

An Unwanted Second Chance by JB Tirado

Chapter 1

“Enter!” yelled Commander Whey. Riley pushed open the door to see the commander seated behind his mahogany desk. The room was large and spacious, the desk set right in the middle with a couple oversized armchairs in front of it. The right wall was floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the central plaza of the Werewolf Council’s main compound and to the left of the room was a conference table and chairs. Through the windows, Riley could see the sky dappled in pinks and purples as the sun set, a few people hurrying across the plaza as the day ended. Commander Whey stood as Riley walked in, smoothing his silver tie as he gave her a mild smile. His once black hair was mostly gray now, but his brown eyes were still sharp. “Please, sit,” he said, motioning to the chairs in front of the desk. “I appreciate you coming in on such short notice. I know you’ve only just gotten back from the Silver Streams pack this morning. I was reading through your preliminary report while I was waiting for you. You did good work, as always.” “Thank you, sir,” Riley said as she sat on the edge of one of the armchairs. While she was used to the commander and his office, she still always felt a sense of caution when in his office. She had been working for the council for six years now, having worked her way up to head warrior advisor about two years ago. The Werewolf Council was in charge of overseeing all the packs in North America and lending assistance when packs were in need. A lot of Riley’s job involved arbitrating pack boundary disputes and lending advice on pack security issues. Riley, like everyone at the Council, reported to the commander and the commander reported to the Council Elders, a group of elected elders who met twice a month. The commander sighed, folding his hands on his desk. “I hate to ask this of you, Riley, knowing that you’ve just come back, but it appears that we have a dire situation with the Red Moon pack.” He pursed his lips before continuing. “Wesley is the advisor out there right now and things are not going well for him.” Riley frowned, trying to remember if she had ever heard of Red Moon before. There were close to a thousand packs scattered around North America, so it was hard to keep track of them all. “We were discussing the issue in our morning briefing,” the commander continued, “but unfortunately you hadn’t arrived in time. The alpha at Red Moon is dealing with persistent rogue attacks, starting about two years ago. The problem has been getting worse until the pack finally requested Council assistance six months ago. We initially only sent additional warrior assistance, but we sent an advisor about six weeks ago.” “Wesley?” Riley knew Wesley. She had worked with him. He could be a bit hot-headed and impulsive, but overall was a pretty good guy. He was one of the few who had never talked down to her or treated her as inferior simply because she was a woman. The commander nodded. “Yes, and the alpha there is quite displeased with Wesley. I guess Wesley made some changes to a patrol schedule without consulting the ranked members of the pack. There was an attack and the alpha blames Wesley for it.” Riley relaxed slightly back into the chair. “You don’t change a patrol schedule without consulting at least the gamma. Wesley knows that.” The commander sighed, rubbing his forehead. “Yes, well, we all know how hard headed Wes can be.” “True.” Riley brushed her long brown hair over her

shoulder. "If Wesley is the advisor, who is the head warrior?" Riley knew that while warrior advisors were not always sent, head warriors were sent whenever Council warriors were. They maintained control and order of the council warriors. "Leo Anderson." The commander drummed his fingers on the desk. "It was Doug Hart, but I had to switch them out about two months ago. Doug didn't like the alpha and the alpha detested Doug. They simply couldn't work together. Leo has a calmer temperament than Doug, so I figured it would work out." Riley had heard that Leo had left for assignment while she was at Silver Streams, but she hadn't had time to check in with Leah, Leo's mate. Leah and Leo were her two closest friends. "The alpha seems difficult," Riley said. "On his second head warrior and now wants a different advisor?" The commander smirked slightly. "You misunderstand, Riley. He doesn't want a different advisor. He wants a second advisor. The best, he said. He asked for you in particular." Riley frowned. "A second advisor? That's highly unusual. And why would he ask for me? I don't know him. I've never even heard of his pack." "Your reputation precedes you it would seem. He heard of an advisor named Atwood from another alpha. He said he was told you were the best, so therefore he wanted the best." "Does he know that I am a woman?" This was always a concern for Riley. While the Council had many women who worked there, some packs were set in their ways and did not like to listen to a woman in charge. The commander shrugged. "It didn't come up. He asked for the best. You are the best. If it bothers him that you are a woman, he can get over it." Riley smiled slightly. "What is this alpha like?" "His name is Kent Westwood. He took over the pack about ten years ago when he was nineteen." "That's pretty young." Most alphas took over their packs sometime between twenty-one to twenty-five "His father, the previous alpha, died unexpectedly so he had no choice as the heir. He is well-loved by his pack, but not by many outside of it. He has a reputation of being an asshole. At alpha meetings, he is quiet and not social. When he talks, he is exceptionally blunt and direct. He was initially very resistant to Council assistance and had a lot of reservations. He doesn't like ceding control to our people. Riley shrugged. "Most alphas don't like ceding control." "True," the commander agreed. "Leo gets along well with him, but Leo gets along with most people. Leo does give me positive reports about the ranked members of the pack. He says they are smart, detail-oriented and strategic. He seems to appreciate the alpha's bluntness." "So Wes blundered the patrols and now I need to go?" "Well..." The commander paused, rubbing his forehead. "The attack that happened can't be directly linked to the patrol changes, but three council warriors were killed as well as two warriors from a nearby allied pack and two from Red Moon itself. The alpha is worried that if the problem persists, his allied packs may start pulling their assistance. He feels that Wesley's strategies aren't effective. He wants someone to work in tandem with Wesley. He feels this will get the result he wants." "But two advisors working in the same pack is not our protocol." "It's not," he agreed. "But this situation is unique. It's rare that we see this level of rogue attacks on a specific pack that result in such high casualty rates. It seems that we need to deviate from standard protocol." "So you want me to go out?" He nodded. "I told the alpha I would speak to you, but I did warn him that you were fresh of a stressful assignment and we don't typically put advisors on back to back assignments." That was true. Riley generally had a minimum of two weeks between assignments so that she could finish reports to the Council Elders and do any necessary follow up with the packs. The Silver Streams pack had been on the brink of war with their neighboring pack, Misty Lakes, so it had been a stressful two and a half months of mediating discussions and renegotiating boundaries. Riley had been

looking forward to getting back to the compound for a couple weeks. “OK, tell me more about the pack,” she said with a sigh. “They’re fairly isolated, but mainly because of location. They don’t share any borders with other packs and they are about two hours away from the closest human city. The woods around their pack are full of rogues, but until the last two years, they haven’t reported any issues. They are very self-sufficient and have never requested assistance from the Council prior to this event. They used to be very small but have been growing, especially under their current alpha. They are well-known for their warriors. They are considered some of the best and they have high numbers that attend the academy.” Sending pack warriors to the National Werewolf Academy was a source of pride for packs. Only the best warriors were accepted to the academy and the more warriors a pack had in the academy, the better the pack. Riley, like almost all Council workers, had also attended the academy and prided herself in being a strong fighter. Riley shifted in her chair. “What about the beta? Gamma? Luna?” The commander glanced at some notes on his desk. “There’s not much noted about the beta or gamma, other than they are close in age to the alpha. There is no luna.” Riley raised an eyebrow. “The alpha is almost thirty and doesn’t have a mate? That’s highly unusual.” Werewolves were lucky in the supernatural world, as each one had a fated mate, gifted to them by the Moon Goddess. Finding a mate was like finding the other half of your soul. They were meant to complete you. The attraction to a mate was powerful and most werewolves searched out their fated mate as it was supposed to be a bond like no other. It was highly unusual for an alpha of that age to not have a mate. Mates were supposed to make each other stronger, so mated alphas were viewed as better leaders. Most alphas either searched for their fated mate or took a chosen mate by the time they were in their late twenties. The commander shrugged. “How old are you? You still don’t have a mate.” Riley frowned, ignoring the coldness that spread throughout her chest. “I don’t want a mate,” she said sternly. The commander chuckled. “Yes, Riley. We all know that.” He sat up slightly in his chair, staring at Riley. “So will you go out to Red Moon?” She nodded with a sigh. “Yeah, I’ll go. If the problem is as bad as it sounds, they need help.” He nodded. “I can always count on you. You’ll need to leave in the morning. I’ll have Gloria work on booking your tickets and contacting the pack. “Ok, sir.” Riley stood, stretching slightly. “I’d say I’ll start packing, but I haven’t even unpacked yet.” The commander smiled slightly. “You can take a month off when you get back. You’ll have more than earned it.”

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Chapter 2

“I don’t know why you had to insist on this second advisor,” Max said again, leaning back into the couch with a frustrated sigh. Kent sighed, leaning back in his desk chair to stare at the ceiling instead of his beta. “We’ve been over this already.” “We already have enough interference from the council,” Max complained. “I know you don’t like Wesley, but a second advisor isn’t going to change the situation. It’s just one more person to get in the way.” “We all agreed to this,” Patrick, the gamma, chimed in from where he sat in an armchair, running his fingers through his dark hair. “We agreed that the sooner we get the rogue issue handled, the sooner we can get the council out of here. We need the

council. Our allies won't work with us if we don't cooperate with the council and utilize all their resources. We need these warriors. "I know that," Max growled, sounding exasperated. "I just don't like this many outsiders meddling in our business. There's a lot at stake here." "I know you're worried, Max," Kent said softly, looking back at his best friend. "I am too. But Wesley has f****d up too many things. I don't trust him and I need someone who can get this situation handled. Alpha Brent at New Sky worked with this Atwood guy last year when he was having all the issues with Pine Valley. He was impressed with how that situation was handled. He said this guy was the best." "We have to get this handled," Patrick chimed in. "Plus, we're in this together, no matter what." "I know," Max sighed. "So when is this guy going to be here?" "I don't know," Kent answered. "The commander said the guy just got back from a long assignment this morning and might not want to go on a new assignment so quickly. I guess that is not how the council generally operates, but he is going to ask Atwood to make an exception for us." There was a knock at the office door and all three turned their attention there as Kent called for whomever it was to enter. Wesley, the council's advisor stepped in, his blond hair disheveled. Leo, the head warrior, was a step behind. "We were hoping for a word," Wesley said tersely, his forehead creasing as he looked at the ranked members of the pack. "What is it?" Kent snapped. His patience was already thin when it came to this man. Wesley had caused one f**k up after another since he set foot in this pack. "I just spoke to the commander," Wesley explained, his voice thin. "He said that he will be sending the advisor you requested tomorrow." Kent nodded. "Good. I'm told this Atwood guy is the best and I need someone who actually knows what they're doing." Wesley glared at Kent, his lips disappearing into a thin line, but it was Leo who spoke. "Riley Atwood is not a guy." Leo's voice had an edge Kent had never heard before. "She is a woman and she is one of the most skilled warriors I've ever worked with." "A woman?" Max raised an eyebrow, sounding skeptical. "Yes," Leo snapped. "And an excellent warrior." "It makes no difference," Kent said with a wave of his hand. "I don't give a damn if she's a woman. Just as long as she's good at her job." "She is," Wesley muttered, glaring at Kent. "She is the best for a reason." "When will she be here?" Patrick said. As usual, he was the one looking at logistics. "Tomorrow evening. Her flight should land around 6pm," Wesley replied. Kent nodded. "Max, you will get her from the airport." He glanced up. "Me?" "Yes, Beta," Kent sighed. "She is the best advisor from the council. We're not sending an omega out. You will get her." "Evan is still sick," Max said quickly. "I can't leave Penny alone with both boys." Kent frowned. "I realize that but I can't send Patrick when Lana is so close to having her baby and I can't walk away in case of another attack. Give Penny my apologies, but you have to go. "I can get her," Wesley offered. "She does know me after all." Kent scoffed. "I'll trust my beta with this task, thanks." Wesley's eyes darkened, but he said nothing. "Sounds like it is handled then," Leo said with a nod. "If you don't have any further questions Alpha, we'll take our leave." Kent waved his hand, dismissing the council workers. "Are you sure about this?" Max asked after the door had closed. Kent sighed again, pinching the bridge of his nose. "No, Max, I'm not. But we have to try something. We have to protect our pack." "I just wish there was another way." Max stood up, running a hand through his hair. "I don't like it." "It will work out," Kent said, hoping he sounded reassuring. "You'll see."

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Chapter 3

The plane landed around 6pm the next evening. Riley's legs were stiff as she walked off the plane, her body already tired from all the traveling of her last assignment. She had barely slept the night before, staying up to read over the reports that the commander had forwarded from Wesley. She liked to be well prepared for an assignment, but she regretted her decision now. She was so tired her body felt heavy and she had gotten no sleep on the flight due to the screaming human child in the row behind her. She walked slowly through the airport, her bookbag feeling heavy on her back. I need to run, Rose, her wolf complained in her mind. Due to the disputes at Silver Streams, it hadn't been safe to run in wolf form that often, so Rose was starting to feel cooped up. Once we get to the new pack, Riley told her. There seems to be a lot of woods there so you can run there. Rose seemed to accept that answer as Riley reached the luggage carousel, watching it spin slowly. She was squeezed between a couple of humans, one talking animatedly about visiting a local bar. She felt relief at the sight of her suitcase, grabbing it quickly so she could head towards the exit. As she grew closer to the airport doors, she caught a distinct scent and looked up, watching the people around her carefully. Werewolves had a heightened sense of smell, making it easy for them to determine who was human, werewolf or some other type of supernatural being. Riley could smell the werewolf nearby before finally catching sight of a man watching her with curiosity. He was tall with messy blond hair and light brown eyes. He was lean and muscular, wearing a pair of faded blue jeans and a green t-shirt. He smiled slightly as she approached him. "You must be Riley," he said as she got closer. "Wesley told me what you looked like." "I am," she replied, coming to a stop in front of him. "And you are?" "Max Greene." He offered his hand. "I am the beta of Red Moon." Riley shook his hand, tilting her head to the side. "The alpha sent his beta to retrieve someone from the airport. Max grinned lopsidedly. "Only the best for the best." She couldn't help but smile. The beta's demeanor was very easygoing. He reached to take her suitcase and she gave it over with a small thanks. He motioned for her to follow as he turned towards the door. "It's a long drive to the pack. We might not make it there until after dinner time. I can stop somewhere along the way to pick you up something to eat. Is there anything you would like?" The idea of fast food made Riley's stomach churn. "Thanks for the offer, but I'll be alright. I ate a snack on the plane. I'd rather just get to the pack." Max nodded. "Alright, boss." He led the way through the parking garage to a small, silver BMW. He loaded her suitcase while she got into the passenger seat. As he climbed into the driver seat, he passed her a bottle of water. "Hydration is key, boss," he said when he caught her surprised expression. "Plus Penny

insisted I take water for you. She also made me bring some granola bars in case you're hungry. Now, she didn't bother asking if I wanted anything." He chuckled slightly as he reversed out of the spot. "Well, that was very considerate of me." Riley cracked open the bottle and took a sip. "Is Penny your mate?" "Yep." He steered the car out of the garage. "Best one there is if you ask me, but I might be a bit biased." "Any kids?" "Two boys. Alex and Evan. She wants a girl though. She's always talking about it." "And what do you have to say about that?" He shrugged. "I'm doing my part. The rest is up to Goddess." Riley smiled, leaning back into her seat. She liked Max already. He had a way of making her feel relaxed and at ease, which few people seemed able to do anymore. Riley wasn't a particularly social person outside of her job. The only other people she really enjoyed being around were Leo and Leah. "What about you?" Max asked after a moment of silence. "You have a mate?" "No," Riley said quietly, looking out the window, watching the human city pass by. "I don't have one nor do I want one." Max glanced at her quickly before returning his gaze to the road. If he had any thoughts about her lack of mate, he chose to keep them to himself. Riley looked out the window, watching the city fade away into the countryside. "I'm told the pack is quite remote," she said after a few more minutes of silence. "Yes," Max said. "About two hours away from the city. We don't have any packs that border our territory." "What are your closest packs?" "West Valley is the closest. It's right outside the city. Then there's New Moon, Opal Lake and New Sky." "Are you allied with all of them?" He nodded. "They've all sent us warriors. We're fortunate for all the alliances right now." He paused for a moment. "Plus all the council support." Riley smirked. "I know most packs don't want Council intervention. You won't offend me if you say so." He shrugged slightly. "I mean, I guess I wish we didn't need the help but we do." "I was out at New Sky last year," Riley commented. "I had to arbitrate a dispute with the boundaries along a new established pack." "Pine Valley." "You heard of it?" "I heard of the dispute. Pine Valley broke away from New Sky and there was bad blood between the two alphas. Alpha Brent at New Sky told us that you handled the whole issue really well. He was impressed by you. That's what made Alpha Kent request your assistance." "Really?" "Yeah, Alpha wants the best for our pack. When he heard that you were the best, he wanted you." "Does he realize I'm a woman?" Max glanced at her confusedly. "Of course. Leo and Wesley told us about you. It doesn't matter though. Alpha doesn't care." "Does your pack allow female warriors?" "Of course. We don't have the numbers to turn away good warriors. Plus, if you can fight, why should it matter?" "What is your alpha like?" She tried her best to sound nonchalant as she watched Max's face in the fading sunlight. "Met some rough alphas in your travels?" Max chuckled, clearly seeing through her. "A few." "Alpha is more progressive as far as alphas go, but again, we don't have the numbers to be picky about pointless things. He doesn't care about male or female, omega or gamma or kappa or what have you. He just wants people to do their jobs and do them well." She nodded. "That sounds like a good alpha." "He's the best." She noted the pride in Max's voice. "What have you heard about him?" She hesitated, debating how to respond. He clearly liked his alpha so she didn't want to be insulting. "He's strong. Runs a solid pack that produces good warriors. I'm told he's blunt and direct." "Have they told you he's a mean bastard?" Max said with a smile. "Asshole was the word that was used, actually." Max laughed. "I've heard that one too." He drove in silence for a moment before adding, "He's a good guy. He's been through a lot and it's made him hard in some ways, but he loves his pack and does his best." Riley studied Max for a moment. "The two of you are close." "Of course. He's my best friend." Max shook his head with a sigh. "I wasn't born

into the beta position like most. Alpha's father had a beta but he never had children. I grew up the son of an omega. My father was a warrior but he died when I was a baby. I was raised by my mother. She worked in the packhouse kitchen so I grew up there. Alpha and I were best friends as kids. When his father died, the previous beta and gamma encouraged Alpha to pick someone he trusted, so he chose me." "Not the gamma's son?" "No, which surprised everyone except maybe Patrick, our gamma." "So the gamma wasn't upset by his choice?" "No." He scoffed softly, smiling at her again. "It takes a lot to upset Patrick. He's a good guy. He has always supported the alpha. He has always said that what is best for the alpha is best for our pack." "Your pack sounds nice." "It is," Max confirmed, his voice warm. Riley leaned her head back, closing her eyes for a moment. The exhaustion of the last couple weeks was really catching up with her and she felt herself drifting off to sleep.

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Chapter 4

Riley awoke with a jolt, gasping as she sat up sharply. Her forehead was covered in a cold sweat, her mouth dry. "You ok?" Max reached over to touch her arm lightly. "Yeah," Riley said, swallowing hard. "It was just a dream." She looked out the car window. They were on a narrow road with nothing but trees on either side. The sun had sunk well behind the trees, leaving the road shady and dark. She watched the trees fly past, trying to shake the images of Paul. She hadn't dreamed of him in years, but his face was as clear as if she had just seen him yesterday. She wrapped her arms around her chest, trying to shake the coldness that spread over her at the memory of him. "We're almost there." She could hear the concern in his voice as Max glanced at her. "I'm fine," she muttered, trying to reassure herself as much as him. "It was just a bad dream." "You were talking," he admitted. "You kept saying a name, over and over." "Paul?" He nodded. "He's just a bad memory." She

closed her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. “How much further?” “We’re here.” He smiled as the woods thinned and they entered a small town. She could just make out the quaint town with small homes and shops in the last bits of sunlight. “This is a cute town,” she commented as they moved down the roads. “It is,” Max agreed. She spotted the packhouse as they approached. It was five stories high, painted in soft beiges with forest green trim. It had a wide set of stairs leading up to a double door entrance. “This is lovely,” Riley remarked as they pulled in. She was used to smaller, remote packs being a bit worn down and outdated, but Red Moon was clearly different. “Alpha’s father had it remodeled when we were still boys. The first two floors are things for the pack – dining room, recreation area, gym and what not. The third floor is for guests and the fourth floor is split between the beta and gamma wings. The fifth floor is for the alpha.” “What about the warriors?” “There is an addition on the back for it. You can’t see it from here but it sticks out to make an L-shape. It’s two stories high. All of the unmated warriors live there.” “Sounds like you guys have a good set up.” They climbed out of the car and Max unloaded her suitcase. His eyes glazed over and she knew he was mindlinking his alpha. When werewolves lived within a pack, they had the ability to connect directly through mindlink as long as they were within a certain distance, eliminating the need for things like cell phones most of the time. Riley had lost her ability to mindlink when she had left her pack behind, but found it was not something she missed. “Alpha is currently in a meeting with your advisor and head warrior as well as our gamma. He asked that you be briefed before going to your room.” She nodded. “That’s fine. He smiled. “Good, because I don’t exactly have your rooming situation figured out. We’re a bit overrun with guests due to our situation. All our allies have sent warriors and we’re struggling to house them all.” Riley frowned. “Doesn’t the luna usually handle lodging and accommodations for guests?” “Yeah, but we don’t have a luna. My mate took over as the alpha’s assistant a few years ago and she usually handles these things, but Evan has the flu and she’s been occupied the last couple days.” Riley shook her head. “The commander said there wasn’t a luna. I just forgot.” “Easy enough to forget,” Max mumbled, moving up the steps. “Most packs have one.” There was something about Max’s tone that stuck out to Riley, but she couldn’t place it. Before she could put too much thought, Rose woke up and began pacing in her mind, making Riley feel slightly nauseous. “Are you ok?” She turned to see Max watching her from the top of the stairs, two lines creasing his forehead. “Yeah,” she muttered with a shake of her head. “I’m just tired. I just got back from an assignment yesterday and I don’t usually take assignments back to back like this.” Max nodded. “Your commander mentioned that. If you need to rest, I can tell Alpha. He’ll understand. It’s almost eight.” “No, let’s not keep him waiting. I’ll be fine.” She started up the steps, trying to ignore Rose. “Alright, boss,” Max said with a shrug. He led the way into the packhouse. The double doors opened to a wide lobby full of couches and chairs. There were some pack members sitting in the space, talking quietly. He led her across the lobby to an elevator. Once inside, he punched the button for the fifth floor. Riley rubbed her temples. Rose’s pacing was relentless and she was panting. Riley was having a hard time focusing on anything else. What is wrong with you? Riley demanded. I don’t know, Rose answered. I can’t explain it but something is going to happen. “Are you sure you’re ok?” Max asked again as the elevator doors slid open. They stepped into a wide hallway with white wainscoting and burgundy walls. In front of them was a set of wooden double doors. The hallway had several doorways that Riley could only assume were bedrooms as well as a small sitting room off to one side. “Yes,” she replied, shaking her head slightly. “I’m fine.

My wolf is acting strange. I think she's overtired." "We don't have to do the meeting right now," Max insisted. "You can rest and I'll ask my mom to cook something up for you. She's the head cook now and she won't mind in the least." "Please stop," she said, sounding harsher than she meant. She took a deep breath, trying to calm her voice. "I'm fine, honestly. I want to meet the alpha tonight." He chewed the corner of his mouth for a moment before nodding. "Ok then." Max pushed open one of the wooden double doors in front of them and she followed him into the room. The office was huge, done in the same white and burgundy walls as the hallway. There was a large cherry desk set opposite the double doors. Behind the desk were several sets of cherry bookcases and on either side of the bookcases were large floor to ceiling windows. On the right were four large black leather armchairs and on the left was a large leather couch. Riley was immediately struck by the smell of sandalwood and pine. The smell was so powerful, so alluring that it rooted her to the spot. She barely registered Wesley and Leo, sitting in armchairs to her right or the man leaning back on the couch to her left. Her eyes flew immediately to the man behind the desk, who stood up as they walked in. He was clearly the alpha. He was tall with jet black hair that was brushed back from his face. He was muscular, his light blue polo stretched taut across his chest and biceps. His eyes turned black as he looked at her, his hands curling around the edge of his desk. She could see the veins in his forearms pulse as his eyes widened. He was the source of the alluring smell. Her eyes felt glued to him, her heart pounding in her chest. She wanted to run to him, to touch him, to breathe him in. But at the same time, she felt rooted to the spot, unable to move in any direction. Mate! Mate! Mate! cried Rose. "No," whispered Riley. "NO!" The alpha's voice boomed through the room, causing the other men to start slightly, surprise splashing across all their faces. "Alpha?" said that man on the couch. "Are you ok?" The alpha's mouth turned down, his arms trembling as he tightened his grip on the desk even more. Riley couldn't look away from him, her body humming, her mind racing as Rose pranced about declaring this man their mate. "Alpha," Wesley said cautiously, "this is Riley Atwood. She's the best advisor from the Council. She's the one you requested." "NO!" the alpha roared, his eyes getting even darker with anger, though Riley wasn't sure how that was possible. "GET OUT!" Leo stood, his face a mixture of shock and confusion. "Alpha, you can't order her out. She's the one you requested. You specifically asked for her." "Not her," growled the alpha. "The rest of you - get out." Max grabbed Riley's elbow. "I'm not sure what's going on, but maybe you should come with me." He tried to steer her away but the alpha growled again. "She stays," he boomed. "The rest of you - GET OUT!" Max immediately released her arm and turned to leave, unable to disobey his alpha's order. The man from the couch, likewise moved to leave. Wesley and Leo hesitantly moved towards Riley. "Are you ok, Riley?" Wesley whispered as he approached. "We can stay with you," Leo offered, gently taking her wrist. She finally tore her gaze away from the alpha to look at her friend. Leo had short sandy brown hair and light brown eyes with a sharp nose. She shook her head. "I'll be fine," she managed to say, her voice sounding raw. "It will be fine. You can go." They both moved away from her, casting wary glances at the alpha. She turned to watch them go, nodding in what she hoped was a reassuring way. As the door shut behind the two of them, she turned to face her mate.

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Chapter 5

Kent watched the council workers leave, the woman turning to watch them go. His grip on the desk was so tight he was surprised that it didn't crack in his hands. It took every ounce of his willpower not to go to her, to sweep her up in his arms. She smelled amazing, like vanilla and cloves. Pax, his wolf, was going crazy in his mind, howling over their mate. As the door closed, Kent finally released the desk, willing himself to stay in one spot. She turned, her long brown hair swaying around her. Her eyes were a light hazel. She was small and almost dainty, which he found odd for the supposedly best advisor from the council. She looked at him for a moment before closing her eyes and rubbing her temples. Kent frowned. What was going on in her head, he wondered. She didn't seem pleased about finding her mate, anymore than he was about this. Her forehead was creased, the corners of her mouth ticking down in a frown. Her cheeks were reddened and he suddenly felt a wave of sympathy for. Goddess knows she wasn't planning on this anymore than he was. He turned, opening the small cabinet behind his desk. Inside were several bottles of liquor. Kent wasn't a big drinker anymore, but he still liked to have some on hand for visitors. Now certainly seemed like a good moment for a drink. He poured two tumblers before turning around. She was still standing in the same spot, two steps inside the door, watching him warily. "Bourbon?" He did his best to temper his voice, chiding himself for yelling when she first walked in. She stared at him for a moment in surprise before nodding and slowly approaching the desk. She gingerly took the glass from him before sinking in the armchair closest to his desk. He pulled open his desk drawer, feeling a slight jolt at the sight of Lily's picture. It was always there, but for some reason, a wave of guilt washed over him as he looked at it this time. He grabbed the bottle and slammed the drawer shut harder than he meant, causing his mate to jump in her seat. "Sorry," he said quietly. He held up the bottle. "Aspirin? If your wolf is anything like mine, your head is going to split open any second." She laughed softly and it sounded like music to his ears. "Goddess, yes." She took the bottle from him and dumped two pills

into her hand before passing it back to him. He also took two pills and swallowed them with a swig of bourbon, enjoying the burn as it slid down his throat. He studied her for a moment as she ran her fingers around the rim of her glass, chewing on her bottom lip. "You don't want a mate," she said after a moment of silence, looking up at him. He sighed, leaning back in his chair. He took another drink before responding. "It's not that. It's just..." He looked away, staring at the door as though Lily might walk through it again. How many times had he done that? Hoping it had all been a nightmare? That she might come back? "I had a mate once," he said finally. If this news surprised her, she didn't show it. For a moment a dark look passed over her face. "Me too," she whispered. He sat up straight, his eyes widening. "We are each other's second chances?" This is a blessing, Pax cried in his mind. The Moon Goddess has blessed us double. If the Goddess wanted to bless us, she wouldn't have taken Lily to start with, Kent snapped back. That was not the Goddess's doing, Pax repeated for what might have been the millionth time since Lily's death. Second chances are a rare blessing. The Goddess has deemed us worthy. When he focused away from Pax to his new mate, he saw the haze in her eyes that said she was also having a conversation with her wolf. He waited a moment until her gaze focused back on him. "Is your wolf arguing with you too?" He couldn't help but smirk at the thought. "Yes," she sighed. "She seems to think this is a blessing." "Right," he scoffed, "like they just forget how difficult it was the first time." "Exactly." She took a big swig of her drink and shook her head. "You can reject me though. I survived one rejection. I'll survive another. I'm sure you understand." Kent was pretty sure he forgot to breathe for a moment. Reject her? He swallowed as he tried to process his thoughts. Who would reject her? She was clearly beautiful and was a well known warrior for the Council. He would think anyone would be lucky to have such a strong mate. Did she think he had rejected Lily? How ludicrous? Lily had been the biggest blessing in his life. "I didn't reject my mate," he managed to say after a moment. "She died." His new mate froze, her eyes widening. "W-when?" she stammered. Kent swallowed, staring down at his glass for a moment. "A little over four years ago." He swirled the drink in his glass before forcing himself to look up at her. "It's not that I don't want a second chance, it's just that losing her was so hard. I loved her." He stopped, blinking quickly before continuing. "She was the best thing that ever happened to me and losing her nearly destroyed me. I don't think I can go through that again. I've resigned myself to being alone. It's better that way for me." He fisted his hands to hide the tremor that ran through them. She chewed her lip for a moment as she considered him. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I had no idea." He hesitated a moment before asking the question tumbling around in his head. "What happened with your previous mate?" She took another drink and then looked up. "He rejected me. He was older than me. He had a chosen mate. They had a family." He felt his chest tighten and a sense of unease. "Is there more to that story?" "No," she said forcefully but he knew it was a lie. Mates could tell when the other was lying, but he didn't even need that ability to know she was lying. "I like being alone," she continued in that same forceful tone. "I enjoy my life and I have the career I always wanted. I have no desire to be someone's mate and sit at home popping out pups." It was like a punch to the gut. She didn't want a mate. She didn't want him. He finished his drink and stared at the empty glass for a moment. That was fine. He was used to being alone. "So you want to reject this bond?" He looked back up at her as Pax howled in his head. "I..." She stared at him, her mouth slightly agape. Her eyes clouded for a moment before she focused on him. "What do you want?" That threw him off. He had been sure of her answer a moment ago.

What did he want? For a moment he could see Lily's black hair, dancing in the wind, laughing at some long forgotten joke. That's what he wanted. He didn't want to go through caring and loving someone else just for them to die, like every important person in his life seemed to do. He didn't want to be haunted by memories of people who had left this world forever. But he knew that wasn't what she meant. She meant this bond. Her smell filled his senses as he looked at her. Fated mates were a gift from the Moon Goddess. Rejecting a mate was akin to rejecting the Goddess herself. Many who lost or rejected a mate died. Second chance mates were almost unheard of. Those who received a second chance were considered truly blessed and deemed worthy by the Goddess. Kent had never heard of anyone rejecting a second chance. "I don't know," he finally answered. "I'm not sure I'm ready for a new mate but I also don't want to reject a gift from the Goddess. Losing my first mate was hard enough. If you are meant to be my second chance, I don't think I should just throw that away." She took a drink of her bourbon and stared across the room. He bit his bottom lip as he waited for her to look back at him. "What do you want?" he asked once she met his gaze. She frowned at him and looked back down at the glass in her hands. "I don't know." She looked back up at him. "I'm not sure I want a mate. It's not you." She sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "I just don't think I can go through having a mate again." "What happened?" He genuinely wanted to know. She shook her head. "I already told you." "You told me a watered down version," he corrected, leaning down slightly to catch her gaze. "It..." She chewed her lip for a moment. "I don't like talking about it. I was very young and foolish and I thought the mate bond was a fairytale. Turns out... it's not." He felt a surge of pain through the bond and he knew it was hers. Whatever happened with her last mate had clearly hurt her a lot. "I'm sorry," he said after a moment of silence, not sure what else to say. "What do we do?" she whispered. He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to think clearly. He did not sign up for this mess when he asked for a new advisor. As if he didn't have enough to deal with the rogue issue, now he was expected to deal with the potential rejection of a new mate. He needed to focus on his main priority, which was protecting his pack. A strong alpha makes a strong pack. "Here's what I know for sure," he said, looking back up at her. "If we reject this bond right now, it will weaken both of us dramatically. My pack is being attacked on a regular basis. If I'm weak, then my pack is weak. If you are weak, then you can't help me or my pack. I'm not saying we need to accept this bond right now, but I don't think we should reject it right now either." She stared at him for a moment before heaving a sigh. "Well, shit." "You see my point?" He drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. "Yes." She leaned forward to set the tumbler on his desk. "You have a good point and I know you're right, but I don't want to feel like I have to be in a bond that I don't want." "I would never try to make you a part of a bond you don't want," he said quickly, but it still felt like a punch to the gut. She clearly did not want a mate to the point where she wouldn't even entertain the idea. "Goddess," she muttered, rubbing her forehead. "This damn wolf is going to make my head explode." He couldn't help but smile. "I know the feeling. What is your wolf's name?" "Rose. Yours?" "Pax." He leaned forward to take her empty glass and then stood to put both back on top of the cabinet. "We have another issue," he said as he turned back to her. "I did very abruptly kick four guys out of here. They're going to ask what is going on." She frowned. "I think they'll figure it out. You weren't very subtle about demanding they leave. I trust Leo and Wesley but I don't want anyone else with the Council to find out. I could lose my job if they find out I am mated to an alpha. If you trust your beta and gamma, I am ok with them knowing as long

as they agree to not tell anyone else.” He chewed his lip for a moment. “I trust them with my life. I have no issue telling them. I just think...” He sighed, leaning back in his chair. “You don’t know them. They’ll be pushy. They’ve been suggesting I take a chosen mate for about a year now. When they find out I’ve got a second chance mate, they won’t let up.” She shrugged. “I can handle that.” Kent couldn’t help but chuckle. “You have no idea what you’re agreeing to.”

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An Unwanted Second Chance - Ripped 6[1,367 words]

Chapter 6

Riley watched the four men file back into the room after the alpha mindlinked his beta. Leo and Wesley took two of the armchairs while the beta and gamma sat on the sofa.

“Is everything ok?” Max asked hesitantly after they were all seated.

The alpha nodded at Riley and she sighed. Apparently she was going to do the talking.

“Everything is fine,” she said to Max. “I will tell everyone what happened, but only under the condition that this information remains among the six of us. That means no one from the Werewolf Council, nor this pack, is to

know.”

“This includes mates,” added the alpha, looking pointedly at his gamma and beta.

“That’s a big ask,” Max said. “Better be worth it.”

“It is,” snapped the alpha, giving the beta a sharp look. He looked back at Riley and gave her a reassuring

nod.

Riley took a deep breath. “The alpha and I have discovered that we are fated mates.”

“What?” said Wesley.

“Seriously?” exclaimed the gamma, sitting forward.

“I knew something was going on,” Max cried.

“Stop,” said the alpha, rubbing his forehead. “Just let her talk.”

Riley nodded. “It was definitely not something we expected and we needed a few moments alone to decide

the best way to move forward.”

“The best way to move forward?” Max looked confusedly between her and the alpha. “It’s the mate bond. It’s a gift from the Goddess. The best way forward is to accept it.” He looked at his alpha. “Kent, this is your second chance. The Goddess has deemed you worthy of another mate. That is almost unheard of.”

“His second chance?” Wesley raised an eyebrow, looking at the alpha. “You had a mate before?”

“She died about four years ago,” the alpha said softly.

Riley frowned. She again felt a heavy wave of sadness through the mate bond, the same she had felt earlier

when he spoke about his previous mate. She desperately wanted to reach out to touch him, to comfort him,

but she reminded herself that she wasn’t doing anything foolish this time. She would not allow herself to get

carried away.

“It nearly destroyed him,” Max said, turning to look at Wesley and Riley. “It took him years to recover.”

“Max, please, stop,” the alpha said quietly, his voice sounding strained.

“He’s right though,” said the gamma, looking at the alpha. “Lily would want you to have a second chance. She would be happy for you.”

The alpha closed his eyes tightly, shaking his head slightly. Another pang of sadness surged through the mate bond. The alpha stood up suddenly, walking across the room to the windows. He stood with his back to

everyone.

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“You don’t understand how important this second chance is,” Max said and Riley turned, surprised to find he was talking to her. “You mentioned not wanting a mate, but maybe you just don’t understand how great the mate bond can be. Do you understand what it means to get a second chance?”

“I do,” she replied. “This is my second chance as well.”

“What?” Leo exclaimed. “You had a mate?”

Riley sighed and nodded, looking down at her hands. “It was before I went to the academy. I was just eighteen. He rejected me.”

“Wesley raised another eyebrow. “Are you serious? Why?”

“I don’t want to rehash all of that,” she said, shaking her head. “Especially not in front of people I barely know.

“But is this why you don’t want to accept him?” Max asked, his voice rising. “Are you afraid he’ll reject you

too? Because...”

“Max! Stop!” Kent’s voice was forceful, but he didn’t turn to look at them. “She already said she didn’t want to

talk about it.”

“But someone needs to make this make sense to me,” Max exclaimed, standing up to look at Kent. “Because

I’m lost here. I get why you’re hesitant, but why is she?”

“Leave it alone, Max,” the gamma said gently. “She’s right. She barely knows us and a rejection is a deeply

private matter. It’s not your business.”

“If she’s going to be our luna, I think it is,” Max argued.

“Stop!” This time it was Leo. “She’s one of my best friends and I didn’t even know. You aren’t going to bully her

into talking about something like this.”

Max seemed genuinely surprised at Leo’s tone. It was apparently enough to also make him stop. Max sat down, rubbing his face with both hands.

“It was nine years ago,” Riley said, catching Max’s gaze. “Life moves on. Rehashing awful things won’t make it

better.”

“What’s your plan then?” Leo asked, his voice calmer. “Are you two going to accept the bond? Reject it?”

“Neither,” Riley said. “The alpha pointed out that rejecting our bond would weaken us both significantly and with all the rogue attacks, this isn’t a great time for that. Since we’re not sure we want to accept the bond either, we’re just going to wait for now. Once the threat of the rogues is taken care of, we will make a

decision.”

“That’s a pretty big f*****g decision to put on the back burner,” Max muttered.

“There are bigger things to focus on,” the alpha said.

“f**k. Kent, come on...” Max started, standing up again.

“I think Alpha Kent is right,” Leo said, cutting Max off. “The rogue attacks are getting more targeted, more vicious and more deadly. We need to take care of the thing that poses the biggest threat to this pack and its members. If Riley and Alpha Kent aren’t ready to make a decision about their bond, then leave it alone. It’s their decision anyways. Our job is to focus on this pack’s safety above all else.”

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Chapter 0

The alpha nodded, looking at Leo. “Well said.”

“Fuck.” Max sat down heavily.

“Patrick,” the alpha said, looking at the gamma. “Please go over patrols again with Leo and make sure we are secure for the night. Wesley, please phone the commander and let

him know that Miss Atwood has arrived safely and discuss any other potential reinforcements we can get. And Max, please show Miss Atwood to her room.”

Everyone stood. Patrick, Leo and Wesley filed out. Riley looked expectantly at Max. Max frowned and looked

over at the alpha. “So about her room...”

“For f**k’s sake, Max. What now?” The alpha raked a hand through his hair, messing it up. Riley bit her lip,

suddenly wondering what his hair would feel like under her fingers.

“I don’t exactly have a room lined up yet. We have so many visiting warriors right now that most of our rooms

are full. I need to double check a couple things. Penny was going to look over it if she got the boys to sleep

early.”

The alpha pinched the bridge of his nose. “I pray to the Goddess that your son gets better soon. I really need

Penny to take care of these things. She’s a much better assistant than you are.”

“No argument about that,” Max replied.

“Go check on things and get her a room. She can wait here with me until you’re done.”

Max turned to leave but stopped, turning back to Riley. “Are you sure you don’t want anything to eat?” he asked. “You never did eat and it has been an eventful evening for you.”

“I’m fine.” She smiled, touched by his concern.

“Are you sure?” the alpha asked once Max had left. “I can ask someone to get you something.”

“I’m sure,” she said. “If I had an appetite, it is gone now.”

He nodded. “How about another drink then? I’m getting myself one. Would you care for a second, Miss

Atwood?”

“Absolutely, but please call me Riley. I guess we are mates after all.”

The alpha chuckled, a deep soft sound that made Riley’s pulse quicken slightly. “Ok. Riley then.” She felt a small thrill run through her to hear him say her name. “But only if you agree to call me Kent – not alpha.” He turned to hand her a refilled tumbler.

“Thank you, Kent.” She took a big drink. She knew she was going to need it.

An Unwanted Second Chance - Ripped 7[2,088 words]

Chapter 7

“This is not the way I envisioned my evening going,” Kent said with a sigh, walking back over to the window he had been looking out.

“Yeah, I get that.” Riley walked over to the window as well to look out. The sun was gone and the grounds below the back packhouse were barely visible in the light of a half-moon.

“What’s out there?” she asked, motioning to the grounds below.

“You can barely see it, but there’s a long building running off the far side of the building.” He pointed in the direction. “That’s the warriors’ barracks. All the unmated warriors live there.” He pointed towards the shadowy outline of a building towards the back of the grounds. “That is our own warrior training center and academy. We’ve tried our best to structure our own warrior training to match the National Werewolf Academy so our warriors who don’t get into the academy still get similar training. The ground in the middle that you can’t really see is our outdoor training area. There is a track and outdoor sparring area.”

“Where’s your school and hospital?”

“Towards the center of town. They’re better protected there.”

She nodded. “Smart. Always keep your most vulnerable in the most secure spot.”

Kent sipped his bourbon, staring out the window in silence for a moment before he turned towards her. “I know this isn’t what you want,” he said softly, “being mated to me. But I hope you know that I don’t mean any harm to you.”

Riley looked up into his eyes, a deep blue like the sea, and suddenly felt a wave of heat come over her. His smell was overpowering and she suddenly realized how close they were standing.

“I-I know that,” she stammered, backing up from him. She turned quickly, intending to cross the room to create space but she didn’t see the small footstool set next to one of the bookcases. Her toe caught the leg of the stool and she fell hard on the wood floor, her tumbler shattering as it smashed into the ground.

“s**t,” Riley cried, her palm stinging sharply.

“Are you ok?” Kent said, hurrying towards her.

She lifted right hand to see a jagged piece of glass sticking out of her palm. She went to remove it when Kent knelt down beside her.

“Don’t,” he said, reaching to grab her hand.

She jerked away from him, scooting backwards on the floor. His eyes widened in surprise but Riley was too overwhelmed to explain that she didn’t want him to touch her. She didn’t want to feel the tingles that happened when mates touched. It felt like too much right now.

“You’ll bleed everywhere,” he said calmly, looking at her. “Don’t pull it out yet. Let me get a towel.”

She nodded and he stood, moving to his liquor cabinet and taking out a small hand towel that was hanging inside the door. She stood as he walked back over, but as he got close, she backed up, her back hitting the wall behind her.

He froze, raising his brow slightly. He put the towel over his shoulder and raised both hands in front of him,

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“I just want to get the glass out. I Wont 88 though he were talking to a scared animal.

Which, she supposed, she was acting like.

He took a tentative step towards her and held out his hand waiting for her to extend her own. It was throbbing in pain and she knew the glass needed to come out so it could start to heal. Reluctantly she held her arm out and he gently wrapped his fingers around her wrist, bringing it close to him to look at.

She gasped as the sparks shot up her arm, but Kent acted like he didn’t notice. He carefully pulled the shard of glass from her palm, letting it drop to the floor as blood

began to seep up from the cut. He grabbed the small towel from his shoulder and wrapped it tightly around her hand.

“How quickly do you heal? This might need stitches.” His voice was still soft as he applied pressure to her

hand.

Werewolves healed faster than normal compared to humans and other supernatural beings.

“I heal about average for a warrior.” She looked up to see a line between his eyes as his face creased in

concern. She felt an urge to smooth it with her thumb.

Suddenly Rose howled mournfully in her head. A deep ache pierced her chest and she suddenly doubled over, pulling her hand from his grasp. Inexplicably she saw Paul in her mind, his blonde hair blowing in the wind outside of their house. He was smiling, that smile that made her heart stop the first time she saw it. She could almost smell him, blueberries and fresh cut grass and all the things that made her think of summer. She felt hot tears start to pool in her eyes as the pain in her chest sharpened, almost like being rejected

again.

“Riley?” Kent sounded surprised as he came towards her. She grasped at her chest with her good hand,

Rose’s howls echoing in her mind. She felt Kent wrap his arms around her and pull her upright against his

chest. She buried her nose in his shirt and inhaled deeply, the smell of sandalwood and pine suddenly

calming her. Rose’s howls trailed off and the aching in her chest relaxed.

“Riley?” Kent put his hand under her chin, lifting her face to his. “Why are you crying?” He moved his hand

from under her chin to gently wipe the tears off her cheeks.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “It was just like all those old memories and all that old pain came back.”

He pursed his lips. "I guess we're not as healed as we like to pretend." His voice, barely above a whisper, cracked on the last word. She met his stormy eyes and saw the tears swimming there. He took a deep breath, leaning forward to rest his forehead against hers. She closed her eyes, wrapping her good hand around the back of his neck as he pulled her closer.

"Kent - oh s**t - sorry." Max came quickly through the door but backed out just as quickly when he saw them, slamming the door shut behind him. Kent and Riley immediately separated but he was already gone.

Kent frowned. "Well, shit." He motioned to her hand. "Can I see it again? I'll get Max to bring a first aid kit to patch you up." She held her hand out and he gently unwrapped the towel, examining the cut. "It's already starting to heal," he said softly. "I don't think this will need stitches after all. I'm going to mindlink Max." His eyes glazed over as he mindlinked his beta.

A few moments later the door opened again and Max entered, carrying a small red first aid bag. He looked

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< Chapter 7

+15 Points >

between the two of them nervously. Kent motioned for Riley to sit on the couch and Max knelt in front of her, carefully unwrapping the towel. He gently cleaned the cut and wrapped gauze around it.

"It's not bad," he said as he was finishing up. "It should heal by the morning. Were you guys fighting it out?" He gave her a wry smile.

"I broke a glass," Riley muttered.

"Over his head, I hope," Max quipped as he started to pack up the first aid kit. "Might knock some sense into

him."

"Do you have a room set up for Riley?" Kent shot an annoyed look at his beta.

Max frowned. "Ok, here's the thing. The third floor is full and all the guest rooms in the gamma and beta wings are full as well. I only have two options available. There is an empty room in the warrior barracks, but there are also several free guest rooms here on this floor, in the alpha wing."

“She’ll take a room up here,” Kent said at the exact same moment that Riley said, “I’ll take the room in the

barracks.”

Kent turned to Riley. “You’ll room up here. It’s more suitable for a guest than in the barracks.”

Riley stood up, narrowing her eyes at Kent. “I’d prefer to room with the warriors as I am a warrior.” She didn’t

add that she wanted to room as far from as she possibly could.

“The barracks are for unmated warriors,” Kent countered. “Not for guests of the Werewolf Council.”

“Since I am the one who will sleep in there, I will decide which room I stay in,” she snapped.

“You are not staying in the barracks around a bunch of unmated male wolves!” Kent roared.

“I’ll stay wherever the hell I want!” she yelled back.

“Might I make a suggestion?” Max said, interrupting them. He had been watching the exchange much like one would watch a tennis match. Kent motioned for him to speak. “If you both want to work together for the safety of this pack, doing things to enrage each other seems like a bad idea. I think you both need to take a

breath and calm down and talk about things rationally. And maybe try not to yell.”

Riley pinched the bridge of her nose. “I can stay where I want.”

“True,” Max said, “and neither of us -” he gave a pointed look at Kent “-is disagreeing with that. But maybe try

to think about it from his perspective. Like it or not, you two are mates and it is natural for a mated male wolf to not want his mate sleeping around a bunch of unmated males.”

“I am an adult,” she said, rolling her eyes. “It’s not like I’m going to sleep with any of the warriors if I stay

there.”

“Again, true,” Max said, “but what if the roles were reversed? What if Kent chose to go sleep around a bunch

of unmated she-wolves?”

Riley bit her lip as she glared at Max, not sure how to respond. She didn't want to admit that just the idea of that made her blood boil in a way that she couldn't even comprehend.

“So now where do you want to stay?” Max asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Back at my apartment sounds pretty good,” she muttered.

“So the alpha guest room then?” Kent said.

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Chapter 7

She glared at him. “Fine.”

+15 Points)

“Good.” Max nodded. “With that all resolved, I will move your suitcase to the room at the end of the hall. The alpha can show you the way.” With that he grabbed the first aid kit and left the room.

She stared at the closed door for a moment. “How did that happen?”

Kent shrugged. “That's Max. He's a good beta because he's good at getting people to see things they don't

want to. He's very good at diplomacy.”

She looked at Kent. “Yeah, I can see that.”

“Well,” Kent said, motioning to the door, “shall I show you to your room?”

She nodded and followed him out the door and down the hallway. They passed the sitting room she saw

earlier and finally stopped at the last door on the right side of the hall. He pushed open the door to a large

room with a king sized bed. The bed was covered in a dark blue plush bedspread. The walls were painted a

light sky blue. There were arched windows on either side of the bed and a small desk and sitting area to the

right. There was a closet and ensuite bathroom to the left.

“I’ll leave you to get some rest,” Kent said. “My bedroom is at the opposite end of the hallway if you need

anything. Breakfast is served between six and eight so I suggest getting down there by seven before all the

good stuff is gone. I’ll gladly take you to the dining room tomorrow so you know how to find it.”

“Thanks. I’d appreciate that.” Riley took a step into the room, looking around. She spotted her suitcase and bag by the closet.

“Are you sure you’re not hungry?” Kent leaned against the door frame as he watched her. “I can have

someone bring something up for you.”

“I’m sure,” she said, giving him a small smile. “But I appreciate the concern.”

He watched her for a moment before nodding. “Ok then. I’ll see you in the morning. Goodnight, Riley.”

“Goodnight, Kent.”

An Unwanted Second Chance - Ripped 8[1,620 words]

Chapter 8

“You’re such a fool sometimes,” Lily laughed, pushing against Kent.

He grabbed her wrists, smiling at her. “A fool for you.”

“Oh Goddess,” she cried, “and you’re a corny fool too.”

He leaned in to kiss her, expecting to feel her soft, pliant lips but he felt only air as he toppled forward. Suddenly he was in wolf form, Pax running through the trees with urgency. There were people mindlinking him but all he felt was the sense of dread. He knew his mate was hurt and hurt badly. He pushed his wolf to

run faster, willed himself to reach to her.

When he finally arrived in the clearing, Lily was laying there in human form, covered in blood. His wolf howled and he shifted back into human form. As he moved to hold the body of his mate, she changed.

Suddenly it wasn't Lily, but Riley he held. Her hazel eyes were lifeless, her long brown hair fallen lank and listless away from her face. Pax howled inside his head.

Kent woke with a start, his heart hammering in his chest. Cold sweat covered his forehead. He squeezed his eyes shut tight and willed himself to take a deep breath. He raised a shaking hand to push his hair out of his face. He could almost smell Lily, a sweet gardenia that had always made him think of spring.

He rolled over, sitting up on the edge of the bed to look at the clock. It was just shy of five in the morning. He sighed, rubbing his eyes as he stood up. Something felt off, a weird sensation in his chest. It took him a moment to realize that it wasn't his, but Riley's.

He stood up, shaking his head to clear it. It was strange to him that four years ago he had been highly attuned to the feelings of a mate. The mate bond always made it easy to tell what one's mate was feeling, but it had been even easier with Lily. They had grown up together. She had been Patrick's tag-along little sister back then, sassy and competitive and annoying as hell. He already knew all her looks and tell tale tics before finding out they were mates, so their relationship had been easy to him.

But his new mate, she was a different story. He knew many wolves met mates that they hadn't previously known and felt an instant connection, but the circumstances of his meeting with Riley were so different from

what felt normal that he couldn't even put words to it.

He threw on a pair of sweats, a long sleeve shirt and his shoes, heading down the stairs and out the back doors of the pack house. The air was crisp and cool, the leaves on the trees just starting to change colors. Everything pointed to the signs that fall was on the way. Kent started running the perimeter of the training facilities, trying to take his mind off of Riley. He tried to focus on menial tasks – checking in with the farmers

to make sure that food stores looked good for the winter, reviewing warrior applications for the winter

enrollment in the training program, having the maintenance crews start their yearly inspections on the main

buildings to make sure they were weatherized properly.

He listed tasks in a tedious manner, trying to remember everything that needed done before Christmas. Of course, Patrick already had a list stored somewhere on a computer that he would print off and make Kent go over within the next month. Penny would handle most of the details, informing Kent when each task had been completed. But list making helped calm his mind and provide him with a sense of order, something he had been lacking severely over the last year as the rogue attacks worsened.

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After his run, he headed back towards the back of the pack house. As he approached, he saw a familiar figure moving up the stairs, her arms full of bags.

“Elva,” Kent called, jogging towards her, “let me help.”

Elva turned and smiled, her round face glowing in the rising sun. Her once brown hair was streaked with gray, laugh lines were etched around her brown eyes, but the year did nothing to change her smile.

“Good morning, Kent,” she said as he approached. She was one of the few people outside of the ranked members of the pack who called him by his name instead of Alpha, but that was because she had practically

raised him.

Elva had been the chef in the pack house for as long as he could remember. She used to bake him special birthday cakes when he was a child and always made his favorite things for dinner at least once a week. She had also been the person to clean up his scraped knees and comfort when he was just a boy, after his

mother had died.

And with Elva, came her son, Max, his best friend and his beta. Elva was the closest thing he had to a mother for the last 22 years and Max had felt more like a brother than a friend.

He grabbed the bags from her hands and stooped down to give her a kiss on the cheek.

“You’ve always been such a good boy,” she said with a warm smile. “Why are you out so early today?” She turned heading up the stairs to open the door so Kent could walk through with the bags.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he said as he walked through the door. “Too much on my mind these days.”

Elva sighed. “I’d tell you that you worry too much, but I know how bad the attacks are getting. Sheila’s boy was killed in the last attack. He was only nineteen.”

Kent gritted his teeth as he walked into the kitchen. He was the one who carried the boy, Kelvin, back from the woods after the attack. He could still remember how his blond hair had turned red with his blood. He had

been such a promising warrior.

Kent set the bags on the counter in the kitchen and spotted one of Elva's assistants, a young woman with jet black hair and olive toned skin standing by the sink, washing out a pot. She jumped when saw Kent.

"Alpha," she murmured, bowing her head slightly before quickly turning back to the sink.

"Good morning, Junie," Elva said as she pulled off her jacket. "Is Rudy here yet?"

"No, Elva," Junie answered without turning. "I haven't seen him."

Elva shook her head, glancing at Kent. "That boy is always late. If he wasn't such a good cook, I would have fired him ages ago."

Kent smiled. "I need to go shower and get ready for the day."

"I have plenty of work to keep me busy," Elva replied, smiling warmly. "Thanks for your help with the bags."

When Kent stepped out of the elevator on the fifth floor, his nose was immediately struck by the scent of vanilla and cloves that seemed to emanate from all the surfaces. He groaned as he turned towards his room. How on earth was he going to keep this woman out of his head when everything on his floor smelled like her?

After his shower, he dressed quickly, combing his hair back from his face. He walked down the hall, stopping in front of Riley's door. It was nearly seven, which was the time they had agreed to meet, but he wasn't sure if

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<Chapter 8

+15 Points)

he should knock or wait for her to come out. Maybe she had changed her mind about going to breakfast with him. Maybe she just wanted him to leave her alone.

He heard the elevator ding and turned, taking a few steps towards the sound of the doors sliding open. Penny stepped out, her auburn flowing down around her. She headed towards his office door but stopped when she saw him approaching.

“Morning, Alpha,” she said chipperly.

“Good morning, Penny,” he replied, coming even with her in the hall. “How’s Evan doing?”

“His fever broke last night, thank the Goddess. He woke up hungry and raring to go. Max went ahead and took both boys down to breakfast, but I thought I better check in with you. Leaving you in Max’s not-so-capable hands for a few days probably hasn’t gone well.”

Kent smiled. Penny was Max’s mate and also Kent’s assistant. She had taken on that role after her older son,

Alex, was born. After Lily’s death, she also had taken on some of the responsibilities of a Luna in order to keep the pack running smoothly. Kent honestly didn’t know where he would be without her.

“He did pretty good, overall,” Kent said.

“What were you doing down there?” Penny nodded towards the end of the hall he had come from.

“Oh...” Kent rubbed the back of his neck. “We have a visitor from the Council, another advisor. Max put her in

the guest room down there. I had offered to walk with her to breakfast this morning but she hasn’t come out

and... well, I wasn’t sure...” He trailed off, glancing back down the hall.

Penny gave him a strange look. “Did you knock on the door?”

“I don’t want to bother her,” Kent admitted.

Penny shook her head, raising an eyebrow. “Ok, then would you like me to go knock on her door?”

Kent felt a rush of relief. “Yes, could you? I’ll wait in the sitting room.”

Penny took a step down the hall and stopped, turning to look at him. “Are you ok?”

“I’m fine,” he answered quickly. “Just go.”

**An Unwanted Second Chance - Ripped 9[
1,406 words]**

Chapter 9

Riley woke up to someone knocking on her door. Her chest ached terribly, her head was pounding and she felt sick to her stomach. Rose whimpered in her head but said nothing when Riley tried to talk to her. Slowly, Riley climbed out of the bed and opened the door. Standing there was a tall, beautiful woman with auburn hair and

bright blue eyes.

“Hi,” she said cheerily, “sorry to wake you. Alpha asked me to come check on you. He said you were supposed

to go to breakfast with him but he didn’t want to bother you.”

“Oh, right.” Riley glanced back in the room. “I must have forgotten to set an alarm when I went to sleep last

night.”

“No worries.” The woman smiled warmly. “If you still want to go, we’ll be in the sitting room just down the hall

while you get ready.”

Riley rubbed her forehead. “Umm... sure.” She took a step back to shut the door.

“Are you ok?” The woman’s forehead was creased in concern as she looked at Riley.

“Please don’t take

offense, but you don’t look like you feel well.”

“I’m ok.” Riley gave what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “I skipped dinner last night and I think it’s

catching up to me.”

The red head looked aghast. “Did Max not offer you any dinner? I told him to make sure you got something to

eat, but I swear he never listens to me.”

Riley couldn’t help but smile. “You must be Max’s mate.”

“Oh, Goddess!” The woman smacked her forehead. “I didn’t even introduce myself. I’m Penny, and yes, I am

Max’s mate.”

“Well, please don’t blame him. Max did offer to get me something to eat several times but I refused. So it’s

really my own fault. Please give me a moment to change and I’ll be right there.”

Penny smiled again and nodded. “I’ll be down the hall with the alpha.”

Riley shut the door and rubbed her temples. Her whole body felt sore and tired as she made her way to her

suitcase to find an outfit for the day. All the travel and the events of the last day seemed to have taken its toll

on her. She hoped that coffee would make things a little more bearable.

She put on a pair of jeans, a light green sweater and a pair of dark brown ankle boots. She threw her long

brown hair into a high ponytail and brushed her teeth. She looked in the mirror, seeing the dark bags under her hazel eyes. She washed her face and dabbed on some concealer, hoping to make herself look slightly

more alive than she felt.

She walked towards the sitting room, trying to ignore the way her stomach rolled at the thought of food.

“Maybe you should go check on her again?” Kent was saying as she approached.

“Give her a few more minutes,” Penny replied, sounding annoyed. “I woke her up. She needs a few minutes to get ready.”

As Riley entered the room, she was greeted by the rich smell of sandalwood just before she saw Kent, his

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dark blue eyes watching her intently. He was sitting in a chair by the window but rose quickly as she walked in. His scent was soothing, suddenly washing away the headache that had been threatening to split her skull.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked, his deep voice sending a shiver down her spine.

“Well enough. It’s just been a lot of traveling in the last few weeks.”

He nodded. “The commander told me that. He didn’t want to send you initially because you were just getting

back from an assignment.”

“He gave me a choice,” she said with a shrug. “I chose to come given how bad the situation is here.”

“We appreciate that.” Kent motioned towards the doorway. “Should we get something to eat?”

“The boys are probably giving Max a hard time,” Penny said, turning towards the door. “Evan woke up with more energy than he knows what to do with.”

Riley turned to follow Penny out and Kent came up behind her as they passed through the doorway, placing his hand on the small of Riley’s back. His touch sent a flood of sparks and tingles up her spine, causing her to shiver again. Rose immediately perked up and swooned at their mate’s touch. Riley had to resist the urge

to roll her eyes at her wolf as they reached the elevator.

Once they reached the dining hall, Riley had to stop to take it all in. There were plenty of round and square tables set up around the room. Along the back wall was a buffet set up with pancakes, waffles, sausages,

bacon, hash browns and scrambled eggs. The room smelled wonderful. It was alive with movement and noise as warriors and pack members moved about and enjoyed breakfast. Penny excused herself quickly and

headed towards a table where Max sat with two boys who looked remarkably close in age. One boy had his

mother’s auburn hair and his father’s goofy smile, but the other had jet black hair and olive skin that didn’t

match either of his parents.

Kent placed his hand on her back again, sending another wave of sparks up her spine. “Let’s get some food

and sit. I’ve arranged for us to meet again with the team in an hour.” He was leaning in to speak in her ear so

he could be heard over the noise of the room. His breath hit her ear, sending another shiver through her body

and rendering her unable to form a word.

Riley simply nodded and allowed herself to be led over to the buffet. She got some eggs, bacon and a waffle

before filling a mug with piping hot coffee. When she turned towards the tables, she saw Wesley and Leo

sitting by themselves. Leo waved her over and she moved between tables to reach them.

“How was your evening?” Wesley asked as she set her food on the table. Wesley had pale blond hair that was neatly combed back from his face and exceptionally pale blue eyes.

“Restless,” she muttered, sitting down. “I didn’t feel the greatest. I just came off assignment two days ago

and I’m already on the next one.”

Leo frowned. “I’d say you should take a break, but the situation here is pretty bad.”

“Yeah,” Wesley added, “I feel bad that you’re being overworked, but I am also relieved you’re here. I’m at a

total loss with the situation. We have no idea why these attacks keep happening. I need a fresh set of eyes.”

She sighed, taking a sip of coffee. “Well, the sooner we figure this out, the better.”

“Where are you bunking?” Leo asked.

“In a guest room in the alpha wing.”

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Chapter 9

+15 Points >

“Wow,” Wesley said, raising an eyebrow. “I guess the alpha doesn’t want to let you go too far.”

Riley shook her head. "It was the beta's suggestion. I guess there are so many people here from other packs that there are no other rooms. It was either the alpha wing or the barracks."

"I can believe that," Leo said. "I'm in a guest room in the beta wing. They have two little boys and they are

loud."

"I'm surprised you didn't insist on sleeping in the barracks," Wesley remarked.

"She tried." Riley turned to see Kent setting his plate down beside her. "But we came to an understanding."

Riley rolled her eyes. "Yeah, right. The understanding being that there wasn't really much of a choice."

"Exactly." Kent took a sip of his coffee, his blue eyes watching her over the rim.

"This is going to be interesting." Wesley smirked as he watched them.

"What is?" Riley frowned at him.

"You two." He motioned between her and Kent with his fork. "You are both exceptionally headstrong and

stubborn people. I'm going to enjoy this show."

"f**k off," Riley muttered, glaring at him.

Kent chuckled quietly as he took a bite of food. Leo leaned back in his chair, an amused smile playing on his

lips.

"So how was the last assignment at Silver Streams?" Leo asked. "You were out there for a few months."

Riley was grateful for the change in topic and happily dove into talking about how they negotiated peace

between the two packs.

An Unwanted Second Chance - Ripped 10[1,475 words]

Chapter 10

Kent walked ahead of the council members as they went to his office for a meeting. It had been an interesting breakfast, watching his new mate interact with Wesley and Leo. It was clear that they were all friends. Riley had talked about the issues at Silver Stream and he had found himself entranced as she spoke. She loved her job, that much he could tell, and if her reputation was true, she was excellent at it.

When he opened the door to his office, he was relieved to find Patrick and Max already waiting for them. Once everyone got situated, Patrick gave a quick rundown of patrol schedules and information that scouts had gotten about rogues in the forest northwest of pack grounds.

“It appears that they are setting up camp there, but we haven’t sent our scouts to determine how many there are,” he concluded.

“Any idea why they are banding together like this?” Riley asked.

Patrick shrugged. “We’ve found camps as large as fifteen in twenty before, but nothing at the sizes we are seeing now. Previously they banded together for survival. The woods can be brutal, especially in the winter. We’re used to rogue attacks, but nothing like we’ve seen in the last two years.”

“Tell me more about what’s happening,” Riley said, leaning back in her chair.

“We’re no strangers to rogue attacks,” Patrick explained. “Maybe one or two every couple months. Never more than six to eight a year. Usually just one or two rogues attacking, hoping to steal food or supplies. Sometimes we get feral rogues that attack anything that moves. Occasionally we might get a group of five or

six, but that was so rare before. The woods around the pack are vast and enticing for many rogues because

there aren’t a lot of packs around. They can roam freely without worrying about accidentally running into a

pack’s territory. We’ve always taken a live and let live approach with the rogues. As long as they stay off our

territory and don't harm our people or animals, we have no reason to bother them.

"But about two years ago we noticed there were rogues that weren't attacking but running close to the

borders. We started to suspect that they were planning an attack and were tracking our patrols, so we

started mixing up routes and schedules to throw them off. There was a sizable attack anyway. About ten rogues overpowered and killed three of our warriors, making it close to town before we drove them back.

After that, the attacks became more frequent and their numbers grew. We were still managing the issue but

about six months ago, everything changed.

"There were two simultaneous attacks, each with a large amount of rogues. Our warriors weren't prepared for

it and multiple warriors were killed. Some of the rogues made it as far as town and killed several innocent

people before we were able to drive them out. After that, we started requiring all citizens to take some type of

basic warrior training to be prepared and we started requesting assistance from the council. The attacks

haven't stopped though, and they are only getting worse."

"We're worried that the rogues may overpower us at some point," Kent added, his stomach twisting at the

admission. "We've never had an issue like this before."

"You've never launched any type of attack against the rogues outside of your territory previously?" Riley

asked.

"Just once." Kent couldn't look at her. He couldn't admit what he had done.

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“It was when the Luna was killed,” Max explained for him. “Lily, the Luna, was out on patrols when she was involved in an attack and killed. We hunted down the rogues that killed her.”

“Your Luna ran patrols?” Wesley asked.

“Of course she did,” Patrick snapped. “She was a warrior. She was the daughter of the previous gamma and my sister. She was raised to be a warrior and she was excellent.”

“She was one of our best warriors,” Kent explained calmly to Wesley, “right along with Patrick and Max. She didn’t want being a Luna to interfere with her duties as a warrior so she ran patrols and trained and did all those things in addition to her Luna duties.”

“She was on patrol with a new warrior that day,” Max added. “She was training him to run the patrols when the attack happened. The warrior was gravely injured and Lily tried to run the rogues off, but there were two of them. They were bigger than her, they overpowered her. By the time we got there, she was...” Max turned his head, looking up towards the ceiling, his face twisting with the memory.

Kent closed his eyes, trying to chase away the memories that rose up. Max covered in Lily’s blood, grabbing Kent’s shoulder, trying to steer him away. The sight of her in the grass, her face ghost white. And the blood.

So much blood.

“Max got there first,” Patrick explained quietly. “He’s the one who found Lily. The warrior only lived long enough to describe what happened and give us an idea of where the rogues went. After he died, we went looking for the rogues. We found their encampment about five miles outside the pack territory to the northwest. There were ten rogues and... Kent... we...” He ran his fingers down the arm of the couch, his face

punched and tight.

Kent still remembered the way the encampment had smelled. It had been putrid. He still remembered their faces as he charged in, the smell of his mate’s blood still about him. He could still feel the way Pax’s teeth

had sunk into their soft flesh. He could still hear the way they screamed.

“They killed your Luna.” It was Leo’s soft voice that broke him from his memories. “They killed someone’s mate and someone’s sister. You did what you thought was just.”

“We’re not proud of what we did that day,” Max murmured, his voice hoarse. “There were mistakes.”

“You killed someone you didn’t think you should?” Riley asked.

Kent flinched even though her question was delivered kindly. It wasn't just the people they killed that day, but

the one who survived.

"Grief is powerful," Patrick finally said. "It can blind you."

"Do you think the attacks now could have any connection to what happened with the Luna?" Wesley asked.

Max shrugged. "I don't know but it could be possible."

"Are there any other reasons the rogues might be attacking?" Riley asked, looking at Kent. "Are they after

something?"

Kent hesitated. His stomach twisted. She would know if he lied.

"Not that we're aware of." Patrick jumped in, saving Kent from responding.

Riley turned to watch Patrick and Kent bit his lip. Mates could feel strong emotions in one another. Surely she could sense his unease. He forced himself to take a deep breath, willing himself to calm down.

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Chapter TU

"We have a theory that they want to clear the pack to have more free space to move," Leo said, oblivious to the tension. "This pack is the only thing that interrupts the woods."

Wesley jumped in, going on to list the nearest packs and the amount of land that the rogues stood to gain, while Kent tried to ignore Riley's eyes on him.

"I suppose that's a possibility," she murmured after a moment. "We shouldn't be guessing at their motive though. If there is another attack, we should try to capture one of them alive. If we can interrogate a rogue, we might find out more information."

"We thought we had one captured during the last attack." Leo sighed heavily. "But apparently his injuries were

too much. He died before we could interrogate him."

"He didn't even seem badly injured," Wesley lamented, shaking his head, "but he died in the cell."

“Let’s focus on now,” said Kent quickly, eager to change the subject. He looked at Riley. “What do you need? The sooner we figure this out, the better.”

She hesitated, her hazel eyes watching him intently.

“I would like to take a look at your defenses,” she finally answered. “I want to look at patrol schedules. I want

to hear about how the patrols run and what has happened in the last few attacks.”

“I can tell you about that,” Patrick said, drawing her gaze. “I can tell you what you need to know.”

She nodded. “That sounds like a good place to start. I want to spend a day or two just getting used to how

the pack runs. Then we can really dig into what is driving the attacks and how to stop them.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” Kent leaned back in his chair, eager to end the meeting. “If you need anything else,

let me know.”