Chapter 4

Avery's POV A few days later I stood in front of my mirror. I pulled my nightshirt away from where my shoulder met my neck. My bite mark was already healed. That was remarkably fast. I touched the smooth skin in disbelief. There was now no visible indication of what had happened under the Mating Moon. I knew the mark was still there, but it was sealed inside and invisible to others. If only I could reach out and find the man who had mated with me! However, since my wolf was dormant, I also could not sense my mate through the bond. I had no way to find him, or communicate with him. I didn't even know what he looked like! Today was the Mating Ball where the Nightwolf Alpha would choose his mate. I needed to find someone to accept me by the end of today, or my father would kill me to save face. It felt like an impossible task. A commotion rose from down below, and I lifted my head from my knees, listening. "Alpha Gideon is about to arrive!" I heard my step-mother snap. "Finish the preparations." Zara's tone was tense and fearful. Alpha Gideon was not someone anyone would mess with. I pressed my hand over my heart, feeling it thud against my palm. I could hear it clearly in the silence of my dusty, still, bedroom. It was time for me to leave, but when I stood and tried to leave my room, the door lock clicked loudly. From the other side, I heard Zara laughing. "No one want you anyway. You might as well just wait for death, dear sister!" Gideon's POV Being Alpha of Nightwolf pack means dealing with a large amount of bureaucratic bullshit. Tradition was a venerable word that sometimes felt more like a venomous curse. I had long ago learned to face uncomfortable duties head-on. Still, there were few obligations I despised more than this one to which I was headed. It was the day of the mate selection. I had done my best to distract myself from the distasteful task to come. Spread across the leather seat next to me were thick dossiers detailing the most recent reports on attacks throughout my territory. The ledger in my hands detailed my commands for troop movements, and where to place our scouts as the dangerous time of the dark moon approached. Paperwork, unfortunately, was not enough to occupy my mind these days. As my driver guided the sleek sedan through the dense woods, I watched swirls of mist rise above the trees. Thick bands of vapor arced up towards the distant sun and shattered into smaller puffs, drifting down the valley into which we were descending. The motion reminded me of a woman, arching her back in pleasure off of the forest floor beneath me. She too, had shattered and disappeared. "Still no sign of that girl from that night?" I snapped. It came out more harshly than I intended, and my Beta sitting across from me widened his eyes in surprise. "Apologies, Alpha." Tegan replied carefully, "No new marked women have been reported in any pack I searched." I tapped my fingers on the seat and frowned. Within me, my wolf was pacing in aggravation. "Keep finding her. At all cost." Tegan flinched at my response but said nothing as the car rolled to a stop at the Silvermoon ceremony hall. Behind us in the drive, more vehicles from my pack parked behind us. I stepped out of the car, and

straightened my jacket. There was a group of women standing near the door, eying me appreciatively. Their scents were all shouting a mix of curiosity and fear. I saw a few dive out of my line of sight to avoid attracting my attention. Didn't they know that motion is what attracts predators' attention? Foolish. I knew why they were running though. I had heard what the other packs said about me, and the things I had done. I couldn't care less. But with my scary reputation, it was more difficult to believe that some of their cheeks were flushing already. I guess there were always lunatics who would take any risk if it meant a chance at power and status. I spared no more attention to any of them while I strode towards where the old Alpha of Silvermoon was waiting. "Alpha Gideon." the old Alpha nodded his head in greeting over our clasped forearms. "I am honored to welcome you to this hall." "Alpha Leon." I nodded brusquely in return, suddenly weary of these formalities. "I understand there was a rogue incursion here a few nights ago. I encountered some of them as well. Have you been able to make any way into locating them? It seems to be originating somewhere near your borders." The old man's face took on a distant, wary expression. "Oh, well now, let's see." Alpha Leon cast his rheumy gaze around the room, as though the answers were written on the far wall. "No, we haven't located that. We've had some other incidents that have required our focus." Something in his tone gave me the distinct impression the rogue issue hadn't featured in his attention at all, much less been the center of his focus. Irritation bubbled up within me with all the subtlety of a geyser. "Then I suggest you focus on that," I ground out, "and stop causing trouble that I will have to clean up." Silence fell over the ceremony hall. To the side, I saw Tegan's lips twitch. He knew how much I was leaving unsaid. Alpha Leon was lucky he'd only gotten a taste of my temper. Even if I caused him to lose face in his pack, I couldn't bring myself to feel sorry about it. If his pack had been patrolling properly, my mate would not have been almost attacked. My wolf might be less angry, and I might not need to claim her right there in the forest to calm my wolf. If my wolf was patient enough to take her back to my packhouse, I wouldn't have let her just run away the next morning. The awkward moment passed, and formalities resumed, but I had already checked out. I moved through the greetings and hospitality traditions - my mind miles away. The sooner I got out of here, the sooner I could resume my search for her. In the middle of what felt like an endless parade of Silvermoon's eligible mates, one of the men in the crowd approached. "I'm Cohen, the Gamma of the pack, Alpha Gideon," He said. "I am responsible for organizing this mating ball. You have been shown all the daughters of our highest ranking families. Which matches are you most interested in so far?" Everyone went quiet in the room. I could sense expectation, fear and curiosity bubbling from the crowd. I glanced at all the girls in the room and crossed my arms. No big difference. "I don't really care. Anyone will do. Before I take volunteers, however, you need to know-" I paused. "I won't mark anyone I choose today. Prepared for that..." "But the tradition-" Alpha Leon hesitated. "The tradition doesn't force me to mark anyone. Just marriage," I cut his words before he could finish. "I have a marked mate already." Now the room was filled with apprehension and wary glances. I guess no one wanted to be picked under these conditions, by an Alpha known to be ruthless and a mistress to compete with in the future. I was glad. It was better if no one volunteered anyways. "So anyone will do," I turned to the Gamma who spoke to me earlier. "Maybe your daughter?" "Oh-, She-uh-she's mated to Ryan already. So-" The gamma clearly panicked and stuttered. "Father, how could you forget about Avery?" One of the girls walked to the front and turned around to face me. "Alpha Gideon, I'm Zara, the Gamma daughter of the pack. Forgive my

father for neglecting to mention that I also have a sister." "She admires you a lot, but she isn't here because she hasn't been feeling well lately. Maybe you'd like to meet her?" she continued, but there was something to her smile that made me feel like she was scheming something vicious. Still, all women except my fated mate were all the same to me. "Fine. Bring her to me."