipped by without any word from Damon or Owen. By now, they should have finished whatever they were doing or at least sent a message to update me. Sebastian and Richard were also expected to check in. The silence gnawed at me—was it a good sign, or should I be worried? I wanted to hold onto hope, but the uncertainty was suffocating. I needed to know what was happening.

Sleep eluded me completely. I lay staring up at the ceiling of Luna Sam's room, my eyes tracing the restless shadows cast by the moonlight filtering through the trees outside. My mind wandered uncontrollably to Elara. What was she doing at this moment? Was she awake too, wrestling with her own thoughts? Was her wolf pacing anxiously inside her mind, just as mine was? The distance between us felt unbearable. I hated that I'd become so attached to someone who might not want me once all this was over. The thought stung—how had I let myself care so deeply? Rationally, I knew this was different from what I'd felt with Kennedy, but the ache felt painfully familiar. My wolf's longing for Elara was growing stronger every day we spent here at Black Claw, and I couldn't deny it. I wished this endless back-and-forth would finally end, but the Moon Goddess seemed determined to make things difficult for me.

Damn it, I needed a distraction. I rose and began pacing the room, restless and unable to find a comfortable spot. Luna Sam hadn't wanted to be alone, and I didn't fully trust her not to sneak downstairs to interfere with whatever the witches were doing to break Junior's spell. Maybe she didn't trust herself either.

It was too early to reach out to Jason, to see if he was on his way. But I wanted him here. I'd made friends and worked well with the Black Claw pack and even some of the Coven witches, but having someone from home—a familiar face—felt like a lifeline. Someone who understood me, who knew my past. I didn't know when I'd become so sentimental; it was both comforting and frustrating. Part of me just needed the reassurance that I wasn't losing my mind, from someone who truly knew me.

Luna Sam's window offered a wide view of the packhouse grounds, the moonlight illuminating the front property. I stood still for a moment, taking in the quiet night, but soon the urge to move overwhelmed me again, and I resumed pacing. At least Luna Sam seemed to be resting. I couldn't imagine the weight of worry she carried—caring for a child caught in this mess, not knowing how to fix it, not knowing who else might be affected. Isolation was her only option. She'd been afraid to involve anyone else, probably terrified of spreading whatever this was. I understood that—she wanted to keep it contained within the pack.

We had to get a handle on this situation quickly. No more pups could be hurt. I desperately hoped the others would reach out soon, but if they were busy dealing with Junior, I didn't want to distract or derail their efforts.

"You're going to wear a hole in my floor if you keep stomping like that," Luna Sam's voice broke through my thoughts. I turned to see her lying on her side, watching me with tired eyes. She looked younger than I'd ever seen her—her hair tousled, blankets pulled up to her chin like a child seeking comfort.

"Sorry if I woke you. I haven't heard anything, and I'm terrible at sitting still," I admitted, moving back toward the window as if the view might suddenly offer some answers.

"Control freaks usually aren't good at sitting still. I should know," she said dryly.

"How are you feeling this morning, Luna?" I asked, settling onto the couch. This was something I could handle—something I could help fix. Making sure the Luna was safe and able to lead her pack was part of my responsibility.

"I feel better. The rest was exactly what I needed. But I should go see my son, and you need to check on your team. Give me a few minutes to freshen up, and then we'll head downstairs and get some food ready for everyone." She didn't leave room for argument or alternative plans. She'd rested as I asked and allowed the witches I trusted to care for her son. Now, she was ready to take charge again—to be the Luna her pack needed.

I stepped into the hallway and immediately noticed three guards posted at intervals along the walls leading to the main living area. I recognized them from training—they were some of Junior's closest friends. "When did you guys get here?" I asked.

"We arrived a few hours ago. Jason told us to stand guard while the Luna rested. Can you tell us what's going on with Malcolm? We haven't been allowed in the house for a month, and no one's heard a thing. The pack's scared," the boy in the middle, Bryce, said. Hearing Junior referred to by his proper name felt strange—Malcolm Junior, the name always sounded so formal. I wondered when his friends had started using it.

"We're trying to get you answers. I'm not sure what I can say or what I need to keep confidential because I don't have all the information yet. Once the Luna is ready, we'll check on Malcolm and hopefully be able to answer some questions," I explained.

About twenty minutes later, Luna Sam joined us in the hallway. We walked silently down to the kitchen, Luna Sam leading the way. She didn't acknowledge the time the warriors had

spent standing guard, nor did she seem surprised to see them there. She must have communicated with them last night and kept it from me. I wasn't sure whether to feel impressed or irritated by that—but this wasn't my pack.

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Chapter 405

62 – Ben

We made our way into the kitchen, where she chatted casually, as if this was just another ordinary day. Together, we gathered a generous amount of food—not only for ourselves but also for the other warriors, the two witches residing in the basement, and anyone else who might need sustenance. Our arms were piled high with provisions by the time we headed back downstairs. When we reached the cage room, the door was ajar, and there sat Junior, slumped and disheveled in the storage nook. Though he looked worn and beaten, he was alive—breathing steadily and fully conscious as I approached him. It took him a long moment before he met my gaze when I crouched down in front of him. His eyes were heavy with sadness and worry.

“What the hell happened, man?” he asked, voice low and raw. “I was out on a run like any other day, and then... nothing. I don't remember a thing after that. Next thing I know, I wake up locked in a cage with my own pack, surrounded by strangers chanting and throwing things at me.” His tone dropped to a whisper, vulnerable and youthful. “Tell me, what happened? What the hell happened, man?” His eyes locked onto mine, desperate for answers only I might have.

I glanced over at Owen and Damon, silently asking, “What did you find?” The tension in the room was palpable; everyone seemed to be holding their breath, waiting for an explanation.

Owen produced a large, gleaming stone and handed it to me. The moment I touched it, a sharp itch spread across my hand, forcing me to recoil and hand it back as if it were burning me. Owen seemed to anticipate my reaction, staying close and flipping the stone over to reveal a familiar sigil etched into its surface. It was the same mark we had seen on all the Shadow Markers, but with several additional strokes, more intricate and ominous.

Damon's voice cut through the silence. “This isn't good. It's specific—and it was wedged right in the center of the ceiling above Junior's head.” He turned to Luna Sam. “Is this the only cell you have for detaining someone, or are there more?”

Sam straightened, her posture firm. “This is the only one. Our pack is small; we don't have a need for more cages in the packhouse.”

“I don't know if these stones were meant specifically for your alpha or for any wolf locked in the cage,” Damon continued. “But they're definitely designed to agitate and suppress the human side of whoever's inside. We'll need to do more research, but any rogue witch using this kind of magic is dangerous. What happened to Junior is horrible, but if this wasn't targeted just at your alpha, then someone is recklessly casting spells without caring who

gets caught in the crossfire. That's even worse than a targeted attack—it's innocent lives being affected." He paused, then added, "We need to consult with our High Priestess. Junior needs rest, and I want your healers to work alongside ours to tend to him. He must be protected just as carefully as we protect Ben."

Damon and Owen moved to assist Junior, but a low growling erupted behind me. Junior's closest friends stepped forward, their expressions fierce and mistrustful. The witches had possessed their Alpha, and now, they didn't trust the two men helping him. They weren't going to stop Damon and Owen from doing what was best for Junior, but the tension was thick—this was likely part of the plan: to make us turn on each other, to sow chaos within our ranks.

I released my beta aura, a silent command that halted everyone in their tracks. More growls followed, waves of animosity radiating from the wolves behind me. I had to give credit to Damon and Owen—they were on high alert, ready for a fight if necessary, but their stance wasn't defensive; they had no desire to escalate the situation any further than I did.

Gwen turned toward me, her face set to unleash some angry teenage rant about letting the others do their jobs because they supposedly knew better. I raised my hand to silence her, not caring if I offended her. I may have only been a few years older, but I hoped I had never been as impulsive as she was in moments like this.

"I've done nothing that any beta wouldn't do," I said firmly. "Put your aggression away. We will find the right way to handle this. These witches are in the same boat as our two packs—they're threatened just like we are. They won't harm your alpha or anyone in your pack. You need to learn to stand down and follow orders." I could see the tension ripple beneath her skin. She wanted to argue, but she wouldn't win. Still, I sensed there was a fierce fight in many of them, and the stone in Damon's hand might be influencing their emotions.

I turned to Luna Sam for support. She stepped forward and placed a steady hand on Gwen's shoulder. "Now is not the time," she said calmly. "I trust Ben's judgment—he has come to our aid more times than we could have hoped. These witches are our guests. They freed your alpha from a trance that held him captive for nearly a month. Don't let your anger cloud your judgment. Not all witches are bad, just as not all wolves are good. We will get to the bottom of this, but you must keep your emotions in check." She nodded toward Owen and Damon, who returned the gesture with quiet understanding.

Though the tension lingered, the group allowed us to pass. We helped Junior up to his room, where his friends refused to leave his side, which I welcomed. Luna Sam gave strict orders for checks every thirty minutes, even if there was nothing new to report. The rest of us returned to the office. As we rounded the stairs, I spotted Jason standing in the doorway. The sight of him immediately eased the weight on my shoulders. He nodded at me as I passed and gave my shoulder a reassuring pat.

We all followed Luna Sam into her office. She took a seat at her desk, and Sebastian closed the door behind us. The sound of the latch clicking into place made Luna Sam look each of us in the eye. "All right," she began, "I want to know exactly what's going on. We all deserve a full explanation for why the Beta, Delta, and former Beta of the Black Claw Pack, the Delta of the Blue Crescent Pack, and two witches—who just happen to know that our Alpha is

under some kind of possession and how to fix it—arrived here just in the nick of time.” Her words immediately had us standing at attention, ready to report like the soldiers we were.

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Chapter 406

63 – Elara

“You do realize you can’t just outrun anxiety, right?” My wolf’s voice sneers inside my mind, clearly enjoying every moment of my torment.

I grit my teeth, pushing my pace even harder. “I gave them all the exact same instructions... yet not a single one checked in yesterday. Not Sebastian, who’s supposed to be \*my\* Delta, nor Richard, who treats following orders like some sacred law. What am I supposed to think? Everyone knows Ben’s affected by this magle crap, and he’s the only one under twenty-one in the group that went out. There have been so many ‘random’ rogue attacks lately it’s almost expected now.” My breath comes out in a rough grunt as I accelerate. I should shift, let my wolf take over and run wild, but that kind of burning muscle fatigue is what I really need—not the relentless pounding of my wolf’s energy.

“We both know he’s fine. We can feel it. You need to relax a little,” she says, her voice calm but firm.

I shake my head. “What about the others? Owen, Damon, Richard, Sebastian—they all went with him. What if something’s wrong with all of them? I get why my dad kept Mom so close all the time.”

“You can sense every member of your pack. Don’t try to fool me with that,” she counters sharply. “And if something had happened to the witches, they’d have called Brianna and Marietta by now. Why not reach out to Ben?”

“And look desperate? Absolutely not. We have better things to do...” I mutter, trying to push the thought away.

“Like running patrols suspiciously close to Red Fang territory every two hours? Yeah, no. You don’t look desperate at all,” she teases.

“Shut up!” I growl, but I can hear her laughter echoing inside my head. Despite myself, a small smile tugs at the corner of my mouth. I’m not fooling her—or anyone else—but I’ll deny the desperate need to know he’s safe for as long as I can. I have to get through this on my own first. Then, maybe, I can figure out this mate bond and whether he was telling the truth about Kennedy.

A hot shower is exactly what I need after that exhausting run. As I head back inside, I pass several coven members going about their tasks. I’ve relocated some families with young children into the guest wing—it just feels easier for them that way. These kids possess powers I’ll never fully understand, but at their core, they’re still human and not built for harsh elements. No child should have to spend winter nights in a makeshift tent. I’ve offered to

bring more of them in; some declined, probably enjoying the freedom of the forest just like my wolf does. Brianna and Marietta share a room nearby, with some of their elders taking rooms close by. It keeps them near my mother's old office, which I've allowed them to use for storing their books and scrolls safely. If they're not using their magic to protect those items from the weather, they can focus more energy on the pack and the coven's needs.

We've been working long hours—from early morning well into the night—brewing potions and crafting whatever else is necessary to combat the Shadow Markers that keep cropping up. I just wish I knew if they were all set long ago and there really are just so many of them, or if someone is sneaking behind us, planting more.

Signs of the coven are everywhere in the packhouse, and the more I discover about them, the more I appreciate their way of life compared to the stuffy traditions my parents clung to. Herbs hang from every beam, and I've never seen our private greenhouse so full of life. My mother adored her plants and spent hours tending to her flowers, but these witches have transformed the space into a vibrant, living apothecary. They even transplanted some of Mom's favorites into a special corner to honor her memory.

"I know you don't want to hear this, and you've got a thousand things on your plate, but at the very least, you should mark each other," Brianna says gently one evening. "You're both leaning towards the bond. It'll make you stronger, your pack stronger. That connection? It's huge for morale. Forget anyone who thinks it's just a male/female thing—it's about leadership. It'll keep you both safe, especially if this magic stuff is as nasty as Jason and Tommy say."

"Well, at least you gave me some logic," I admit, rubbing the back of my neck. "I'll talk to him when he gets back. He's visiting Junior right now. We haven't heard from him, and Ben's worried something's wrong." I sigh, holding my phone between my shoulder and ear as I straighten my chair and sit down. "No promises, but I will bring up marking. Okay?"

"That's all I ask," she replies in a voice so sweet it's almost teasing. She's definitely used to getting her way.

I lean back, letting out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. The weight of everything still presses down on me, but maybe—just maybe—I'm starting to find a way through the storm.

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I've also come across candles, small clusters of tree branches, and symbols crafted from scattered debris, all carefully bound together with twine, scattered throughout the forest. They seem to serve a dual purpose—both protective charms and decorative elements. Had someone asked me a year ago if I'd welcome such chaos, I would have firmly said no. Yet, strangely enough, these arrangements now offer me a sense of security I hadn't expected to feel.

Before stepping inside my office, I inhale deeply the soothing scent of lavender and lemongrass hanging just outside the door. The calming aroma steadies my nerves for a

moment. No sooner have I closed the door behind me than my phone starts ringing. My heart leaps with hope—it might be Ben.

“Elara?” A feminine voice breaks through, slightly breathless.

I blink a few times, trying to shake off the disappointment when I realize it isn’t the deep, familiar baritone I’d been longing to hear. “Uh, yeah... hello?”

“Hey! Umpf... I hope this is a good time. I just wanted to check in on you and see how Ben’s settling in. He’d never call us for a chat like this, and Jeremiah’s worried about his best friend.”

“Oh, hey Rayna! Are you sure now’s a good moment? You sound like you’ve got your hands full.” I catch a muffled grunt in the background.

“There really isn’t much downtime with pups, honestly. Especially when you have two who are already channeling the most extreme behaviors of their father and aunt—skipping straight past crawling and walking, too. I’ve pretty much given up on some aspects of parenting and safety rules. Believe it or not, Jer and James are actually watching the twins right now. I just have to keep the door open in case one of the big boys gets hurt.” She laughs, and I can’t help but smile at her humor despite the chaos she describes.

The idea of pups still feels foreign to me. Though I’ve been around them all my life, growing up as an only child without cousins means my experience is limited mostly to training school-aged kids. The tiny, fragile babies intimidate me.

“Well, since you’re off duty for the next five minutes, what do you want to know?” I ask, trying to keep the mood light. I’m guessing she wants to hear if Ben is settling in well and making friends—her full “mom” instincts kicking in because of her own pups.

“I want to know how your mate bond is going. I wasn’t really paying attention the last time I saw you, but Jer and Jason said you’re both struggling with it.” Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. Of all the things she could have asked, that’s where she started?

“Uh, well, things have been pretty hectic around here lately, so the mate bond isn’t really our top priority right now. You know, with the spells and a witch coven moving into the pack to help us...” I hadn’t meant to say so much, but I hoped to distract her.

“What do you mean it’s not a priority?! How can you protect the pack if you haven’t even bonded?” Her voice sounds shocked, almost incredulous.

Since I began integrating coven members into the packhouse, the elders have only spoken to me briefly and sparingly. They don’t approve of witches on our land, but Rayna’s right. It’s my decision—my instinct—to work with them to save the pack, and I’m wasting energy arguing with the elders about it.

“But what am I supposed to do about Ben? I know how he feels about her. I know she’s mated to your brother, and that’s tearing Ben apart. And now this magic stuff is just another

barrier keeping us from even having a moment to figure out what any of this mate bond stuff really means.”

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Chapter 408

65 – Ben

“Damn, man, I really missed you!” I exhale, unable to hold back the relief and warmth flooding through me.

Jason grins, shaking his head. “Yeah, it’s been different without you around, bro. Your brother’s hanging in there, though. I think he’s feeling the weight of living up to your reputation, if I’m honest.”

I scoff lightly. “That’s nonsense. He’ll be alright. He’s only two years younger, and honestly, he never signed up for this kind of pressure. Not many second-borns expect to step into the shoes of the first-born.”

We’re outside, sitting by the firepit that Brody, Junior’s Beta, thoughtfully set up for us before heading off to rest ahead of his patrol. The night air is cool, the crackling fire casting flickering shadows on our faces.

I decide to address the obvious but uncomfortable topic. “I’m going to skip the elephant in the room because you’ll probably say now isn’t the time. But don’t think I haven’t noticed—you’re still not marked.”

Before I can launch into the usual explanation Elara and I give everyone, Jason cuts me off. “Save it. Seriously, we’ll talk about this later. Jer’s worried, and Rayna’s got that ‘mom-mode’ switched on—she’s ready to drive out here and pack you up like a kid to bring you home.” He chuckles, but I can tell there’s no exaggeration in his tone.

He leans in, voice dropping. “What’s going on with Malcolm? I know what you told them, but I want every detail, even the small stuff. We knew magic was involved, but what the hell happened after you got back to Black Claw?”

I spend the rest of the night—and part of the early dawn—filling him in on everything we’ve witnessed in Black Claw, along with what Elara and I have been sensing. The weight of it all presses down on me as I recount every detail.

“My biggest question right now is why I didn’t feel the stone’s effect that trapped Junior,” I admit, sliding to the edge of my seat and gesturing behind me. “I’ve always been the barometer for detecting magic around Black Claw. Even on the drive here, I could sense the pull—the influence of the Shadow Markers. But when I walked into those cells, I didn’t feel a thing. Junior’s reaction was extreme—he was caught in a feral rage, something I’ve never experienced.”

I run my fingers through my hair, frustration evident. “I hate that someone can have that kind of unchecked power over us. I hate that I don’t know how to defend myself or protect anyone else. The worst part? Nothing is consistent. Nothing adds up or makes sense.”

I sigh, letting my hands fall to my sides. “We’ve been operating on the assumption that I can detect the magic because it targets wolves under twenty-one. That’s been the pattern—those running the drugs, the ones we’ve found dead. That’s the only constant. But now... after seeing Junior’s reaction and my lack of one, I just don’t know.”

Before I can say more, a voice clears its throat behind me. “Excuse me, Beta,” Damon interjects, stepping forward with a thin leather strap bearing a black, diamond-shaped stone.

I barely have time to question him before he continues. “I had the same doubts you did. If age was the factor, you should’ve felt something. But that theory doesn’t hold. At first, I thought maybe it was because Malcolm Junior is only seventeen, and that’s why his reaction was so intense. But then I overheard some teenagers complaining about all the leaders being targeted and what would happen if someone could protect them properly...”

He trails off, rolling his eyes. I know I’m young, and sure, I’ve said my share of dumb things before gaining experience, but Junior’s team is still green—they’ve got a lot to learn. Unfortunately, now isn’t the time for lessons.

“Sorry for the tangent,” Damon says, shaking his head. “Anyway, the mention of leaders got me thinking about you. You’re mated to the Black Claw Alpha, right?”

I hesitate, avoiding Jason’s pointed look. “I am, but I’m not marked. So technically, I’m not a leader of the pack.”

“Pish, details,” Damon waves it off. “Your goddess chose you to stand beside Elara. That’s enough for your pack to recognize your authority and follow your lead.”

He pauses, then adds, “Back to my point—I think they’re right. The leadership is being targeted. Some spells grow stronger over time, like a fine wine aging. The spell on the stone meant for Junior was powerful, but only affected him. If our theory was correct, most people in those basement cells would’ve been affected, including you. But now I believe the magic is targeted, with side effects.”

He places the pendant in my hand, and immediately I feel a strange lightness, as if a weight has lifted from my shoulders.

“What is this?” I ask, surprised by the sudden surge of energy coursing through me.

“Let’s call it amped-up obsidian,” Damon replies with a smile. “I called Brianna and told her what happened. Your mate has a matching one, just in case. The stone offers protection on its own, but we’ve added modifications tailored to the reactions we’ve seen so far. As long as you wear it, you should be safe from what we’ve encountered. If the rogues change tactics again, we’ll adapt.”

Before I can respond, a voice calls out from behind us. “Beta Ben, Alpha Malcolm wants to see you.”

We all turn, the night suddenly feeling heavier with the weight of what’s to come.

## **Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below**

Chapter 409

66 – Ben

Tristan guided Damon, Jason, and me inside the house, leading us directly to Luna Sam’s office. The choice of meeting place caught me off guard for a moment. Why would Junior insist on seeing us here? After all, he was supposed to be resting in bed, not conducting meetings. Especially considering he’d just endured a brutal attack—a spell meant to turn him feral had scrambled his mind completely.

“Don’t even start,” Junior said firmly, cutting off any sympathy before it could be offered. “I’ve already heard from my mother, and I’m not looking for anyone to treat me like a fragile kid. Some jerk—or more likely, a group of jerks—invaded my pack and tried to tear it apart from within. I want answers.” There wasn’t outright anger in his voice, but beneath it lay a simmering frustration; this was the breaking point for him, tired of being underestimated. His team mirrored his irritation, their expressions hard and determined.

Jason and I, alongside Luna Sam, shared everything we’d uncovered so far. Damon and Owen lent their expertise with the magic, but the situation was proving more complicated than I had hoped.

“So, you’re telling me you’ve taken down at least a dozen of these Shadow Markers, yet the problem persists?” Junior’s gaze sharpened, clearly frustrated.

“We don’t know,” I admitted, rubbing my temples in frustration. “That’s the real issue. We keep detecting the magic, but we’ve never actually caught a wolf acting as a mule for the product. That’s the missing link. I can’t tell if what we’re doing is making any difference. Every time we find a mule, it’s because they’re already dead. We’re still operating under the theory that whoever’s orchestrating this wants access to the waterway at the southern edge of the packs.”

Junior’s eyes locked onto mine. “I want to meet with Elara. She and I need to figure out what more we can do. I refuse to hide in fear, and neither will she. But we’re banging our heads against a wall, and I’ve had enough. I want those witches,” he nodded pointedly at Owen and Damon, “and those rogues. And I want them here, now. Your coven leaders should be involved too. I’m done getting my information secondhand. Ben, make it happen tomorrow.”

“You got it, Alpha.” There was nothing else to say. After issuing a few more orders, he dismissed us.

As Jason and I walked toward my room, he muttered, "I'm surprised he didn't ask for Jer or Alpha James to come along."

"I thought the same," I replied, "but maybe Junior and Elara are on the same wavelength. He probably thinks the two of them have something to prove since they're the ones being targeted. There are a dozen packs around here, and no one else is reporting anything like what we've seen."

"Yeah, you're probably right. You've always had a better connection with Junior than the rest of us. You just get him."

"Maybe so," I said, "but it's not stopping the magical attacks or helping us find more clues about the magic we keep detecting. Speaking of which, I'm not the only one who can feel that low hum of magic in the air. Did you sense anything when you arrived?"

"Not at home," Jason answered. "But when I got here, I felt a strange buzz under my skin. I figured it was from Junior or maybe that stone they found embedded in the ceiling. I don't feel it anymore, though."

"Once we decide where to meet, you and I need to split up with Damon and Owen to check the perimeter before anyone else arrives. There's no way that stone got into the ceiling without inside help. We know Jeff wasn't working alone, and I don't think we've caught his partner yet. We need to keep this location under wraps and start narrowing down suspects without tipping them off."

"Sounds like a plan. Get some rest—we've got the afternoon patrol coming up." I nodded and headed to my room.

I reached out to Elara via mindlink. Her powers had grown stronger, but calling her directly ensured the connection wouldn't drop.

"Hey. What's going on?" Her voice held an edge of urgency, though she tried to mask it.

"Sorry it took me a few days to call. We were right—Junior was attacked from within. I don't know who did it yet, but someone got close enough to plant a massive stone with a spell inside Junior's cells. He went feral, and his wolf locked him inside his own mind. He stayed like that for a month. Sam thought it was some kind of disease—before you start giving her a hard time, know that she tried everything she could before asking for help. She didn't want anyone else to get sick."

"Is he okay now?" Elara asked softly.

"Yeah, Damon and Owen are pretty powerful. They recognized the spell immediately. It took a few hours to break it, but Junior's recovering now."

Her voice softened further. "What about you? Did it affect you?"

I tried not to let my stomach twist at the concern in her tone. "It did, but not like Junior. Damon thinks the spell had been there a long time, and I got stronger the longer it lingered."

He and Owen also believe it was designed specifically for Junior, so for me, it just caused nausea. Still, I had to leave the room like a little wimp.” I chuckled softly. “Anyway, Junior’s pissed. He wants to meet with you on neutral ground tomorrow. He’s done being treated like a weak kid, and I think he’s offended on your behalf too. He wants to meet Brianna and Marietta. He’s, and I quote, ‘tired of getting all his information secondhand. He wants it firsthand.’”

“Okay,” Elara agreed, “we can make that work. Let’s do it first thing in the morning. We can start combining our patrols too.”

We ironed out a few more details, but she didn’t seem eager to end the call like I expected. She gave me a time to check in the next morning, and we both signed off. I lay back on my bed, feeling just as confused about my mate as ever.

## **Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below**

Chapter 410

67 – Elara

I lay flat on my back, eyes fixed on the ceiling above, while the soft, persistent hum of my wolf’s presence echoed in my mind. My wolf was deeply engaged in a silent dialogue with Ben’s wolf, and I found myself grasping for reasons to keep the conversation alive. It was strange—this connection between our wolves—but I didn’t fully understand how it worked. Just when I thought the exchange had ended, she would nudge me to stall, though she never explained why. I could only suspect they were plotting something behind the scenes. Taking a slow, deliberate breath, I exhaled quietly, frustrated that even our wolves couldn’t leave the whole mate issue alone. Their reasons might be stronger than ours, but why couldn’t we simply be left in peace, allowed the chance to get to know one another without interference?

Still, these thoughts didn’t stop me from imagining him—Ben—especially on the nights he wasn’t curled up on my couch. My hands wandered over my skin, trying to recreate the memory of his touch, though it was never quite the same. Yet, the mere thought of him sent waves of pleasure through me, pushing me to climax faster than ever before. I knew my mind was wired to respond to him; our conversations were never dull or meaningless. Even when he was away with another pack, my body betrayed me, reacting as if he were right beside me.

But why was the rest of me so reluctant to accept the idea of having a mate? That nagging doubt lingered at the back of my mind, refusing to be silenced. Something felt off, though I couldn’t pinpoint what. With that restless thought swirling in my head, I finally drifted into sleep.

The packhouse was already alive with activity when I made my way down to the dining room in the pale light of early dawn. The air buzzed with tension, voices low but urgent.

“What’s going on?” I asked an Omega passing by, my voice sharp with concern.

She hesitated, glancing nervously over her shoulder. “A body was found between the packhouse and the Coven’s camp...”

“And no one thought to tell me?!” I snapped, my voice rising, causing her to recoil slightly.

“I... I’m sorry, Alpha. I just heard... I...” she stammered, unable to finish her sentence as I pushed past her toward the back doors.

Witches from the Coven were moving past me, their faces drawn and troubled, but there was no panic or fear radiating from them—something my wolf and I would have sensed immediately. I forced my way through the small crowd gathered, determined to see for myself.

“Next time, send for me immediately if something happens on my pack’s land,” I growled as I stepped inside the circle.

Then I froze. It was a child. A pup from my pack—young, no more than ten or twelve years old. I couldn’t see her face clearly, but her shallow, labored breathing told me she was still fighting for her life. That flicker of hope ignited a fierce fire inside me, making my entire body tremble with rage. Whoever had done this had crossed a line.

A Coven healer was already tending to her, but I wanted one of my own as well. There was blood staining her torso, but the air around her crackled with magic, an ominous sign that this was no ordinary injury. They would have to work together if we were going to save her. Brianna and Marietta appeared beside me, their expressions grim.

“We just heard,” Marietta said, her voice steady but worn from battle. “Any idea what happened or who found her?”

“No, I’ve only been here a few minutes. Your healer was already with her when I arrived, and I called for one of my own. I can feel the magic in the air, but I haven’t examined her injuries yet. I thought it best to wait for you. She’s holding on, but I don’t want to make it worse if she’s fighting a spell rather than a physical wound.”

Marietta nodded and stepped forward, resting a reassuring hand on the Coven healer’s shoulder. The two exchanged a silent understanding, and Marietta took over the care.

I hated standing there, helpless and watching, feeling useless as always. I began to pace, restless, until Brianna stopped me with a firm hand on my arm.

“Your nervous energy won’t help her,” she said quietly. “She needs you to be strong—for both of you. Kneel beside her and talk to her. Right now, you’re the only familiar thing she has.”

Taking a deep breath, I lowered myself to the ground on the other side of the girl. Her face was pale, expressionless, drained of life. “Ella,” I whispered softly, willing her to hold on. “You’re strong. I know you have the fight in you.”

I grasped her hand gently, forcing my anger deep down where it couldn't consume me. "Remember how you fought with Bobby the day you learned those release moves," I said, trying to lighten the mood with a small laugh. The healer chuckled quietly beside me, and Ella drew a ragged breath.

"What's wrong with her?" I asked, studying her injuries. The wounds looked minor, nothing that should have caused this kind of reaction.

"There's definitely some kind of spell work involved," the Coven healer said. "It seems she ingested something as well. I'll wait to hear what your healer thinks."

At that moment, Healer Smith pushed through the crowd. "When and where did you find her?" he asked urgently.

A Coven witch I hadn't met before stepped forward. "We found her on the path, Alpha. She had this note in her pocket. She's been like this since we found her thirty minutes ago. Her condition hasn't changed for better or worse. We sent someone for help immediately."

The witch handed me a crumpled piece of paper. I unfolded it carefully and read the chilling message:

Your efforts are worthless. Give up now, or more will follow.

A cold shiver ran down my spine. What on earth did that mean? "Our efforts are worthless? Which efforts?" I asked, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "We have a lot going on right now."

I passed the note to Brianna, who had stepped up beside me.

"Most likely, it's referring to all the efforts you've made to protect your pack," she said grimly. "Please take Ella to the pack hospital and assist however you can, Gene."

She grabbed my arm firmly. "We need to get to Red Fang as soon as possible. You, Ben, and the Red Fang Alpha—you three need to face this together. This problem requires all of you working as one."