

Submission is Not My Style – Chapter 11

Kali

“W-We didn’t know she was your mate, Alpha,” a warrior stammers from above, his voice shaking. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had pissed his pants. “It was Commander Gideon’s order-”

Alpha? As in Alpha Jack?

Another growl rumbles through the air, shaking the very ground beneath me. This one is even more feral. “How dare he? I don’t give a damn if he’s my cousin. No one disobeys me. I’ll make an example out of him. Go get him.”

– The sound of hurried footsteps scrambling away fills the air. Darkness presses in around me, heavy and suffocating, the kind that makes you feel like you’re drowning with your eyes wide open.

Then, a voice-deep, authoritative, laced with something dangerously soft-calls down to me.

“Mate, are you hurt?”

The way he says it—as if he would burn the world down for me, like I’m something fragile, something precious— makes my heart stutter. He sounds so... different. So unlike Travis.

Maybe the Moon Goddess didn’t make a mistake this time.

For a second, the thought of having a second-chance mate isn’t as horrifying as I once believed.

“I’ll get you out of there. Now.”

I strain my eyes, but I can’t see his face. He’s too high up.

But just his voice alone is enough to make my heart race.

My wolf whimpers in longing, pushing against me, wanting to be near him.

“Take my hand, mate.”

The moment he says it, my body tenses. No. No physical interaction. If I touch him, the bond will snap into place, and rejecting him will be even harder if he turns out to be a monster. I won’t make such a dangerous mistake.

“No.” I force coldness into my voice. “Get me a rope. I’ll climb out myself—and I’ll bring this man with me.”

Silence. A thick, heavy silence that makes my skin prickle.

I swallow hard, wondering if he even heard me. I open my mouth to repeat myself when-

A low, menacing growl shakes the pit. "Take. My. Hand."

I stiffen at the possessiveness in his tone. Arrogant.

Commanding. He's not just anyone-he's definitely an Alpha. My blood runs cold.

Could it really be... Alpha Jack? The ruthless leader of the Blood Fang Pack?

No. No, the Moon Goddess wouldn't be that cruel. I shove the thought away, gritting my teeth. "Unless you get me a rope so I can get both of us out, I'm not coming up." I hesitate, glancing at the man beside me. He's barely breathing. Why do I even care? Maybe because I know what it feels like-to be abandoned, to rot away while everyone watches.

I refuse to let that happen to him.

"He's dying," I say softly, desperation seeping into my voice. "He won't last long down here. You can't just leave him-"

"Then wait until he dies before you come out."

His voice is indifferent, cold and merciless, like he's discussing the weather. "By the looks of it, hell last two hours at best. Get comfortable in the black hole, mate."

Shock slams into me. My jaw clenches as I glare up at the unseen figure. "How can you be so heartless?"

"That man is a traitor. He was sentenced to death. And mate—" his tone shifts, dark amusement lacing his words"

—didn't anyone teach you not to talk back to your mate?"

"So I ended up with another arrogant bastard as a mate.

Just my luck."

I mutter the words under my breath, cursing myself for ever thinking-even for a second-that he might be different. My chest tightens with bitter disappointment.

For a moment, I had dared to hope. I had dared to believe I could have something good.

Stupid.

"I'll say it again-I won't forsake this man. If you refuse to help, then leave me be." I bite out.

Silence. Then, a rustling above. A moment later, a rope drops down.

I don't hesitate. Quickly, I tie it around the man's frail body, securing him to my waist, and give a sharp tug. The rope tightens as someone hauls us up. The climb is rough, my muscles screaming in protest, but I grit my teeth and push through.

As soon as we reach the surface, hands grab the man, laying him on the ground. He groans-still alive. Relief floods me.

I suck in a breath, turning to thank whoever helped me-but the second I look up, all the air leaves my lungs.

Towering over me is the most stunning man I've ever seen.

Tall and powerful, his presence is almost suffocating. His sharp jawline and midnight-black hair make him look like he was sculpted by the gods. His piercing silver eyes hold an intensity that makes my knees weak. But what's even more shocking is the way he's staring at me—not with lust, not like I'm some prize to be claimed, but with something darker, something unreadable that makes my stomach flip. I barely register the way my own eyes widen as I take him in. His lips twitch, amusement flickering in his gaze.

“Are you done ogling, mate?”

Heat rushes to my cheeks.

“Now that I’ve granted your wish and saved that traitor, it’s time for you to repay me.” His silver eyes darken. “I don’t go back on my word, mate. When I sentence someone to death, they die. You made me break that rule.” He steps closer, the air between us crackling with tension. “So tell me, mate, how do you plan to repay me?”

I narrow my eyes at him. He looms over me, his sheer size nearly overwhelming, but even as my heart pounds against my ribs, I refuse to let him see a flicker of fear.

“I don’t remember making a deal with you,” I say sharply holding his gaze despite the intensity in his eyes. “I gave you an option-if you wanted me out, then you had to bring him too. That’s only fair, considering I was thrown in there like a damn dog.” I spit the words at him, glaring. I don’t miss the way his lips press into a firm line, or the slight twitch of irritation in his jaw.

A low growl rumbles in his chest. “You weren’t in there for long,” he mutters, annoyed. “I was ready to pull you out immediately, but you—” he steps closer, his presence suffocating “—were stubborn. You made me go back on my word as an Alpha.” His fingers flex at his sides before he scoffs, shaking his head. “And yet, here you are, still talking back, still looking me in the eyes as if we are equals.” His voice lowers, dangerous. “I am an Alpha. Have you not been taught respect?”

Alpha. He was truly an Alpha.

I swallow, words sticking in my throat, unsure how to respond.

But before I can gather my thoughts, hurried footsteps echo through the tension, drawing my mate’s attention.

Peering over my mate towering form, I see the bastard commander-now sporting an eye patch-throw himself to the ground in a deep bow, forehead practically kissing the dirt.”Alpha Jack,” he wheezes. “I deserve death for disobeying your orders, but I had to teach this stupid bitch her place.”

My eyes widen, and my fists clench. Did he just-?

A chilling silence follows.

Jack tilts his head slightly, as if amused. Then, in a voice that sends a shiver down my spine, he murmurs, "Stupid bitch?" His tone is light, almost curious. "You dare insult my mate in front of me?" He clicks his tongue, shaking his head like the commander is the biggest disappointment he's ever seen. "Wow... you must have multiple lives."

The commander stiffens, his breath catching. His head snaps up, eyes wide with horror, his face draining of color.

"D-Did you just say. mate?" His gaze flicks to me, as if seeing me for the first time or worst I had just grown magical horns."Your Luna?" His voice trembles, his entire body shaking as the gravity of his mistake sinks in. "

Alpha, I-"

Jack doesn't answer.

The commander uses the opportunity to immediately starts stammering as he presses his forehead even deeper into the dirt. "I didn't know, Alpha! If I had known, I swear

—I swear I wouldn't have touched her. But she—" his eyes dart to me with a sharp glare "-she clawed my damn eye out! She disobeyed me! She-she did what women aren't supposed to do! She looked me in the eye-she talked back!"Jack exhales sharply through his nose, his gaze drifting lazily to me before settling back on the trembling commander. His lips curve into a slow, dangerous smirk." Tell me," he muses. "How can a weak little female like her possibly hurt a fly... let alone beat up a commander?"

"She's not weak!" the commander blurts out before he can stop himself. "This bitch Is fucking strong!" His voice cracks with desperation, his wounded pride spilling out before he immediately sucks in a sharp breath, realizing what he just said.

Jack's smirk grows colder. "Oops. There it is again." His voice drops to a deadly whisper. "You never learn, do you?"

Then -before anyone can react-he moves.

One second, the commander is on his knees. The next-Jack's massive hands are gripping his face, his fingers like iron. There's a sickening crack. A lifeless body collapses to the ground.

I inhale sharply. He killed him. Just like that. Without hesitation. Without remorse.

Jack merely dusts off his hands like he swatted away an insect.

I stare at the corpse, my mind struggling to process what just happened. Yes, I hated the man, but did he deserve that? Just like that? No trial. No chance to grovel. No warning. My heart pounds as I take a step back, instincts screaming at me to run.

This man-my mate-is heartless.

He really does live up to his name as the most feared

Alpha.

Jack exhales in mild annoyance, as if handing a minor inconvenience. Then, his piercing gaze lands on me. “Since you refuse to repay me, mate...” His voice trails off as he flicks his fingers.

Before I can even think, warriors step forward.

“What are you—?” My words die in my throat as two of them grab the barely conscious man I had fought to save-without hesitation, they throw him back into the black hole.

“No-!” My body moves on instinct. I lunge forward, but before I can reach the edge, a firm hand grips my wrist.

A shockwave of electricity shoots through my skin.

I gasp, body freezing at the contact.

It’s him. His touch. His scent.

Slowly, I turn my head, breath catching as I meet Jack’s gaze.

He watches me, eyes glinting with amusement, lips curving into something almost... predatory. A slow smirk spreads across his face as he leans in, his voice low and taunting—a perfect mix of warning and seduction. “Tell me, little mate... do you want to love me, or do you want to fear me?” His thumb brushes over my wrist, sending another shockwave through me. “Either way ...you’ll find out soon enough.”

My stomach twists-part horror, part something else I refuse to name.

“Take my mate to the mating room,” he orders, his tone disturbingly calm, as if he didn’t just murder someone right in front of me.

“No-let me go!” I thrash against his grip, but his hold tightens just enough to keep me in place.

“I wouldn’t fight too hard if I were you,” he murmurs, his breath hot against my ear. “I hate waiting... but I do enjoy breaking the ones who make me.”

Submission is Not My Style – Chapter 12

Alpha Jack:

I watch her-my mate—the woman I have spent my life impatiently waiting for. She lifts her chin, those fierce emerald eyes locking onto mine without a trace of submission. Her lips curl into a smirk, sharp and teasing-almost daring.

“I’m not one to be broken, Jack.”

Fuck. The way she says my name ignites something dark inside me.

“But I’d love to see you try.”

Her words slither through the space between us like a challenge-bold, reckless. No woman has ever dared to look me in the eyes, much less speak back to me with such confidence. But this one? My mate? She has no fear.

I should be furious, but instead, I’m intrigued. My fingers twitch with the urge to grab her by the throat, force her to kneel, and make her understand who she belongs to. But I won’t.

When I imagined my mate, I pictured a soft, delicate woman-one who would bow at my command, whisper my name with reverence. A woman i could shield, one who would seek comfort in my strength, who would let me protect her without question. A woman like my mother, my sisters, like every other female in my pack who knowsher place beneath me.

Instead, I got her.

She stands tall, her athletic frame honed from years of training-nothing like the women of my pack, who are small, dainty creatures bred for submission. Her raven-black hair cascades down her back, framing a face that should belong to a Luna, not a woman thrown into a pit like an animal. And her eyes... they burn with an inner fire that dares me to strike her down.

Every part of her is a challenge.

I don’t know whether to crush her or keep her. For the first time in my life, I don’t know what to feel. But one thing is certain-my life will never be boring again.

My fingers flex unconsciously before I release my grip, careful not to bruise her smooth, perfect skin beneath them. It infuriates me that I even care. I don’t do soft. I don’t do careful.

Just then, my warriors step forward, ready to escort her to the mating chamber as I ordered. But before they can lay a hand on her, she growls-low, dangerous.

“Don’t put your filthy hands on me. I will walk on my own.

Lead the way.”

Her command rings with such authority that even my seasoned warriors freeze, hesitant. They are used to silent, obedient women, not one who gives orders like she belongs here.

A slow, dark smile spreads across my lips as I watch them step back. They fear my wrath more than hers, yet still, they obey. Interesting.

Just as she strides past me, one of my warriors clears his throat and bows his head, his voice uncertain.

“Alpha..”

“Speak.” My voice is edged with impatience.

He swallows hard. “She... she clawed out the general’s eye.

That’s why he threw her into the Black Hole. His ego was wounded.”

I tilt my head, studying her anew. A woman who tore apart a man twice her size? I almost want to laugh.

In my world, women don’t fight. They exist to serve. To please. To obey. They are born into submission, raised to know their place beneath men like me.

They do not raise their voices. They are possessions-meant to be controlled, protected, used. They are either mated to strong males or sold off to forge alliances.

My mother had been the embodiment of that tradition.

Even after my father’s death, she remained by his grave, faithful until her last breath, as was expected of a mate. I had built a house for her beside his tomb, a monument to her devotion. My sisters, Alpha-born, were no different. Despite their Lineage, they had bowed to the customs, marrying strong warriors and remaining unwaveringly loyal to their mates.

But my mate?

She is chaos. She is wild. She is everything a woman in my pack is not.

She isn’t like them. She isn’t like anyone I’ve ever known.

And that is going to be a problem.

I don’t like what that means for me.

My fingers tighten behind my back as I watch her shadow disappear, my expression unreadable.

I hadn’t killed the commander for throwing my mate into the pit. No, I had killed him because he dared to insult her in my presence, even after learning who she was-my mate, his Luna. That was an insult to me as Alpha, a direct challenge to my authority. And no man—not even my own blood—could be allowed to question my power.

My uncle will rage when he learns of his son’s death.

Good.

He has hated me for years. Our history is drenched in blood. He ambushed my father when he was weak and sick, hoping to claim the Alpha position for himself. But even at fourteen, I was stronger. I defeated him and took my rightful place. Killing his son only makes us even. After all, he took my father's life.

My uncle can do nothing. He knows better than to challenge me. My rule is law, my word absolute. I built this pack on fear and dominance, and I will not tolerate disrespect-not even from my own kin.

But my mate... she is testing me in ways no one ever has

She had pleaded for the life of that weak, fragile man who had been thrown into the pit before her. Even in the face of her own danger, she had fought for someone else. I had seen the fire in her eyes when I signalled my warriors to throw him back into the abyss. She had moved before she could think, instinct driving her forward to save him.

But I had stopped her. My hand curled around her wrist, holding her back as the sparks of the mate bond surged between us. She gasped, eyes snapping to mine in shock.

And in that moment, as my warriors obeyed my silent command and tossed the man into the darkness below, I saw something in her gaze that made me breathless.

Horror.

She looked at me as if I were a monster.

She doesn't know I am worse than a monster.

She doesn't know the man she risked her life for was an assassin sent to kill me. That I couldn't let him walk free.

That I had used her refusal to accept my deal as an excuse to do what had to be done.

She will learn.

In time, she will understand the world she has been thrust into. And I will enjoy breaking her—piece by piece-until she accepts it. Until she submits to me, as a Luna should.

This should be interesting.

Submission is Not My Style – Chapter 13

Alpha Jack

The scent of my mate still clings to me as I force myself to walk away from the black hole of misery.

My wolf howls in frustration, barely restrained, desperate to claim what is his. Every instinct in me screams to run to the Mating Room, to find her waiting-ready-to complete the bond and start the future we were destined for-bearing strong male pups.

I have waited long enough. I will not waste another second.

But duty calls.

I was supposed to meet with a messenger from the royals

-sent by the Alpha King himself-when I caught her scent. In that instant, nothing else had mattered. Not even the damn Alpha King. I had run to her like my life depended on it, unwilling to risk losing her before I even knew her.

And what did I find?

My mate, Locked away in the most dangerous part of my pack. The very place I had forbidden my warriors from using to imprison women. And yet, my own cousin-my trusted commander-had dared to put her there.

Another reason why he had to die.I stalk through the pack house, my boots striking hard against the stone floors. Warriors step aside as I pass, some lowering their heads in submission, others stiffening under the weight of my fury. They know better than to cross me when I'm like this.

By the time I reach my office, my muscles are wound tight with barely restrained rage. I push open the door, my voice low and rough.

“I’m late.”

Then I freeze.

Sitting in my chair, with his useless leg stretched out before him and his hands resting on that damned walking stick, is the one man I despise more than anyone. My uncle.

His twisted smirk ignites my fury all over again. The bastard looks too comfortable, as if he owns the damn place.

A scowl twists my face as I step inside, shutting the door with more force than necessary. “What the hell are you doing here?”

My body is tense, ready to rip him apart if necessary. He doesn’t bother hiding the hatred in his eyes. Good. The feeling is mutual.

“Now, now, Jack. Is that any way to greet family?” His fingers tighten around the handle of his cane.”I’m here on behalf of the Alpha King,” he continues smoothly, his tone laced with venom. “I serve as the King’s messenger now, assigned to various packs-including yours. That’s the Alpha King’s message for you.”

A harsh laugh escapes me as I shake my head in disgust. "That's a fucking lie. What use does the Alpha King have for a crippled old man?" My gaze drops pointedly to his leg-the one I shattered when I ripped his position from him." You're useless."

"Is that so?" he muses, tilting his head. "You think the Alpha King would waste his time on a cripple?" He taps his cane against the floor, the sound echoing through the room. His lips twitch into something like a smile, but his eyes remain calculating. "You may have destroyed my legs, but my mind remains sharp. And knowledge, dear nephew, is far more powerful than brute strength."

I step closer, my fingers twitching with the urge to wrap around his throat. "So what? You got on your knees and kissed the Alpha King's ass for a scrap of authority? A sliver of power? Hoping you could crawl your way back here and try to challenge me again?"

His smile falters-just for a fraction of a second-before twisting into something more menacing. "Oh, Jack. Still the same arrogant little boy." His voice is almost pitying, but his eyes gleam with malice. "But let me be the first to congratulate you on finding your mate again."

My jaw tightens involuntarily at the mention of her. I don't respond, and that only encourages him.

"I hear she's different this time. A wild beast that needs taming. That must be why you killed my son —your own cousin-just because he insulted her. Called her a stupid bitch, wasn't it?" He leans forward his eyes dark with satisfaction. "But I think that wasn't the only reason you killed him. Was it revenge, Jack? For your father? Because we both know your pathetic mate wasn't worth that much-blood."

A growl rips from my throat before I can stop it. My vision darkens at the edges, my wolf clawing to the surface. I slam my hands onto the desk, the wood creaking under the force.

"If you're so eager to join your son, keep talking," I snarl."

I'll make sure you both rot in the same grave."

He chuckles. "Tsk, tsk. You can't kill me so easily anymore."

I belong to the royals now. Lay a finger on me, and you challenge the Alpha King himself."

I grit my teeth. That bastard knows exactly what he's doing. And worse? He's right. The Alpha King is the only man I respect-the direct descendant of the Moon Goddess-the only one i wouldn't challenge without cause. But that doesn't mean I won't find a way to crush this piece of shit.

My uncle watches me, savoring my silence like a man sipping fine wine.

. "You may think you're the most ruthless

Alpha," he muses, "but the Alpha King? He's something else entirely."

I tilt my head, studying him. "What kind of deal did you make to get in his good graces?"

A smirk pulls at his lips. "Worry about taming your little mate first. And if you can't handle her..." He pauses, his gaze darkening with something vile. "Then hand her over to me. I've always been good at taming bitches like her.

Just like I did with your first."

The next thing I know, my hand is around his throat, lifting him from the chair. His cane clatters to the floor as he chokes, his fingers clawing at my wrist. I savor the panic that flickers across his face, my wolf howling in approval, urging me to snap his neck like a twig.

"If you ever lay eyes on my mate—if you so much as breathe in her direction—I will rip your fucking tongue out and feed it to the crows." My voice is deadly quiet, but the promise in it is undeniable."

His throat bobs as he swallows, but the smugness returns too quickly. "Ah, so the great Alpha Jack is already whipped," he taunts, his voice strained from my grip." How cute."

I shove him back into the chair with a growl, my jaw tightening. "Get out of my sight before I stop giving a damn about royal consequences."

He picks up his cane slowly, adjusting his clothes with deliberate arrogance. "I'll take my leave," he says, Chapter 14

smirking. "But remember, nephew-mates are weaknesses. If you don't break her like you did to your first, she will break you."

I don't respond.

I just watch as he limps out of my office, my hands still trembling with the urge to snap his neck.

Mates are weaknesses?

No.

My mate will be my greatest strength—once I tame her into the perfect, submissive Luna.

Submission is Not My Style – Chapter 14

Kali

The warriors march me through the heart of Alpha Jack's pack, their presence imposing. Yet, despite the weight of my circumstances, my gaze sweeps across the vast expanse of the territory. It is unlike anything I have ever seen—massive, thriving, powerful.

The buildings tower above, far more developed than those of my old pack, and the roads are well-maintained. This is not just a pack; it is a kingdom in its own right. It's built on discipline, dominance, and order that seeps into everything. From the way the warriors march and train in

the distance, their roars and grunts echoing like thunder, to the way the pack members bow their heads in submission when they pass us. This is not just a pack; it is a force.

Yet, something halts my admiration.

A sharp intake of breath lodges in my throat as my gaze snags on a scene that sends rage clawing up my spine.

A woman. Cowering.

She flinches as a man —her mate, I assume—grabs her arm and yanks her toward him. His face is twisted in rage, his teeth bared as he hisses something in her ear before shoving her to the ground.

The woman whimpers, curling in on herself as if she's done this before. As if she's used to it.

I expect someone-anyone-to react. To step in. To at least show a flicker of disgust and look horrified. But no one does.

The pack members around them glance, uninterested, some even smirking. Others walk by as if this is normal, like her pain is nothing and as if this is just another ordinary moment in their day.

My stomach twists in disgust.

What kind of place is this? How could they just ignore this?

My muscles tense, hands clenching into fists. Instinct demands I intervene. I don't care whose pack this is—no one should stand by and watch this happen. My feet shift forward, ready to charge, to drive my knuckles into that bastard's face—

A firm hand clasps my wrist, stopping me.

"No," a voice murmurs, low yet firm.

I spin, prepared to glare, to fight off whoever dares to stop me, but freeze when I meet a pair of warm, knowing eyes.

Unlike the other warriors who have been all sharp edges and silent intimidation, this one has a gentleness to him, an aura that doesn't reek of cruelty so I know he isn't like them.

He doesn't look at me like I'm prey, like I'm something to be controlled. His dark eyes hold a quiet plea, and his grip is firm but not forceful. There's something familiar about him, something that makes my chest ache.

"Don't interfere," he says softly.

"Why? She's being abused!"

His lips press into a thin line before he sighs. "It's a taboo to interfere between mates. No one is allowed to come between them, not even the Alpha." He lowers his voice, glancing around before

adding, “And especially not you-not when he hasn’t introduced you as his Luna yet. It would put him in a complicated position.” 1

1 blink, my fury simmering, but I know he’s right. I’m not staying here. This isn’t my pack. I have no authority, no role. Still, every part of me burns to defy this twisted logic, to rip that woman away from her monster of a mate.

“So, what?” I demand; my voice trembles with suppressed fury. “She just has to take it?”

His jaw tightens, and for a second, I think I see something in his eyes-regret? Sadness? He doesn’t answer my question. He doesn’t need to.

The woman on the ground suddenly crawls forward, clutching at her mate’s leg, breaking what little restraint I have left. “Please,” she sobs, her voice raw with desperation. “Forgive me. I won’t do it again.”

I can’t watch this. The man sneers before grabbing a fistful of her hair, forcing her head back as she gasps in pain. My stomach churns, my entire body screaming at me to do something.

I move without thinking.

Or at least, I try.

The warrior steps in front of me, blocking my view. His presence is solid, unmoving, as if he already knew I would react this way. His body shields me from the sight. “Please,

” he murmurs, “don’t.”

I exhale shakily, my anger curling into something bitter.

There’s no reason to play the role of Luna when I’ll never be one.

But it doesn’t make it any easier to swallow.

I glance up at him, and the ache in my chest intensifies. He reminds me of Caspian-my best friend. His kindness, his quiet strength... it makes my heart twist with longing.

Forcing a small, sad smile, I nod. I don’t trust my voice to speak. –

“Let’s go,” he urges.

He leads me away along with the other warriors, guiding me past the scene-past the suffocating silence of a pack that turns a blind eye to such cruelty. I glance at him from the corner of my eye. A kind-hearted warrior in a place like this? How does he survive? And why do I trust him? I exhale, forcing myself to forget everything.

The warriors escort me through a massive house, its interior just as grand as its exterior. The hallways stretch endlessly, the air thick with the scent of wood, leather, and something undeniably

masculine. We finally stop before a door-twice my height, made of dark oak, with intricate carvings of wolves and moons.

Another of the warriors bows his head. "This is the mating room."

As the words leave his mouth, my heart pounds in my chest. Before I can speak, they turn and walk away, the heavy thud of their boots fading down the hall.

I am left alone, standing before the door that seals my fate.

But then I remember—I have the power to seal my own fate.

I can reject Jack as my second-chance mate.

The moment my fingers curl around the handle, I hesitate, my heart hammering against my ribs. Taking a deep breath, I push the door open.

I gasp, my eyes widening at the sheer size of the mating room—it's far larger than I expected. Massive, more extravagant than anything I've ever seen. Grand chandeliers cast a golden glow over the space, while deep mahogany walls give it a dark, intimate feel. For a brief moment, the fear that had gripped me—the haunting memories of Luna Diana's warriors dragging me, stripping me bare to force me into mating with Travis—disappears.

I should feel terrified.

But I don't, and something else stirs inside me. A strange, unfamiliar warmth.

My gaze drifts to the enormous bed. God, the bed—it's something out of a sinful dream. The frame is sturdy, built to withstand anything, and the deep crimson silk sheets look almost too inviting. My breath catches as an entirely inappropriate thought creeps into my mind—Jack lifting me roughly, throwing me onto the mattress, his strong hands gripping my hips as he towers over me. His mouth trailing fire down my neck before capturing my lips, his voice husky as he claims me, making me his.

My thighs clench at the sheer audacity of the thought, heat pooling low in my stomach.

What the hell is wrong with me?

The sudden creak of the door snapping open makes me jolt back to reality. My eyes widen in panic as I spin around, slapping a hand over my mouth. Two women enter, their heads bowed in submission.

Shit.

Did they see my reaction? Do they know what I was just thinking about?

I curse myself inwardly. How could I, even for a second, entertain such a thought about Jack? He's a monster, a killer without remorse. He even said he would break me.

Shame burns hot in my cheeks.

It has to be the mate bond that was making me feel this stupid. The brief physical touch when he held my wrist must have triggered this madness inside me. But then again, with or without the mate bond... have you seen.

Jack? The bastard is unfairly gorgeous—a walking sin, temptation wrapped in muscle and arrogance.

I shake my head sharply, trying to rid myself of these ridiculous thoughts. Straightening, I clear my throat as if that will erase my sinful imagination.

One of the women moves toward me, her hands reaching for the tattered remains of my dress. My body tenses instantly, my instincts flaring. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I demand stepping back. “We need to prepare you for the Alpha,” she says evenly, like it’s the most natural thing in the world. She keeps her eyes lowered. “You must be bathed and dressed appropriately.”

Prepare me?

My gaze flicks to the side, where a revealing dress is laid out on a chair-thin, sheer, and barely enough to cover anything.

“No.” My voice is firm. “I’ll dress myself. And bring me something that actually covers my body.”

The women hesitate, their eyes darting between each other, clearly not used to being defied. One of them opens her mouth to protest, but I let out a low growl, and they freeze. Surprise flickers across their faces, as if the very thought of a woman asserting herself is something unheard of.

Finally, they nod and step back. “As you wish.”

Once they leave, I take the opportunity to strip out of my dirty clothes and sink into the large tub, letting the hot water soothe my aching muscles, easing some of the tension that has knotted inside me since I arrived in this pack. I close my eyes, letting myself have this one moment of peace. By the time I step out, the women are back, this time holding a far more suitable dress. Relief washes over me.

“Thank you,” I murmur as I take it, slipping it on. Then my stomach growls. Loudly.

Embarrassed, I press a hand against my abdomen, suddenly aware of how long it’s been since I last ate.

One of the women notices and gestures toward a chair.”

Sit. I’ll get you some food.”

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The other hands me a fresh towel before leaving the room. I murmur a quiet thanks and take a seat, exhaustion settling into my bones. Within minutes, a large tray of food is placed before me, and at the mere sight of it, I dig in like a starved animal.

“Eat like a proper lady,” one of them scolds lightly, but! ignore her, shoving another bite into my mouth. They sigh in frustration before leaving, finally granting me some privacy.

I don’t know when I’ll get a meal like this again— especially once I leave Jack’s pack.

When I finally lean back, rubbing my full belly, I can’t help but admit-his pack may be cruel, but they have damn good food. The taste almost reminds me of my mother’s cooking, a pang of longing hitting me as I think of her. I need to send a letter. To her. To Caspian. Let them know I’m okay.

Before I can dwell on the thought, a deep voice cuts through the silence, making me freeze.

“Now that you’ve eaten your fill, don’t you think it’s my turn to eat you to mine?”

My head snaps up, my entire body stiffening.

Jack. He leans against the doorframe, arms crossed, a lazy smirk playing on his lips. His silver eyes gleam with amusement-and something darker, something that sends a shiver down my spine.

I sit up straight, shooting him a glare. “Stay the hell away from me.”

He chuckles, stepping inside with slow, deliberate movements, like a predator stalking its prey. “You say that,” he muses, “but your body tells me something else.”

I scoff, crossing my arms. “You’re delusional.”

“Am I ?” His voice drops lower, huskier, sending an unwanted heat rushing through me. “Because I can hear your heart racing, mate. I can smell it-the way your scent changes when I’m near.”

I open my mouth to fire back, but nothing comes out.

Damn it. He’s too perceptive. He steps closer, and I instinctively rise to my feet.

“Fuck,” he murmurs, his gaze darkening as he stops mere inches from me. “I can’t wait to be inside you.”

Anger surges through me, burning away every other feeling. “That will never happen,” I snap. “Let’s end this as soon as possible. I don’t know why I didn’t do it the moment I saw you.”

Jack cocks a brow. “What’s that? Kiss me?”

(I smirk. “No, reject your ass. I, Kali, reject Alpha Jack as myI don’t get to finish.

Because suddenly, his lips crash against mine.

A gasp gets trapped in my throat as his mouth claims me

—hot, demanding, and possessive. His hands grip my waist, pulling me flush against him, and damn it-my knees nearly buckle at the sheer intensity. His lips are rough, his movements both punishing and desperate, as if he's furious with me, with himself, with this whole damn situation.

And yet... I don't push him away.

I should. I really, really should.

But I don't.

Because the moment he kisses me, every thought in my head vanishes. My body betrays me, heat surging through my veins, and all I can focus on is the way he feels, the way he tastes-like danger, like temptation, like something I swore I'd never want.

And yet... here I am, melting into his touch.

I try to fight the pull, but it's impossible. My traitorous body leans into him, my eyes fluttering shut as I return the kiss. Then -A flash.

A little girl. Sitting on a bed. Clutching a familiar blue necklace.

I gasp into the kiss, my breath stuttering as dizziness crashes over me. The room tilts, my vision blurring. Jack's lips leave mine in an instant, his hands gripping my arms to steady me.

“Mate,” he breathes, his voice laced with concern. “Are you okay?”

The last thing I feel is Jack gently lowering me onto the mattress before everything fades to black.

My head spins as the image of a little girl clutching a blue necklace burns into my mind. Even with my eyes closed, it's all I can see. I know that girl is me-I recognize the familiar curve of my cheeks, the shape of my nose, the quiet sadness in her innocent eyes, and her dark curls. She is me.

I feel it deep in my bones.

I try to push past the haze, to remember more, but no matter how hard I claw at the fragments, they slip through my fingers like sand. Even my wolf is restless, scratching at the edges of my mind, desperate to grasp something-anything-that could tell us who we are and where we come from.

“How did we remember that?” I ask her, frustrated.

“I think...” My wolf whispers hesitantly. “I think it was because of our mate.”

My breath catches. “What?”

“The bond, Kali. Maybe it was Jack who triggered the memories.”

Her words settle in my mind like a slow-moving storm. I don't want to believe it, but a part of me already knows she's right. This has never happened before—not until Jack's lips met mine. It means Jack is somehow connected to my past. And that means I would have to accept the bond.

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But accepting it means accepting something far worse.

Submission.

I will never submit to him. I will find my past on my own.

And that means I have to leave him – as soon as possible. I will continue my journey to the witch's hut and uncover the truth myself.

"I refuse to believe that," I snap. "Jack is dangerous."

Staying with him means putting myself at risk."

"But what if staying with him is the only way we remember?" she counters. "What if we need him to unlock the rest of our past?"

"I'll figure it out on my own. I don't need him."

There's a pause before my wolf murmurs slyly, "Why don't we kiss him again and test the theory? Maybe if we do, we'll see more..."

I groan. "Absolutely not."

She starts whining in my head, but I ignore her. Deep down, the thought unsettles me—if kissing Jack really did something to me—then our bond is far stronger than! I want to admit. I need to get away from him before I fall deeper into this mess.

I refuse to let our bond grow through physical touch.

That's the last thing I want. The door creaks open, snapping me out of my thoughts. I squeeze my eyes shut tighter, pretending to be asleep.

"I know you're awake."

Jack's deep voice slides over me, making my heart thump against my ribs. I bite my lip, cursing my body's reaction.

Then he chuckles, low and teasing.

"I don't mind waking you up with a kiss if that's what you're waiting for," he muses. "Should I play Prince Charming?"

My eyes snap open, and I scowl at him, even as heat rises to my cheeks. “Don’t you dare.”

I still can’t believe I kissed him-and then fainted like some delicate fool. Who even does that? Worse, it was my first kiss. Not that he needs to know. He’s probably kissed a hundred women before me-just like Travis-

I slap myself lightly, scolding myself for feeling jealous about whoever Jack has been with. It’s none of my business.

He smirks, tilting his head as if studying me. “You look like you’re thinking really hard about something. Let me guess

—you’re still mad I kissed you?”

My cheeks burn hotter, and I curse myself for reacting so strongly. “Don’t flatter yourself,” I snap, sitting up. “And don’t ever kiss me again.”

He steps closer, his scent wrapping around me like a warm embrace. “Really? Because I could’ve sworn you kissed me back... like a dominant queen. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you enjoyed it.”

Heat flares in my chest, and I clear my throat. “It shouldn’t have happened, and it sure as hell won’t happen again,” I say firmly.

Jack, of course, ignores me. His expression shifts, his smirk fading from teasing into something more serious.” Are you okay?” he asks, his voice lower now. “You fainted.”

I tense, embarrassment creeping in. Seriously, who the hell faints from a kiss?

“I’m fine,” I say stiffly, sitting up straighter. “You didn’t need to worry about me.” He leans in, his presence overwhelming in the best-and worst-way, “I didn’t call the pack doctor,” he says casually, though there’s an edge to his voice. “I figured you wouldn’t be comfortable with another man touching you while you were asleep.”

I narrow my eyes. “That’s not your decision to make.”

His gaze darkens, his jaw ticking. “Maybe not. But the thought of anyone else’s hands on you makes me want to rip their throat out.”

My breath catches. The possessiveness in his voice is unmistakable, and it should terrify me. Instead, it sends a dangerous thrill down my spine.

My fingers curl into the sheets. “You don’t own me, Jack.”

A slow, wicked smirk spreads across his lips. “Not yet.”

Damn it. This man will be the death of me.

My pulse quickens. “I will never belong to you,” I say, even as my voice wavers.

Something primal flashing in his silver eyes. "You keep saying that," he murmurs, lifting a hand to brush a stray strand of hair from my face. "But your body tells a different story."

I swallow hard, hating how his touch sends a shiver down my spine. I need to get out of here.

And I need to do it soon.

"Are you okay? he asks again, his voice lower this time, but I know better than to mistake it for genuine concern.

I scoff, slapping his hand away. "Don't waste your energy pretending to care, Jack. I'll be gone soon."

His silver eyes burn into mine. "You are my mate. How the fuck am I wasting my energy? You're not some random woman. You're my mate-my one and only Luna."

I let out a bitter laugh. "Exactly. That's the problem. You don't actually care about me, Jack. You just need a Luna."

You need me to fulfill duties, to be the perfect little mate so your pack can look at you like you're untouchable. But without this bond, you wouldn't even look at me twice.

I've seen the way your pack treats their women. That says everything about you.

"Alphas like you only know how to take. You don't know how to give, and I will never be your Luna. I don't want to be with you. Can't you see? That's why I tried to reject you."

His jaw tightens, his eyes flashing with something unreadable. Then, to my shock, he exhales sharply and steps back.

"I won't ever accept your rejection," he says, his voice rough, controlled. "But I will let you leave freely." My breath catches in my throat.

That's it?

He's just... letting me go?

Jack turns toward the door, and for a fleeting moment, I think it's over—that he's truly walking away.

But then—

Something heavy drops at my feet with a dull thud.

My bag of gold. The one his men had taken from me.

My eyes widen. I drop my gaze to the bag, my fingers twitching at my sides.

Jack folds his arms, watching me. "That's yours, isn't it?"

Nothing inside is missing. Take it and leave." He tilts his head, a smirk playing at his lips, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "But if you dare come back to my pack... or if you fall into my arms again, I won't give you a second chance to escape. So, dear mate, make sure you run as far away from me as you can."

I swallow hard. This... this isn't what I expected. I expected him to chain me to a bed, demand my submission, and use his strength to bend me until I had no choice but to give in. That's what alphas like him do, isn't it? Dominate.

Conquer. Take.

But instead... he's letting me go. My heart flutters despite my resistance, and my wolf howls in protest. Don't leave mate. Stay. We need him. He needs us.

I grit my teeth and shove her voice to the back of my mind. No. I will not be weak. I will not let the mate bond decide my fate.

Without a word, I bend down, grab the bag of gold, and straighten. I don't hesitate. I don't let myself look at him any longer than necessary.

I turn on my heel and walk out the door.

Even though my heart is screaming at me to stop.

Submission is Not My Style – Chapter 17

Alpha Jack

I stand by the window, watching as my mate walks away without a single moment of hesitation. Her heavy bag of gold is slung over her shoulder, yet she carries it as if it weighs nothing. She doesn't glance back-not even once.

No second thoughts, no lingering doubts in her steps. Just pure determination, as if she truly believes she's convinced she's escaping. The thought irks me more than it should.

Did she really think I'd let her go that easily?

A bitter chuckle escapes my lips as I lean against the frame. A part of me wonders-how the hell did a woman like her, strong and stubborn, come to possess that much gold? What kind of job could she have done? Because one thing is certain-she would never bow to an Alpha and earn such a fortune through obedience or dedication.

But more than that, what truly fascinates me is her audacity-the way she tried to reject me so heartlessly, so effortlessly, without even a flicker of hesitation. If I hadn't silenced her with that kiss, she would have done it-slicing the bond clean through as if it meant nothing. That damn rejection would have been cold-blooded, ruthless.

Still, there was one good thing that came from her little attempt-

Kali. Her name. So damn beautiful. So fitting.

And the bond? Fucking electric. It's been a long time since I've felt something like this. But she's fighting it-fighting me. And I fucking hate it.

A low growl rumbles in my chest, my wolf restless and agitated. "Are you seriously just going to stand here and watch her leave?"

I roll my eyes at his possessiveness.

"Yes. To gain her trust," I mutter.

"Trust?" My wolf scoffs.

"Let her think we're not the big, scary, bad wolf lurking in the dark."

"But we are."

I huff. "And if we act like it now, we'll never have her. She's one stubborn she-wolf. If we force her, she'll fight harder.

If we let her run..."

"Then we hunt," my wolf finishes, his voice dark with anticipation but there's no patience in him. "I don't care what she thinks. She is ours. She belongs to us. She should be in our arms, not running from us. Let's claim her now. Mark her!"

A snarl rips from my throat, shaking the walls. "And what?

Lock her up until she submits? Force her? You want to repeat our past mistakes? Do you want history to repeat itself?!"

My voice is laced with fury, but underneath it, there's a raw edge-one only my wolf and I understand.

He falls silent. Then, a low whine escapes him, a deep, aching pain threading through our bond. A haunting agony that makes my muscles tense. The past is something we never speak of. The past is something we drown.

I exhale slowly, forcing control over both of us before speaking again. "Tell me... you enjoy the hunt, don't you?"

A cruel smirk tugs at my lips.

My wolf lets out a rumbling growl. "Yes. The thrill of letting prey think it's free-letting it taste safety, only to drag it back into our jaws-it makes the feast all the sweeter."

“Exactly.” My smirk widens.

I grip the windowsill, watching Kali disappear into the woods. “That’s what we’re doing. Letting her think she’s free. Letting her come back to us willingly. Letting her fight, struggle... and then break. We make her submit when the time is right.”

But my wolf isn’t satisfied. He growls low, restless. “And when will the time come? You saw the look in her eyes.

You felt her wolf’s silence. She blocked me when I tried to reach her. She’s already planning to reject us the moment she gets the chance. You’re playing a dangerous game, jack His desperation coils in my chest, making it hard to breathe. And I know he’s right. I saw it too. She’s strong—dangerously so. And if she keeps resisting...

A sharp pain explodes in my skull.

Blinding, searing pain.

Fuck! I clutch my head, staggering away from the window.

It’s happening again. The pain. The loss. The madness.

I need to lock myself up. Now.

My wolf thrashes inside me, clawing at my mind like a rabid beast. His howls turn into deafening roars, my head splitting apart from the force of it. This isn’t the first time.

Ever since her, my wolf has been broken. Unhinged.

That’s why I had the cage built deep beneath the packhouse—a place no one dares enter. A place to keep my own damn wolf from tearing everything apart.

I stagger through the packhouse, biting back a snarl as I shove open the hidden entrance to the underground chamber. The moment I step inside, the scent of silver burns my nose. The walls gleam with a deadly glow, and the cage in the center of the room stands open, waiting for me. The pain will be unbearable, but it’s necessary.

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With a snarl, I step inside and slam the door shut, locking myself in before the madness takes over completely. My hands grip the bars, knuckles turning white. My wolf howls, thrashing violently, but the silver keeps me from shifting fully.

Hours pass before he finally stills. Not calm—never calm—but restrained. My breathing is ragged, my body drenched in sweat, but once again, I am in control. I mind-link Fury, my most trusted warrior. Unlike his name, he’s eerily composed—a silent killer beneath a calm exterior.

“Track my mate.

A second later, a quiet, deadly voice replies. “Alpha.”

“Follow her. Stay in the shadows. Report everything to me.

“Understood.”

I close the link and straighten, rolling my shoulders as the last remnants of pain fade from my body.

With a sharp exhale, I unlock the cage and push open the door, careful not to touch the silver bars.

As I step out, my mind drifts back to Kali. I wonder where she was heading before those rogues led her here. If my former commander hadn’t killed them, I might’ve spared one-forced answers out of him. But none of that matters now because no matter how far

Kali runs, no matter how much distance she thinks she’s put between us-

Soon enough, she’ll realize there is no escape. Only death can stand between us.

Speaking of death...

Today marks my father’s death anniversary.

Cursing under my breath, I make my way to the house I built for my mother beside my father’s grave. She has dedicated her entire life to honouring my father, as she should. A woman of obedience and submission. Unlike Kali. If only she were like my mother, things would be so much easier.

When I arrive, I see her already performing the ritual, her hair falling in long strands as she shaves it off, her hands steady, her expression serene. Once the ritual is over, we bow together, and she leads me inside for tea.

“You don’t always have to come, Jack,” she says as she pours my cup. “I can do this alone. I know you’re busy fulfilling your duties as Alpha.”

I take a slow sip, letting the warmth chase away some of my tension. “This is one of the only times I get to see you, Mother. And I’m not just here because of Father.”

She smiles knowingly. “You’ve grown so much, my son. I was scared when you became Alpha at such a young age, but you’ve done far greater things than your father. I know he would be proud.” She places a gentle hand on mine. “Now, you just need to find another mate-this time, a strong but obedient Luna, like I was to your father.

Then no one will ever question your authority.”

I exhale sharply. There’s no hiding anything from her. “I already found my second-chance mate.”

Her eyes widen slightly, but before she can speak, continue, "She's a stubborn she-wolf. She tried to reject me." My jaw clenches. "But over my dead body will I let that happen."

To my surprise, my mother's expression shifts. "Jack," she says calmly, "I think it's for the best that your mate is rejecting you. Accept her rejection."

I freeze, completely taken aback. "What?"

She sighs and sets her teacup down. "This is an opportunity, Jack. You should ask the Alpha King for his only daughter's hand in marriage. We both know he won't hesitate. You are the best candidate for that position, and I have no doubt that he and his daughter will accept. After all, you would be doing him a favor. You are the strongest and most ruthless Alpha out there."

The Alpha King had two daughters, but one had gone missing-something no one dared to speak about for fear of their lives. It was a forbidden topic.

"Marry his daughter," my mother continues. "Make her your Luna. Solidify your power. Once you do, you can finally end your uncle and crush your enemies beneath your feet. No one will ever challenge you again-not even the Alpha King himself."

She leans closer, her gaze sharp. "The Alpha King would be honored to have you as his son-in-law. You are everything a ruler should be-powerful, feared, and relentless. With his daughter by your side, you will be unstoppable."

sit in silence, staring into my tea, slowly processing her words. Marry the Alpha King's daughter? Secure my rule?

But most importantly I would make Kali regret ever thinking she could walk away from me?

A slow, wicked grin spreads across my lips.

"I'll think about it."

I walk-one step at a time-away from Blood Fang territory.

It feels unreal.

I expected resistance-warriors blocking my path, Jack's men dragging me back, or worse, him hunting me down himself. But nothing. No sound of pursuit, no angry growl carried by the wind. Just silence.

It doesn't make sense.

I haven't known Jack long, but in the short time I've spent with him, I've learned one thing—he isn't the type to let something, or someone, slip through his fingers. He's ruthless, possessive-the kind of man who carves his name into whatever belongs to him. And according to fate, I belong to him.

So why isn't he stopping me?

The thought chills me.

Maybe this is a game. Maybe he's watching from the shadows, letting me run just so he can enjoy the chase.

I grit my teeth. If that's the case, he's made the biggest mistake of his life.

Because I'm never coming back.

Once I cross far enough, I glance over my shoulder one last time. No movement, no sign of anyone following. My heartbeat slows slightly, but I don't let my guard down. I crouch behind a thick tree, place my bag of gold between my teeth, and shift.

Bones crack, stretching, shifting. Dark obsidian fur ripples across my form, streaked with glowing silver patterns. My claws dig into the dirt as I steady myself. The moment I'm fully transformed, I bolt.

I sprint through the forest, leaves whipping past me as follow the path I once took-before fate dragged me into Jack's den.

I snarl.

Fate is a cruel bitch.

The trees blur as I run, the sound of the stream growing louder in the distance. Relief swells in my chest when I see it, the familiar glistening water winding through the forest.

For the first time since leaving Jack, I smile.

Not stopping for food. Not stopping for water. Not making the same mistake again.

I push myself harder.

Mile after mile, I follow the stream east, my paws barely making a sound against the damp earth. Twenty miles pass before the landscape shifts, the trees thinning until I reach a clearing. There.

I follow the path leading northeast, forcing myself to keep going for another ten miles. My legs burn, my lungs scream for air, but I don't stop.

Not until I see it.

The witch's hut.

- I skid to a halt, panting, my chest heaving as I stare at the small, crooked structure standing alone in the distance. A worn-out cabin, its wooden frame barely holding together, vines creeping up the sides like fingers grasping at a forgotten past I shift back into human form, my bare feet sinking into the damp grass.

I made it.

Swallowing hard, I step forward.

The closer get, the worse it looks. The windows are clouded with dust, the door slightly ajar as if someone left in a hurry and never returned. My stomach twists uneasily as I push it open.

A thick cloud of dust explodes into the air, making me cough. I wave my hand in front of my face and step inside.

It's... empty.

No candles burning with eerie light. No scent of magic in the air. Just broken furniture, shattered glass, and a thick layer of dust coating every surface.

I inhale sharply, my chest tightening.

No.

No, no, no.

I was supposed to find answers here. I was supposed to find someone who could tell me what happened to my family, to the witches.

Instead, I found nothing.

All this effort.

All this running.

For what?

My breath shakes as I clench my fists. "Damn it," I whisper.

I turn in a slow circle, searching for anything-anything-that might give me a clue. But everything is old, abandoned, and untouched for years.

I feel sick.

I feel... lost.

Submission is Not My Style – Chapter 19

What now?

I can't go back to my old pack. I can't go back to my mother. And I sure as hell can't go back to Jack.

So where the hell do I go from here?

A sudden noise shatters the silence.

I freeze.

At first, I think it's a rat scurrying through the debris, knocking something over. The hut is old and abandoned-It makes sense. I almost ignore it.

Almost.

Then I hear it again.

A rustling. A whisper of movement.

I whip around, muscles tensed, eyes scanning the room.

My breath slowing as my ears strain to pick up any sound.

And then I see it.

A shadow.

It moves fast, slipping out the back door like a ghost.

Someone was here, watching me. But there's no scent, no trace of life other than my own. Who the hell is that?

My wolf growls in my head, ears perked. That person could lead us to our family. They might be our only clue.

Chase them-NOW!

My breath catches.

A clue? To my family?

Before I can think twice, I'm already moving.

I burst through the back door, my bare feet pounding against the dirt as I chase after the retreating figure.

They're fast, but I push harder, following the fresh footprints pressed into the damp earth. My muscles

- scream in protest, but I grit my teeth and double my speed, closing the distance.

Then, I see them.

A figure cloaked in black, gliding through the trees like a shadow. But not fast enough.

Without hesitation, I lunge.

I launch myself through the air, arms outstretched-my body colliding with the figure.

We crash to the ground in a tangle of limbs, dirt flying up around us. The impact knocks the breath from my lungs, but I recover first. The figure beneath me thrashes, struggling to break free, but I straddle them, pinning their arms with my legs. My hands wrapped around their throat."Identify yourself before I snap your neck!" I snarl, my grip tightening.

The figure stills. Slowly, trembling fingers reach up, pulling away the hood and mask.

I blink.

An older woman. Wrinkled skin, yellowing teeth, wild purple eyes.

A witch?

My grip tightens.

She coughs, struggling to breathe. "Please," she wheezes, her voice raspy. "Mercy."

Something about her frail frame, her shaking limbs, makes me hesitate. I'm not sure why, but my instincts tell me she's no real threat.

Loosen my grip-just slightly.

"You were spying on me, weren't you?" I demand, my voice still hard.

The woman coughs again, rubbing her throat. "No," she rasps. "I was... looking for someone."

A sharp pang hits my chest.

Could it be?

"Someone?" My voice is barely a whisper. "Were you...were you looking for an abandoned child?"

Her eyes snap to mine, widening in shock. Her mouth parts slightly, her yellowed teeth visible as if she's struggling to form words. "How... how do you know that?"

My breath stutters.

She really was looking for someone.

For a little girl.

A girl from years ago.

A girl who was abandoned.

"Years ago, I was meant to take a lost child back to her family," she says breathlessly, her fingers twitching against the dirt. "They have been searching for her ever since."

My family.

They're looking for me.

They never abandoned me.

A choked sound escapes my throat, my vision blurring for a second. "I-" My voice wavers. "I am that girl. I'm the girl you're looking for. I was abandoned. Please... take me to them."

The woman inhales sharply, her expression softening with something that looks like pity. "Oh, child," she murmurs, reaching out and cupping my face with her bony hands.

Your mother... she's been searching for you. Your family-they miss you so much, my dear."

Tears sting my eyes. I squeeze them shut, swallowing the lump in my throat.

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This is real. This is real.

They want me.

I sniff. "Please... take me to them."

The woman hesitates, studying me carefully, "But how can I be sure you are the one?"

I swallow hard, my fingers trembling as I reach for the small pouch hidden inside my bag of gold. My heart pounds as I search through the coins, my wolf watching warily. Then, my fingers brush against the familiar cool metal, right where I had hidden it. A wave of relief washes over me.

Carefully, I pull out the blue necklace my mother had given me, even though it burns against my skin. I clutch it tightly for a moment, steeling myself, before holding it out for her to see.

"I had this as a child. It's mine."

The woman's lips part in shock. Her gaze locks onto the necklace, her tongue flicking across her lips. For a moment, she just stares, as if entranced. Then, slowly, she reaches for it, her fingers twitching slightly before she composes herself.

“Yes... yes, you are the one,” she breathes. “You truly are the girl I was sent to find.” A breath of relief leaves my lips. I tuck the necklace back into my pouch and stand, helping the woman to her feet.

“Come,” the woman says. “Let me take you home.”

I nod, falling into step beside her.

My wolf shifts uneasily. “Kali, she has no scent. We can’t trace her. We shouldn’t trust her so easily.”

I roll my eyes. “Can’t you see she’s old and weak? She couldn’t hurt a fly. She’s our only lead –if we miss this chance, we might never find them.”

My wolf stays silent, but I feel her unease.

Still, I push the doubt away.

The woman talks as we walk, her voice weaving stories about my mother. She tells me about her kindness, her laughter, and how she never stopped looking.

I listen, my chest aching with longing.

I wonder-who do I look like? My mother or my father? Do I have siblings?

But just as I let myself dream...

The woman suddenly stops walking.

I blink, looking around. A dead end.

What Something hard slams against the back of my head.

Pain explodes through my skull.

The world tilts, my vision blurring.

Oh... shit... not again.

Déjà vu.

Just like with the rogues.

I stagger, my knees hitting the ground.

Distant voices. Laughter.

“We hit the jackpot!” A man’s voice sneers-rough, excited.

“She’s one of those rich little girls from the witches’ hut years ago!”

More laughter.

“And she has the rare blue necklace!”

My stomach lurches.

Another voice sneers. “We can take all her gold and the necklace and be filthy rich. Hell, we could sell her to one of those packs looking for a sex slave. An Alpha would pay a fortune for her.”

Rage surges through me, but my body is too weak to move. A voice chuckles darkly. “How did you even find her?”

The woman—the one I trusted—laughs, her tone dripping with mockery.

“Oh, the poor thing missed her family. I saw the desperation in her eyes,” she coos. “I told her exactly what she wanted to hear. Now she knows—never trust anyone.”

I shudder.

I was so stupid to let my guard down—again.

I should have learned my lesson after what the rogues did to me.

hate myself for being so naive.

But what makes me hate myself more—what makes me feel weak—

Is that even through the pain, through the betrayal, through the agony of my own stupidity...

I find myself reaching for the mate bond.

For Jack.

For the man I swore I’d never call for.

I curse myself.

But I can’t stop.

His name is on the tip of my tongue, clawing its way out even as my world turns to darkness.