
MAYHEM MANUSCRIPTS SEASON 2: CRYPTIDS
Hush
AVERY COLLINS


MAYHEM MANUSCRIPTS SEASON 2: CRYPTIDS
Hush
AVERY COLLINS

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2026 by Avery Collins

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. For permission requests, contact author.averycollins@gmail.com

The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred.

This work, including all text, ideas, characters, and plotlines, is entirely original and the sole creation of Avery Collins. No artificial intelligence tools or automated systems were used in the writing, editing, or creation of this material or its book cover. Similarly, I do not give permission for my work to be used to train any AI systems.

First edition 2026

Cover Design by Lily James

Cover Illustration by RolesBM

Editing by Jennifer Keller

Formatting by Nicole Tarr

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

Dedication
Author Note
Trigger Warnings
Glossary
Gather ‘round…
1. Lucas
2. Lucas
3. Onyx
4. Lucas
5. Lucas
6. Onyx
7. Lucas
8. Lucas
9. Onyx

10. Lucas
11. Lucas
12. Onyx
13. Lucas
14. Lucas
15. Onyx
16. Onyx
17. Lucas
18. Lucas
19. Onyx
20. Lucas
21. Onyx
22. Onyx
23. Lucas
24. Lucas
25. Onyx
26. Onyx
27. Lucas
28. Onyx
29. Lucas
30. Lucas
31. Lucas
32. Onyx
33. Lucas
34. Lucas
35. Onyx
36. Lucas

37. Onyx
38. Lucas
39. Onyx
40. Lucas
41. Onyx
42. Lucas
43. Onyx
44. Onyx
45. Lucas
46. Onyx
47. Lucas
48. Onyx
Epilogue
Epilogue
Acknowledgements
Mayhem Manuscripts Season Two:
Also by Avery Collins

OceanofPDF.com



In the dark, a little ember learned to glow,
while wild roots curled around a heart of stone.
The forest gave its monster something soft to hold,
and called them both, at last, home.

[*OceanofPDF.com*](OceanofPDF.com)

Author Note

DEAR READER

Before you step into the woods with Onyx and Lucas, I wanted to add a small note.

This story is completely fictional. The lore, creatures, bond, forest magic, and everything surrounding the Cervari were created for this book. While the story is inspired by different supernatural stories, folklore vibes, cryptid legends, and all the deliciously creepy things we love whispering about in the dark, Onyx is not a wendigo, and there's no attempt to make him one.

He is his own creature, from his own fictional mythology, built from root, bone, antlers, lantern light, and entirely too many feelings for a man who hates shoes.

So please, before you start reading, suspend your belief a little—okay, maybe a lot. Leave the real world at the tree line, follow the blue light, and let this strange, haunted, moss-covered love story be exactly what it is: a fictional monster romance about grief, healing, choosing love, and finding home in the last place you expected.

Thank you so much for taking a chance on something a little different from me. I know this isn’t my usual kind of book, but I hope you love Onyx

and Lucas, their weird little forest, and the ancient cryptid boyfriend. Please be mindful of the trigger warnings.

Now go on.

The woods are waiting.

—Avery x

OceanofPDF.com

Trigger Warnings

Please take care while reading. This book contains dark themes and intense emotional content, including:

Violence & danger

- Graphic on-page violence
- Blood and injury
- Death on page
- Murder
- Threat of death
- Physical assault
- Kidnapping
- Being tied up/restrained against one’s will
- Suspension restraint in a dangerous context
- Confinement in an abandoned mineshaft
- Choking/strangulation-related danger
- Monster attack
- Predator/prey threat
- Stalking and being hunted
- Weapon-like claws/teeth/antlers
- Body horror elements

- Injury recovery/wound care
- Brief death of a main character

Death, grief & trauma

- Grief and mourning
- Complicated grief after disappearance/death
- References to missing persons
- References to past disappearances
- Death of a side character
- Death of an animal/animal remains used as a warning
- Trauma responses
- Panic/fear responses
- Nightmares and distressing dreams
- Survivor's guilt
- Guilt over perceived abandonment
- Emotional breakdowns
- Character believes his loved one is dead

Abuse, manipulation & betrayal

- Emotional manipulation
- Betrayal
- Deception and luring someone into danger
- A character is groomed/manipulated by a predatory supernatural being
- Obsession mistaken for love
- Coercive/possessive behavior from a villain
- Gaslighting-adjacent behavior
- An ex-fiancée attempts to re-enter the main character's life after cheating
- Past cheating/infidelity
- Emotional fallout from betrayal

Monster romance / supernatural body content

- Monster romance
- Cryptid/monster anatomy
- Shapeshifting
- Body transformation
- Half-monster transformation
- Bone/skull imagery
- Antlers, claws, teeth, and nonhuman bodies
- Cloaca / nonhuman genital anatomy

- Magical slick
- Bond sickness / fever-like arousal state
- Mate bond
- Marking/bite mark
- Scenting
- Supernatural possessiveness
- Supernatural communication/mind-link
- Death and resurrection through supernatural means

Sexual content

- Explicit sexual content
- Monster/human intimacy
- Nonhuman anatomy during sexual scenes
- True-form monster sex
- Anal sex
- Oral sex
- Fingering
- Slick/preparation
- Praise kink
- Possessive language during intimacy
- Marking/biting during consensual intimacy
- Size difference
- Predator/prey dynamics in consensual/intimate contexts
- Bond-driven arousal/heat / Omegaverse heat elements
- Soft dominance
- Dirty talk through a mind-link
- Sexual awakening/queer awakening
- First time with a man
- First time with a nonhuman partner

Consent notes

- The central romance is consensual.
- The mate bond creates intense instinct, longing, and physical need, but consent and choice are treated as sacred between Lucas and Onyx.
- There are non-consensual threats/restraint/violence from antagonists, but not romanticized as part of the main relationship.

Mental/emotional themes

- Heartbreak after infidelity
- Loneliness

- Fear of abandonment
- Fear of losing control
- Feeling suffocated by protection
- Arguments around boundaries and independence
- Emotional codependency fears
- Healing after betrayal
- Learning healthy boundaries inside a possessive bond
- Identity changes after trauma and transformation

Other content

- Small-town missing persons investigations
(not main theme)
- Abandoned mines/quarries
- Dark forest/being lost in the woods
- Folklore horror elements
- Religious/mythic goddess imagery
- Family fear and grief
- Coming out to family
- References to past death/disappearance of a young woman
- Mentions of police investigation and serial killer labeling

OceanofPDF.com

Glossary

<u>You absolutely do not need to read all this right now. Come back to it if some terms confuse you a little.</u>

Aestrata

The Earth Mother. Ancient creator goddess of the Cervari, shaped from root, bone, hunger, night-sight, storm-memory, and old earth. She does not offer easy mercy, but her justice is deeply tied to balance, choice, and the natural order.

Bond

The soul-deep connection between a Cervari and their chosen mate. It allows emotion, instinct, desire, pain, and sometimes words to pass between them. A bond is not ownership; it strengthens through trust and consent.

Bond Sickness

A dangerous fever-like state that happens when a Cervari mate bond begins but remains unsealed. The human mate's body and spirit begin changing to fully receive the bond, causing fever, dreams, pain, disorientation, and desperate longing until the bond is completed or eased.

Cervari

Ancient forest guardians created by Aestrata. They are solitary protectors of old forests, ridges, waters, and wild places. Their true forms are antlered,

skull-faced, powerful, and deeply tied to the earth. Humans often mistake them for monsters.

Deepwood

The oldest and most sacred part of the forest, where ordinary paths fail, and ancient laws hold stronger. Few beings are meant to enter it. It is closest to Aestrata's presence and remembers things the rest of the forest has forgotten.

Den

A sacred place of safety and belonging. For Cervari, a den is more than shelter; it is a threshold of trust. To invite someone into a den is an act of deep vulnerability. Lucas's cabin and Onyx's hidden hollow both become dens in different ways.

First Body

A Cervari's true form. Large, antlered, skull-faced, clawed, and bound to the forest's power. Onyx uses this phrase because his human shape is learned and secondary, while his first body is what Aestrata originally made.

Guardian

A being created or chosen to protect the balance of the natural world. Guardians do not simply keep peace; they preserve balance, and balance sometimes has teeth.

Lantern

A blue-white flame carried from a Cervari's antler. It is not needed for sight. It can serve as warning, call, guide, or lure. In the wrong hands, it becomes a trap.

Lantern Stalker

The human folk name for the antlered creatures seen in the forest with blue-white lanterns. The legend confuses Cervari guardians with Varkhyn predators, which is part of why Onyx is feared before he is understood.

Mark

A bite or physical sign given during the sealing of a mate bond. Onyx's mark at Lucas's throat is both protection and promise, warning the forest and other old things that Lucas is claimed by choice and guarded.

Mate

A rare chosen soul-match for a Cervari. A mate is not prey, property, or possession. The bond may awaken instinct, but true mating requires

recognition, consent, and choice from both sides. A mate is not promised to every guardian, as some may not find theirs.

Mind-link / Bond-link

The mental connection that allows Onyx and Lucas to communicate through the bond. At first, Onyx cannot speak aloud, so the mind-link becomes his primary way of communicating with Lucas.

Onyx

The human name Lucas gives his Cervari mate. His first-name is older and rooted in Aestrata's making, but "Onyx" becomes sacred because Lucas chose it and Onyx accepted it.

Threshold

A physical, emotional, or spiritual boundary. Cervari treat thresholds seriously, especially the entrance to a den or the private space of a mate's mind. Crossing one without invitation is a violation.

Varkhyn

A corrupted Cervari, turned from guardian into predator. Varkhyn feed on fear, cruelty, and human suffering. They are the reason many old stories describe skull-faced forest creatures as monsters that lure and devour people.

Sheath

The protected, hidden opening in a Cervari's true body. It is both intimate and vulnerable, usually concealed by fur and instinct until trust, arousal, or mating draws it open. For Onyx, allowing Lucas to touch him there is an act of profound trust.

Slick

The natural fluid a receptive mate's body produces during arousal, bonding, or preparation for mating. In Lucas's case, slick first appears during Bond Sickness as his body changes to safely accommodate Onyx.

Heat

A heightened state of physical need, sensitivity, and longing caused by the mate bond. It can appear during Bond Sickness, intense emotional closeness, or deepening intimacy. Heat is not mindless; choice and consent still matter.

Opening

A general term for the body's receptive entrance during arousal or mating. For Lucas, it refers to the changed, slick entrance his body develops

through the bond. For Onyx in true form, it can refer to the sheath when it becomes visible and responsive.

Receptive Change

The physical transformation that allows Lucas's body to safely receive Onyx despite their differences. It begins during Bond Sickness and becomes part of his changed nature later on.

Mating

The physical and spiritual act that deepens or seals the mate bond. Among Cervari, mating is not just sex; it can carry instinct, magic, trust, vulnerability, and protection. True mating requires willing choice from both mates. The human body is nt harmed during this process.

Sealing

The moment a mate bond becomes stable and fully rooted. For Lucas and Onyx, the bond seals through intimacy and Onyx's mark at Lucas's shoulder, ending Lucas's Bond Sickness and tying their life-threads together.

Life-thread

The living strand of a bonded person's existence as felt through the mate bond.

Rootfire

The green-white force of Aestrata's power.

First Shape

Another term for a Cervari's true body. It can be used interchangeably with First Body, though First Shape may feel softer or more poetic in intimate contexts.

True Shape

A Cervari's natural guardian form, as opposed to the human form used for closeness, disguise, or moving among people. For Onyx, this is his antlered, skull-faced forest body. For Lucas, it becomes his half-Cervari form after Aestrata's intervention.

OceanofPDF.com

Gather ‘round...

IT HAD BEEN A stupid little end-of-summer trip. Five teenagers from the same town, three tents pitched in a rough semicircle, and a foldout table buried under chips and cheap liquor.

They came up to the clearing because it was where everybody went at least once before they left for college. The old ridge road led to it if you knew where to turn off and didn’t mind scraping your truck against low branches. It sat far enough out—past the cabins and hiking paths—to give them the exact kind of freedom eighteen-year-olds liked to romanticize.

No parents, no teachers, and no cell service unless the wind felt generous. Just woods, alcohol, and the illusion that nothing bad ever really happened to people who were young enough to laugh at danger.

The fire burned down from a bonfire to something lower by the time the stories started turning ugly. The Bluetooth speaker died an hour ago, and the silence after the music left too much room for the woods pressing in around them. Beyond the ring of light, the trees stood black and endless; old trunks crowded tightly together, their branches knitted so densely overhead they turned the sky into jagged slices of stars.

They were around the fire, all pretending they weren’t keeping one eye on the darkness between one laugh and the next.

Jonah sat with his elbows on his knees and a half-empty can hanging from his fingers, trying too hard to look relaxed. His girlfriend, Ava, sat cross-legged on an old camp blanket beside him, wrapped in his flannel over her tank top because she had started shivering twenty minutes ago and refused to admit it.

On the other side of the fire, Becca propped her boots near the stones and needled Marcus about some ghost story from middle school. Devon, quiet for too long, tipped the neck of his bottle toward the dark tree line and said they were all telling the wrong kind of stories for this part of the woods.

That got their attention. Marcus snorted and told him to spare them the serial killer routine, but Devon only leaned forward, orange light dragging over his face and catching the edge of his grin.

“I’m serious,” he said, his voice pitched lower than the crackle of the fire, so everybody had to lean in a little to hear him. “My granddad used to hunt around here before the park service blocked off half these trails, and he swore there were parts of these mountains nobody should walk after dark. Said the old people had a name for what lived out there before they started calling everything a bear or a cat to make tourists feel better.”

Becca rolled her eyes, but she pulled her boots back from the fire and tucked her feet under herself. “Here we go,” she said, though it had less bite than she probably meant.

“Locals call them Lantern Stalkers,” Devon went on, and everyone groaned because they already knew the legend. “Not because they carry lanterns every night, or because somebody saw a guy in the woods once. They called them that because sometimes people would see a light moving through the trees where no trail should be, too high off the ground to be a person holding it normally, too steady to be some camper. If you saw it once and stayed put, maybe you were fine. If you saw it twice, it had noticed you. If it started moving away and stopping, moving away and stopping, waiting for you to follow…” He paused just long enough for the wind to shift across the clearing. “Then you were already gone.”

Marcus laughed, but the sound came out thin. “That’s not even a story. That’s camp counselor crap.”

Devon looked at him and shrugged. “You want the story part? Fine. My granddad said people disappeared up here long before anybody kept proper records. Hunters, hikers, and one logger back when they were still cutting near the north ridge. Then, later, a couple from out of town, some drunk

college kid, a guy with a rifle who swore he'd track whatever was taking deer off his property. They sometimes found things left behind, but my granddad always said the real bad part wasn't the bodies. It was the ones who lived long enough to come back and talk. They all said they saw a light in the trees and knew they should run, but it felt rude to turn away. Felt wrong. Like the woods wanted them to be polite."

"That's creepy as hell," Becca muttered despite herself.

Jonah gave a short laugh and tipped his head back. "You're all gone. Three beers in and suddenly manners are what kills you."

Ava smiled because Jonah always joked when things got too tense, but her smile never fully settled. She had grown up with enough small-town stories to know these woods had their own reputation.

People talked about disappearances around here with that careful, half-skeptical tone that still left room for fear. Even now, with the fire hot against her shins and Jonah warm at her side, she had the strange feeling that something beyond the clearing was listening to Devon speak. And waiting.

Devon sat back and drank, but then he glanced past them toward the tents pitched near the tree line. "Laugh all you want," he said. "Just don't go wandering if you need to pee tonight. My granddad said that's when it gets you. Half asleep, half drunk, stepping out into the dark, thinking you'll only be a minute."

Becca told Devon to shut up because she actually knew she'd need to pee later, and now she was going to think about forest demons all night. Everybody laughed, and the tension loosened just enough for the group to dissipate by degrees after midnight.

Marcus and Becca drifted to their tent, still bickering. Devon wandered off to spit into the bushes and came back whistling badly, trying to undo the mood he had made. Jonah and Ava ducked into their tent, a flashlight in hand, the smell of smoke trapped in their clothes.

Inside, the tent was warmer than Ava expected, close with body heat and the stale scent of nylon, dirt, and beer. Jonah crawled into his sleeping bag with a groan and pulled her against his chest, mumbling something about Devon being an asshole.

She laughed softly and told him he had still listened to every word. "Only because Marcus looked ready to piss himself," Jonah said, his voice already

blurred by sleep. He then kissed her temple, lazy and automatic. “If you see any glowing murder lanterns, wake me up first.”

She meant to tell him she would. She meant to stay there tucked against him until morning.

Instead, she lay awake listening to the sounds outside change as the hours dragged on. The fire snapped lower. Somebody coughed in another tent. Wind moved through the trees in long, dry breaths. Jonah was out cold, one arm heavy over her waist, his mouth parted against the top of her head.

Ava stared into the dark and told herself that the unease crawling under her skin came from too much alcohol sitting strangely in her stomach. After a while, she eased Jonah’s arm from around her waist and slipped out because she actually did need to pee, and because she was not about to wake him for that after he had joked about it.

The cold outside hit fast, as did the herbal smell of damp leaves. She zipped the tent behind her and stood still for a second, letting her eyes adjust. The campsite looked stripped down and unfamiliar without a proper fire. The coals glowed under a shell of ash. The shadowed tents in the clearing gave an illusion of hunched, dark animals.

Beyond them, the forest waited with that same patient stillness that had been needling at her all night. Ava wrapped Jonah’s flannel tighter around herself and walked a short distance toward the trees—far enough to feel private but not far enough to be stupid. At least that was what she told herself.

She stepped behind a broad pine and saw the light.

At first, she thought it was one of the guys coming to scare her, but no beam cut across the ground. The glow hung at about eye level between the trees, soft and blue, and too warm to be electric. She froze, one hand at her throat, watching the light move once, sliding deeper into the woods. Then it stopped.

Every tiny hair on her arms lifted.

“No,” she whispered, though she wasn’t sure who she was talking to.

Ava took one step toward it before she understood she was moving. Her mouth went dry. “Hello?” she called softly, immediately hating the sound of her own voice out there. No answer came back.

The lantern drifted again, and something deep in her chest pulled with it. Not curiosity, but not exactly fear either. The feeling was bizarre; an invitation wrapped around command.

Ava didn’t remember deciding to cross the clearing. She only realized she had when branches brushed her sleeves, and the campsite fell behind the first row of trees.

Panic rose hot enough to cut through the strange calm pulling at her, and she turned her head sharply, trying to keep the tents in sight. They were still there, but farther than they should’ve been. The fire pit was a smudge, and the truck had vanished behind tree trunks.

She had only walked a dozen steps, maybe twenty, and already the forest had rearranged itself into something unfamiliar, as though the woods had opened a path for her and expected her to have the decency to follow.

“Guys?” she called, and her voice came out too small and was swallowed almost instantly. “Jonah?”

No one answered, and the lantern waited.

The smell of damp, herbal leaves thickened around her until it coated the back of her throat. Her eyes watered, and she wiped at them with her sleeve. When she lowered her hand, the lantern was farther away.

Ava’s breath shook as she followed it down a narrow deer path she didn’t remember seeing during the day. Branches snagged at Jonah’s flannel, and mud sucked at the edges of her socks. Somewhere to her left, the creek rushed louder than before, though she didn’t remember moving downhill.

She kept telling herself to stop. She said it inside her head with increasing force until the word became useless.

Stop. Stop. Stop.

Her body didn’t listen.

Her pulse hammered in her ears, but underneath that sound, something else moved through her, something warm and terrible and intimate.

Come deeper, Ava.

Ava made a broken sound and clapped both hands over her ears… because that sounded like Jonah.

She stumbled against a tree and caught herself on rough bark, breathing hard through her nose. The lantern swung ahead, half hidden now by a wall of cedar boughs.

“Please,” she said, and shame hit her because she didn’t know what she was begging for. “Please, I don’t want to.”

The woods went still, and for the first time since leaving the tent, she saw the shape behind the lantern.

Her breath caught so sharply it hurt. Every story from the fire came back at once, stripped of exaggeration and drunken laughter, until nothing remained except the raw, animal truth: she was standing alone in the dark.

The creature didn’t rush her—that almost made it worse. It stood there among the trees with one clawed hand hanging open at its side, massive shoulders half lost in shadow, watching her in complete silence.

The lantern hanging from one black antler tine lit the black, bark-textured markings and deep scars across its chest and arms. It looked less like a monster wearing the woods and more like the woods had grown a body and stepped forward. Ava tried to scream for Jonah, but only a thin, broken sound came out.

The thing tilted its head curiously, and Ava felt warmth trickling down her jeans as her bladder let go.

By the time dawn touched the ridge in a thin gray line, the camp was already awake.

They found her footprints—socked feet in the damp soil, heading into the trees. They found Jonah’s flannel snagged on a branch even farther from camp.

After that, adults came. Rangers and police came. Dogs came too. Becca stood with Marcus near Jonah’s truck while handlers tried to push them past the creek. The dogs whined. One lay down in the mud and refused to move. Another tucked its tail in so tightly it looked injured. They found one of Ava’s silver rings two miles from camp near the creek, but they never found Ava.

Jonah told them Ava had been scared and acted strangely withdrawn all day, even though she initially planned the trip. He told them they’d been drinking and woke up to find Ava was gone.

He didn’t tell them about the Lantern Stalker until the second night, when he stood outside his house under the porch light and smelled something sweet and herbal drifting in from the dark trees beyond the road.

Only then did he tell his mother everything.

Only then did he admit that when he closed his eyes, he kept seeing a blue-white light moving between the pines, and Ava following it while calling out for him.

By fall, nobody on the ridge told the story like a joke anymore. Not after searchers said the dogs lost her scent where the ground became old and thick and strange.

Devon, who never touched another drop of alcohol around a campfire again, started telling younger kids the rules the same way his grandfather told them to him.

If you see a lantern moving where no person should be, you go the other way.

If something calls your name from the dark, you don’t answer.

And if the forest ever looks like it’s trying to show you something, remember that some things in the woods are old enough to know exactly what humans follow when they want to be led.

OceanofPDF.com

1

Lucas

HEARTBREAK CAN BE A hell of a motivator.

Sure, it comes with depression, sadness, or overall morbidity, but it sure as shit makes up your mind for you.

A week ago, I was getting ready to go out with my fiancée to our wedding rehearsal dinner. A week ago, I made the mistake of going through her phone in search of a number I had lost, and a text popped up, shattering every future I had ever thought I was building with her. A week ago, I found out she'd been fucking my best friend for about six months leading up to the wedding.

So, yeah, heartbreak is a hell of a thing. It's also the reason I'm currently driving through my hometown for the first time since I left ten years ago.

But I suppose it's not all negative. I got the job I always wanted as a teen, and it might not be fancy, but it's a dream come true.

The last stretch of road is still the same, which knocks the breath out of me more than it should. It curves through old pines and cedars, narrow enough that branches scrape the sides of the truck if I drift too far, and every bend gives me another piece of the place I spent half my life swearing I'd leave for good.

I used to know every turn on this road by muscle memory. I still do, apparently. My hands barely need me. They guide the wheel on instinct while heaviness settles under my ribs—not quite relief, not quite hurt. Maybe both.

I had a good job in the city. Better pay and better hours, if I'm being honest. A decent apartment, coffee that didn't taste like burned dirt, and neighbors who minded their own business. Five states over, I built something that looked stable from the outside, even if my work wasn't truly fulfilling.

Then this position opened up back home, and I put in for it half on impulse, half because some stubborn part of me never stopped wanting this place. When they called to say I got it, I actually laughed. I remember standing in my kitchen with my phone in my hand, grinning like an idiot, already picturing these woods, this cabin, and this job.

A week ago, that feeling still lived in me. Now, it feels like it belonged to somebody else.

The ranger cabin comes into view through the trees, and I slow without meaning to. It sits tucked back from the road with the porch facing the woods and the roofline half shadowed by branches. The place looks smaller than it did when I was younger, but that's how memory works. It makes things bigger, brighter, easier to love.

The old place still has the same deep-green trim, the same patched steps, the same lean on one side that nobody ever really fixed. There's a new truck parked out front from the department, and the sight of it brings back the reminder I've been trying not to sit with for the whole drive up here.

Mark Hasting, the last ranger, vanished. Not transferred or quit—*vanished*. His name was in the paperwork, and in the careful tone people used whenever they mentioned why the post had opened up unexpectedly.

Missing. Search ongoing. No conclusion.

I cut the engine and look up at the cabin that's supposed to be my fresh start. All I can think is that somebody else was meant to be living here right up until he wasn't.

"Okay, Lucas. You came this far; might as well go all the way," I say, trying to psych myself up for the start of my solitary life. "Just get outta the truck and get this dang thing over with."

The second my boots hit the gravel, old pine needles crunch under the soles, and the smell of the place moves around me fully. Pine. Old dirt.

Clean air and the faint smell of smoke clinging to the cold cabin chimney. The start of fall always added a sweeter scent to the forest. This is it, the cabin I used to visit in my youth when I fell in love with the forest. Sixteen-year-old me would be so stoked.

The forest air slides under the collar of my shirt and across the back of my neck, cooler than it was on the highway. The sun is lowering behind the ridge, turning the treetops copper at the edges. It's the hour where everything looks softened and beautiful.

"Hell of a fresh start," I mutter with a scoff as I stand beside the open truck door with one hand on the roof.

I should feel grateful—I *am* grateful. That doesn't change the fact that I'm heartbroken and standing in front of what is supposed to be my new home with my whole life packed into a truck bed.

With a sigh, I drag a hand through my hair and walk up the porch steps. I wish I had the opportunity to come home with excitement instead of this dragged-out ache in my chest and hope instead of suspicion. But I'm here, anyway, and I'm going to make the most out of it.

Heartbreak and all. Humiliation and all.

I'm here with the woods outside my door, the job I've always wanted, and a cabin that smells of familiar mornings and of coming out here to bother Tom Jackson when he was still living here. The forest doesn't care that my left hand feels too light for the weight it would have carried. The cabin doesn't care that the last man who lived in it drove out one day and vanished in a place he was meant to protect.

What I have in my hand now is a set of keys, a badge, a set of trails that need walking, fires that need watching, and people who need someone who knows which rocks are loose and which rivers flood faster than they look.

OceanofPDF.com

2

Lucas

ON MY FIRST OFFICIAL day as Sweet Rivers' Park Ranger, I'm up before the alarm with the first thrums of excitement coursing through me. I'll be seeing people I haven't seen in a long time, including my momma and sister. I feel bad that I didn't get to see them yesterday, but I was honestly too tired to visit anyone after unpacking and getting the cabin ready.

Not too tired, apparently, to lace up my boots and take one short hike before dark, because common sense has never stood much of a chance against this forest when it starts calling my name. I told myself it was just to stretch my legs after all that driving, but by the time I made it back to the cabin with pine needles stuck to my socks and my lungs full of cold mountain air, I knew I'd been lying.

The air has that pre-dawn chill that sneaks under blankets, one I've missed no matter how many 'camping' trips I took in the city. Nothing beats a small town surrounded by miles and miles of forest.

I lie there for a while just listening to the quiet, letting the sounds sort themselves out in my head the way they used to when I was seventeen. Back then, my biggest problem was whether the fishing wardens would catch me skipping class to sit by the river.

Wind in the pines, a low hush, and push through the needles. Somewhere to my left, a mourning dove calls, and there’s a squirrel chittering in the eaves. Underneath it all, I know with absolute certainty that three deer are moving behind the cabin because that soft, uneven crunch of hooves on dry needles is as familiar as my own heartbeat.

“Time to get this day started, Dawson,” I say and push myself out of bed.

When I step onto the porch in my socks and a coffee mug in hand, the world smells right again for the first time in months. I crouch down near the corner of the porch where dirt meets the stone foundation.

A set of small, delicate hoofprints crosses the packed earth, dew darkening the edges. They aren’t fresh enough for the deer to still be close, but they’re from this morning. That small fact settles something that’s been rattling in me ever since I threw my boxes into my truck bed and left the city.

I missed this—the ease of reading the ground, the way a bent blade of grass or a smudge of mud tells a whole story if you bother to look closely.

When I straighten, my chest tightens for a different reason—the reminder of why I’m here hitting the same way it has every morning since.

I take a long drink of coffee and breathe through it, but the hurt sits there anyway, heavy and stupid. Part of me knows you can’t just turn off three years of emotion from building a future with someone, even if the foundation was rotten the entire time.

“Alright, enough,” I say, rolling my shoulders back until they crack. “New day, new life, and all that.”

The words fix nothing, but they give me something to step over. I just need to take it one day at a time.

I go back inside to shower, trim my beard, and pull on my uniform. Afterward, I run a hand through my unruly red hair until it settles into something manageable, then clip my badge to my chest.

The fabric is stiff because it’s still new, but my heart soars a little at the patch on my chest.

Sweet Rivers State Park

Ranger Dawson

When I look at myself in the bathroom mirror, I don’t see the guy who got cheated on. I see the kid who used to follow Tom’s truck through these same trees, memorizing every trail.



Driving into town takes less time than I remember. The road snakes along the river, that familiar stretch of water glinting silver through the gaps in the trees. It widens as it approaches the first gas station, the faded welcome sign with SWEET RIVERS in chipped paint beside a hand-painted pine tree with one too many branches.

I take a left on Brabant Street and smile when I see the Ranger's Station looking exactly the same as it did when I was in high school. Brown brick and clear glass, and the big wooden sign out front that says PARK OFFICE in letters so big they cast shadows on the lawn.

Tom's old truck is already in the lot, along with two other vehicles I don't recognize. I pull into a space, kill the engine, and sit there for a second, hand resting on the gearshift. My heartbeat bumps up no matter how much I tell myself these are people I grew up with, and they won't judge me for running back home with my tail between my legs.

I get out and walk toward the door, hearing voices and the squeak of a rolling chair before I even cross the threshold. Inside, the air smells like coffee, printer toner, and the faint tang of wet fur that always seems to cling near a park. The front desk is exactly the way I remember it from high school: a scratched laminate counter, the same little dish of free stickers for kids, and a jar of ballpoint pens that never seem to work the first time.

Behind it, Sarah Knox looks up from her computer, her hair shorter than it was when I left so long ago, but still the same dark blonde, albeit shot through with silver streaks. She'd probably smack me for pointing that out.

"Well, I'll be damned if it isn't Lucas Dawson," she says in that drawl of hers, standing up with a grin that makes her eyes crinkle. "I thought you disappeared forever into some national park out west and forgot your roots."

I grin back despite myself and lean on the counter. "They tried to keep me, but I got homesick for your coffee and Tom's nagging," I say. "Good to see you, Sarah."

She comes around to hug me; the embrace is firm and familiar. When she steps back, her gaze flicks over my uniform, and her smile softens. “Look at you, all official. Tom’s in the back. He hasn’t shut up about you coming home since the email.”

“I can hear you.” Tom’s voice booms from somewhere down the hallway before he appears, moving with that unhurried stride he’s always had. His beard is more gray than brown now, and his face a little more lined, but his eyes are exactly the same—sharp, kind, and amused as they sweep over me, just like Sarah’s did. “You’re late.”

I glance at the clock and snort, knowing I’m actually ten minutes early. “And a good mornin’ to you, too,” I say.

He closes the distance between us and pulls me into a hug that smells like pine resin and aftershave. “I’m glad you’re here, kid. You made the right choice.”

I want to say something about how my first choice blew up in my face and how this feels more like triage than a plan, but I swallow down the bitterness.

New day, new life, Dawson.

“Yeah, I’m glad, too,” I say instead.

He claps me on the shoulder, then jerks his chin toward the door to the right. “Parker’s in the equipment room pretendin’ he knows his ass from a radio battery. You might as well rescue him before he breaks somethin’.”

At the mention of Parker, warmth spreads in my chest. I haven’t seen him in person in two years. He came to the city for a visit, and we both overdid it with beer and nostalgia, promising to keep in touch. We never did, and I blame that on myself. I know I was too caught up in my life in the city, and it made me push everyone I love away. Including the person who used to be my best friend. The idea of working with him is one of the few bright spots the last week hasn’t managed to taint.

I find him in the small equipment room off the main hall, standing with a coil of rope in his hand and a look of deep concentration on his face. He’s broader than he was in high school, shoulders filling out the green ranger shirt and making it strain a little across his back. His sandy hair is shorter on the sides now, though the front still flops into his eyes.

I lean against the doorway. “You know if you wrap that from the middle, you’ll end up with a knot you’ll hate in about a minute.”

He whips around before I’m even finished talking, the coil slipping out of his hands and landing on the floor with a thud. For a second, he just stares at me with wide eyes, then his mouth splits into a grin that hits me square in the chest.

“Holy shit, Luke,” he says, closing the distance in three long strides and pulling me into a hug that knocks the breath out of me. “You’re really here! I thought it was just some elaborate prank Tom was pullin’ to see if I’d cry at my desk.”

“No cryin’ yet, but the day’s still young,” I manage, laughing as I thump his back. When we step back, the easy familiarity slides into place as though we never lost it. “You workin’ here still feels illegal.”

He snorts. “Yeah, well, you bein’ my boss feels illegal,” he shoots back immediately, though there’s no resentment in his tone, just pride. “You know that means I have to respect you now, right?”

I raise an eyebrow. “Pretty sure that wasn’t in the job description.”

He chuckles and bends to scoop up the rope, wrapping it correctly this time as muscle memory kicks in instead of overthinking. “Tom said we’re headin’ over to meet the sheriff this mornin’. Apparently, you have to charm law enforcement as part of the initiation ritual.”

“Right after the blood sacrifice and secret handshake,” I say, but my stomach twinges because I know the sheriff’s office is where the missing persons reports are.

Parker must catch something on my face, because his eyes soften. “Hey,” he says, bumping his shoulder against mine. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I say, and this time it’s true enough that I don’t feel guilty for saying it. “Just tired. It was a long drive to get here.”

He studies me with that way he has, the one that saw through my bullshit when we were sixteen and hiding beer in the woods.

“Sheriff’s a good guy,” he says with a nod. “Bit intense about the whole missing persons situation, but I figured that’s in the manual somewhere. Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

We walk to the sheriff’s office together, cutting across Main Street. Sweet Rivers hasn’t changed much since I left. The hardware store with the peeling sign is still on the corner. The diner across the street still has the same handwritten daily special board outside, with the same messy handwriting I remember advertising their all-day breakfasts.

A few new storefronts have opened—a yoga studio that makes me raise an eyebrow, and a coffee shop with succulents in the window—but the bones are the same.

The sheriff's department is in the same squat building it's always been; the flag out front flapping gently in the breeze. Inside, the receptionist is someone I vaguely remember from high school—older now, with tired eyes and a braid down her back. She waves us through when Parker tells her why we're there.

Sheriff Reyes waits for us in his office, his door half open. He stands when we step in, tall and lean, probably in his late forties, if I had to guess. Dark hair cut close, and a face that's seen more than small-town life usually hands you.

"Lucas Dawson," he says, taking my hand. "Tom's been singing your praises to anyone who'll listen."

"Sorry about that," I cringe. "He tends to exaggerate."

Reyes huffs a quiet sound that might be a laugh. "We'll see. I'm glad we have someone who knows these woods. We've had more trouble the last few years than I'm comfortable with."

He gestures for us to sit, then nods toward the wall behind us. When I turn my head to see what he's showing us, all that earlier worry hits me in full force.

The bulletin board is bigger than I expected, spanning most of the wall. It's covered in paper, photos, printouts, and maps, all overlapping. It looks chaotic at first glance, but resolves into grim order when you look closely.

Faces of all ages stare back at me, some blurry from old cameras, some clear from recent ones. Names, dates, and locations are written beneath them; all connected by lines of string to spots on maps where they were last seen. At least a dozen have the word FOUND scrawled across their notes in red ink; others have nothing at all.

I spot Mark Hasting's photo near the center—it's the one from his ID badge, the computer printout crooked, as if someone stuck it up in a hurry and never straightened it.

Last seen: North Ridge trailhead parking lot.

Personal vehicle abandoned. No evidence of foul play.

No evidence of anything, to be completely honest. I came here knowing the previous ranger had gone missing, knowing there were hikers who never came home, kids who didn't show up for dinner after parties in the

woods, and campers who walked out of their tents and were never seen again. I knew all of that. But reading about it is different from seeing its massive scale.

“This is why I’m glad you’re here,” Reyes says after watching me carefully. “I don’t have the manpower to put boots on every trail every day, and Tom can’t do what he used to. We’ve had more missing person reports in the last five years than in the twenty before that combined. Some turned out to be runaways who wanted to be found; others…”

I watch as his jaw tightens. “Others didn’t,” I finish quietly.

He nods. “I don’t like unsolved things. So, if you see anything out there that doesn’t fit, I want to know. I don’t care if it’s a weird campsite, a car parked where it shouldn’t be, or a gut feeling. The woods are your territory more than mine, and I have to rely on that.”

The weight of that responsibility settles next to the rest of the baggage I’m already lugging around. I suppose this is better than moping around and being depressed about an ex who betrayed you in the worst way.

“You’ll know,” I say with a nod. “If somethin’s off, I’ll tell you.”

After a while, we talk logistics—radio channels, emergency response procedures, and contact points between departments. Parker cracks a few jokes in between, loosening the air enough that no one suffocates on seriousness.

Before we leave, Reyes hands me a few of the recent missing persons files, and we thank him before leaving. Outside, the sun has climbed higher, the day already getting warmer, but the wall of faces sticks behind my eyes as we cross Main Street again.

“You good?” Parker asks, glancing sideways as he swings his keys around his finger.

“I’m fine. It’s just… a helluva lot when you see it spread out like that,” I admit.

He grimaces. “Yeah. My mom refuses to drive past that building now—says it’s cursed. Jonah and his friends were the last ones up there; her house was the first one they stopped by after leavin’ the woods.”

The mention of my nephew pulls my head out of the sheriff’s office. “How is he? I’m stoppin’ by my sister’s tonight for dinner. We only texted a little, but she didn’t really mention what happened.”

Parker’s mouth twists. “He’s… different since that camping trip. He barely speaks and is a lot more withdrawn. We both know Jonah is not a

quiet or withdrawn guy. I'll let Mel tell you the whole story, but just know he's not the same kid he used to be when you left—he even put college on hold."

The unease ratchets up my spine again, and this time it has a personal edge. Jonah was the kind of kid who talked nonstop about everything that crossed his mind. He used to beg me to take him on hikes that were probably too long for his little legs, and had been planning his escape to college since he was fourteen. The idea that he's refusing to speak, and that college is on hold, just doesn't sit right.

I suppose I'll see what happens tonight.

OceanofPDF.com

3

Onyx

I HAVE WALKED THESE woods for so long that even the oldest redwood feels young beside me.

There are places beneath the ridge where the ground has changed shape three times since I first knew it. Rivers have moved, stone has split, fires have come through and stripped the land bare enough that I watched new growth rise from the black earth and become forest again.

Humans built their roads where animal paths once ran. Then widened them beneath a hard black stone that smells wrong when the sun heats it. They built their towns farther south—first small enough that I could cross from one side to the other without waking a sleeping human. Then they grew larger each generation until their lights began staining the dark.

I remember when none of it was there. Before the first houses, before the first roads, before human voices carried this far into the mountains. I was already old when they began settling close enough for their smoke to reach my territory. I have watched them from my trees. Sometimes they saw me; most did not—that was always by design.

The forest knows how to hide what belongs to it, and I belong to the forest more deeply than the roots at my feet. When I want eyes to pass me by, they do. Human sight slides away from me on command. Even animals

understand this. Once, this pleased me. Now it is simply another part of my hollow existence.

Before sunrise, my feet carry me through the northern wood without purpose. There is no need to patrol far today, as nothing has entered my territory that requires killing or driving away. The elk have already moved toward the higher slopes, and wolves crossed the eastern boundary three nights ago, caught my scent, and turned back without challenge.

Still, I move. The hollow in me demands movement, even when movement offers nothing. Earth Mother Aestrata made us to endure, though sometimes I wonder whether she understood what endurance becomes after enough time has passed.

I remember her more clearly than I remember my own kind. Her memory is not sight or sound; it lives deeper, pressed into the same place where instinct lives. We came from the earth already knowing territory, hunger, protection, and solitude. She gave us no need for packs or crowds. We were made to stand alone, each bound to land that recognized us until we returned to it.

Morning has already broken over the ridge, though little sunlight reaches me here. I move because there is little else to do. Hunger does not guide me this time, as I already fed before dawn—roots from beneath wet ground and mushrooms from beneath a fallen cedar. I also spotted berries high along the western slope, dark and sweet, where no human hand had reached them.

The earth gives, and I take what it offers me. I have never needed the flesh of those who walk on two legs, no matter what stories they tell beside their fires.

Humans fear being eaten, so they give teeth to every shadow and call that truth. I have teeth; that much they know. They know little else.

I learned their tongue early on, because they never stopped using it. They speak when frightened, happy, alone, and angry. They speak even when no one answers; endless sounds shaping meaning. I understand them, though I have no wish to imitate them.

I could take the smaller shape if I so wished. I did once, centuries ago, when humans began entering my woods in large numbers, and curiosity pulled harder than caution.

I remember pain—bones folding inward, antlers sinking beneath the skull, muscle tightening into a body too small for itself, and skin smoothing over where rough bark markings should be. Humans would look at me

knowing something was wrong, even when they could not name it. I have not worn that shape in five hundred years.

A new scent catches on the wind, and I stop, turning toward the eastern ridge without knowing why. I lift my head, one hand settling against the rough trunk beside me as I listen.

Water farther downslope, the faint groan of a branch heavy with last night's damp, a vehicle far beyond the trees. Nothing unusual for this time of the morning, but that scent—

It reaches me again, and every muscle in me locks at once. Faint enough that a wolf might miss it beneath the wet earth and pine resin, but I do not. The air moves through the openings beneath the bone fused to my face, carrying the scent deeper into me, and I suck in a stuttered breath.

It belongs to one human—a male.

His scent clings faintly to the rough edge of a pine where his hand must have rested, and carried along the brush where fabric disturbed leaves that have not yet settled back into place.

I move closer to the pine. Countless things in the scent register—river water, damp earth, and human skin warmed beneath cloth. There's a faint metallic trace of something he carries, too. But beneath it all is something else… something with no name in any human tongue I've learned.

I press my hand against the place his fingers touched, and the reaction crashes through me so violently that my claws score the bark. My entire body knows before my mind catches up, and the hollow inside me tears open so fast, I think I've been wounded.

I lift my hand to my chest, claws pressing against the hardened black texture there. No blood or torn flesh, yet something has reached beneath the bone and muscle and gripped.

Aimlessness withers within me so quickly it frightens me. I have always walked without needing anything beyond territory and survival. Now every part of me points in one direction.

I turn toward the scent and my feet move before choice enters my consciousness.

The scent leads close to the den where men in green cloth live, then fades beneath old vehicle tracks and other human smells. Rangers—humans who walk trails, watch fire, find lost people, and remove foolish ones from dangerous places. People have lived here across generations. Some knew enough to respect the woods; others did not.

The human I am tracking has been here. His scent has settled across the porch, around the foundation, on the steps, and faintly through an open window. Hmm, he lives here now.

I stand amongst the trees and look toward the den through the screen of cedar, drawing bark and leaf around my shape until even a human staring at me would see only forest.

I remain nearby for the rest of the day and hours pass, but I do not move far. It should feel no different from any other hours I have lived through, but it does. I notice every engine moving along the distant road, and every human voice carries too clearly.

I circle the cabin twice without approaching the den, reading more of him from what he has left behind. He walked around the eastern side this morning and crouched near the foundation where he touched the ground. When I find the place, I lower myself and examine what he must have looked at.

Small deer tracks run across the packed dirt, and his fingers disturbed the soil beside them.

Understanding settles through me with a warmth I have not known before. He reads tracks. He notices what moves around his home. He understands that the ground speaks if one knows how to listen. The thought feels strange in its simplicity, though satisfaction runs beneath it.

This human knows land. Not as I know it; he cannot hear the shift of a mouse beneath leaf mold or smell rain while clouds are still beyond the ridge. But he has learned enough to look down when other humans only look ahead. Most of the men who have lived here did not bother to look down at all.

The sun has sunk low when an engine finally turns onto the road leading toward the ranger’s den. My entire body responds before the sound grows closer.

I move into the trees near the clearing and let the forest cover me completely.

The vehicle comes into view, and his scent reaches me through the open vents and gaps in the machine before I even see his face.

The hollow inside me tightens painfully when the vehicle stops near the ranger’s den. He remains inside for several breaths, staring through the glass. I watch every movement in the shadows as one hand tightens on the

wheel and the other passes through his hair. He releases a slow, measured breath and mutters something.

He talks to himself the way the lonely ones do. I know that sound; I know loneliness all too well.

When the door opens and he steps down onto the gravel, the hollow inside me that has waited to be filled since creation finally recognizes what stands before me.

For the first time in centuries, the memory of Aestrata rises whole. She gave us one promise—one not every Cervari would receive: a mate.

Some would exist without ever knowing the pull, and there would be no punishment or failure in that, as we were complete without the other.

There may come one whose scent your body knows.

One whom the land places in your keeping and places you in theirs.

If they come, solitude ends.

There is no slow awakening as I feel the bond taking hold. It closes around me with such a force that one hand catches against a cedar tree beside me.

He’s smaller than me—much smaller, though humans always are. Taller than some of his kind, but lean and strong. His body carries the balance of someone who knows uneven ground, made of walking muscle and human strain.

When he lifts his face toward the den, I see his eyes.

Moss colored. *Beautiful*.

The word comes reluctantly because human language often weakens what I mean. They use beautiful for flowers, polished stone, painted walls, and sunsets. Humans throw it around everywhere.

My mate.

My beautiful small thing. Mine to know, mine to guard, mine to answer. And I am his in the same ancient way, though that part of the instinct feels odd after so many years of belonging only to myself.

I have watched humans pair themselves for generations. I have watched them touch mouths, share dens, raise offspring, and mourn each other. Their bonds always looked fragile to me. They made promises, then broke them. Loved, then left. Reached for one another, and then chose distance.

I never understood why they continued trying. Now I stare at one human and understand why they risk everything.

He stands beside the vehicle and rubs the back of his neck with one hand. Copper-red hair has escaped his hat, curling faintly near his ears and damp with the day’s sweat.

Pale skin, short copper hair on his face—a beard, as humans call it. Small marks scatter across his nose and cheeks. Sun marks. He carries the sun in pieces across his skin.

I want to put my mouth there. Not to bite, but to… count? No, counting is human. To learn, then? To press scent into them, to trace them with my tongue. To know each one belongs under my gaze.

The urge confuses me.

He has spent the day among humans; their scents cling faintly to him. Coffee, paper, dust, another male who stood close enough to touch his shoulder. The smell means nothing once I find my mate underneath it.

River.

Pine.

Smoke.

Earth.

And sorrow.

That last scent draws something violent to life inside me.

Human pain is so strange because so much of it has no body. His hurt is not injury; I know the difference. No blood runs beneath his clothes, and no sickness lives in him. This is the strange kind of wound humans carry inside of themselves, one their body reveals when they insist they are well.

My mate carries a split in him.

The pain sits under his skin and changes the rhythm of his breathing when he pauses beside the vehicle.

I find myself wanting to know who caused this. More than that, I want to understand what must be removed so the scent of grief stops living in him.

From here, I watch him cross the open space and see his hand shake a little as he reaches for the door. Then he stops suddenly and turns his head directly toward me.

I go completely and utterly still.

His eyes search the trees with a focus that tightens my stomach. He cannot see me; I have chosen that. The forest wraps over my shape too completely for his human eyes.

Still, his brows furrow, and he looks deeper into the trees. “Hello?” he calls.

His voice reaches me for the first time. I have heard thousands of human voices before, yet his makes me want to return sound.

My throat shifts beneath fused bone on old instinct, though no word waits there. I have never learned what humans do with their mouths and tongues to shape their sounds. I understand their speech because listening requires nothing from my body. But speaking would.

His heartbeat has changed; I hear it from where I stand. He is wary, though not frightened. More than that, there is another change beneath the wariness, something that answers the new pull in the hollow in me.

He feels something, but he does not yet understand what.

I remain where I am long after he disappears inside. A light burns in the den window, and for the first time in as long as I can remember, I stay in one place because there is nowhere else I'd rather be.

The world has narrowed to one breathing body.

For millennia, I have moved through this forest because movement filled the emptiness of existing. Tonight, the emptiness inside me isn't empty anymore. It's restless, crowded, and awake.

Now there's a word that fits in the space where nothing lived before.

Mine.

OceanofPDF.com

4

Lucas

WHEN I MAKE IT back to the ranger cabin, the porch light is the only thing waiting for me.

The woods crowd around the place as I pull up, thick past the spill of the headlights. I kill the engine and sit there for a few seconds, hand on the wheel, listening to the engine tick down under me.

The day has been too full. I really had my work cut out for me on my first day, then dinner at Mel's. Momma cried into my shoulder for a full minute when she saw me, then threatened to smack me for making her wait a whole day to see me.

It should have helped; I mean, parts of it did.

Mel made roast chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans with enough butter to kill a man. Apparently, heartbreak means everyone tries to feed you until your organs surrender.

Her husband, Aaron, hugged me with one arm and slapped my back with the other the way men do when they want to show sympathy without saying anything too soft. Momma kept touching my face as if she needed proof that I was really there, then kept calling my ex 'that girl' with enough venom to strip paint off the walls. After the week I've had, 'that girl' is generous.

The house looked the same in the ways that mattered. Same photos lining the hallway, though Jonah’s face had aged from gap-toothed kid to broad-shouldered teenager in football gear while I was living five states away. Same dent in the kitchen table from when Mel dropped a cast-iron skillet on it. Same old couch that eats you if you sit in the left corner.

I stood in the doorway for a second after I arrived, and that stupid familiar smell of dinner, laundry detergent, and old wood nearly took me out at the knees.

Mel caught it; of course she did. She wrapped me up in a hug before I could make a joke out of it, pressing her cheek hard against my shoulder as she said, “I’m so glad you’re home, Luke.” I closed my eyes because that name made me feel seventeen and thirty-five at the same time.

Dinner was good, even with the ache underneath it. Everyone tried not to talk about my failed almost-marriage, which meant they talked around it with the subtlety of people carrying furniture through a narrow hallway. I told them I was fine until Mel gave me the look she used to give me when we were kids, and I swore I hadn’t eaten the last cookie even with chocolate still on my mouth.

Then Jonah came downstairs, and the entire atmosphere dipped. I still remember him as the kid who followed me around on trails in too-big boots, with a stick he insisted was a walking staff.

The last time I saw him, he was sixteen, restless and confident, built strong from football and carrying himself with the easy arrogance popular kids develop when the world has been kind to them. He was a tight end like I was, and had been proud of that.

The nineteen-year-old that walked down for dinner wasn’t the boy I remembered.

He was still big and broad through the shoulders, but he moved more carefully now. His eyes went straight to me, then to the back door, then to the window over the sink where the yard sat dark beyond the glass.

“Hey, kid,” I said, standing from the table because I had no idea what to do with the tightness in my chest. “You get too cool to hug your uncle now?”

That would have gotten me a grin not too long ago, but tonight Jonah’s mouth barely moved. He came over and let me hug him, but he stayed stiff in my arms.

“Hey,” he had said, voice lower than I remembered.

Mel’s face did something she tried to hide by reaching for the salt. Momma looked down at her plate, and Aaron got very interested in the water in his glass. I hated all of it.

After dinner, I found Jonah on the back porch, elbows on his knees, staring past the yard toward the treeline. The porch light threw gold over one side of his face and left the other in shadow.

A year ago, I would have expected him to be texting five different friends by now, making plans, and acting like the world existed to be survived at top speed. Instead, he just sat there wrapped in his hoodie, with his phone dark beside him.

I lowered myself into the chair beside him and sat quietly with him for a minute. “Your mom says you’re taking some time before leavin’ for OSU,” I said, trying to keep my voice easy, because I could feel him bracing already. “Nothin’ wrong with that. Hell, I took a gap summer after high school and stretched it until Tom threatened to drag me into ranger trainin’ myself.”

Jonah gave me a faint glance. “Yeah.”

“That’s all I get?” I asked, leaning forward and resting my forearms on my thighs. “I drove across five states to get one syllable?”

His mouth twitched, but it didn’t become a smile. “Didn’t ask you to, Uncle Luke.”

“No, you didn’t,” I said, keeping my eyes on the same dark strip of trees he was watching. “But I’m here anyway, so you’re stuck with me now, alright?”

The silence after that had weight. From inside the house, I could hear dishes clinking and Mel laughing at something Momma said, but out on the porch, Jonah looked like he was listening to something far away. His knee bounced once, stopped, then started again.

“I read the files about your camping trip,” I said gently, and Jonah visibly flinched.

I regretted the words the second they left my mouth, because fear crossed his face so fast it made him look younger. He swallowed hard, and his gaze snapped to the trees again.

“I’m not talking about that,” he said.

“Okay,” I replied, meaning the words. “Then we won’t talk about it.”

His fingers curled into his hoodie cuff. “Everyone wants me to talk about it. Cops, Mom, therapists, school people. They ask the same shit in different

voices, like I'll forget I already said I don't know," he said, then cringed a little. "Sorry for cussin', Uncle Luke."

"Don't worry about it." I watched the muscle jump in his jaw and made myself stay calm. "Do you? Not know, that is."

Jonah looked at me then, and for the first time all night, I saw the kid under the fear. Angry, exhausted, and trapped inside a story everyone else wanted to finish for him.

"I remember enough," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "That's the problem."

A chill crawled up the back of my neck, but I didn't push even though every instinct in me wanted to, especially after Reyes' wall of faces. But Jonah wasn't a file, and whatever happened in those woods had already taken enough from him.

So, I nodded and said, "You don't have to tell me tonight. But just know that I am here whenever you want to talk."

He stared at me for a long moment, suspicion and relief fighting for first place in his expression. "Mom said you're living in the old ranger cabin."

"Yeah, I moved in yesterday," I said.

His expression changed so sharply, I felt it in my gut. "Don't follow any blue lights if you smell something sweet and weird in the air," he said.

I kept my voice steady. "Sweet and weird how?"

Jonah stood up abruptly then. "I'm tired," he said, already moving toward the door. "Goodnight."

I stayed on the porch after he left, staring at the same trees he's been watching, and told myself there were a lot of ways trauma can turn ordinary darkness into something scary. The human brain wants a shape to put to that trauma. It wants a monster because a monster is easier than a missing girl and dogs refusing to track past the creek.

Now I'm back at the cabin with Jonah's face in my head when he told me not to follow blue lights.

"They're still tellin' stories about the Lantern Stalkers, huh?" I murmur to myself and shake my head, then grab my bag and step out of the truck.

When I move to unlock the front door, a chill runs up my spine and my heart feels like it wants out of my chest when I catch a faint herbal scent on the breeze. I turn around to look at the treeline.

"Hello?" I say, already knowing no one would be there.

Man, Jonah's words must really have gotten to me.

I get inside, lock the door, and start going through the motions of getting my evening in order. I rinse my coffee mug from this morning, check the back door, and set the files Reyes gave me on the small kitchen table.

I've vowed to not open them after 8 p.m. because I am not doing missing persons homework as soon as I get home, no matter how much my brain wants to jump in.

I shower, brush my teeth, and crawl into bed with muscles aching from a day that felt three days long.

For a while, sleep stays just out of reach. I left the window slightly cracked open because the cabin holds heat strangely, and the night air presses cool against my face.

I can hear the forest sorting itself around in the dark: wind through the pines, something small moving through leaves near the porch, the distant rush of water from the nearby river. I used to find comfort in naming every sound. Tonight, every familiar thing has a second meaning to it.

I turn my head and shove an arm under my pillow, staring toward the dark window. "Great," I mutter to the empty cabin. "First day back, and I'm already lettin' teenage campfire stories freak me out."

Obviously no one answers, but for one stupid second, I feel like I'm being watched.

Not through the window, exactly. Not in the way that makes me want to grab my flashlight and check the yard. It feels deeper than that—a pressure in the center of my chest I can't explain. I lie still and listen until the feeling fades and exhaustion finally takes hold.

When sleep eventually comes, it drops me straight into the trees.

I know I'm dreaming because the forest is too vivid and wrong at once. The path beneath my feet is one I recognize, then it isn't. The trunks are too tall, the spaces between them too narrow, and the canopy overhead turns sunlight into a deep green black.

I'm running, breath hard in my chest, legs burning with the familiar strain of uphill ground. But I don't know where I started or where I'm going.

Something is behind me.

It moves without crashing through brush, without snapping branches or any of the clumsy noise something that large should make. Its awareness follows close at my back, steady and patient, and every instinct tells me I should be terrified.

I'm not—that's the worst part.

It’s as if some part of me has been waiting years for something worth running from.

Branches tug at my sleeves, damp air fills my lungs, and my bare feet don’t step on any stones or get tripped by exposed roots. But underneath the night air and the green smell of moss and old leaves, another scent threads through everything.

Sweet.

Herbal.

The smell thickens until it feels almost warm, wrapping around me and coating each breath. I’m pulled deeper into a forest that keeps opening at the exact moment I need a path. The dream carries me forward, and the thing behind me follows without hurry.

I know with a certainty that makes no sense, that if it wanted to hurt me, it already would have.

I stop suddenly, and slowly turn my head, but before I can see what’s following me, I jolt awake in bed as if I’d been dropped from a height.

For a few seconds, I can only breathe. My shirt clings damply to my chest, the blankets are twisted around my legs, and my cock is embarrassingly hard.

“Fuck,” I gasp, dragging a hand over my face.

The room smells like old wood, clean sheets, and the faint smoke that always lingers in the cabin. Beneath it, just for a second, I catch a hint of something sweet and herbal.

My breath locks, but then it’s gone.

OceanofPDF.com

5

Lucas

FIVE MONTHS LATER, I know which porch board groans under my weight and which one stays quiet. I know the cabin holds heat badly in the morning, but traps it like a stubborn old dog in the afternoon. I know the coffee machine needs one good smack on the side before it does its job, and I know the shower pipes scream when I turn on the hot water too fast.

The ranger station no longer feels like a place I'm visiting from my old life. My name is written on schedules, my mug sits beside Parker's in the break room, Sarah yells at me when I forget to sign incident logs, and Tom still calls me kid even though I'm old enough to have lower back pain after bending over a desk for too long.

The work sets into a rhythm—trail checks, permit calls, weather reports, fallen branches after storms, and tourists who think 'steep incline' is a suggestion. Most of it is paperwork, patience, and knowing when the weather is about to ruin someone's day.

I like it anyway. Maybe I like the monotony the most.

After everything that happened before I came back, there is mercy in waking up and knowing what needs to be done. There is mercy in boots by the door, keys on the hook, and a charged radio.

The strange thing is, the more ordinary my days become, the less ordinary my nights feel.

I have the same dream every night. Not some nights, not occasionally—every fucking night. Something chases me in the dream, and I know I should be more afraid of whatever's behind me, but I'm not.

Every time it ends in the same place. The trees thin out just enough for moonlight to pour down in a wide patch, and I break into that clearing, lungs straining, skin slick and hot. I know that if I turn around, I'll finally see whatever's been right on my tail.

I never get that far. I always wake up right before I turn.

Oh, and I always wake up with painful freaking morning wood and the scent of Labrador tea in my bedroom.

It took me three weeks to place the scent, because most people around here wouldn't know it unless they spent time near boggy ground and colder wetlands farther north.

It's not the loose, dried kind someone buys in a paper bag from a herbalist, either, but the living plant itself. Leathery leaves, resin, damp soil around the roots, and the faint sharpness that clings to your fingers if you crush it by accident.

The funny thing is, there's no Labrador tea growing around the cabin, and it wouldn't grow here, either. It clings to places people rarely go anymore. Old bogs, old clearings, and old wounds in the forest that were trying to heal.

I don't mention this to anyone, because there isn't a version of *"I wake up with a hard-on, and smell a plant that isn't there after something chases me through the woods"* that makes me sound like I have my shit together.

Maybe heartbreak, a new job, missing persons files, and a traumatized nephew have finally thrown my brain into some theatrical bullshit.

I'm driving home one Thursday evening from the Norton farm when my phone rings, and I already know it's my ex before I look at her name flashing across my truck screen. Irritation cuts through my exhaustion so fast I nearly laugh.

I let it ring.

She's been calling for the last two months. At first, she'd leave tearful voicemails, then angry ones. Then reasonable ones, which pissed me off the most because nothing about what she did deserves a reasonable conversation.

She says we need closure and shouldn’t throw away three years. She said she made a mistake, which is a hell of a gentle word for six months with my best friend while cake samples and seating charts sat on our kitchen counter.

The call ends, and I’m about to breathe out a sigh of relief when it starts up again.

I answer this time, my temper getting ahead of common sense. “What?”

There’s a pause on the other end, and I can picture her standing in our old kitchen. “Lucas,” she says softly. “Please don’t hang up.”

“I’m drivin’. Make it quick,” I say while turning onto the gravel road beneath the budding branches.

“I miss you,” she says, and the words land with all the emotional force of a wet receipt. “I know you hate me right now, but I miss you, and I think if we could just sit down without everyone else in our ears—”

“There’s nothin’ to sit down about,” I tell her, keeping my eyes on the road as the cabin roofline appears through the trees. “You fucked Adam for half a year and lied to my face while we were plannin’ a wedding. That didn’t happen because people were in our ears.”

Her breath shakes, and once upon a time that sound would have softened me. Now it just makes me tired. “I made the worst mistake of my life.”

“No,” I say, easing the truck into its usual spot. “A mistake is forgettin’ to pay the electric bill. What you did was a choice, and you made it over and over again until I found out. There’s absolutely nothin’ to work out.”

“Lucas, please,” she begs, and there’s real panic in her tone now. “You can’t just erase me.”

I shut off the engine and sit there in the sudden quiet, looking at my porch. “I’m not erasing you, Hannah. I’m leavin’ you where you put yourself.”

I hang up before she can answer.

For a minute, I just sit there and soak up the quiet. The Norton cattle incident left mud on my pants, soreness in my thighs, and hay stuck somewhere under my collar.

Farmer Norton’s fence came down in the afternoon, and half his cattle took that as an invitation to tour the country. Parker laughed himself sick over the radio when I told him a cow with more attitude than survival instincts was outmaneuvering me. It took three hours, two deputies, Norton’s oldest son, and me slipping in mud up to my knees before we got them back.

I should be exhausted. I should want a shower, have whatever leftover food I have in the fridge, and go to sleep. Instead, all I want is to be back under the trees, without anything between me and the night.

The early spring evening is too beautiful to waste inside, and maybe that's why I notice something sitting on the porch before I notice anything else.

I get out slowly, phone shoved into my pocket and keys in my hand, and cross the gravel with my attention fixed on the little bundle placed dead center where I can't miss it. The air up here smells damp and cool now that the day's heat has bled off.

At first, I think some kids left it as a joke or some weird arts and crafts project. But when I crouch down, bracing a hand on my knee, and lean in, I immediately change my mind.

It's made with way too much care for kids to have made it. Someone took the time to gather them and tie them.

Thin birch twigs are bound with strips of inner bark, wrapped tight in a pattern I don't recognize but can tell isn't random. Tucked between them are leaves of mountain laurel, glossy even in the low light, with a few dried sprigs of Labrador tea threaded through the center.

That makes my breath slow.

I know those leaves, that scent, and the fact that Labrador tea doesn't grow anywhere near my cabin. Mountain laurel is blooming early along the warmer slopes this year, too—I know because I logged it myself last week.

The bundle smells fresh. Not dead or some decorative wreath someone brought in town. *Fresh.*

I stare at the bundle, scratching my beard as the world around me narrows down to the neat arrangement of sticks and leaves on my step. Someone went through the trouble of finding these plants that don't grow right next to each other, and left them in front of my door. Someone knows what grows out there and what those things mean.

Every old guidebook I ever read, every long boring talk my grandfather gave me about traditional trail markers and forest signs, kicks in at once.

Offerings of bog plants used to mean safe passage, at least in the stories that didn't make it into glossy tourist brochures. Tied bundles on thresholds could mean welcome. Or warning. Or a simple *"look, I see you."*

I reach out, then stop with my fingers an inch away. Every rational part of me says to pick it up, photograph it, or toss it into the brush and stop letting

plants freak me out.

But the rest of me—some instinct I don't have words for—says that if I move it without understanding why it was placed, I'll be breaking a rule I don't remember learning. The forest is full of rules like that.

You don't yell back if you hear someone calling your name from a ravine at night.

You don't whistle under certain cliffs.

You don't dump your coffee grounds near a fox den.

You don't touch the thing on your porch until you know who left it.

"Okay," I say slowly, straightening up. "I guess we're roommates now."

I step over the bundle and walk inside the cabin. Inside, I change out of the mud-stiff uniform and into hiking gear before I can talk myself out of it.

Worn pants, thermal shirt, fleece, jacket tied around my waist because the night will cool fast once I'm deeper in the trees. I pack my bag by muscle memory: water, first-aid kit, compass, radio, headlamp I don't plan to use unless I have to, knife, protein bar, a thermos of coffee, and a leftover chicken sandwich.

The full moon is already showing off by the time I step onto the porch, avoiding the bundle when I head down the steps.

The trail behind the cabin is one I could now walk with my eyes closed. It winds up through a stand of older pines, their trunks spaced wide enough that moonlight drifts down in pale patches, then cuts across a shallow ravine and climbs toward the ridge that runs like a spine above the river.

My boots find the path easily, toes nudging roots I know are there, ankles shifting on the small rocks I expect. The air is cool and damp, every breath filling my lungs with that clean, almost sweet smell you only get when the ground is starting to warm but the nights still hold on to winter.

The last of the snow melted off this slope a week ago, and already the young hemlocks are pushing out fresh growth. I crush a small sprig between my fingers as I walk and lift it to my nose, the resin biting the back of my throat.

The forest is loud in its own way. Owls trade low calls back and forth, invisible in the branches. Somewhere to my right, a small animal rustles through dead leaves, going about its business without caring that a human is thirty feet away. A frog chorus rises faintly from a distant wetland, a steady, rhythmic *ribbit* that blends with the softer sounds of wind moving through needles.

There’s no mechanical noise here, no engine rumble, no generator hum, no buzzing streetlight. For the first time all day, my shoulders release the tension I didn’t even realize I was holding.

This is what I came home for. Not the missing files, the gossip, the campfire tales, or my ex’s name glowing on a screen.

This.

I walk with a smile I don’t have to force, listening to the forest arrange itself around me.

After a while, I leave the wider path and follow the old game trail toward a fallen log I know is near the slope. It’s dry enough to sit on, broad enough to serve as a table, and turned toward a break in the trees where the moonlight comes through cleanly. I settle there with a groan, pull the thermos from my bag, and unwrap the sandwich.

“Dinner with a view,” I say under my breath, since I’ve become the kind of man who talks to himself in the woods.

The night has that kind of chill that feels good after a long day, enough to sting my cheeks and nose, but not enough to make my fingers numb when I unscrew the thermos lid. I pour coffee into the small cup; the steam rising in a thin curl, carrying the familiar sharp scent that’s somewhere between comfort and coping mechanism at this point.

I bring the cup to my lips, ready to take the first sip, when something shifts at the far edge of my vision.

It’s subtle at first, a disturbance in the pattern of dark trunks and darker space between them. I lower the cup slightly, eyes narrowing, and focus past the immediate circle of my clearing into the deeper layers of forest. Everything looks the same, just a horizon of vertical lines and irregular shapes.

Then, between two thick pines about thirty yards out where no trail should have a marker and no camper should be wandering this late, a single light sways in the dark.

It’s warm—a soft, steady blue-white hue that wavers just enough to indicate flame rather than LED, and it hangs higher than a person’s hand should. It’s not bright, not searing white like a headlamp or the aggressive blue-violet of a phone screen, and it sways gently… the way a lantern would.

The light doesn’t come any closer.

I set my cup down carefully on the log beside me, and keep my eyes on that solitary, swaying light without saying a word.

OceanofPDF.com

6

Onyx

I WAIT IN THE dark long before he sees the light.

Moonlight slips between the branches and paints the wet leaves silver, but it does not touch me unless I allow it. My skin takes on the shape of whatever I’m standing next to: bark, shadow, moss, or the pale break of stone through roots.

The forest knows how to keep me. It has kept me through centuries of hunger, storms, fire, and hollow wandering. Tonight, it keeps me while I watch my mate sit on a fallen maple, unaware that he has stopped in the reach of my gaze.

My Little Ember.

The name fits, even though he is called Lucas, because he carries warmth in a body made for this land. Red hair that catches every scrap of light and turns it to copper red, the color of autumn leaves just before they fall. When the sun touches it in the mornings, it glows; when the moon touches it now, it looks like cooled embers. Pale skin marked by those maddening sun-spots that still pull my attention.

Freckles. I know the word. I know humans use it without weight, as if such marks are nothing. They are *not* nothing on my mate. They scatter

over him in uneven places across his nose and cheeks, down his throat and disappearing beneath green cloth where my eyes cannot follow.

They make me want to come closer, but not to hunt or threaten. Simply to understand how one human can carry so many tiny marks and make my hands ache with the need to count them.

I do not come closer.

I have learned caution over these months, though it sits poorly inside me. Cervari do not court the way humans court. We circle, observe, and learn the shape of danger around the chosen one before stepping near. We leave signs for the mate to smell, to see, and to begin understanding that the forest has recognized them.

My kind was never made to kneel at doors and speak gentle sounds. My skull was not shaped for human mouths, and my throat has never learned to bend air, lips, and tongue into their language. With him, I have only the bond, and I have not yet touched it hard enough for him to know what brushes his dreams.

Every night, he runs.

Every night, I follow.

It is the only place I can be near without making his waking fear rise too sharply. He runs, and the chase pulls life into his breath. He turns his head sometimes, almost seeing me, and understanding that I could have caught him at any time, yet chose not to.

The bond grows there, reaching through his sleep while he wakes with my scent still in his nose. I have watched him look for the plant around his den, confusion tightening his mouth. He will not find any there because Labrador tea grows close to my den, miles away from here.

I left my full moon offering tonight.

I watched from the trees as he came home carrying mud, cattle scent, and anger from speaking to someone over the glowing rectangle device I so loathe. I placed the offering just before dusk, knowing where his eyes would fall first.

I bound it carefully with inner bark, tight enough to hold through wind, loose enough for him to see each piece. I made it with claws meant to tear bone and wood, and still I did not break a single leaf.

When he crouched in front of it, every instinct in him stilled and I smelled the recognition in his scent. He reached toward it and stopped before touching. That pleased me more than taking a kill.

He did not destroy it, either. He stepped over it and entered his den while speaking aloud to himself again. But he left the gift where I placed it.

Accepted it, a part of me insists.

Not fully yet, I know this. Human ways are twisted, and I know enough to understand that not destroying an offering does not always mean acceptance of it. Still, he knew enough to leave it whole. He gave the bundle respect, even if he did not understand what kind of respect he was offering.

Now he sits beneath moonlight, far from his den, and the lantern hangs from my antler with its flame covered until only a muted glow spills through the trees.

His eyes fix on the glow, and his body goes very, very still.

The night gives me everything his body tries to hide. His pulse changed first, quickening at his throat, and his grip tightened on the metal cup in his hand. The bitter smell of coffee lifts faintly from it, but beneath it, I catch the brief chemical spike his body dumps into his blood.

The first thin edge of fear.

It reaches me like pain, and I lower my lantern an inch without meaning to.

I do not like his fear. I do not want him to feel it when he looks at me. Fear belongs to those I hunt, not to the one Aestrata has meant for me.

He is not terrified, but he is unsettled, and that unsettled scent prickles the very part of me that has been alone for too long. If I allowed it, the moon would show him everything the stories taught him to fear.

I refuse, and the bond roars in my bones anyway, furious with my patience, urging me to claim, to mark, to drag him somewhere no one else walks.

But the thought of his fear sharpening into terror turns my stomach.

“You’re losin’ it, Lucas,” he mutters after I dim the lantern completely. “You’re fine. It’s… just a light, that’s all.”

He sets the cup down slowly beside him, but he does not reach for the knife I know he has, though his attention flicks there for one breath.

Ranger. Land-knowing human. Smart enough to measure distance, light, sound, and escape. Trained by years of walking places that do not care whether a man makes it home or not.

It pleases me, because a mate who doesn’t belong to the forest would always be half elsewhere, and I don’t share.

I let my scent move toward him to show him I mean no harm—to appease him and calm him. Labrador tea slips across the distance between us and reaches him where he sits.

His reaction is immediate: he draws in one unsteady breath, then another, before his face changes.

Recognition enters him with a force he cannot dismiss. I see the dreams behind his eyes, the bundle on his porch, the missing humans whose names stain papers on the table of his den.

My mate's mind is gathering pieces that do not belong together, and begins forcing them into a shape that doesn't fit.

Fear grows in his scent, not yet large enough to make him break and flee. But enough that shame—unfamiliar and ugly—moves through me.

I have frightened him.

The knowledge sits wrong in my body. I have frightened many humans before. Most were trespassers who entered deep territory with weapons, traps, poison, or careless fire. Their fear meant they would leave. I have worn fear from humans the way stone wears rain—it never mattered.

His fear does.

The bond pulls tight between us, and in that pulling, I sense only confusion, and the stubborn refusal to run too soon.

He is brave, this little ember of mine, and that makes me want to fold myself around him even more.

But possession is not the same as protection, and I've watched humans long enough to know they fear cages even when the bars are meant to keep them safe.

He stands from the fallen log, leaving the cup where it rests. "Parker," he says into the small device at his shoulder, though he has not yet pressed it. "Okay, no. Nope. I am not callin' this in and soundin' even crazier than I feel right now. Jesus, Dawson."

He speaks to himself when he is uncertain; I have learned this. It is one of his habits that I have collected with the rest. When grief tightens, he mutters. When anger rises, his words turn sharper. When he is alone and afraid, he pushes humor into the dark as if the dark might take offense and back away.

I almost touch the bond then; not with words, only meaning.

Safe.

Mine.

No harm.

But I stop before it reaches him and step back through brush that makes no sound. My shape folds seamlessly into the trees, less visible with each slow movement, until even the reflective burn of my eyes is hidden.

I move away from him, not far enough to leave him unguarded, only far enough that the pressure of my presence loosens from the clearing.

He remains still for a long while. I watch him from farther west as he finally exhales—a rough breath that makes my claws flex into the earth. He gathers his things, looks once to where the light had been, then walks back toward the trail to his den.

I follow behind him, keeping my steps light and quiet as he returns to his den safely, pausing when he sees the bundles still there. For a moment, he looks down at it, then back to the forest, before he walks inside and closes me out.

I have scared him. The truth remains even after his heartbeat has slowed inside. I meant to show him only the edge of my presence, to comfort him with the scent of his mate. Instead, I gave him fear.

Tomorrow, before he wakes, there will be another gift on his steps. Not birch this time, but something softer. I will gather fern still curled tight from spring growth because it opens slowly and does not demand the sun all at once.

I will add cedar for shelter, yarrow for mending where fields grow wild near the abandoned fence line, and one small white stone from the creek. No Labrador tea, since the scent frightened him tonight, and an apology should not reopen the wound.

He may not know what it all means, but I will know. The forest will know.

My little ember was afraid, and I stepped back.

Tomorrow, I will leave proof that I can.

OceanofPDF.com

7

Lucas

THE SECOND BUNDLE IS waiting for me when I open the front door.

Morning spreads through the trees in slow, pale light, catching on damp leaves and making the whole yard look washed clean after last night.

And there, neatly next to the first one, sits a new bundle.

I don’t look away, and it feels really dramatic. I never used to be a dramatic person before I moved back to Sweet Rivers. Now I’m having weird dreams, smelling plants that should be nowhere near my cabin, and seeing blue-white lights in the forest at night.

Five months ago, my biggest supernatural belief was that Sarah Knox could smell unsigned paperwork from two rooms away. Now, I’m standing on the porch of my cabin and wondering if something out here is trying to have a conversation with me.

The new bundle is different. It’s smaller, and somehow softer—if forest debris can look soft. The twigs are thinner, and they’re bound with pale strips of inner bark so carefully, I can see where each loop was pulled tight but not tight enough to break.

Curled fern heads are tucked through the middle, while dark, familiar cedar lies beneath them in flat sprays. Several stems of yarrow are also

woven through the tiny white buds, not yet fully open. At the center rests a smooth creek-polished white stone about the size of my thumb.

I immediately notice that there's no Labrador tea, and my chest reacts before my brain gets permission. "Okay, that's… not better."

Except, some part of me thinks it is, and that's the problem.

Something in me looks at the bundle and understands it. Not in words, exactly, but in pressure and shape. The fern, cedar, yarrow, and stone—all offered without the scent that scared the hell out of me last night. It feels more like someone setting a hand down without touching me.

An apology.

The thought hits so clearly that I step back, my heel bumping the threshold.

"Nope," I mutter, dragging a hand through my hair hard enough to tug at the roots. "Absolutely not. Plants don't apologize. Weird forest stalkers don't apologize. That's not a… thing."

The trees don't answer, which is rude considering how much they've had to say lately.

I glance toward the forest edge despite myself. Nothing moves out there except early light and wind stirring the pines. It looks ordinary—worse, it looks beautiful. That's the trick of this place, I guess. It gives you morning birds, dew, soft cedar smells, and the kind of quiet that makes your shoulders drop even when every logical part tells you to run.

I don't run. I don't touch the bundle either. Instead, I stand there long enough for the cold porch boards to bite into my bare feet and last night's dream to crawl back, making my face go hot.

I slap both my heated cheeks with cold hands. "What the hell is happenin' to me?"

It hadn't been the usual dream—or maybe it had started that way. Running through the trees, breathless but not afraid, with that sweet old scent in the air and the feeling of something behind me that could catch me at any second and kept choosing not to.

I remember the forest opening up around me. I remember the moon through the branches, the cold soil at my feet, and my pulse—too hard and too eager.

Then the dream changed, and I wasn't running anymore.

Suddenly I was braced against a tree with rough bark under my palms, forehead bowed and my body shaking from something that wasn't fear.

The body behind mine was big—broad chest plastered to my back, thick thighs bracketing mine, and a hand around my throat keeping me right where he wanted me. And yes, everything about the dream made it clear that it was a man behind me, and he was not small.

That became more than clear when he pushed his thick cock into me.

My face is on fire as I remember the deep, body-wrecking pleasure and the feeling of being held in place by someone far bigger than me. Every time I pushed my ass back in the dream, he would groan into my neck—low and hungry—and the word he whispered there… that's the part my brain throws into a locked box the second I wake up.

Aaand, I'm hard again.

A short, embarrassed laugh slips out, and I swipe a hand over my face, scratching my beard. "No," I say firmly, pointing a finger at the bundle, as if it's arguing with me. "No, we are not doin' this. I'm not havin' a midlife sexual awakening because of one friggin' dream."

Multiple dreams, my subconscious supplies unhelpfully.

A squirrel darts along the porch rail and freezes at the sound of my voice. It stares at me with beady black eyes, tail twitching.

"Don't look at me like that," I tell it, and it runs.

Yup, I have officially lost it.

I'm thirty-five, straight, and old enough to know that putting weight on anything that happens while I'm unconscious is a mistake. Sure, I haven't exactly been fighting women off with a stick since the breakup, but that doesn't mean I go to bed secretly hoping some faceless forest giant will rail me against a tree.

This is just loneliness. Loneliness and living out here all by myself. *That's all.*

I finally step back inside, close the door, and try to be a reasonable adult for the day.

It goes about as well as expected.

At the station, I sign the reports Sarah shoves at me before she can yell. Parker talks for twenty minutes about trying to fix the sink in his apartment and somehow flooding his downstairs neighbor's bathroom, and I nod in the right places while seeing a blue light between trees every time I blink. Tom asks whether I slept, and I lie badly enough that he pauses with his coffee halfway to his mouth.

"You look twitchy," he says.

“Thanks. You look old,” I answer, because deflection is cheaper than therapy.

Tom gives me a dry look over the rim of his mug. “Cute. Try again.”

“I’m fine,” I tell him, grabbing a stack of trail notices from the counter. “Weird dreams, too much coffee, and not enough sleep.”

“That ex still calling?”

I sigh and go for the truth, because it’s easier. “Yeah, and I’m ignorin’ most of them.”

“Good,” he says with an immediate bluntness that makes me love him. “Some bridges burn because they need to stop lettin’ people cross.”

I look at him for a second, surprised by his old-man wisdom sneaking in before nine in the morning. “That’s annoyingly good.”

He shrugs, and I almost open my mouth, because Tom knows these woods better than me, and if he laughs, at least he’ll do it gently.

Then another flash of blue slides behind my eyes, and my mouth decides to ruin my perfectly good plan to be normal.

“Have you heard reports of lights in the forest?” I ask, aiming for casual and landing near suspiciously specific.

Tom lowers his mug. “What kinda light?” he asks.

I shift the stack of trail notices in my arms and pretend my spine isn’t currently trying to crawl out from under my shirt. “I don’t know… Out between the trees; too high to be campers. It moved once, then it stopped.”

Tom doesn’t answer right away. He looks past me toward the front windows, like he can see past the ridge if he stares hard enough. “Where?”

I regret mentioning it immediately. “Just… generally.”

“That’s not a place, Dawson.”

“Near the north trail,” I say. “Far enough out that it could’ve been anyone messin’ around.”

Tom’s jaw works once. “Could’ve.”

I stare at him, confused at the look on his face now. “That doesn’t sound like your convinced voice.”

“Because I’m not convinced. I grew up in this town.” Tom looks back at me, and the lack of humor on his face shuts me up better than any rumor could. “Did you follow it?”

That question bothers me more than it should. He doesn’t ask *‘are you sure?’* or *‘you sure it wasn’t campers?’* Not even *‘what the hell were you doing out by that trail after dark?’*

Did you follow it?

I try to laugh, because the alternative is admitting my stomach just sank. “No. I’m not a horror movie victim. I stood there, made some incredibly brave internal decisions, then went home.”

“Did it call to you?”

“Come on. Don’t tell me you’re about to go full campfire story on me.”

“Lucas.”

I sigh again, because he used my name instead of Dawson. “No, nothin’ called out to me. Why—”

“Good,” he interrupts, then looks me over. “Do you remember them stories about the Lantern Stalkers?”

Of course, I do. Everyone from Sweet Rivers remembers the Lantern Stalkers. They’re baked into childhood around here, right between don’t swim after heavy rain and don’t let Farmer Norton talk you into helping with his fence unless you have three hours to spare.

Kids dare each other to hike to the ridge at dusk. Teenagers use the legend to scare each other around campfires, then pretend they weren’t scared when they hear a branch snap. Adults roll their eyes, but they still tell you not to follow lights, because superstition is apparently fine as long as you say it like practical advice.

I look at Tom, waiting for the smile that doesn’t come. “People still believe that story? Tom, come on.”

“People still go missin’ in those woods, so yes,” he says without missing a beat. “Stories stick around because somethin’ feeds them.”

“Yeah. Fear, bad weather, drinkin’ too much at eighteen, and wanderin’ off cliffs. These woods and mountains don’t exactly need monsters to kill people.”

“No, they don’t,” Tom agrees, and that’s somehow worse. “But stories like that stick for a reason.”

This is Tom—sensible, budget-meeting Tom. The man who once told me every unexplained noise in the forest is either an animal, water, or somebody being stupid. Hearing him talk like this makes me feel fucking sick.

I don’t respond, and Tom straightens. “Don’t follow any lights in the forest. Don’t respond to any voice you hear, especially if they sound familiar. And if you smell something sweet and herbal out there, leave immediately.”

“You’re tellin’ me to believe an old legend?”

“I’m tellin’ you, I’ve found grown men crying a hundred yards from parkin’ lots when they swore they’ve been walking for hours. I’ve watched dogs refuse to cross a creek for no reason I could see,” he says, lowering his voice. “I’ve seen blue-white lights out there, Lucas. So no, I’m not tellin’ you to believe every story. I’m tellin’ you not to get cocky just because nothin’ happened to you while you grew up here.”

I look down at the papers and swallow hard before looking back at him. I never mentioned the color of the lights. “Blue-white?” I whisper.

Tom’s expression falls. The words sit between us, and Tom’s voice lowers another notch.

“I know you grew up here, and I know you know the trails better than most. Hell, I taught you half of what you know. But if you see that light again, especially north of the creek or anywhere near the old ridge, you walk away and head straight back home.”

The problem is some part of me wants to go out there and see it again.

Then Parker crashes out of the equipment room with a dented toolbox in both hands and grease on his cheek, announcing, “Nobody panic, but I may have lost a screwdriver inside the wall.”

Sarah doesn’t even look up when she sighs. “Again?”

The normal noise rushes back in so fast it almost feels staged.

By late afternoon, I’ve convinced myself of several things in rotation:

One, someone is messing with me.

Two, somebody knows about Jonah’s camping story and wants to scare the new ranger.

Three, I’m tired enough to connect unrelated things because the human brain is an idiot.

Four, none of that explains the dreams.

Five, I’m not thinking about the dreams.

Six, thinking about not thinking about them is still thinking about them, and I should probably go slam my head into a tree.

When I get back to the cabin after work, both bundles are still on the steps.

I stand there in my uniform, keys in hand, and look down at them. For some reason, the first one feels louder beside the second. The Labrador tea woven through it has dried at the edges, but the scent still lingers faintly if I breathe close enough. The second bundle gives off cedar and crushed fern.

I step over them again without touching them.

OceanofPDF.com

8

Lucas

I'M STANDING IN THE kitchen after dinner, staring out at the forest through the window above the sink, and telling myself I'm staying in tonight.

That's the sensible thing to do; the adult thing. A man sees an impossible light in the woods one night, finds a mysterious offering on his porch the next morning, and that man stays inside, behind a locked door, and with a loaded gun.

By nine, I'm changing into hiking gear.

"You're an idiot," I mutter as I pull on my socks. "It's like you're asking to get railed against a tree by a monster."

I pack lighter this time: radio, knife, water, headlamp, first-aid kit. No thermos, no sandwich, no plan to sit around and make myself an easy target for the local cryptid I've apparently decided to flirt with.

The word 'flirt' makes me stop, one hand on my backpack strap, and stare hard at the wall until my face cools down.

Not flirting—*investigating*. There's a difference… probably.

The moon has slipped into a waning gibbous, bright enough that I leave the porch light off when I step outside. I pause beside the bundles and stare down at them, my fingers inching toward the second one. I still don't touch

it; instead, I look out at the treeline, where the path begins as a darker seam between the trunks.

“If this is some asshole with too much free time…” I trail off quietly, “you should know I’m armed, irritated, and deeply embarrassed, which is the most dangerous version of me.”

The forest waits, and I walk.

The night is gorgeous, which makes it hard to stay angry or scared. Spring has softened the cold but left enough bite in the air. The ground gives way under my boots, damp from yesterday’s rain, and the smell of the forest rises richly around me.

Pine resin. Cedar. Wet stone. Leaf mold. Ferns uncurling near the trail edges. Somewhere farther downslope, the creek works over rocks with that steady, rushing sound I’ve known since childhood.

I stand there, close my eyes, and breathe it all in.

This feels like home, and that is the most dangerous thing about it. I know how easy it is to trust what you love, only to be fucking blindsided.

“Don’t go there, Lucas,” I say, shaking off the melancholy threatening to creep into my peace, and keep walking.

I leave my headlamp off and let the moonlight do the work. Harsh light ruins night vision and pisses off everything trying to exist without human interference. This is their home; I’m just a visitor and need to respect that.

I move slowly, listening more than looking. An owl calls from the west. Something small moves through the brush and then goes still until I pass. Farther out, a fox screams, sharp and ugly enough that my shoulders jump despite knowing what it is.

“Drama queen,” I whisper, smiling despite myself.

The smile doesn’t last long when the Labrador tea scent reaches me, and I stop so fast that I scare something scurrying next to me.

My pulse doesn’t spike this time, but it changes. It slows and deepens in a way I don’t know what the fuck to do with. That scent slides through the trees, and my body recognizes it with embarrassing speed, causing my cock to kick up with interest.

“What the hell, body?” I whisper.

My hand tightens on the strap across my chest, and I think of the latest dream again. Bark under my palms, heat at my back, hand around my throat, voice in my head saying—

I shut that door in my head so hard it practically rattles. “Get your shit together, I swear to God,” I say under my breath.

Then the light appears, effectively shutting me up.

It’s about thirty yards out, the blue-white light way too high in the trees, unless someone is really committed to doing an impression of Edward Cullen.

Yes, I watched Twilight with my ex. What of it?

The light sways slightly, even though the air around me is still. Last night, it stayed far off, distant enough to pretend it could be anything. Tonight, it seems to wait.

My skin prickles.

Every lesson I’ve ever learned about wilderness safety lines up in my head and starts screaming.

Don’t ignore instinct.

Don’t approach what you can’t identify.

Don’t become the dumb missing persons case people discuss at the ranger’s station.

But my instincts aren’t telling me to run… that’s the problem. My fear exists, sure. I’m not stupid enough to stand in the middle of a forest staring at a floating light and claim I feel nothing. My mouth is dry, my heart is working harder than it needs to, and my fingers inch toward the knife at my belt.

Under the shock and tension, I feel that pull again—the same one I felt when I came home after my first day at work. It doesn’t feel like a command; it feels like an invitation.

Don’t follow any lights in the forest.

I take one step toward it, ignoring Tom’s warning. The light doesn’t move away, so I take another step, moss muffling my boots. It stays where it is, the distance between us shrinking with every pace I take rather than because it’s coming toward me.

My heartbeat snarls up the back of my throat, loud enough that I wonder if whatever’s out there can hear it. The scent grows thicker as I approach, filling my lungs until the forest smells less like spring and more like my dream. I have to swallow against the groan building up because of my swollen cock.

I move slowly, partly because I’m not eager to die and partly because some ridiculous part of me is afraid that moving too fast will make the light

vanish.

I stop when I’m maybe eight or ten feet away—any closer and I would have to squint against the glare—and the shape behind the light becomes visible by degrees.

At first, my brain refuses to accept what I’m seeing. It tries its damnedest to make the impossible behave, but then the light dims, and all those borrowed explanations fall apart.

The light is coming from a lantern hanging from the curved tip of a black antler.

The realization drops into me with a clarity that cuts through everything else. It’s not a hook or a branch; it’s dangling from a rusted iron loop that’s been hooked over tines of bone.

The antler itself is massive; thick at the base, branching wide, pitted, scarred, and black as char. My brain, poor thing, tries yet again to make excuses for what I’m seeing, but my eyes drag over the rest of the creature, and it abandons all hope.

It’s standing on two legs and tall—taller than anyone I’ve ever stood this close to. Seven feet, maybe more; the top of its head almost brushing the lower branches. Its skin is slate gray where the lantern light touches, with black markings spreading over its arms and entire chest. They look similar to tree growth rings—slightly raised, darker, and roughly patterned.

Broad shoulders, long arms, hands covered in those markings and darkening at the tips where claws extend.

Its massive torso narrows to a lean waist, where the rest of its lower body is covered in dark brown fur and long legs with joints bending the wrong way. Its hooves make me think of a deer and hint at a gait that could cover ground much faster than mine without even trying.

“Holy shit,” I breathe when my gaze snaps to the skull on its face. I know immediately that it’s not a mask, the way you know the difference between a taxidermied head on a wall and an animal blinking at you in the underbrush.

It’s a weathered stag skull, the bone darkened and shaped with an elongated muzzle. Long, thick, dark hair spills from under the skull and over its chest, and faint blue lights, similar to the lantern’s, burn behind hollow sockets. When it breathes, air moves through its nasal cavity with a faint sound, more felt than heard.

I know I should feel afraid right now. I know I should be screaming, grabbing my knife, pissing my pants—*something.* I'm looking at the fucking town legend; the thing from every campfire story that made kids sleep with flashlights under their pillows.

But the fear isn't what hits first—not even the mounting arousal, which I am *not* unpacking right now. Shock does. It knocks everything else sideways as I stare up at it, breath caught somewhere in my chest, and all I can think is *the stories got it wrong*.

The creature doesn't move toward me; it just stands there with a stillness no living thing should be able to hold. But even that word—creature—starts feeling wrong the longer I look.

Him.

The thought hits so hard it almost makes me dizzy, because a second ago my brain was still screaming *creature*, *thing*, *monster*—every safe little word people use when they don't want to admit something is looking back.

But *he* is looking back.

"You're…" I trail off, words escaping me completely. "You're real."

He tilts his head to the side in a movement that should make him look more animal—it doesn't. It makes him look as if he understands every word.

The smell rolling off him slams into that same place in my chest that the dream keeps poking at. Not death or rotting meat, but Labrador tea and smoke sunk so deep into skin and hair that it might as well be growing there. It makes every nerve in my body sit up and pay attention.

I've finally set my eyes on the thing that's been chasing me in my dreams for months, and my instincts aren't telling me to book it. It sighs and says, *'There you are.'*

But then a word hits my skull, and my body moves before I make a single decision.

I take one step back, my boot sliding through the damp leaves as I keep my eyes on the creature and shake my head.

Mate.

"No," I say, except the word barely comes out because my throat has gone dry. "Nope. Absolutely fucking not."

His chest rises slowly, and he still doesn't lunge at me. He still doesn't reach for me with those massive hands that look like they could pull a fucking redwood tree out of the earth.

That’s when I finally come to my senses and run.

The first few strides are ugly and uncoordinated. I almost go down because I don’t look where I’m putting my feet. Every ranger lecture I’ve ever given about not sprinting through unfamiliar terrain at night comes back to mock me in my own voice.

I catch myself on a sapling, shove away, and launch myself down a trail hard enough that my lungs seize on the first breath.

Mate.

That’s the word from my dream, the word I’ve spent all damn day trying not to think about. The word whispered into my neck while dream hands pinned me to a tree and my own body betrayed every neat little label I’ve ever put on myself.

Mate.

“Fuck,” I wheeze as I get close to the cabin. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

I expect fear to take over at any time now—that would make sense. Running should unlock it fully now that I’m moving, dumping panic into my blood until I’m stupid with it. Goddamn it, I should feel hunted or minutes away from becoming another picture on Reyes’ wall.

But the awful, sick joke is that I’m not scared. My heart is pounding, sure. My mouth is dry, my skin is tight, and shock has lit up every nerve. But underneath all of that, underneath the disbelief punching holes through the rational part of my brain, there’s the same thrill from the dream. The same breathless awareness of something behind me that could close the distance if it wanted to but doesn’t.

The same horrifying certainty that I’m not being chased to be killed.

I can feel him close behind me, too. Not crashing after me, but following with that quiet, patient movement that makes the forest feel complicit. The kind of movement that shouldn’t belong to anything his size.

I can’t hear his feet or branches breaking, but I know it’s there. The smell of Labrador tea keeps threading through the cold spring night every time the wind turns—not overpowering me or dragging me in, just present.

… like a hand held close without touching.

“Stop thinkin’ things like that,” I snarl at myself. “That is insane.”

Insane, yes. Good word; human word. A word for men who find twig bundles on their porches, dream about being chased through the forest, then meet the seven-foot nightmare who apparently railed them in said dream. The biggest issue shouldn’t be how good its voice felt in my head.

The cabin appears faster than I expect, or maybe I'm running harder than I realize. Moonlight spills over the small clearing where the ranger cabin sits with its porch dark and the two bundles waiting on the steps.

Seeing them almost makes me stumble. They're so small from here—just carefully tied plants and a little white stone. Not weapons, threats, or teeth.

Gifts.

I run harder, and gravel skids under my boots as I hit the clearing. My hand fumbles for my keys even though the door is unlocked. Apparently, my body wants to supply a little slapstick to the mental breakdown I'm currently experiencing. I shove the door open, shut it, and lock it behind me, then stand there breathing so hard my ribs hurt.

For one full minute, I do nothing. I don't move away from the door; I just stand there in the dark entryway, listening to the quiet outside.

Too quiet, I almost think, then nearly slap myself. I am not doing that. I am not going to stand here and assign evil intent to normal forest silence. I know better. I've spent most of my life in these woods and know silence has texture and reason. Animals pause when something large passes.

Something large *is* out there, and I remember the creature too clearly.

The lantern hanging from its antler, the fused skull—weathered, real, and moving when it breathed. The pale glow of its eyes locked on mine. Its sheer size, and the careful distance it kept even as I backed away.

Especially then.

It could have crossed that space in a blink; I know that for fucking certain. If that creature wanted me on the ground, I would have hit the dirt before my body even comprehended his touch.

But he let me run.

… and he called me *mate.*

OceanofPDF.com

9

Onyx

LITTLE EMBER RUNS.

Mate, I told him. *Mate,* the old law was written in the marrow long before his people named this forest.

His feet answered with distance.

For one breath after he turns from me, I remain exactly where he left me, with his wordless shock still pressing through the new bond.

The forest opens for him because it knows him now. Branches that could catch at his clothing only brush him; roots he does not see sit low beneath the moss instead of rising beneath his boots. The earth does not trip my mate as he flees from me, and that small mercy is the only reason I let distance stretch between us before I follow.

He is fast for a human. Not fast enough to escape me if I wanted to take him, but his body knows how to move through uneven land. Even running blind with shock, he chooses good ground more often than not. He ducks branches without looking at them fully, the memory of this forest guiding him through panic that is not panic.

That is what wounds me.

He is not truly afraid. I smell fear, yes—there and gone again beneath the pine, night, sweat, and ache of human disbelief. Fear should be bright. It

should flood from him and fill the path, but it does not.

What pours from my mate is confusion so deep it almost becomes pain, denial beating through his pulse, thoughts moving too quickly for the bond to shape into anything I can understand.

And lust. I can smell desire underneath all the denial.

His body knows me in the old way, but his mind refuses what it has accepted. He runs because his perception has been split open and shown him a truth too large to comprehend.

Still, it cuts to watch him retreat from me, even though I knew he might run. I have watched humans long enough to understand that what stands outside their knowing becomes a threat before it can become wondrous.

I stepped into the light regardless. I allowed him to see the one Aestrata chose for him. I gave him the first word through the bond because no other word inside me mattered.

Mate.

The word had moved into him cleanly. I felt it strike, felt his body answer before his mind recoiled, and for one impossible moment, I believed recognition would hold there. Not acceptance; I am not so foolish. Though perhaps I am closer to foolishness than I was before his scent crossed my trail.

I thought he might stay long enough to look again. He did not. My chest aches as I follow beyond the reach of his hearing.

The bond has just begun, and already it has learned rejection. *Rejection.* Their word fits close enough. A mate turning from the call.

But he does not mean it as rejection as such, some quieter knowing tells me. I reject that comfort because it changes nothing. My mate still ran from me.

I keep pace behind him, close enough to guard but far enough not to drive him harder. The light of my lantern is out now, hidden so the trees receive no glow. Without it, I become one with the forest. I pass between trunks in silence, my markings taking on that of dark bark and damp stone. My antlers slide through branches that shift only after I am gone.

Owls fall quiet above me, and a fox freezes beneath the brush, its body low and heartbeat frantic until it smells that I do not hunt tonight.

Tonight, I follow what is mine and take nothing.

The den clearing comes into view through the trees. I have never liked this clearing. From the first day men shaved it out of my pines, it felt

wrong. Too open. No places for shadows to cling. No trunks to lean into.

Yet the forest had its say in where they put their shelters, and guided their hands to this exact patch. Now I understand better. This is the thin place between his world and mine.

A door for him. A border for me.

I watch as he stumbles toward the door, and I move forward before reason catches me, reminding me my mate is not ready to accept my protection yet.

He rights himself without my aid, and when he sees my offerings again, his body falters. Through the bond, I feel the word he gives them before he buries it beneath more disbelief.

Gifts.

The ache in my chest deepens. Yes, little ember, they were gifts. I made them with hands that know breaking better than binding. I gathered what he would know, what would speak to the part of him that still hears land beneath human noise.

Birch, because he bends and remains unbroken. Mountain laurel because he watches these slopes. Labrador tea because it is the scent by which the bond first found him. The fern, cedar, yarrow, and creek stone after his fear rose—an apology made from plants because my mouth cannot shape the sounds his kind use when they have caused hurt.

He looks at them only long enough for recognition to strike again before he throws himself inside the cabin and closes the door.

The lock turns. The sound is small—human metal sliding into place. A fragile boundary held by wood and metal hinges. I could break it with one hand; tear the door free without effort and stand within his den before the echo left the room.

The thought sickens me. A mate’s den should not be entered by force. Part of me—the part that is antler and claw and the simple knowledge of hunger and chase—snarls at his closed door.

Mine, that part argues, pacing up and down inside my chest.

I chased him in dreams and scented him in his sleep. I walked his path, left gifts, gentled my light, held my claws away, and still he turned.

‘So, take,’ it counters with a growl.

Another part, the older one, the one that carries the weight of all the seasons I outlived my brothers, the one that remembers whole ranges going quiet, lays a heavy hand over the snarl’s mouth.

No. Not yet. The last of us cannot afford to be foolish, and the forest cannot afford it either.

This is not about filling my own hollow with heat and noise. This is about tying the right knot between land and man, binding him into the roots so the park he keeps does not tear itself apart under the weight of his people's footsteps.

So, I stop at the treeline and wait yet again.

Inside, he moves through the den like a storm trapped within a body—pacing, muttering to himself, his panic and disbelief high. I could press calm into him, show him I remain outside and that no harm waits at the threshold. The need to do so burns through me, and the need is not gentle.

After a long while, he moves to the front door, and my body freezes in anticipation. I hear his hand on the lock and the small change in his breathing. He does not open the door, but he stands close to it. The night air carries his scent through the old seams around the frame.

"You can't be real," he whispers at long last, and the words reach me, settling into an ache.

I do not answer him. There is nothing I can give him that would help, as my voice cannot form his language yet. My mind can send meaning, but meaning would become another trespass tonight. He has seen too much at once: the truth of his dreams standing before him with antlers, claws, and a claim he never asked to receive.

He eventually leaves the door, and his steps grow slower after that. Water runs through pipes, cloth shifts, and then his bed creaks beneath his weight. For a long time, he does not sleep. His heart keeps lifting toward waking each time one of the forest's children makes an ordinary sound.

So, I patrol while he waits for sleep, though not close enough for him to sense me at the window. I make sure nothing with teeth or hunger comes close enough to his den to scent him. I leave marks where they will understand it—bark scored high, scent pressed into stone. The only language of territory written where animals and older things can read it.

When I return, my mate is almost asleep.

His heartbeat slows eventually, fighting surrender until exhaustion drags it down. The bond softens with him, no longer snapping with disbelief, but not open either.

Dreams gather near him, and I stay still at their edge. Tonight, I do not enter; he needs sleep without me inside his safe space. Only when his sleep

deepens fully, do I approach his steps where the two bundles still lie.

For several moments, I stand and look at them. The first offering is already drying at the edges, while the second remains damp with evening air. He did not destroy them, even when he realized they were from me.

Still, their presence presses hard now. He has seen me, so the courtship must change.

I crouch down and gather both bundles with care, my claws sliding beneath the bark bindings without tearing them. I hold the white stone in my palm for a breath longer than the rest. It came from a creek below his den, smoothed by water over years of patient wearing down. I meant it to say *I can wait; I can soften what I am enough not to frighten you.*

Perhaps the stone spoke too soon.

I take the offerings into the trees, far from his den, beyond the place where smoke could slip through his window and trouble his sleep.

I make a small fire in a ring of old stone where lightning split a pine years ago. I use dry bark and dead twigs—nothing living when I spark my claws together. The flame catches quickly, low and orange, such a different creature from the blue flame of my lantern.

I place the first bundle into the fire. Birch curls, mountain laurel blackens, and Labrador tea release their scents sharply when heat takes them. Then I burn the second and watch as fern shrivels, cedar snaps softly, and yarrow gives its small pale buds to flame. The bark binding darkens and falls apart, and with it goes the apology my mate was not ready to receive.

I set the white stone at the edge of the fire, not inside it. Stone has no need to burn; it will remain there until rain cools it and moss grows near.

Ash lifts in the night air. I watch until nothing remains but glowing red fragments, reminding me of my mate.

Humans say burning can be both an ending and a cleansing; their meanings often fight one another. To me, this fire is neither. It is a taking back—not from him, never from him. But from the part of me that believed the old ways could be placed on his steps and understood without fear.

My mate is human. He needs time, and time is the one gift I possess too much of.

When the last flame lowers, I cover the ashes with earth and press my palm over the warm place while my decision becomes clear.

I will stay away.

The decision comes with pain, but also with steadiness. I will not stand in his path until he calls me, and I will not force the bond open because my own chest aches. I will not fill his dreams tonight, or leave more offerings before he has chosen what to do with the knowledge of me.

I can be as patient as a growing sapling, if that is what he needs. But staying away does not mean abandoning.

I will watch from farther out and keep his den within the circle of my territory. I will listen for his heartbeat through storms and learn the rhythm of his days without pressing myself against them. If danger approaches, whatever enters will learn that my patience has teeth.

My little ember ran from me tonight, and I let him. Tomorrow he will wake to empty steps and empty dreams.

Let him wonder.

Let him breathe.

The forest and I have waited for many things. We can wait for this.

OceanofPDF.com

10

Lucas

I WAKE WITH A jolt; heart kicking against my ribs, body braced for the familiar aftershock that has dragged me out of sleep every morning for the last five months.

Lying in the gray wash of early dawn, I wait for the usual pieces to settle into place: the moonlit run, the heat coursing through my body, and the fact that I'm being chased, not hunted. I wait for the familiar smell to permeate the air, as usual, while I pretend smelling boggy herbs inside my cabin is normal.

But nothing comes.

No dream residue, no pounding pulse that feels tied to someone else's stride, no scent wrapped in my sheets. The room smells like old wood, cotton, and the faint trace of last night's coffee cup on the nightstand.

Just the cabin. Just me.

In fact, I feel better rested than I have been since before I got here. For a second, I think maybe the dream happened, and my brain immediately dropped the memory of it before I could hold on, the way dreams normally do. I close my eyes and try to grab the tail end of whatever usually slips through my fingers when I wake… but there's nothing there. Just blankness —a dead patch where something should be.

My stomach sinks so fast it feels like I missed a step.

That reaction annoys me on principle because I should be relieved. Any sane person would be relieved. I spent months waking up unsettled, overheated, and confused, breathing in a scent that shouldn't exist inside my bedroom.

Then last night I saw the thing those dreams belonged to.

No dreams should mean peace. No chasing should mean I finally get my damn sanity back. So why am I lying here feeling hollow?

"Seriously?" I mutter at the ceiling, already irritated with myself. "That's where we're at now? I feel empty 'cause I'm *not* bein' stalked anymore?"

I push up onto my elbows and scrub a hand down my face. The room feels too clean and ordinary. No tension hums under my skin, no strange awareness stretches from me to the trees outside. I'm just a guy in a cabin, waking up for work, and somehow that feels wrong.

He's… gone, isn't he?

I sit there in the dim light with that idea pressing in from all sides, and my chest tightens. It's fucking ridiculous. He isn't mine to lose. He isn't anything to me except a creature in the forest who told me I'm his mate, and then I ran. He took the hint, and that should be the end of it.

But it doesn't feel like the ending I want, and that realization sits ugly inside of me.

Eventually, habit drags me out of bed. I get ready for the day while trying not to think about antlers, claws, and what it means when something out of legend takes its scent back.

My eyes keep flicking toward the front door, even though I tell myself I'm not looking. I'm not. I'm a grown man with a badge, a radio, and enough responsibility to keep people alive in places where one bad decision can turn a pleasant day into a rescue mission. I'm not standing in my kitchen, anxious over whether an antlered forest creature left more arts and crafts on my steps.

After making a second batch of coffee—after burning the hell out of the first pot—I carry the mug to the front door with a knot in my throat.

I don't expect the porch to be empty when I open the door.

Not just one bundle gone—both of them.

Seeing nothing there hits so stupidly hard that I actually step out onto the porch and look around, as if the wind might have moved them. I check the

side of the porch, the bushes, the gap near the railing where leaves collect—nothing.

Did that… did he take them back?

Jesus Christ, why the fuck does that hurt?

A week ago—hell, yesterday morning—I would have called that a win. Creepy unexplained offerings removed from my doorstep? Problem solved. Today the emptiness where they sat lands like a shut door.

I stand there with coffee cooling in my cup, staring at the empty step like an idiot. He left those things and watched me refuse them. He showed himself, called me ‘mate’ inside my head, and I ran like my ass was on fire. Then he took them back.

A sick little twist of guilt hits me in the gut.

“I didn’t…” I start, then shut my mouth because I’m outside at six in the morning, talking to a missing bundle of plants.

But I didn’t mean to reject him. Not cruelly, at least. Not with the intention of sending him away. I was in shock; anyone else would be too. I saw a seven-foot cryptid in my woods, and my first coherent thought was to run the fuck out. It felt like a fair response, especially after he called me mate—*what does that even mean?*

But if he took my panic for refusal, if those bundles disappearing and the dreams falling silent mean he stepped back because I told him no…

My throat works as I swallow again.

Why am I not thinking about this like a rational human? Why am I feeling bad for insulting something that could easily kill me? What if he thinks I rejected him and comes to get me anyway?

These questions churn in my head as I walk back inside the cabin. I don’t know why I’m feeling this way, why the thought of a massive cryptid being wounded by my rejection hurts me this much. I don’t even think he would take me, to be honest. Nothing about him gave off a feral, possessive vibe. But then… the missing persons—

I lean back against the door and close my eyes.

Nothing lines up neatly. He didn’t *feel* like the type to kidnap or eat humans, but what do I know? He didn’t follow me inside my cabin; *that* much I know. He stayed out there when I locked the door. He stayed until I fell asleep, took the gifts while I slept, and didn’t haunt my dreams again.

And for some reason, it makes me feel like I did something cruel.



For the next three weeks, life is mostly the same. No dreams, no offerings, and no feeling of being watched or stalked. The routine goes on because it has to.

Trails don’t care that I may or may not have emotionally wounded an ancient forest creature with boundary issues. Work doesn’t pause because my dreams disappeared. Sarah still shoves papers across the front desk and tells me she refuses to mother a grown man who can’t remember to sign forms. Parker still calls me *boss* in the most lovingly disrespectful tone possible. Tom still watches me with that old gaze that misses almost nothing, but he doesn’t ask me questions anymore.

Maybe he knows I’d lie, or maybe he knows I don’t know how to tell the truth.

Every night, I go to bed and expect the forest.

Every morning, I wake with nothing.

No running, no chase, no blue light waiting between the trees, no presence behind me, and no Labrador tea sitting in my lungs when I open my eyes. Just plain, dreamless, useless sleep that should make me functional and instead leaves me waking with a quiet ache I can’t justify to anyone.

I still go out on trails and hike after shift when I can. I tell myself I’m checking storm damage, monitoring spring washouts, and keeping an eye on campsite use. All true, technically, which makes the lie easier to live with.

I don’t take the same path every night; I’m not that pathetic. I take North Ridge once, Marlow Creek twice, the eastern loop when a report comes in about downed branches, or the old deer trail behind the cabin on nights when I don’t have enough daylight left to pretend to work.

I never see the lantern, and I never smell him.

By the fourth week, I am angry with myself for missing something I never invited into my life.

Dinner at Mel’s that Sunday is normal enough, although Jonah sits at the table with us and answers more than he used to. Not a lot, but enough that Mel keeps glancing at me with cautious hope whenever Jonah speaks in full sentences. He even laughs at a joke Aaron makes. The sound is rusty and brief, but it’s there.

I should leave the house feeling lighter. I do, partly. Then I drive back to the cabin too late to hike, and the empty porch is still waiting when I pull up. I sit in the truck for too long and stare at the steps.

Still nothing.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Dawson?” I breathe, tilting my head back. Then another thing crosses my mind, and I scoff.

Why does this feel more painful than the breakup?

That Thursday, I come home after helping Parker deal with drunk, out-of-town campers at Pine Hollow. I’m too wired to sleep and too tired to hike. I dump my gear by the door, kick off my boots, then my eyes fall on the little stone on my kitchen windowsill.

I found it on a trail weeks ago, half buried near a washed-out slope—smooth, black, and heavier than it looked. Onyx, I knew immediately, since I know rocks the same way people know cars. I meant to toss it in the little dish where I keep trail finds, but I never got around to it.

I stand there and stare at it, then I laugh because apparently I’ve hit the point in this experience where giving gifts back to cryptids feels like the next logical step.

“Fantastic,” I say, picking up the stone. “Am I really that lonely that I’m willin’ to do this?”

I walk toward the front door before I can talk myself out of it.

I stand a step above where the bundles were placed and crouch down, setting the onyx where the apology bundle sat. It looks small there. A small stone on gray boards, offered to something older than the town itself.

I keep my fingers on the stone for a second, feeling ridiculous for doing this. Then I pull my hand back and decide to cut the crap.

“I’m sorry,” I say quietly, feeling heat crawl up my neck. No one’s here to see me, but something tells me he’s listening. “I don’t know if you understand apologies—I don’t even know if that’s what one of those bundles was. But if it was… then I’m sorry I didn’t… I’m sorry I just ran.”

I drag a hand through my hair, messing it up as I stare down at the stone. “You scared the hell out of me. Humans don’t usually run into campfire-

story monsters on the daily. I didn't expect… I didn't expect you."

"You called me mate. I heard it… in my head. And I have been dreamin' about the word before I even saw you, so you have to understand that's a lot to dump on a guy."

I breathe out through my nose, laughing at myself.

"You didn't hurt me, and I know you could've. You didn't catch me when I ran away either, and you didn't come into my home. You stayed outside, then you took your things away and I… I felt empty."

There's my truth, finally spoken without the bullshit deflections. Might as well get it out there before my grippy sock trip.

"I didn't mean to reject you. I don't know what I meant, and I…" I trail off, get to my feet, and pull at my hair again. "I'm not promising anythin', alright? I'm not sayin' come grab me and drag me off into the woods. But I didn't mean to be cruel by runnin' away from you."

A twig cracks somewhere far beyond the yard, and I freeze. For one suspended second, I wait for the scent or the glow in the trees.

…but nothing comes. The forest remains silent.

I sigh and look down at the stone again, then shake my head. "I guess that's it."

I leave the stone on the step and go inside.

Sleep takes me fast that night. One second I'm staring at the ceiling with the window open, letting in the cool pine air, the next I'm in the forest.

Moonlight turns everything silver. I know this place and this feeling. Bare feet on moss, breath sharp in my lungs, and the sense of something behind me that would send prey running into panic, but instead fills me with electric anticipation.

I'm running again, this time with a grin splitting my face; long strides eating the distance. The path doesn't exist, and yet I know exactly where to place my feet.

Only tonight, when I break into the clearing, I turn.

I don't know why I do it. For months, I've woken up before I could get a good look. For months, I've let him chase me while some part of me understood he wasn't trying to catch me unless I chose to stop.

So, I stop.

… and the sight of what's behind me knocks every coherent thought out of my head.

OceanofPDF.com

II

Lucas

I EXPECTED ANTLERS. BONE. A glowing lantern swinging from a black tine. I expect that towering shape from the trail: fused stag skull, slate skin, and claws.

Instead, there's a man—or something close enough to make my brain stumble over the difference.

He stands a few yards away between two old trees, taller than any man I've seen up close—and that's saying something, since I'm six feet myself.

Six-five, maybe more, long-limbed and carved with muscle in a way that makes my brain short-circuit for a second.

His chest looks like it could stop a truck, with arms that look like they could throw said truck into a creek, and a stomach cut into so many hard lines I briefly forget I'm supposed to be having a normal reaction to any of this.

Apparently, the local forest cryptid comes with eight-pack abs.

His hair is black, thick, and long enough to fall past his shoulders in heavy waves, as if no comb has ever won a fight against them. He's wearing black pants and is bare-chested—because of course he is—with dark markings running over his chest, shoulders, arms, and up the side of his throat.

At first, I think they're tattoos, then I remember our first meeting. They look like tree growth rings tattooed on his skin.

His eyes are what hold me. They're blue—not normal blue, but burning with the same eerie blue-white glow as his lantern behind almond-shaped eyes.

Everything about him is rough, wild, and wrong in the cleanest way, and my body reacts before my brain finishes panicking that it's reacting at all.

I've never looked at a man and thought *beautiful*. Not really. I've known men were good-looking in the abstract way. I can recognize it without wanting anything from it.

This man isn't just beautiful; he looks like the forest built itself a body from shadow and roots, then gave it eyes bright enough to guide someone home or lure them deeper.

Well, then. I guess it's time to admit I *am* having a late sexual awakening. Love that for me.

He walks closer, and my throat works around nothing before I force words out. "Are you…" I stop, trying not to fucking die because of how stupid this will sound. "Are you the same thing I saw in the forest?"

He watches me with an intensity that makes my pulse kick, then he gives one small nod.

"Okay," I say, rubbing a hand over my mouth. "Right. Okay. So this is… you. This is what you can look like?"

Another nod. His head tilts afterward, hair sliding over one shoulder, and that gesture carries enough of the creature from the woods that my skin prickles. Different shape, same presence, and same attention.

"Can you talk?"

His mouth parts slightly, and I focus there before I can stop myself. His lips are shaped like a man's, but his canines are a little too long when I catch a glimpse of them. He moves his jaw once, then his brows draw together with an expression that looks almost frustrated.

A pressure touches the inside of my skull. It's not rough or painful, but more like fingers pressing against the surface of water. I stiffen, but I don't pull away.

No mouth-speech, I hear in my mind.

It's not exactly like hearing a voice. It's more like the shape of meaning dropping fully formed into my head, wrapped in the texture of him. Rough. Deep. Not human in the way it moves. The words are mine, English and

clear, but the cadence beneath them is older, stranger, built out of instinct and image and scent instead of grammar.

I know human tongue from listening. This shape has not learned to make it.

I stare at him, openly gaping. “So, the mind thing is real.” He nods once. “And you’ve been doin’ that in my dreams?”

Another nod, but a sensation—our bond?—dips through the space between us before he answers more fully. ***Dreams are safer. Less fear. You ran and knew I would not take you unless you turned.***

My face heats so fast I’m grateful that this is a dream and the lighting is weird. “Yeah, well, the dreams got a little more… complicated than runnin’.”

His gaze drops to my mouth, then lower for half a second before returning to my eyes. Through the bond, I feel something I’m not ready for: satisfaction, hunger, curiosity, and a possessive warmth that makes my knees almost forget their job.

I point at him, because absolutely not. “Don’t look at me like that.”

His head tilts again, and it’s as endearing as a puppy. ***Like what?***

“Like you know exactly what I’m talkin’ about,” I grumble, and the words come out more breathless than annoyed, which is humiliating as hell.

He doesn’t smile, but something around his eyes changes. It’s subtle, and because the face is human now, I can read it better than I could through the skull. Amusement, or whatever the forest-creature version of amusement is.

I clear my throat and drag us back to safer ground before my dream decides we should continue where we left off last time. “Did you stay away because I ran?”

The amusement vanishes when he nods again. The bond—yes, I’m calling it that now—tightens and for one second, I feel the shape of his hurt. Not dramatic or human in the way I understand hurt. But real; deep enough that my chest aches in answer.

He stood back because I ran. He took the bundles so I wouldn’t be reminded of what scared me. He gave me space, and somehow that feels so much worse than if he had kept leaving things.

“I didn’t mean…” I stop and swallow hard. “I didn’t mean for you to think I rejected you. I was shocked, and you were… still are a lot to process.”

His gaze searches my face. ***I know.*** There's no blame in his words, and that makes it harder.

I look away first, staring past him at the trees because staring at him keeps doing things to my insides that I am not equipped to handle.

"Those bundles… were from you, yeah?" I ask, and he nods again. "And the second one was an apology for scarin' me with your light?"

Another nod.

I huff and scrub a hand through my hair. "I knew it. I mean, I don't know how I knew it, but I knew it."

Fuck me, what are words?

His attention drops to my hand when I lower it. The focus is so intense it makes me aware of my own fingers. The scar near my thumb from a pocketknife accident when I was fifteen, the dirt under one nail even in a dream.

"The missing people," I say before I lose my nerve and his gaze snaps to mine again. "Hikers, Ava, the previous ranger—all of them. Was that you?"

No.

It hits hard enough that I believe him before I can argue with myself. The word is too clean and absolute, with no defensiveness or fear of being caught.

I breathe out slowly. "You didn't take any of them?"

He shakes his head. ***Humans die in forest. Water takes them… cold takes them. Fall, fear, and foolishness takes them. I have killed threats… not hunted your kind for meat.***

Something in the way he says 'threats' makes me freeze. "You've killed humans?"

His eyes hold mine when he nods. My stomach tightens, but honesty matters more than the answer. "Because they came after you?"

He considers that, and I can feel him sorting through human words with effort, shaping them around instincts that aren't built like mine.

They… came with fire. Iron teeth. Poison. Guns. Took more than the earth gave. They hurt forest and living things with… noise and pride and over-hunting. Some saw me and chose attack. Some I… chased away. Some would not leave.

I am a little horrified, I won't lie. I also live and work in these woods, and I know exactly how cruel people can be when they think wilderness is theirs

to use up. Still, knowing a thing in theory and hearing him admit he's ended human lives are two different things.

"But you didn't take the missing ones?" I ask again.

No.

I nod, not because the matter is settled, but because I need somewhere to put the answer for now. "Is there another one like you?"

He shakes his head, and I only realize now how close he's standing. ***Not anymore. I am the last one.***

"Uh, huh," I mumble, because standing this close to him is frying my restraint.

He's a wall of heat and muscle and all those strange, impossible details forced into a shape I don't know what to do with. My eyes keep catching on bits of him: those tree-ring markings disappearing into his hairline near his neck, the crazy width of his shoulders, and the slow rise of his chest. The shape of his hands, still a little too large. His long fingers with the nails dark but human enough in this form that my body stops trying to file them under danger and starts wondering how they would really feel braced on my hips.

What the fuck, Lucas?

I drag my gaze back up to his face before I can embarrass myself even more. "Do you have a name?" I ask.

The silence after that question feels different. He's watching me with an expression I can't read, flexing his fingers once at his side.

Not for human mouth.

I raise my eyebrow. "You have a name, though."

He shakes his head. ***Not name. Earth-mark. First calling. You cannot hold it.***

Oookay, I guess that means it's in some cryptid language I can't pronounce. Alright. "Then what do I call you?"

He steps closer. Only one step, but my pulse reacts wildly. ***You give name.***

I stare at him, flustered and stunned. "You want me to name you?"

Yes.

"That feels… bigger than you're making it sound."

It is.

Of course naming the ancient skull-faced forest predator from my dreams is a huge deal. Why would anything in my life be normal now?

I rub my thumb against my palm, suddenly remembering the stone I placed on the step this evening. The little offering I left because I didn't know how else to say I was sorry.

"Onyx," I say softly.

He inhales, and the whole dream seems to breathe with him. The bond opens wide and warmth flows through my chest in a rush so pure it almost hurts. Happiness. Contentment. A deep, settling pleasure without human awkwardness attached.

He accepts the name with his whole body, shoulders lowering, eyes brightening even more, and one hand pressing over the center of his chest.

Onyx. Yes. From your mouth, I keep it, he says, and looks at me with a kind of devotion that should send me running again.

Maybe it would if I were awake. Maybe the dream makes me braver, or maybe I'm tired of pretending my body doesn't know him.

Onyx. He's as beautiful and wild as the stone I gifted him. Beautiful, like the forest is beautiful when you know enough to respect that it could kill you. He reminds me of the only place that has ever made me feel fully at home… he is the forest personified.

His gaze lowers briefly to my mouth again.

I notice.

He notices me noticing.

Heat climbs my neck, and because I have zero survival instincts in this dream, I say, "Don't get smug. I'm still processin'."

Onyx's eyes narrow with that almost amusement again. ***Processing***, he echoes in my mind.

I laugh despite myself, soft and startled, and his entire expression changes at the sound. The hunger is still there, and so is the possession. But underneath all that is wonder so stark and quiet that it knocks the smile right out of me.

OceanofPDF.com

12

Onyx

HE STAYS.

That is the first thing that matters. Not the name he put on me—though that settles warmly under my skin like a coal tucked into bark. Not the way his scent changed when he looked at this softer shape, his fear loosening into heat, confusion, and that curious pull that makes animals step closer instead of away.

Those matter, too; they matter much. But first is this: my little human, my little ember stands in the clearing and does not run from me.

I did not know how badly I needed that until the bond quieted with it. It had paced in me, sore and restless, nosing at the place where he turned from my first form and fled to his den.

I knew it was right to pull away from him. Pushing harder would have snapped him away from me for good.

Now, he stands before me in the moon-bright clearing with my new name on his tongue, and the ache eases so much that I almost sway with it.

Onyx.

I feel the name take root. He names me from something he chose to give back, and the bond receives it before I know how to hold myself still beneath the feeling.

I press my hand to my chest because the body I wear is too small for what is moving through me.

His scent has changed since the first night I saw him. Fear is there, yes, because he is not foolish, but it no longer comes first. Curiosity pushes against it. Caution. Guilt. Heat when his eyes travel over the body I wear and then snap back to my face as if he has been caught stealing from the forest.

He does this often—looks, then denies looking. Human contradictions remain difficult.

I feel him think men are not beautiful to him, then look at me as if I have become something beautiful anyway. He says he is still processing, though he does not chew, grind, or soften anything between his teeth. He speaks of disbelief while standing in the dream he entered after leaving me a stone and an apology. He fears being claimed, yet his body leans toward the bond every time it touches him.

My mate is confusing.

My mate is here.

That is enough to make happiness move through me so much it almost hurts.

And I cannot stop looking at him. Little Ember's face moves quickly, much quicker than mine ever has, expressions changing and overlapping. Humans waste nothing with their faces. He wears all of his emotions in flashes that vanish before I have fully understood the first.

My kind never needed that much movement—scent and stance and silence did our talking. But my mate is made of quicker things, and I am trying.

"What are you?" he asks first, then his face takes on an expression of embarrassment. "I mean, what creature are you?"

Cervari. I send him the name Aestrata gave my kind. ***Made from forest, for forest.***

His brows draw together. "So, you're like… a forest guardian?"

I like that, so I nod.

"Were there more of you?" he asks, and I nod again. "What happened to them?"

Time happened. Fire happened. Iron, hunger, human roads shrinking dark places, winters too hard and summers too dry… I trail off, struggling to explain. ***Some went quiet the way old things do. They are gone.***

His mouth softens at the corners, and I recognize it as grief. Grief for beings he has never met. He is made this way, I think. Quick to hurt for others, even when he should be keeping himself safe. It explains why he still smells faintly of his old pain.

“How long have you been alone?” he asks.

Too long, I think, but I let the bond do what my mouth cannot. I send him not a number, because numbers that large lose meaning in a human mind. I send him a feeling; snow after snow, leaves falling and growing back. Rivers changing course, dens rotting and being rebuilt. The long ache of silence.

His breath catches. “Oh.”

Yes.

He looks down for a moment, then back up at me. “And the dreams? That was you?”

This one I can answer better because it is recent and wrapped up in the bond.

Sleep is the easiest place to touch without breaking. Wanted soft before hard. Wanted your body to know me before your eyes feared me.

Redness floods his face and throat in a swift rush. It comes with embarrassment, yes, but also that lower, sweeter thing I have come to know well from the edges of his dreaming. Want—he remembers what happened in those dreams.

Good. I pressed pleasure there on purpose, built nests of safety under his skin so when he met me waking he wouldn’t be too afraid. This shape is human enough for him to look at me without the bright snap of shock. That is why I forced myself into it after so many years.

But it has limits I had forgotten. Bone folded inward, antlers buried beneath skull, skin smoothed over markings that should be bark dark and thick. Teeth made smaller, though not small enough. Hands shortened. Claws pressed back until my fingers feel dull and strange. This body aches from every place it has been made less.

He shifts his weight and drags one hand through his red hair. The motion sends the copper strands into worse disarray, and I want to put them back only so I can feel them between my fingers. But I keep my hands at my sides because he watches my hands with the careful attention of prey and ranger both, and I have already learned that wanting is not permission.

“That explains…” He stops, hand slipping to the back of his neck, and his scent spikes hotter. “Actually, no, we’re not unpackin’ that right now.”

I do not know what he means by unpacking, but I feel that there is too much inside him for him to understand. I accept that.

“Why me?”

Simple question. Hard answer.

Because the first time your scent touched the ridge, my bones woke up and knew you.

Because the forest bends toward you.

Because your feet land where they should, and you listen when the dark speaks.

Because when your heart broke, you still came back to this place instead of hardening away from it.

Because the bond chose, and the bond has roots deeper than either of us.

I could say all of that through the mind-link, but it would drown him. Too much feeling, too much certainty pressed at once into a human skull still trying to accept that antlers became a man. So I choose the smallest true piece.

You are mate.

I watch as his body stills, and the whole clearing seems to hold its breath.

“You keep sayin’ that. Do you mean in the fate way? The… soulmate way? Or do you just mean…” he gestures between us helplessly. “Chosen?”

I tilt my head, considering. The distinction matters to him. Their kind likes neat edges on things that bleed into each other.

All, I send. ***Earth Mother chose you for me. I could have hunted, could have taken, but did not. I waited, watched, called. Wanted you to turn toward me with your own feet***.

His eyes close for a beat, as if my honesty lands heavy. When they open again, something in them has changed.

“I left you a stone,” he says.

Warmth unfurls through me so suddenly, I almost lose shape. It ripples from the center of me out towards fingers, face, and spine—a physical thing. I nod once again.

“Did you… like it?” he asks, and the uncertain way he asks is something I dislike.

My little human, who has walked these woods for months knowing every track and weather sign, still asks for reassurance as if I might not have taken

his gift into my very marrow.

Through the bond, I send him the instant I heard him talking to me before he placed it on the step. I sent him the satisfaction of placing it in my fist and carrying it to my den.

“Oh,” he says, his pale skin reddening again.

He asks more questions after that, as if now that the door is cracked open, he cannot help himself from leaning his entire weight on it.

Do others know about you? Have you always been near the town? Were the stories true about people disappearing? Can you really look like this outside dreams? Can you come into town? Have you ever—

Too many.

Each question is its own trail splitting off into ten more. I know the shape of many answers, but forcing them through his language is like pulling antlers through a rabbit tunnel. Holding this form is work at the best of times, but it is made worse because I am exhausted.

I did not sleep after my mate refused me—not really. I lay in the pine over his clearing and listened to his heartbeat while I made plans. Then I walked the ridges through every dark hour that followed; too raw to settle, too aware of his absence in the bond.

So, when I took this man-form tonight, I did it on a body already stretched too thin.

The first sign is the ache at the back of my skull, then a pull along my spine where the antlers want their true weight back. The marks under this skin start to itch, not on the surface but where shape and self rub wrong against each other.

Little Ember notices before I choose to tell him. Of course he would notice. He watches land and weather for a living.

“Hey,” he says, stepping a little closer, concern jumping into his scent immediately. “Are you okay?”

The irony of that lands strangely. I am an ancient thing with a skull face and antlers taller than his whole upper body, and still, concern is my human’s first instinct when he sees my shoulders tighten.

Tired, I send, but the word comes out slower.

His eyes narrow, scanning me. “This form is hard for you.”

I shrug one shoulder, which translates badly in this shape. ***I have not taken this form in five hundred years,*** I say. ***And have not slept since you ran.***

Guilt blooms in him all at once. It floods his scent so strongly I can almost taste it. “Five hundr… you took this form because of me? After not sleeping for nearly four weeks?”

I dislike that immediately. He is always so ready to put blame on his own shoulders, as if pain in a room must belong to him.

I shake my head. ***Not your fault, never your fault. I chose a shape that… would be easier for you to accept. My want. My choice.*** He looks unconvinced, so I use the bond gentler this time. ***Chose to wait. Chose to not sleep. You staying… worth it all.***

That seems to get through to him. I feel the guilt in him soften slightly. “You should’ve slept.”

I could say the same to him for half the season he has been here. Instead, I answer with honesty. ***Could not.***

His throat seems to work as he swallows. “Will I see you again?”

There is no world in which the answer is no. Not now. Not when he has named me and left a stone in apology, even when the apology was not needed. Still, I understand what he is asking.

Come to the forest.

He stares at me. “What?”

Forest is mine. Trails, creeks, old ridge, cedar hollow. I live there. If you want me, come where I am.

He exhales, and some tension unwinds in him. “So, if I come out there… you’ll come?”

I nod and send a pulse of reassurance through the bond. ***Always.***

That seems to shake him more than it should. I feel it ripple through his chest; a small, stunned tenderness that catches on heartbreak and pulls. I feel him remembering something, a promise made by someone whose promises were made of paper and ash. My certainty lands differently because I do not know how to counterfeit it.

A tremor moves through the human shape. My vision dims at the edges, exhaustion dragging me down even toward where my body lies. The forest in the dream blurs, then steadies when I force more strength into it.

Little Ember sees that, too. “You need to go,” he says quietly. “And Onyx?”

Yes?

He hesitates, then steps closer one last inch. Not close enough to touch, just enough that his warmth reaches me through the cool dream air. “I’m

sorry I ran from you.”

That’s the regret I’ve felt ever since I pulled myself back from him. I let the link carry my answer, even though it is slower now.

You saw… my true form and… it was too much. You ran to breathe, Little Ember. I understand.

His lashes lower briefly, then his eyes snap back to mine—so wide and clear. The beautiful color of moss and my treeline. “Little Ember?”

I nod. ***Red hair even in moonlight***. I tap my chest. ***Warmth in… my cold hollow. Small compared to me, yes... but not weak. A thing that glows after fire has passed… and can start burning again… if given breath.***

He goes quiet once more, and I worry I have done wrong again, even if his scent does not carry fear.

“My name is Lucas, but I don’t mind you calling me that,” he says, clearing his throat while looking down at the grass. “When I come back, don’t…” he looks back up at me, cheeks a deeper red than before, “don’t disappear again.”

The possessive curl in me likes the word ‘when,’ not ‘if.’ I answer it with a small pulse of agreement. Then, because honesty is much easier than comfort, I add, ***If I am a danger… to you, I pull away. Else, I stay.***

“That’ll have to do,” he says, and offers me a smile—faint and tired, but beautiful enough to hit me again with how strange humans are. They can pull so much light into their faces with a tiny movement.

The dream thins around us. I can feel the edges of his sleep shifting toward waking, and my hold on the man-shape loosening. The clearing blurs at the far end, pines smearing into shadow, and I take a step back.

Sleep, Little Ember, I send through the bond. ***Find me.***

The red returns to his face, stirring the old hunger in me. But I am too tired to hold the feeling for long.

“I will,” he says.

Then the dream gives way, peeling apart into moonlight, scent, and the last feeling of his attention on me. I let the human skin drop from my mind with painfully sharp relief.

I wake beneath the earth-warmed hollow of my nest with the name Onyx rooted inside me, and my mate’s question still bright in the bond.

Will I see you again?

Yes.

When he comes to the forest and his feet choose the trail, all he needs to do is look in the dark and find me already waiting there.

OceanofPDF.com

13

Lucas

MORNING DRAGS ME UP from sleep like a hook under my sternum. No gentle drifting, no warm stretch—just a hard snap into consciousness, every nerve already on a hair trigger.

I lie there for a second, tangled in sheets, trying to blink the dream out. Moonlight. Blue eyes. A name claimed and kept—and my body responds like it signed its own contract while I was out cold.

I'm hard—painfully, impossibly hard. The kind of throbbing heat that turns thought into static. I shove a hand under the blanket, palming the problem like pressure alone might talk it down.

It only gets worse, thick pulses dragging a groan out of me before I can bite it back, the fabric of my boxers already damp at the tip. I roll onto my side and curse under my breath. Everything aches, and every pulse echoes Onyx's voice in my head.

This is stupid.

I throw the blankets off and stumble to my feet, boxers tented obscenely. Cool air slaps my legs and does nothing to help the needy ache. I mutter a string of half-formed oaths, pad to the bathroom, and crank the shower as hot as it'll go.

Steam fills the space, fogs the mirror, and loosens my muscles—but the problem between my legs only stiffens, bold as a bruise. I step under the spray and hiss when the water hits my overheated skin.

"Fuck," I groan as I tilt my head back and close my eyes, trying to breathe through it. Bad move because the image that flares behind my eyelids is pure, unfiltered dream.

Onyx in the clearing, moonlight striping those wide shoulders, tattoo-like markings over his arms and chest, thick black hair falling over his shoulder. God, he looked all man, and it is confusing as hell.

Then another memory crashes in—the older dream, the one where he didn't just stand in the clearing, but pushed me up against a tree and fucked the life out of me.

My cock kicks under the spray, each throb matched by a tug low in my gut. I brace both palms on the tile, water pounding on my back, and try to focus on anything else, but nothing sticks. It all slides off the slick surface of need until I'm left with bright blue eyes and a wall of muscle.

"Goddamn it," I whisper, but it's ragged, and half gone to a moan.

I wrap a hand around my cock because there's no point pretending anymore. The first stroke steals my breath—too sensitive, too much. I rest my forehead against the wet tiles and work myself slowly, my palm gliding easily with soap and water, my hips rocking without permission.

I try to keep it controlled, which is laughable considering I'm braced in my bathroom jerking off to the memory of a forest creature who, until last night, didn't even have a name I could pronounce without sounding insane.

Steam clings to my skin. Water runs down my spine, over my thighs, under my feet, and every stroke pulls another image loose from the dark place I shoved it.

Onyx looking at me when I named him.

Onyx's relief pouring through the bond so strongly it felt like someone lit a fire inside my ribs.

Onyx's bare chest marked with those dark, bark-like lines, the shape of him huge and still, and so painfully careful with me that it does something worse than scare me.

It makes me want.

I press my forehead harder against the tiles and drag my fist faster, jaw clenched so tightly it aches.

“This is so fuckin’ stupid,” I mutter, but my voice breaks at the end, ruining the whole point of trying to sound annoyed.

My body doesn’t care about my opinions. It’s had five months of dreams, four weeks of absence, and one dream conversation with a male creature who looked like the forest learned how to stand on two feet and watch me with devotion. My body has taken all of that information and reached a conclusion without consulting me.

The worst part is how easy it is once I stop pretending.

I groan and stroke my cock faster. My knees wobble, so I widen my stance, picturing those long, dark-tipped fingers wrapping around my hips, pulling me back onto him until all I can hear is skin slapping and my own moans.

My hips jerk into my hand, and I choke on a sound I’m grateful no one is around to hear. I think of his hand over his chest when I gave him the name, the way happiness came through him without shame or defense, pure enough that it made my own ribs hurt.

My hand moves faster, slick and rough, water beating down on my shoulders while I chase the edge with an anger that has almost nothing to do with anger anymore.

I shouldn’t say his name; I really shouldn’t, but it rasps out anyway. “*F-fuck*. Onyx—”

As soon as the word leaves my mouth, I’m gone—body locking, pleasure ripping up my nerves in bright, relentless waves.

When I come, it tears out of me hard enough that my knees buckle and my palm slaps the tile to keep me upright. My breath catches, then breaks into a groan that echoes off the shower walls while my body pulses through it, white heat spilling over my fist and washing away almost instantly under the spray.

For a few seconds, I’m nothing but shaking muscle and embarrassment delayed by pleasure. Then reality crawls back in with the steam.

I stand there, panting, one hand still braced on the wall, and stare down at the water spiraling toward the drain as if it can tell me what the hell I’m supposed to do with myself now.

I didn’t just get off to a fantasy; I got off to *him*. A being who stepped out of myth and right into my life, claimed a name from my mouth, and now owns half my headspace before breakfast.

“Great,” I say hoarsely. “Fantastic. Very normal start to the day.”

By the time I clean up, finish the shower, and step into the fogged bathroom, humiliation has fully settled into my skin. I wipe the mirror with the side of my hand and look at myself through the smeared reflection.

I look well and truly debauched. Red hair, dark, wet, and sticking up weird. Freckles against a face still a little too flushed. Eyes a little wild. Thirty-five years old and officially losing my mind over an ancient cryptid I named after a rock I found.

“You’re going to work today, and you’re gonna act normal,” I point at my reflection. “You’re gonna sign reports, answer radios, check trail conditions, and absolutely *not* think about the fact that you just jerked off to a guy who has antlers in his other form.”

The man in the mirror looks unconvinced.

I’m unconvinced, too, but bills and responsibilities are useful things when your internal life turns into a circus fire.

I dress in my uniform, get coffee going, throw the towel from the bathroom into the wash, and deliberately do not think about the fact that if this bond is half as mutual as I think it is, then he probably felt every second of what happened in the shower. The thought catches in my brain, and I immediately shove it into a locked drawer in the back of my head.

Work happens regardless of my new sexual awakening. I still have a trail to check, a radio to carry, and people to keep from walking themselves into stupid situations.

I head out, work the day, answer questions from tourists who somehow made it to a state park without understanding how weather works, and spend an hour with Parker knee-deep in brush because some idiot thought carving initials into trail signs counted as romance. Parker talks the whole time, mostly about nothing, and I’m grateful for it because it lets me hide inside responses that don’t require me to think too hard.

“You going out tonight?” he asks as we load tools back into the truck, sweat cooling between my shoulder blades as it dries.

“Maybe.”

He gives me a sideways look. “You say that in a tone that suggests either moonlit hiking or murder.”

“Those aren’t my only two hobbies.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

I snort and shut the tailgate harder than necessary. “I just need some air.”

He raises both hands in surrender. “Alright, Ranger. Don’t let the boogeyman get you.”

The joke lands square in the center of my chest and stays there, because I kinda want the boogeyman to get me. I force out a laugh that sounds passably normal and climb into the driver’s seat before he can look too closely.

By the time I get back to the cabin, the sun is lowering behind the ridge and the spring evening has cooled into that perfect hour where the whole place smells damp and alive.

I park, kill the engine, and sit there with my hands on the steering wheel, staring out at the treeline. I told him I would come. I didn’t specify when, but the promise is still there. The rational part of me wants to eat dinner, shower again, and stay inside with the door locked because meeting Onyx while awake is different from meeting him in a dream.

I get out of the truck and stand at the bottom of the steps for a second, keys in one hand and my bag in the other, staring at the porch. I’m standing on my own property, thinking about a cryptid date. I should feel ridiculous. Instead, I feel nervous.

That’s almost more irritating than the shower incident. I’m not nineteen. I’m not heading to a first dinner with someone I met on an app. I’m a grown man with dirt under his nails and a state-issued radio clipped to his belt.

The person I’m going to meet in the woods wears antlers in one form and can apparently step into my dreams in another. The nerves still show up anyway, hot and skittish under my skin.

I go inside, dump my work bag on the chair by the door, and change into what has become my evening hiking uniform. A faded charcoal thermal, an old green flannel overshirt, dark cargo pants, thick socks, and boots that know every contour of these trails as well as I do. Then, I pack my radio, water, first-aid kit, knife, headlamp, and a protein bar. Fear and attraction apparently don’t make me stupid enough to ignore blood sugar.

I stand by the door, hand on my pack strap, listening to the cabin settle around me.

“You can still not do this,” I tell myself before I open the door and step outside.

The forest smells like wet cedar, pine resin, fern, and spring soil loosened by thaw. No Labrador tea at first, and my stomach twists with an anxious

little drop. I lock the cabin behind me, pause on the porch, and look at the space where the bundles and stone have been.

“I’m doin’ this, then,” I mutter, then I head for the trail.

I can’t explain it, but I know exactly where I’m heading. There’s a bend in the north trail where the trees open around an old boulder split by lightning years before I was born. The ground there flattens into a natural little bowl, soft with moss, and you can hear the creek if you stand still long enough.

When I come around the last curve, he steps out from between two pines, and I forget how to breathe. Onyx in human form is somehow more shocking in waking life than he was in a dream.

Maybe it’s because dream logic lets impossible things slide right past your brain without resistance. Maybe it’s because out here, in the real forest with dirt under my boots and the cool bite of dusk on my face, a man that beautiful standing in my woods feels just as surreal as antlers.

God, he’s taller than I remember, which seems unfair considering dreams exaggerate things. He’s bare-chested again, long black hair falling loose over his shoulders and down his back. His skin is pale in the dim light, but the dark marks along his arms, chest, throat, and ribs make him look carved from old forest shadow.

In the dream, I thought they looked like growth rings. In waking life, they’re even more striking, raised slightly in some places, smooth in others, following the shape of him in a way no tattoo artist could plan.

Those blue eyes pin me where I stand, and the heat that moves through me at the sight of him is immediate and humiliatingly familiar.

“Okay,” I say before I can stop myself. “That is… not helpin’.”

One of his brows lifts. It’s a tiny movement, but on his face it reads almost comically human.

You came, he says over the mind-link, his voice settling into my head with that same rough texture as before, all gravel and warmth and certainty.

“I did,” I say, and my own voice sounds thin compared to the quiet around us. I swallow and force myself the rest of the way into the little clearing. “You…” I wave a hand at him uselessly. “You look like this here, too?”

The corner of his mouth shifts. Not a full smile, just enough to change the severe line of it. ***Easier in my trees,*** the voice in my head replies. ***Dream takes more. Here I hold shape with the forest around me.***

I glance past him at the trees, the moss, the stone, as if the environment itself might explain that sentence. “So, the forest helps? Holding this form is easier awake than in the dream?”

He nods once, then adds, ***Here is ground. Dream is water.***

“That actually makes sense,” I say, even though it absolutely shouldn’t. “In a weird, cryptid-logic way.”

His head tilts slightly. ***Cryptid?***

I almost smile at the way the word comes through the bond with curiosity wrapped around it. “Monsters, legends, creatures. Stuff that might be real but no one can prove. I guess you qualify.”

Onyx considers that—*oh, my god, why is confusion on his face so cute?*—then he sends, ***Humans name what they fear so fear has walls.***

“Yeah. We do that a lot.”

He moves his mouth then, not speaking, just parting his lips slightly. I see the small hitch in his jaw, the effort of him trying to speak, and the frustration that crosses his face and comes through the bond. Then his throat works around a sound that never forms.

“You don’t have to do that,” I say before he can strain himself more. “The mind-link thing is fine.”

His eyes lock onto mine, and he sighs. ***Never needed to learn mouth-speech or tongue-shapes. Cannot move mouth right,*** he says, and for the first time I catch something close to frustration in the thought. ***Learned words. Did not learn lips. Human speech wants small muscles I never used.***

The explanation is so blunt and intimate that it helps loosen some of my nervousness. “That’s okay. You don’t have to speak aloud for me.”

I feel warmth through the bond. Not like the flood from the dream when I named him, but a smaller pulse of pleasure that spreads through my chest before I realize it isn’t mine. I take a breath, and his gaze sharpens as if he felt me feeling it.

“Still gettin’ used to that,” I admit, and take him in again, more openly this time.

I’m suddenly aware of how much this must cost him. Not just the shape itself, but the effort of making himself comprehensible to me at all. He could’ve stayed in antlers and lantern light and let me do the translating. Instead, he stands here in a body built to hurt me in a completely different way, forcing meaning through a link because his mouth won’t cooperate.

“You don’t have to—” I start, but he’s already moving.

He closes the distance between us slowly, giving me every chance to step back. I don’t. The air around him is warmer than the rest of the clearing. I can feel it before he even reaches me; that strange, banked heat that seems to live under his skin. His scent thickens, too. Labrador tea, yes, but also something darker and richer—warm resin and stone and clean sweat.

I remember this morning in the shower, and I pray to whatever is listening that the bond is one-way right now. Then I remember it absolutely isn’t and almost die on the spot.

Onyx lifts one hand, and I track it like prey tracks a hawk’s shadow—long fingers, dark nails. He pauses a breath from my face, giving me one last chance to object.

“Go ahead,” I say, and the words come out more of a whisper.

His palm settles against my cheek, and every nerve in my body lights up.

There’s no other way to put it. The contact is so startlingly warm that I suck in a breath. Not fever hot or unnatural, just incredibly warm. As if he’s been standing in sunlight all day and carried it with him into dusk.

His palm is rougher than a human hand even through my beard—not abrasive, but textured in a way that makes me think of smooth bark and river stone. He brushes his thumb below my eye with such concentrated wonder that my breath catches.

Small sun-marks*,* he sends through the bond with fascination in his tone. ***Many. Beautiful.***

My face burns. “They’re called freckles.”

Freckles, he repeats, then shakes his head. ***Ember marks.***

I let out a weak laugh because the alternative is melting into the moss. “That’s not what they’re called, Onyx.”

Called freckles; to me is ember marks.

I scoff, trying not to have cuteness aggression right now. “Arguing with you seems pointless.”

His thumb moves again, tracing the highest cluster across my cheek. It shouldn’t feel intimate enough to make my knees untrustworthy. It’s just my face. People touch faces. Barbers, doctors, my momma when she checks to see if I’m feverish, even though I’m an adult.

None of that has ever felt like this. None of that has ever made my blood pull low and hot as it does with him.

Onyx’s gaze drops to my mouth, and I can feel it through the bond more than I can see it. Curiosity. Want, but not human-slick and practiced. It’s instinctive, bright, and complicated by restraint because he has learned restraint matters to me.

I lick my lips before I can stop myself, and his thumb stills against my cheek. Then his expression changes—not hunger now, but confusion.

He pulls his hand back a few inches, but doesn’t fully lower it, brow faintly furrowed as his eyes search mine.

This morning, in water, you needed, he sends through the mind-link, ***was me?***

All the blood in my body rushes straight into my face.

OceanofPDF.com

14

Lucas

THE WORDS HIT ME cleanly—innocently—and for a full second, I don't understand them because my brain refuses to connect them to the obvious… Then my whole body goes rigid.

"Oh, my god," I sputter, choking on air. "No. Nononono, absolutely not."

He doesn't move his hand. If anything, his thumb drifts absently over my cheekbone. ***Felt through bond***, he says, and I really didn't need that clarification right now.

I make a sound that's somewhere between a groan and a laugh and immediately want the earth to open up and take me.

"You felt that?" I ask, voice strangled as I step away from him and run a hand through my hair. "This morning? In the shower?"

His head tilts slightly, and the bond gives me immediate, earnest confusion. ***Shower. Water-place in den. Yes.***

I make a sound that would get me bullied by Parker for the rest of my life if he heard it. "You felt all that?"

Much of that, Onyx says, with such devastating innocence that I turn away, and the bond tightens with a sudden drop of distress so immediate that I feel like an asshole.

Wrong? He asks, the word sounding smaller than anything I've heard from him. ***I did wrong?***

I force myself to look at him, which is a mistake. He's standing there tall, gorgeous, bare-chested, and visibly worried that he's somehow done something wrong. His eyes are too bright, arms held slightly away from his sides.

The embarrassment twists into guilt again. He didn't say all this to tease me. He didn't smirk or try to make it dirty. He only asked because he genuinely didn't understand, and thinks he did something wrong.

"No," I say, stepping closer before I think better of it. "No, Onyx. You didn't do anythin' wrong."

He watches me carefully, still not moving. ***Did not look, only felt heat. Thought bond hurt you. That maybe dream made ache. Wanted to ask and fix.***

I drop my forehead against the heel of my free hand, and laugh once in naked humiliation. "You cannot say that with a straight face."

My face is straight, he says, and that honestly breaks some of the mortification.

"You know what I mean," I groan.

No, he shakes his head.

Of course not. Why would he? He grew up before roads, lives in these woods, and speaks directly into my brain because his mouth never learned how to make human sounds correctly. Social embarrassment over accidental mutual arousal is probably not covered in ancient cryptid courtship customs.

"It was…" I stop. How exactly do I phrase *I got off thinking about you* to a creature who hunted me through dreams until I named him? Every option is awful. "This morning when I woke up, I was… there was…"

His eyes stay fixed on mine, open and intent. Jesus, I'm really standing in a clearing, about to explain masturbation to an ancient forest being I may or may not have a supernatural bond with.

Need? he offers into my head.

"Yes," I say, face burning. "That. Need."

Immediate understanding floods the link, followed by a wave of warm satisfaction so strong, it almost knocks the air out of me. He touches my face again. ***For me?*** he purrs through the bond, deeply pleased.

“Oh, absolutely not.” I peel his hand from my face and step back, mostly so I can breathe again. “You do not get to look smug about that.”

His eyes brighten in an unmistakably smug way, despite my protest. I contemplate lying down on the forest floor and letting the moss reclaim me.

When I don’t answer his question, he steps closer again; concern returns, softening the satisfaction. ***Shame?*** he asks carefully.

I’m sure he’s trying to understand why my body is cycling through heat, panic, and embarrassment like it’s glitching.

“Yes,” I say finally, since lying to a creature who felt me come this morning seems pointless.

Why?

The simplicity of the question makes me want to tear my hair out. “Because people don’t usually… you don’t usually…” I break off and gesture wildly between us. “That’s usually private.”

Bond cannot be private, he says. ***But I will learn.***

That takes some of the sting out, and I blow out a long breath. “Thank you.”

He studies me for a few seconds, then to my complete shock, bows his head slightly in acknowledgment. ***Want for mate is not shame, Little Ember.***

The sentence comes through too accurately and finds the sore place so fast. I think of my ex and how my life was supposed to look. A wife and kids, a house somewhere with decent schools and a garage I’d complain about cleaning.

I think of how neatly I arranged myself around that picture and called it truth. If I didn’t come back home, would I have felt empty my whole life?

“Humans are a bit more complicated than that,” I say, and that’s all I have to offer for now.

You are, he agrees immediately, which should offend me but almost makes me smile. Onyx’s hand rises again, hovering close to my cheek instead of touching. I lean into the touch before I can overthink it.

His hand moves from my cheek to my throat, stroking where my pulse is hammering. Heat flares down my spine as he touches me. I’m suddenly very aware that I’m standing in a moonlit clearing with a man-shaped forest creature touching me, and we’re talking about how he physically felt me get off to him this morning.

“Just so we’re clear,” I say carefully, “this morning was a very private moment. It’s not usually shared with others.”

His gaze stays on me. ***I did not look. I only felt the bond carry heat.***

That matters, I realize. He didn’t pry; he simply felt me. I can tell by the way he says it that if he realized what it was, he would have shut it out. I let out a slow breath. “Right. Okay. That helps.”

Still sorry, he adds.

I blink at him, confused. “You’re apologizing because I got off to you?”

Because I made you feel shame.

That ridiculous knot in my chest tightens in a whole new way. He sounds so genuinely concerned that I can’t even enjoy being embarrassed anymore.

“You didn’t make me feel shame,” I say softly. “I did that all on my own.”

His hand remains at my neck, his warmth sinking into me with every second. The longer he touches me, the more my body seems to understand that this is not a threat—not even close. It’s comfort laced with heat; safety wearing the face of danger.

He studies me for another beat, eyes dragging over my face. ***Would you not have wanted if no bond?***

The question is so innocent I nearly choke on my spit. I can’t answer it immediately because I’m too busy having several horrible realizations in rapid succession.

One: he genuinely wants to know.

Two: he has no concept of how loaded that question is.

Three: my answer matters to him.

“I need you to understand something,” I force out before his thumb can erase my last functioning thought. “I don’t know what I am right now, or what this means for me. I’ve never… wanted another man before, or felt… whatever it is that you make me feel.”

Onyx’s fingers are still, but his hand doesn’t drop. ***Not man only.***

I raise an eyebrow. “What?”

His blue gaze holds mine. ***Not human man. Not human thing. Onyx. Yours if you choose.***

A slow breath leaves me. I know he’s not saying it to be clever or make my sexuality crisis easier with loopholes. He’s just telling me what he is, what he is offering, and where my choice sits.

“That’s… still a lot,” I admit.

He nods once. ***Much.***

"Yeah, much," I say, and I laugh softly.

He finally lowers his hand, and the loss of warmth against my face hits harder than I expected. I keep myself from chasing it by sheer force of pride. He notices anyway, and the bond gives one small pulse of pleased warmth that makes me glare at him. "Don't get smug."

Smug, he says, bright with curiosity. ***You mention smug again.***

"It means proud in an annoying way."

He considers that for a moment, then gives a tiny nod. I have a terrible feeling that he's adding that to his vocabulary.

I point at him. "No."

The corner of his mouth kicks up into a small smile for the first time, and on him, it feels like sunrise cutting through dense trees. I stare before I can stop myself.

God, he's beautiful.

The thought is mine, but the second I realize it, Onyx's eyes flare.

"Oh, come on," I say, mortified all over again. "You felt that too?"

His expression shifts into something softer; more stunned than teasing. ***Yes.***

I look away and rub my face with both hands. "This bond is a privacy nightmare."

Onyx grows still at the word 'nightmare,' concern nudging the bond again, and I quickly lower my hands. "Not literally, it's a joke. I just mean I'm used to my thoughts staying mine."

Thoughts stay yours, he sends carefully. ***Strong ones spill. I only feel edges. Bond is not open unless you open it.***

Wait, knowing that helps a lot. "So, you're not in my head reading everything?"

No. I never stepped into your den. Little Ember's mind is a den, too. A threshold is a threshold.

He says that with absolute certainty, as if there's no difference between my locked cabin door and the private rooms inside my skull.

"Thank you," I say again.

Silence settles for a moment after that, thick with the entire conversation we've just had. My humiliation cools enough that I can think around it again. I'm absurdly aware of where he touched my face, and I can smell Labrador tea everywhere.

“You really felt everything this morning,” I say before I can stop myself.

The bright look in his eyes says yes before he sends it through the bond. Then, he adds, ***Heard my name***.

I make another undignified noise, and the bastard smirks. How the hell? “You’re enjoying this too much.”

Yes, he sends, and I laugh despite everything, helpless and horrified all at once.

“You’re getting an attitude way too quickly,” I grumble, and he flashes me another smile that has my cheeks heating.

The bastard is learning.

That realization hits me with the same force as everything else he’s said tonight. He’s adapting, picking up my cadence, my meanings, and my tone. The bond isn’t just some static connection; he’s actively meeting me where I am. If he can do that, then whatever this is between us is only going to get harder to ignore.

I shake my head, muttering something unflattering under my breath, and the clearing around us seems to breathe easier with the sound of it. The weirdness hasn’t gone away. He’s still too tall, too warm, too beautiful, and too strange, and I’m still standing in my woods negotiating privacy boundaries with an ancient creature who felt me get off in the shower.

But the terror I expected never really arrived. In its place is something more dangerous. Ease. Not complete, not settled, but enough to be noticed.

The easing in me must move through the bond in some obvious, glowing way, because something shifts in his face the second it settles. Not relief exactly. Relief feels too small and human a word for the way his whole presence seems to loosen. The forest itself feels less tight too, the trees no longer holding their breath around us.

I don’t think about what I’m doing before I do it. Maybe if I did, I’d stop myself. Maybe I’d remember this is still strange and new, built out of impossible things I don’t understand. Instead, I just lift my hand and reach for him.

Onyx freezes and stays focused down to the marrow. Every part of him turns toward the movement of my hand, waiting to see what I’ll do with it. My fingers hover for half a second, and then I touch him.

His skin is warm. Warmer than any human skin should be, but I know that now. I know the texture too, though it still catches me off guard: the

faint difference beneath my fingertips where the dark markings climb over his neck and disappear into his hairline; denser somehow.

When my palm settles properly against his cheek, a pulse of sensation ripples through me so suddenly I suck in a breath.

Pleasure.

Not mine—his.

It moves through the bond in one warm, deep wave, not sharp or greedy, just profoundly pleased. The emotional equivalent of a massive animal finally lowering itself to the ground after pacing too long. There's calm in it too; that's what surprises me most.

"You were waiting for me to do that," I say softly.

His eyes stay locked on mine. The answer comes into my head smoother than before, rich and low and steady.

I hoped.

I don't move my hand. If anything, my thumb brushes once, lightly, over the line of his cheekbone before I can think better of it. Another warm pulse answers, gentler this time, and I realize with a kind of startled awe that I'm calming him. Me. A sleep-deprived park ranger with dirt under his nails and a disaster of a love life.

I touch the ancient thing in my woods, and he settles.

OceanofPDF.com

15

Onyx

LITTLE EMBER TOUCHES MY face, and the world inside me goes quiet.

The sensation is nothing like the contact in dreams before this. I have touched him in sleep as shape, scent, bond, desire, and chase. I have felt him through the distance between us, learned the rhythm of his heartbeat, and the way his body warms when he becomes embarrassed.

But this is different. His fingers are rougher than they look, callused from tools, rope, wood, weather, and the endless small labors of a man who belongs outdoors. He touches the line of my cheekbone, then the faint ridge along my nose, where the skull beneath this shape remembers its true structure.

His thumb pauses over one of the marks near my jaw, and pleased warmth breaks through me so strongly that my eyes slip closed.

It ripples out from his touch—calm. A deep settling, as if his palm tells the wildest parts of me to lower their heads and listen.

Mate touches. Mate stays. Mate chooses.

The thought moves through me in old instinct, but I keep it from rushing through the bond too hard. Lucas has taught me that not every true thing should be placed on him with its full weight. Humans need room around the

truth. They need to turn it in their hands, scowl at it, insult it, and pretend they are not afraid of how much they want it.

My little ember does this often. He calls things ridiculous when they matter, and curses when tenderness gets too near.

I lean into his hand before I can stop myself, and his breath catches. The bond gives me the edge of his surprise, followed by a strange, shy pleasure he tries to bury.

“You like that?” he asks.

I open my eyes and look at him. The man-shape mouth wants to answer, but the words tangle. This body still feels wrong around speech—too tight in the throat, too small in the jaw. So, I use the bond-link gentler than before. ***Your hand quiets the hard places.***

That changes his face. Heat rises under his skin, bright against pale cheeks and those scattered ember-marks I want to count with my mouth, my fingers, the flat of my tongue if he ever lets me. He looks away for half a breath, then back again, trying to look steady and failing in a way that pleases me deeply.

“That’s a hell of a thing to say to a guy,” he mutters, but his thumb moves once more along my cheek instead of pulling away. “You say stuff like that and then act confused when I short-circuit.”

Short-circuit. I know this one from the glowing rectangles humans hate and love. Something overloaded. Broken by too much current. His use is not literal; I understand that now. Human words often walk away from themselves.

I let the bond carry my amusement. ***Little Ember sparks too much.***

He stares at me, then laughs briefly. “Okay, first of all, rude. Second, you’re gettin’ way too good at that.”

I do not know which part is rude. I save the word anyway.

His smile fades slowly, not into sadness, but thought. He lowers his hand from my face, and I feel the loss of it like cold, though cold has never troubled my body. The clearing stands silver around us, moonlight caught along ferns and the wet backs of leaves. The creek speaks beyond the slope. Above us, branches knit together and hold the night close.

He looks at me for a long moment. “Can I ask you somethin’?”

Always, I send.

His mouth twitches. “Dangerous answer.”

I wait because I am learning that sometimes he circles a question before he steps on it.

He rubs both hands down his thighs and looks past me at the trees, then back to my face. “I want to see you again.”

I tilt my head.

He huffs, already irritated with the misunderstanding before I understand there is one.

“Not this version. I mean, yes, this version too, obviously, because you’re unfairly distracting, and I’m still annoyed about that.” His eyes flick down my bare chest, then snap back up with a glare as though my body has committed an offense against his peace. “I mean your other form. The real one.”

All the warmth his touch gave me pulls inward. He must feel the change immediately; of course he would. He watches living things too well to miss when one goes quiet. “Onyx,” he says softly.

No.

The answer leaves me too quickly through the bond; blunt enough that he flinches even though I do not mean to strike.

I force the next meaning smaller and more careful around him. ***First face made you run.***

“Yeah,” he says, and I can tell by his tone that he is about to be stubborn. “It did.”

Pain lances under my ribs at the memory. Him running from me, boots tearing through leaves, shock cutting the bond raw, and his den door closing between us. The nights without his dream-scent, without the chase, without the small thread of him that had become the only new thing in centuries.

I do not want to go back to that. I do not want to lose his eyes again.

I step back from him as the man-shape suddenly feels too fragile to hold what’s inside of me. My antlers press beneath the skin of my skull, a deep ache at both temples. The true body hears its mate’s request and rises toward it, eager and afraid in equal measure.

Lucas follows one step, and that stops me more completely than if he grabbed me. “Onyx, if I am your mate, then I have to get used to what you are. I can’t keep actin’ like the parts of you I understand are the only ones that count.”

I can only stare at him.

He swallows hard, then lifts his chin as though bracing for me to argue. “You said choice matters, so let me choose this. Let me see you—all of you.”

The bond opens so wide for one dangerous second that I have to clamp down on it before he feels too much. Joy, fear, want, hunger, devotion, and the old loneliness lifting its head from the ground. He stands there in the moonlight, my human with ember-marked skin and tired eyes and courage he treats as common sense, asking for the face that frightened him because he does not want me divided into acceptable pieces.

Aestrata, Earth Mother—you have truly blessed me.

I nod once and move farther back into the clearing. ***Stay. Please.***

He gives me a look that would make lesser predators reconsider their tone. “I wasn’t plannin’ to wander off during the ancient cryptid strip-and-shift show, but thanks.”

I ignore what I come to know as sarcasm, but it warms me even as my body begins to break its borrowed shape apart.

Human skin loosens first in sensation; the marks beneath it darken and rise. Bone shifts along my spine, stretching upward and outward, no longer folded small. Familiar pain runs through me, welcome after the constant pressure of compression. I feel the skull push out from beneath my skin, then settle and fuse over my human face. My antlers push free in heavy, branching relief, pulling a low sound from deep inside my chest.

My hands and fingers lengthen, nails darkening into claws, and the ground drops farther away as my legs reshape, joints returning to the angle made for speed. Fur sprouts coarsely from the waist down and crawls up the middle of my back, settling over muscle that no longer has to pretend to be human.

When it is done, the lantern materializes last, and I stand before him as I stood on the first night we came face to face. I wait for fear, but Lucas does not give me any.

His lips part and his head tips back as his gaze climbs my full height. Shock moves through him, yes, but different from before. Not the kind that has him running, but the kind that reaches. His scent changes with it, filling the clearing with open wonder that has my claws curling against my palms.

“Holy shit,” he breathes.

Through this form, the bond is easier. No folded threat, no too-small mouth, no human structure pressing meaning into narrow shapes. My mind

reaches him cleanly, but I keep the touch soft. ***You see me.***

Lucas nods without looking away, eyes still drinking in everything he sees. “Yeah, Onyx. I see you.”

The part of me braced for his retreat has nowhere to put itself.

Beautiful, he thinks, before he seems to remember that I can feel the edges of strong thoughts. “Oh, my god,” he groans, face turning red.

I lean down a little, unable to help myself. ***You think loud, Little Ember.***

“I’m aware, thank you,” he says, dragging a hand over his face. “It’s a personal flaw.”

Not flaw.

He glances at me through his fingers, caught between embarrassment and awe. “You are enormous.”

I consider this. ***Bigger in true shape.***

“Yeah, Onyx, I got that,” he says, dry as leaves.

There. Sarcasm again. I know it now. It feels like him standing with a knife made of humor between himself and too much feeling. I like it. I like too many things about him.

Your sharp mouth comes when soft-place shows, I send.

He drops his hand and stares at me, bewildered. “My what?”

I search for a better word. ***Sarcasm.***

“Did you just psychoanalyze my sarcasm?”

I do not know psychoanalyze, but the bond gives me enough from him to understand it means I have touched a place he did not intend to show. I send back pleased warmth. ***Yes.***

Lucas points at me. “You’ve been officially banned from learnin’ therapy language.”

Banned. Another word for held away; a boundary.

No.

His mouth opens. “Excuse me?”

I let the amusement move through the link before I answer. ***I’m learning***

“Wow. Bold of you to sass me in your giant death-deer form.”

Death-deer form.

The phrase makes no sense and complete sense at once. I taste it in the link, the way he uses humor to put his hands around what would otherwise be too large.

Death-deer. Giant. Sass. I am not certain I hold the last precisely, but I understand enough to know he is teasing me.

Teasing, I say, testing cleaner speech.

His smile flashes brighter, pleased. “Look at that. You’re gettin’ better.”

I am, and not only because the true shape lets my mind spread wider. It is him. Little Ember’s speech is full of turns and hooks and meanings tucked under meanings, and the more time I spend in his company, the more the knots make sense. He is less straightforward than the forest and more honest than most humans. Those things live together in him without fighting. I like it. I like him.

He shakes his head, but he is smiling fully now. Not the faint, careful smile from before. The expression changes his whole face, pulling warmth through every ember-mark.

Happiness hits me so hard, I have to lower myself to one knee before him. Not in surrender, but because standing over him suddenly feels wrong when all I want is to be close enough to breathe him in without making him crane his neck.

His smile fades into something quieter as I kneel, and he takes a step closer, reaching out to touch the edge of the skull fused over my face. His fingers trace the weathered bone, careful over the ridges and old scars, then slide down to where slate skin meets the marking near my jaw.

A low rumble moves through me, and his pulse jumps. ***Good?*** I ask.

He lets out a shaky breath. “Yeah. Good, just… intense.”

I lower my head into his hand. Happiness is too small a word for what opens in me. I have known satisfaction from territory held safe, from winter survived, from threat driven out, from the old earth offering food after long hunger. I have known the low, private comfort of lying in a den while rain hammered the world outside and the forest breathed around me as if it and I were the same body.

I have never known this.

My mate touching my true face and looking at me with awe instead of horror. My mate choosing to stand near when every story of his town tells him to flee.

I am glad Aestrata made me endure.

Beautiful, he called me.

No one has ever used such a word for my true shape. Their stories made me hunger, warning, and punishment. Their songs, when they still had songs instead of screens and tinny little speakers, called me shadow and horn and grave-lantern.

Even those who respected my ground respected from a distance, the way one respects a cliff edge or river flood. Useful reverence. Fear with manners. This is something else.

My mate sees bark and slate and bone and the old death-mask fused to my face and gives me beauty.

OceanofPDF.com

16

Onyx

HIS QUESTIONS START, THREADED with pauses as he seems to learn to listen not only to the answers but to the spaces between them. It pleases me that he does not hoard his curiosity out of caution. He lets it live, climb over his remaining fear, and poke at me from every angle.

The forest chose well.

"So, the lantern," he says after a while, glancing up at the tine where it hangs. "You really just… carry that around?"

Yes.

"Why?"

Warning or calling. I tilt my head slightly so the lantern shifts and catches a stripe of moonlight. ***Your kind follows light. Easier than dragging by the throat.***

His mouth twitches, and there's that dry spark again. "Good to know I was one practical decision away from gettin' physically dragged."

Could have, I say. ***It is in my nature to take what is mine.***

His eyes widen, then narrow. "See, now that sounds vaguely threatenin'."

Not threat. Fact.

"That's not as comfortin' as you think it is, Demon Deer."

The words make no sense.

Demon, I know. Humans have used that one before, usually while smelling of smoke, iron, piss, and bad decisions.

Deer, I know too, though I am no deer. Deer are soft-eyed things with quick hearts and fragile legs, good at listening to the forest until fear makes them stupid. I am not a deer. I have eaten creatures that eat deer. Together, the words are ridiculous.

I let the bond carry my confusion***. I am not deer.***

Little Ember's mouth twitches harder. He is trying not to smile now, which I have learned means I have pleased him by accident. His body still holds caution, but it sits beside something warmer—a spark under the smell of fear. "That's the part you're objectin' to?"

Demon is also wrong.

"Is it?"

I lower my head slightly, letting the lantern sway above us from the antler tine. ***Yes.***

He looks at the skull fused over my face, the black antlers, the claws loose at my sides, then lets his gaze travel down over the rest of me with careful stubbornness. The bond gives me a brief flicker of something that is not fear. Heat quickly buried under embarrassment. He clears his throat and looks back up too fast.

"*Riiight,*" he says, voice a little rougher than before, that softened country edge showing up under the city polish. "Sure. You're very approachable."

I tilt my head. ***You approached.***

His eyes narrow again. "That is not the same thing as you bein' approachable."

You came closer.

"I was investigatin'."

You crossed into my path.

"I was followin' evidence."

You followed my light.

He opens his mouth, then closes it again, which pleases me. Humans often become angry when the truth catches them. Little Ember becomes irritated, and his irritation tastes bright, like a flint struck in cold air.

"Okay," he says, pointing one finger at me. "First of all, I don't appreciate the tone."

I send him the shape of the word back, testing it. ***Tone.***

"Yes. Tone."

I have no mouth-speech in this face. No tone.

His eyebrows lift. “Oh, no. You absolutely have a tone. You have the tone of someone who’s winnin’ an argument and knows it.”

I consider this. ***Good.***

He gives a short laugh, surprised out of him before he can hide it. He catches himself quickly, pressing his lips together, but I have already heard it. I have already kept it. Laughter from my mate is something worth storing.

Little Ember drags a hand down his face. “This mind thing is gonna be a problem.”

Bond, I correct.

“Yeah, well, the bond needs manners.”

I let that settle. ***Manners are the little rules humans use when they want things but pretend not to.***

He stares at me for a second, then shakes his head like he wants to be annoyed but can’t quite reach it.

“Great,” he says, and the dry drawl tugs a little stronger on the word. “A philosophical skull monster. Exactly what I needed after my life went to shit.”

Monster.

The word should not matter. Humans have used it for so long that it has worn smooth. Still, from his mouth, it feels different.

If I am a monster, I am yours first.

Little Ember stops breathing for half a heartbeat. His throat works, and his gaze drops to my hands before climbing back to the skull, the antlers, the pale light of my eyes.

He is still afraid of me. He wants me as well. The two feelings twist together in him, and I do not understand why humans make such a war of things that can live in the same body.

“That,” he says carefully, “is another one of those statements you should maybe not toss out like you’re commentin’ on the weather.”

Why?

“Because it sounds…” He stops, jaw working. The ember-marks on his cheeks grow brighter. Little Ember looks away toward the creek, then back at me as if he resents needing to finish his own sentence. “It sounds possessive.”

You belong to yourself, I send, because this is important, and I know humans fear cages. ***But the danger that comes for you belongs to me.***

I feel the edge of his softness before he tucks it away behind sarcasm.

"Well," he mutters, "that's a hell of a loophole."

Not loop. Path.

"It's a figure of speech."

Humans should say what they mean.

He lets out a sound that is almost a laugh and almost a groan. "You really don't know what you're doin', do you?"

I tilt my head, and the lantern swings faintly, blue-white light slipping over the leaves between us. ***I know exactly what I am doing.***

His scent flares, and I pause, studying him. I meant that I know how to guard him. How to watch the tree line, how to place myself between his body and threat, how to scent fear, how to follow blood, how to turn the forest itself against anything that would take him from me.

But Little Ember must hear something else beneath the words. Something that makes his pulse jump and his eyes darken.

Interesting.

He looks furious, embarrassed, and amused all at once, which I am beginning to understand is a common state for him around me. He wipes one hand over his mouth, trying to gather himself. "God, you're dangerous."

The word is not wrong, because I am dangerous. I was made to be. My hands can open bark and bone, my teeth can end a scream before it travels, and my antlers have broken things much older and stronger than human bodies. The forest does not step around me because I am gentle.

But he stands before me, warm and bright and alive, and I lower the weight of that truth into something he can hold.

To others. He looks up at me, and I send the rest carefully. ***Not to you.***

His mouth parts. For once, no amusement comes quickly enough to save him. "That's a big promise," he says.

No.

"No?"

Promise is future. I hold his gaze through the skull sockets, letting him see as much as this face can show. ***This is already true.***

He exhales and shakes his head, then settles onto the split boulder next to us, while I lower myself to the moss beside it. In this form, I am too large to

sit as normal humans do, but his knee brushes my arm every time he shifts.

That matters even more than the first touch did. A first touch can be impulse. An unconscious second, third, and tenth touch is habit beginning to grow.

He grows quiet for a while, then, looking not at me but up through the black shapes of my antlers into the patch of sky beyond. I can feel the change in him before he speaks. Tiredness beginning to settle into his muscles. Tomorrow's obligations flickering at the edge of thought. The small pull of his human life, the den and work and clock-time waiting to reclaim him.

I do not like that pull. I understand it, but I still do not like it.

"You know," he says after a while, voice gone low and thoughtful, "there is somethin' genuinely insane about this being the least stressed I've felt all week."

Least stressed, I echo, and through the bond I taste what he means—less noise in the head, less gnawing loneliness, less old hurt chewing at the edges. ***Calm?***

"Yeah." He glances down at me, expression turning wry. "Which, for the record, is not a compliment to my previous coping mechanisms."

I am not yet sure what coping mechanisms are, but from the feeling around the phrase, I gather they are the poor tools he used before finding me. I decide not to insult them directly because he is still tender in places where his old life cut him.

I am better, I say instead.

He snorts. "Subtle."

Truth does not need to be subtle.

He gives me a look that says he wants to argue and knows he cannot do so honestly. That look pleases me far more than it should.

The night turns more noticeably after that as it cools and the bird calls go silent. The bond carries a faint flare of weariness now too, enough to tell me his body is preparing to pull him toward bed whether his mind wants that or not.

You go back now, I tell him. ***You need to rest. Work early. You are colder.*** I am not guessing; his body tells me all of this.

He huffs, rubbing his hands together. "You're going to be deeply annoyin' once you know all my tells, huh?"

Already know many.

That earns me a muttered curse and a reluctant smile. Then he sighs and pushes off the boulder, stretching until his spine cracks in three small places. The movement pulls his shirt tight across his shoulders, and the bond gives me a quick lick of appreciation before his embarrassment smothers it. I tuck the reaction away with care. It is mine to treasure, not to tease right now.

When he looks back at me, moonlight catches the freckles over his nose and the tiredness softening his eyes. “You don’t have to walk me back,” he says, the words coming before I have even moved.

I shift back because walking beside him in the true form would draw too much attention if another human came near the cabin road, and because he has taken enough of my first face tonight.

The return to human shape aches more after being seen, as if the true body resents folding away when his eyes have finally accepted it. When I stand again in the smaller body, Lucas watches every second with a focus that heats my blood.

“I need magic pants like yours,” he says, then clears his throat. “You’re still unfairly distractin’.”

I step closer, barefoot on wet leaves, shirtless because cloth on my chest feels useless and wrong. Cold air means nothing to my skin. ***Distract good?***

His eyes narrow. “That depends on how smug you’re about to get.”

I smile, or try to. The expression pulls strangely at my mouth, but his breath catches, so I keep it.

Walking beside him in this form is a new kind of pleasure. In my true shape, I watch him from above, behind, or ahead. Here, I match his stride more easily, our shoulders almost level if not quite, our footfalls similar enough that, for brief stretches, the trail sounds as if only one creature walks it.

“You’ve really been here this whole time,” he says after a while, voice soft enough not to disturb the sleeping trees. “Watchin’ me.”

Yes.

He glances sideways at me. “That should bother me more than it does.”

Should? I ask, because the word carries obligation and judgment in his kind.

He makes a small sound through his nose. “Most people wouldn’t love the idea of bein’ under surveillance by a seven-foot forest cryptid.”

Most people are not mate.

He laughs under his breath and grows quieter. I let the silence sit. The forest speaks enough for both of us.

By the time his clearing opens through the trees, I am already resentful of his den.

There it sits, square and pale and harmless, waiting to take him from me for a handful of human hours. Rationally, I know he must sleep there. I know his body needs walls, a bed, and the small rituals of his kind. Instinct does not care. Instinct sees a den that is not mine swallowing my mate at the end of every night and thinks unreasonable thoughts.

He must feel the flare of that through the bond and slows on the path, turning to look at me with one brow slightly raised. “Was that jealousy?”

I am too truthful to deny what is plain. ***Yes.***

He blinks, then laughs softly. “Of my own house?”

It takes you. Annoying den.

“Onyx, it’s a cabin. It’s not competing with you.”

It wins every night.

That makes him laugh harder, enough to bend a little at the waist and press a hand to his stomach. I watch him in helpless fascination, the sound itself almost as pleasing as the warmth it sends through the bond. My sarcasm is learning quickly, but his laughter is the better reward.

When he straightens, still smiling, he takes the last few steps into the clearing and climbs the porch. I stop where the grass gives way to the packed dirt I stood on before, that same invisible line settling around my feet like old law. I could probably step farther and nothing in the world would stop me except choice. Choice is enough.

He notices where I stop, and his gaze flicks to the porch, then to me, understanding moving through him. “You really won’t come in.”

Not without asking.

His expression shifts to touched and slightly overwhelmed all at once. He turns on the top step, one hand on the railing, and looks back at me in the moonlight. His human house is behind him, the forest before him, and me at the edge where both worlds meet.

“Goodnight, Onyx,” he says.

My name in his mouth still feels new. ***Goodnight, Little Ember.***

He shakes his head, smiling despite himself, and opens the door. Warm lamplight spills briefly onto the porch boards and brushes the grass between us. For a heartbeat, I see him in that domestic glow: my wild little ranger

with his tired eyes and rumpled flannel, and the scent of forest still clinging to him.

Mine, the bond says again, but this time gentler, less demand than recognition.

Before he steps inside fully, he looks back one more time. “I’ll come tomorrow.”

I nod once. The answer is unnecessary; the bond already brightened when the promise formed in him. Still, I give him one.

I know.

That makes him smile in that private way I am beginning to think belongs only to me. Then he disappears into the cabin, and the door closes.

OceanofPDF.com

17

Lucas

THE NEXT FEW DAYS turn my life into something that would sound unhinged if I tried to explain it out loud, so I don’t.

I go to work. I check trails, argue with Parker about random shit, and listen to Tom grumble about budget cuts with the same passion most people reserve for family betrayal.

I eat lunch at my desk while pretending I’m not checking the clock. I answer momma’s texts and ignore my ex’s calls. I do all the normal things a man with a badge and a schedule is supposed to do.

Then the sun lowers, and my whole body turns toward the forest.

It should scare me how quickly that becomes routine. It should bother me that after only a handful of evenings, I know exactly where to find him without a map or radio call.

Onyx never waits in the same place twice, but the forest seems to know I’m looking for him now. Yes, I know exactly how that sounds to a rational mind, but I’m mated to a forest cryptid, so rationality fucked off a long time ago.

The paths toward him feel less random now. A broken fern points me deeper. The smell of Labrador tea drifts through the shade when I need to

turn. Sometimes, I catch a glimpse of blue between the trees before he steps out in human form.

Shirtless, barefoot, hair falling in thick, loose waves over his shoulders. He always looks as if he's never once thought that walking around half-naked in spring weather might distract me.

He knows now because I made the mistake of telling him.

The first time I did, his gaze dropped to my mouth, and the bond warmed with enough smug satisfaction that I nearly tripped over a root.

"You are becomin' a goddamn menace," I told him, pointing at him as we walked along the old creek path.

Onyx tilted his head, bright eyes cutting toward me beneath a fall of black hair. Through the bond, his answer came smoother than it had only days before. The shape of it still wasn't quite human, but it got closer each time he borrowed words from me and gave them back with teeth.

A menace is a thing that troubles. I trouble you well.

I laughed so hard I had to stop walking.

That's the part no one warned me about. I mean, to be fair, no one warned me that the local legend who followed me through dreams and nearly gave me a heart attack with his real face would end up having the driest sense of humor I've ever dealt with.

He doesn't always mean to be funny, which makes it worse. Sometimes he says things with the flat seriousness of a creature explaining weather patterns, and I lose my mind in the middle of the trail while he watches me with growing, pleased confusion.

Parker notices something different about me by the third day.

"You've been weirdly happy," he remarks at the station, leaning against the counter with an apple in one hand and a suspicious look on his face. "Not normal happy. Secret happy."

I roll my eyes. "There are categories?"

"There are always categories," Parker says, taking a loud bite. "This one says you're either gettin' laid, committin' tax fraud, or finally bondin' with the raccoons at Pine Hollow."

I press my pen harder to the paper than I need to. "Those are my only options?"

"For you? Yeah. You're not emotionally complex enough for more."

The laugh comes out before I can stop it, and it's the wrong laugh, too—warm and caught off guard. Parker's eyes narrow immediately. I keep my

head down and finish the sentence I was writing, even though I have no idea if it makes sense.

“Holy shit,” Parker says slowly. “It’s sex.”

“It’s not sex,” I say too fast.

His grin turns unbearable. “Oh, so it’s *almost* sex.”

I shove the report into a folder and stand. “I have a trail inspection.”

“You have emotional avoidance,” Parker calls after me.

He isn’t wrong, which is exactly why I leave. But the thing is, nothing has happened between Onyx and me. Not really.

Onyx has touched my face, my throat, my shoulder, and the back of my hand. I’ve touched the bark-dark markings along his ribs, his jaw, the edge of his skull in true form, and the soft-looking black hair that isn’t soft so much as thick and cool and alive under my fingers.

We’ve stood too close in clearings while spring dark folded around us and the bond filled with heat so heavy it felt like trying to breathe through a closed fist.

But nothing has happened. No kissing, no hands under clothes, no full surrender to the fact that my body goes stupid every time he looks at me for too long. The need is there, though. Pretending otherwise would insult both of us because the touching doesn’t get easier.

It hangs in every pause that goes a second too long. It lives in the way his eyes sharpen when I lick my lips without thinking. It claws at me when he changes from his cryptid form to the human one right in front of me, the whole process still strange enough to stun and familiar enough now that my body responds before my brain catches up.

Every touch still hits the same way. Heat first, immediate and impossible, my skin lighting up around the contact point as if his body runs on some other temperature scale entirely. Then the bond goes warm and bright under that, carrying his reaction back to me and mine to him until one touch turns into this loop of sensation that makes my pulse jump and my thoughts go a little slippery.

One Tuesday night, we’re sitting by the creek on a fallen cedar log, close enough that our knees keep brushing whenever one of us shifts. He’s in his human shape because I suspect he likes the way I look at him.

The moon’s not full anymore, but there’s enough light filtering through the trees to turn the water silver. I say something about how this whole situation feels less like a haunting and more like being aggressively courted

by a very patient apex predator, and his answer comes through the link with such dry certainty that I nearly choke on my coffee.

Patient because prey is worth patience.

"You cannot call me prey and expect me not to react to that," I say, flustered.

You are not prey, he corrects, and I feel the weight of his attention settle on me, hot and low. ***You are why prey gets ignored.***

"You can't just announce things like that," I tell him, voice strained while he studies me with calm interest.

I did not announce. I sent.

"That's worse."

Why?

"Because it's inside my head, Onyx."

He gives me that small almost-smile he's been practicing because he knows it ruins me. ***Inside is where true thoughts live.***

The bastard. It doesn't help that his mind-link speech has been improving so quickly, too.

Every night, when I head back to the cabin, Onyx walks me to the edge of the clearing and stops. Every night, that invisible line gets heavier.

At first, it comforts me that he doesn't cross or test the boundary. He stands where forest becomes packed dirt and porch light, arms loose at his sides, hair lifting faintly in the wind, and waits while I climb the steps. Sometimes he's in human form. Sometimes he stays hidden in the trees but lets me feel him there. Either way, he respects the cabin like it's an extension of my body.

A threshold is a threshold, he once told me.

He gets jealous in the weirdest ways, too.

Not of people, really. There hasn't been anyone for him to get jealous of in that sense. Though I have a feeling if there were, I'd know about it immediately. No, what he's jealous of is the cabin.

My den, as he insists on calling it, with the same tone a man might use for a rival who keeps cheating by technically being a building and therefore impossible to challenge directly.

The first night he walked me back, I thought he was joking when he bristled at the porch light turning on and muttered into my head that *it takes you every night*. Then he did it again the next evening, and the evening after that, and by the time Friday rolled around, I'd realized he is, in fact,

genuinely offended by the concept of me going indoors and not being immediately accessible to him until morning.

It would be ridiculous if it wasn't also kind of endearing.

Tonight, for example, we're taking the long trail back from the ridge because I had to stay late checking the far boundary after some asshole dumped trash near the old north entrance, and dusk bled fully into night before I was done.

Onyx met me without me asking, appearing silently beside the trail in his human form as if he'd always been there. He's wearing a dark Henley and black jeans combination he's favored the last few days, which I still haven't asked about because I'm not sure I want the answer.

Either he's stealing clothes from somewhere, which opens a whole new set of questions, or he's somehow acquired them through means I probably also don't want explained. Like the magic pants that stay intact when he shifts into his Death-Deer form.

Already the den calls, Onyx says dryly.

"You sound like you're about to lose me to another man."

He looks down at me, all dark hair and blue eyes and impossible calm. ***I lose you to walls and roof and a bed.***

"It keeps rain off me."

I could keep rain off you.

I stare at him long enough for his expression to shift into what I now recognize as stubborn sincerity. "You cannot personally replace architecture."

His eyes narrow. ***I could try.***

That makes me laugh so suddenly, I drop my keys. He watches me bend for them with an expression that should not make me as fond as it does, and I spend the rest of the walk thinking about the fact that he wants inside and has never once pushed for it.

That's what gets me—not the jealousy or the possessive little pulses through the bond whenever I step through the door and close it between us. It's the restraint. The way he stands outside the circle of porch light because I haven't said yes. The way he waits, even when waiting clearly eats at him. He's a creature who could tear the door off its hinges, but chooses to treat my cheap lock like sacred law.

The porch light clicks on automatically, and I feel the small pulse of irritation move through the bond before he smooths it out. *Mine*, the feeling

says anyway, soft and jealous and embarrassingly sincere.

After saying goodnight, I stop halfway up the steps and turn back to look at him.

He's standing just inside the tree line tonight, hands in his pockets, the pale lines of his face and throat cut by porch light and shadow, hair moving slightly in the breeze. He looks, absurdly, almost normal until you really look at him.

He also looks like something my life had been missing without telling me.

"Onyx."

His full attention settles on me instantly. ***Yes.***

I hesitate, which is annoying because I'm already doing this. "Do you want to come in?"

OceanofPDF.com

18

Lucas

FOR ONE LONG SECOND, I think maybe he didn’t understand what I asked.

Then the silence fills with a feeling so huge, startled, and carefully held that it steals my breath. Not triumph or even possessive satisfaction. A feeling much softer and somehow more dangerous. Want, yes, but wrapped in disbelief and cautious hope—the emotional equivalent of a big animal lifting its head from a stream because it’s not sure it heard right.

Inside? he asks, and his tone is so carefully neutral that I almost laugh.

“Yes, inside,” I say, leaning one shoulder against the porch post. “You’ve been glaring at my house for days. I figure maybe it’s time to stop making the poor thing feel insecure.”

His gaze flicks to the cabin, then back to me. His attention on me always feels like standing in sunlight after years of shade—too much and exactly enough. The dry humor returns first, because of course it does.

The house is the insecure one, he sends, and I snort. Then I watch him flex his hand once. ***Are you sure?***

“Yeah, I’m sure. I want you in my house, Onyx.” I straighten a little and let the answer sit in the air between us without a joke or teasing coloring it.

The warmth that moves through the bond then is unlike anything I've felt from him when he steps out of the trees. Only a few yards of grass separate where he usually stops and the porch, but the shift in him as he crosses it is palpable.

He doesn't rush. If anything, he moves like he's approaching a wild animal, which is ridiculous considering he is the wild animal in this situation. He stops outside the open door and studies the frame, the hinges, the small entryway, the kitchen light spilling across the floorboards.

I cross my arms and smile. "You don't have to make it ceremonial, you know."

His eyes flick to me. ***It is.***

My throat goes tight, and the smile slips from my lips. "Yeah… I suppose it is."

When he steps over the threshold, the bond opens with such wonder that I have to grip the doorknob when I swing the door shut. Onyx stands in my entryway as if he has just crossed into another world. His gaze moves everywhere at once without his head turning much.

He looks too large for this cabin, even in human form. Too old for the cheap laminate counters and humming refrigerator. Too wild for the rug I bought in town because the floor was too cold in the mornings. He belongs under the trees, beside creek stone and moonlight, not standing barefoot on my scuffed floorboards.

Your den is small, he says, and ruins the moment. I bite my lip hard, trying to push down the sarcasm and the laugh bubbling up. He turns those bright eyes on me. ***This is not an insult; it is a fact. Where do you run if danger enters?***

I lose the battle and laugh, walking toward the kitchen. "Most people don't design houses around escape routes from supernatural predators."

They should.

"You're not wrong," I say, and Onyx's mouth almost curves. He's pleased with himself; I can feel it. The smug little pulse he tries and fails to hide now that he knows the word. I point at him. "Don't start."

I have not started, he shrugs. ***I have observed.***

"That's worse."

He looks around again, then very carefully touches the back of one kitchen chair with two fingers. The chair creaks, and he freezes as if it has spoken a challenge.

“It’s fine,” I say, still smiling. “It’s old. Everythin’ in here complains.”

He frowns at the chair, then sends, ***Weak tree.***

I laugh again. “It’s furniture.”

Dead tree made into sitting thing.

“That’s… technically accurate.”

Humans make many things from dead trees and act surprised when the forest dislikes houses.

I stare at him. “Did you just insult my home and my species in one sentence?”

Yes.

There’s no hesitation, just the cool confidence of a being who has discovered being funny on purpose and intends to abuse the privilege. Laughter shakes through me again, loosening something in my chest that’s been tight for months. Onyx listens to the sound like it feeds him.

The longer he stands inside, the more awkward he becomes, and I mean that in the most painfully endearing way possible. Outside, he is impossible grace. Inside, he doesn’t know what to do with his hands, where to look, or what parts of the cabin are safe to touch. When the refrigerator kicks on with a rattling hum, his head snaps toward it, eyes brightening in instant suspicion.

“It’s the fridge,” I say, pointing toward it.

Cold box, he says, displeased, as he steps closer, sniffs, then pulls a face. ***This meat died too long ago.***

I scoff, feeling slightly offended even though I should be used to his cryptid bluntness. “It’s chicken from yesterday and a frozen stockpile for the week.”

Too long dead, he grumbles.

“You eat mushrooms off logs.”

Fresh mushrooms from fresh log.

I cover my face with both my hands and laugh until my face hurts. This fucking man, I swear to god.

Eventually, I convince him to sit on the couch, which becomes its own trial because he lowers himself onto the edge like he expects it to collapse or bite. The couch groans under his weight, and he immediately starts to stand up.

“No, sit,” I say, stepping closer and putting a hand on his shoulder without thinking. “It always makes that noise.”

The second I touch him, the air changes—it always does when we touch. Heat moves through the bond first, then through my body, pooling low and heavy. Onyx goes still beneath my hand.

His skin is warm through the fabric of his Henley, warmer than mine, and the markings under my fingers have a faint raised texture that makes me want to trace them down his chest. His gaze lifts to mine slowly, blue eyes sharpening, all humor quieting into something darker.

Deep, aching want coils between us.

I could lean down, or he could pull me closer. Every part of me knows it, and every part of him knows I know. The cabin feels too small around the force of it, walls and roof and old furniture holding in the kind of pressure I've only felt beneath trees until now.

Then Onyx lowers his gaze to my hand on his shoulder and sends, very carefully, ***You invited me into your den. I will not take more than you've given.***

My throat tightens. Of all the things he could have said, that one gets under every defense I have.

"I know," I say, but it comes out rough.

He looks back up at me. ***You can give more when you are ready. I wait angry, but I wait.***

A shaky, helpless laugh breaks out of me. "You wait angry?"

His eyes narrow with complete seriousness. ***Very angry.***

I sit beside him because if I keep standing over him with my hand on his skin, I'll make a decision my brain hasn't caught up to yet. The couch dips under both of us, and Onyx turns slightly toward me, too big and too still, his knees spread because the human furniture clearly wasn't built with him in mind.

"You're ridiculous," I tell him.

He considers that. ***You laugh when I am ridiculous. So I'll keep it.***

There he goes again, saying things that should be funny and somehow punching me right in the chest.

I look around the cabin, suddenly seeing it the way he might: small, dead-tree walls, glowing rectangles, cold boxes, too many human objects, all of it built to keep the forest out. Then I look at him sitting on my couch, trying so hard to fit himself into my world without breaking anything.

"You're doing fine," I say quietly.

He blinks at me. ***Inside den?***

“Yeah. Inside the den.”

His attention moves over my face, and the bond softens with something almost shy. ***I’m happy. Thank you… Lucas.***

My heart just about leaps out of my chest at his use of my real name. I’ve been ‘Little Ember’ since we met, but this just… hits harder. I lean back against the couch, shoulder brushing his arm. The touch sends another spark through me, but this one I let exist without panicking.

Onyx stays still for half a breath, then relaxes by degrees, his body learning the couch, the room, the sound of the refrigerator, the shape of me beside him. Outside, the forest presses against the windows. Inside, Onyx sits in my cabin because I asked him to.

For the first time since I came back to Sweet Rivers, the place doesn’t feel like a refuge I’m hiding in.

It feels like a threshold we both crossed.

OceanofPDF.com

19

Onyx

THE FLOOR IS BETTER than the bed.

The bed is wrong. Too soft, too high, and too human. With cloth piled over cloth and the scent of sleep trapped inside it until the whole thing feels less like a resting place and more like something made to swallow bodies slowly.

Lucas told me I could use it. He stood in the doorway of this smaller room with red creeping over his throat, one hand rubbing at the back of his neck, and said, “You can sleep in the bed if you wanna. I mean, it’s big enough. Probably. Maybe. Fuck, I don’t know. It’s a bed, Onyx, not a sacred object.”

I had looked at it, then at him, then lowered myself to the floor beside it.

He stared at me for several heartbeats before he said, “Right. Of course. Ancient forest cryptid draws the line at memory foam.”

I did not understand all the words then. I understand enough now.

The bed offends me; that is the important part. The floor holds me properly. Wood beneath my spine, wall at my back, door in sight, window in reach, his breathing above me, and his scent everywhere.

That last thing is the trouble.

My mate’s den is full of him in a way the forest never is. Outside, his scent lives on trails and the places his hands touch. It clings to bark where he leans, to stone where he sits, and to the air after he passes. I follow those traces because every piece of him left behind becomes a small thread leading me back to where he has been.

Inside his den, there are no threads—there is a flood.

Lucas is in the blankets, the pillow, the old shirt thrown over the chair, the boots near the closet, the damp towel hanging from the door, the wooden handle of the knife he sets on the nightstand because he thinks I do not notice him trying to be calm and prepared at the same time.

He is in the room itself, pressed into every corner by months of living here, by sleep and sweat and shower steam, and tired mornings and restless nights. Pine and river water live under his skin. Smoke clings to him even when there is no fire. Human soap tries to cover him and fails. Beneath it all is the scent that belongs only to him, the one that woke my bones on the trail and dragged me from hollow wandering into purpose.

I lie on his floor and breathe him in until my mind slows and brightens.

My little mate invited me into his den. The thought has not stopped moving through me since he opened the door and stepped aside.

He invited me.

Not by accident, not because danger drove him to it, or because the bond pushed too hard and confused him. He stood on the porch with the night behind me and the small warm mouth of his den open at his back, and he chose. I felt the shape of that choice through the bond before the words came. Fear, yes. Nerves, heat, and a little embarrassment because he is Lucas, and embarrassment sits close to his skin whenever tenderness comes too near. But beneath all that was welcome.

He gave me threshold.

I have taken territories, held ridges through storms and driven teeth from dark places. I have watched humans build walls and call them ownership, watched them mark paper and earth and say *this is mine,* watched them fight over lines no animal could smell. I have known possession in old ways, bone-deep ways, ways humans would fear if they understood them.

None of it feels like this. Being allowed inside is stranger than taking. It reaches places in me I did not know still had feeling.

I turn my head slightly where I lie and look at his shape above me. The room is dark, but darkness has never kept him from my eyes. He is on his

back, one arm shoved beneath the pillow, the blanket moved down to his waist.

His shirt has ridden up, showing the lower part of his stomach and the line of hair disappearing beneath the waistband of his sleep pants. His skin carries ember-marks even there, scattered across his stomach. Freckles, he calls them, but ember-marks is better. They look as if the sun touched him in pieces and never fully left.

I want to touch them, but I do not. He invited me into the den; he did not invite every hunger in me to rise and put hands on him while he sleeps.

So, I stay on the floor and keep my body still.

The first part of the night passes with no sleep. I listen to the den settle. Wood creaks. Pipes make small noises inside the walls. The cold box in the other room hums, pauses, then starts again with irritating life. Somewhere near the roof, a small animal moves in the eaves. Lucas already knows about it; he cursed at the squirrel this morning and promised to “evict the tiny bastard humanely,” which I understood only after he explained that humane meant without killing or eating.

Humans make many simple tasks complicated. I like this about him too.

I replay the last days because sleep will not come while happiness keeps opening and closing in me. Lucas walking beside me along the creek. Lucas laughing so hard at my words that he had to brace one hand against a tree. Lucas standing in the cabin doorway, face warm with nerves, inviting me in. Lucas pointing at me when the cold box offended me. Lucas sitting close on the couch, shoulder against my arm, pretending the touch was nothing while the bond told me it was much.

I replay him saying my name.

Onyx.

A stone from his hand. A word from his mouth. A shape I can carry when human thoughts ask what I am to him.

I was many things before.

Cervari. Old one. Horned shadow. Lantern Stalker. Monster, in stories told by mouths that smelled of smoke and fear. Guardian, though humans rarely knew what stayed away because I existed.

Onyx is different. Onyx belongs to Lucas. Not owned or trapped—he would hate that meaning, and I have learned to be careful where human words put chains. Belongs as rivers belong to valleys. As roots belong in

dark soil. As my body belongs to the forest and now turns toward him because the same old earth made both truths possible.

Eventually, the happiness softens enough for sleep to find me.

I drift lightly, not the deep sleep of den and winter safety, but enough that the cabin sounds become distant. The bond remains close. Lucas sleeps above me, his heartbeat slow, his breathing even. For the first time, his den holds us both through the dark.

His scent changes, and I wake fully before my eyes open.

Need spills from him, sudden and warm, threading through the room so thickly that my claws attempt to press against the floorboards before I remember I am in the smaller shape. The human body reacts immediately—too fast, too hot, all compressed muscle and skin and want with nowhere to go.

I go still, breathing through my mouth, though it does no good. I smell him anyway. I feel him anyway.

A quiet sound catches in his throat, swallowed before it can become my name. The blanket shifts against his legs. His hips move once, slight enough that another human might miss it. I miss nothing.

I know what dream-shape need smells like from him. For months, I sent chase, scent, and safety through sleep. Later, when the bond deepened, desire came too. I gave some. His body made some. Then came the dreams where bark pressed beneath his palms, where my body held his, where his voice broke around the word he was not ready to speak when awake.

This is different.

I did not send this dream.

That knowledge makes me lift myself onto one elbow, every sense narrowing to him. Lucas makes another sound, softer, helpless in a way that turns my blood to heated sap. His hand fists in the sheet near his chest. The bond trembles with want, not open fully, but leaking at the edges because the feeling is too strong for sleep to keep contained.

I should leave his mind-den untouched, but the dream is already spilling into me. Not with words or pictures clear enough to be looking. Edges. Heat. My name. A plea shaped around need so fierce my breath catches.

I close my eyes and hide at the edge of the dream, the way I hide at the edge of his clearing, present enough to understand, not enough to command. If his mind turns from me, I will leave. If the bond closes, I will obey. I hold myself small against his threshold, which is difficult for what I

am. I have never been made small without pain, but for Lucas I learn many uncomfortable things.

The dream opens, and I nearly lose the human shape.

He is on the forest floor, not against a tree this time. Moss beneath his back. Ferns crushed under his shoulders. Moonlight over his body, skin bare, ember-marks bright where sweat catches. His legs are spread around a figure of me. His hands are in my hair, then on my antlers, then gripping my shoulders as if he cannot decide which part of me he needs to hold to stay inside his own body.

I am in true form and not.

Dreams understand what waking cannot. I am slate skin and pale eyes, antlers black against the moon, bark marks raised and dark across the body covering his. My skull is there and not there, bone softened enough for my mouth to find his throat, teeth grazing skin without tearing. My hands are clawed, but he is not afraid of them. He pulls me closer when they spread over his thighs.

This came from him—it strikes through me harder than desire.

His sleeping mind reached for my first face and gave it pleasure, not fear. He did not choose only the human shape. He did not put aside bone and antler and claw to make wanting easier. He dreams of me as I am and arches beneath me with his head thrown back, voice raw from begging.

"Onyx," dream-Lucas gasps, and my name in that place carries so much need that I almost answer aloud in the room. *"Please. Fuck… please."*

The dream-me moves over him with the slow, heavy rhythm that made him wake ashamed once, but there is no shame in the dream now. Only need. Only acceptance. Only his hands dragging down my back, fingers slipping through the coarse fur there, his mouth open against my shoulder as he takes everything and asks for more.

I feel my waking body lower closer to the floor, one hand braced hard enough that wood groans beneath my palm.

Then my mouth opens at the side of his throat, and dream-Lucas bares it. Not in fear, in offering.

"Mark me," he begs, voice breaking around the words. *"Please, Onyx. I want it. I want you to claim me."*

The room around my waking body disappears for one violent heartbeat. This is the next step, and my entire being recognizes it.

Bond begun.

Bond named.

Mate touched.

Mate saw first face and stayed.

Mate willingly invited into den.

Now mate dreams of the mark of claiming, of the bite that tells the forest and every old thing that he is guarded and chosen.

For my kind, the mark is not decoration or simple pleasure. It is a promise written into flesh and scent—a threshold crossed with teeth and consent, and the deepest part of the bond opening between two bodies.

Lucas should not know this fully, but something tells me Aestrata has turned her face toward my little mate and sent him a dream.

Aestrata. Is this your hand?

The dream-Lucas trembles beneath dream-me, eyes bright, throat offered, body open to the mark that would change everything. My need becomes so sharp I have to pull back from the dream before it drags me too deep and turns watching into touching.

I open my eyes in the dark room.

Lucas is still asleep above me, but his body is restless now, the scent heavy with arousal, trust, and something dangerously close to readiness. His lips part, and my name leaves him in a whisper.

“On…yx.”

The human shape shakes with the effort to stay where I am, but I do not climb into his bed or touch him.

I sit back on my heels on the floor beside him, eyes fixed on the rise and fall of his chest, and I let the need tear through me without acting on it. My mate must choose while awake. Dreams can prepare him and the bond can open paths.

Aestrata herself could place the image in his sleeping mind, but his waking mouth must still give the final yes. That is the law I make for myself because Lucas taught me thresholds.

His den. His mind. His body. All sacred if he says so, and sacred even before he does.

The dream settles eventually. His scent softens, though the need remains under his skin, waiting. He turns onto his side, facing me now, one hand slipping over the edge of the mattress as if searching for something in sleep.

His fingers hang inches from my face, and I lower my head, stopping just before touching. The need to press my cheek into his palm is almost

painful. Instead, I breathe him in and send one quiet thing through the bond, soft enough not to wake him unless some deeper part of him wishes to hear.

When you ask awake, Little Ember, I will answer.

His fingers twitch, and his heartbeat stays steady.

I remain on the floor until dawn, too full of happiness, hunger, and fear to sleep again. The den is still the annoying den that takes him from me, but tonight it gave me something too. It let me know the bond is moving even when I hold still. It let me understand that the next step waits somewhere close, breathing beneath his skin, gathering courage.

By morning, he will open his eyes and not yet know what he asked of me. Or maybe he will. Humans often pretend not to know what their bodies have already written clearly.

I can wait for his waking words.

I have waited millennia for him.

I can wait one more dawn.

OceanofPDF.com

20

Lucas

I KNOW SOMETHING IS wrong with me, and it has nothing to do with ordinary sickness.

Yesterday afternoon, I was so wired, hot, and distracted that I could barely finish a conversation with Parker without zoning out halfway through. By last night, I couldn't make myself walk into the woods.

I stood on the porch in my boots, hand on the rail, the whole trail yawning open in front of me, and my body simply refused. Not because I didn't want to go. God, I wanted to go so badly it made my teeth ache. But wanting him had gotten tangled up with something deeper and more intense, something that had me gripping the porch post hard enough to leave my knuckles white while nausea rolled through me in waves.

I sent nothing through the bond except a vague, miserable pulse of *not tonight* and then stumbled back inside before I could feel his reaction too clearly.

This morning I called in sick. I lied to both Tom and Parker with my face pressed into the pillow because lifting my head felt like too much work. I said stomach bug. I said I probably picked something up from Norton's place because God knows those cows have no respect for personal space. Tom told me to rest and drink fluids. Parker told me if I'm dying, I still owe

him twenty bucks. I managed something that sounded enough like a laugh to pass.

Then I hung up and curled in on myself while heat poured through me so hard it felt like I was coming apart at the seams.

I keep telling myself I'm fine—just a lingering fever, nothing worse than the flu—but the lie burns colder than the sweat sliding down the arch of my spine.

My skin feels too tight for my body, every inch of me oversensitive, overheated, the sheets twisted around my legs like they've been trying and failing to hold me in place all night.

My room smells wrong too—too full of sweat and sleep. Underneath it is the thick, maddening scent of Onyx, soaked so deeply into everything that I can't tell where my body ends and the bond begins.

I drag in a breath, and it only makes everything worse.

Heat beats behind my eyes in a slow, relentless pulse that softens the world at the edges, and every breath drags through my lungs as if I'm inhaling steam straight from a kettle.

The dreams have been the worst of it because they aren't dreams anymore—they're whole worlds.

Vivid, heat-soaked scenes that follow me even after I wake up. Onyx's body over mine. Onyx's hands on me, careful and enormous, but no longer only careful by the end. His mouth at my throat. His true shape wrapped around me in moonlit moss while I hold on and beg for things I wake up too ashamed and too hungry to name.

Sometimes he's in the human shape. Sometimes he's antlered and massive, skull-faced, all power and old forest and breaking restraint because I ask him to break it.

No, worse, I want him. I pull him down. I arch into him. I bare my throat. I say his name until it doesn't sound like a name anymore, and then I wake up tangled in blankets, cock hard and leaking, with the smell of Labrador tea in the room.

It started after I invited him into the cabin. Now, I'm lying in bed at noon, shirt damp, skin hot, mind slipping in and out of fragments I can't hold together. My body aches in places that make my face burn, even when no one is here to see it. My lower back feels loose and strange. My hips keep twitching with restless discomfort. There's a deep, empty throb low in me that I refuse to examine for longer than two seconds at a time because every

time I do, a dream memory answers it with Onyx's hands and voice in my head.

I press the heel of my palm against my forehead and breathe through my teeth. "Get it together," I whisper.

I don't understand what's happening. I don't know why my body feels like it's turning inside out, why every brush of the blanket over my legs is suddenly too much, why my own skin feels unbearable in places. I don't know why wanting him has become this physical, this consuming, this impossible to hide from. I don't know why my body is acting like it knows something I don't.

By late afternoon, I stop pretending I'm okay, even to myself.

I'm on my back, the blanket kicked to the floor and one arm thrown over my eyes, when the room slowly fills with Labrador tea, damp stone, pine, smoke, and the warm, dark scent that belongs to him alone.

My whole body reacts so violently I almost sob. I sit up too fast, the room tilting around me, and there he is in the doorway.

Onyx.

Human shape, though there is nothing fully human about him. He's bare-chested and barefoot, black hair loose around his shoulders, bright blue eyes fixed on me with a focus that should scare me but instead drags a broken sound out of my throat. His hands hang at his sides, but I can see the tension in them; the restraint.

Deep, humiliating need tears through me, and beneath it is relief so fierce it almost hurts worse. I hate that he's seeing me like this, but the only thought in my head is *finally,* as if my body has been waiting for him to come fix this.

His voice touches my mind, quiet and rough with worry. ***Little Ember.***

I shake my head, breath shuddering. "I don't know what's happening. I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me."

He takes one step into the room. ***You did not come,*** he sends, the words smoother now but heavy with everything he held back. ***You did not answer. Your den smelled of fever. I waited, but I could not anymore.***

"I couldn't," I say, and my voice cracks. "I couldn't even stand up long enough to put my boots on. I'm burning up, and I keep having these dreams, and every single one is—" I stop, choking on the words. "It's you. It's always you, and it hurts."

The bond floods with his concern so fast and strong it draws tears into my eyes out of nowhere. He kneels by the bed, one hand coming up instinctively, like he wants to touch me and is holding himself back by force.

What hurts? Tell me.

I laugh once, then drag a hand through my hair. It's damp again already. "Everything," I say, then shake my head because that isn't helpful. "No, not hurt exactly. I don't know. I'm hot. I can't think. I can't—" I break off, breathing too fast.

His gaze drops once, taking in the sweat on my throat, the way my hands clutch the sheet, the trembling I can't hide, and the fact that my cock is hard through my sweats. The bond brushes me, not prying, not opening doors, only reading what's already spilling out of me. I feel the exact moment understanding begins to move through him.

"You know what's wrong with me?"

His thumb strokes once under my ear, and just that small motion nearly wrecks what little composure I've got left.

Yes. The bond hums deep and low between us, and I feel the answer gather in him before he gives it a voice. ***It is bond sickness.***

The phrase means absolutely nothing to me, and somehow that's worse. "What the hell is bond sickness?"

He breathes in slowly. ***When the bond starts but does not seal. When one opens fully, and the other is already there.*** His gaze flicks over my flushed skin. ***You invited me in completely. To your den, your sleep, and your trust. Bond took that as an opening. It wants completion.***

The words land heavy, unfamiliar. "And completion means—?"

Mating and mate mark.

I lift my head and search his face for humor, but find none. "You're serious. So the dreams—"

Preparations, he confirms, fingers brushing sweat-damp hair off my forehead. ***The bond is showing your body what it is asking for. It is instinct.***

I just stare at him, mouth dry, skin burning, every thought in me suddenly trying to run in ten directions at once and getting nowhere.

"That's why every dream is just…" I gesture helplessly, unable to bring myself to say the words out loud. You, inside me, over me, every version of me giving in.

Onyx cups my face more fully now. ***Yes.***

A tremor runs through me so hard I have to brace a hand against his chest to stay upright. The warmth of him under my palm nearly makes me whimper. He doesn't react to that beyond the deep, low throb of concern and want that moves through the bond.

I'm too far gone for proper panic, and the heat eating through me has burned out whatever reserve of disbelief I had left. The worst part is, hearing him say it doesn't feel wrong. It feels like a key sliding into a lock I've been rattling for months without understanding what it was for.

He strokes my face again, thumb brushing over my cheekbone with unbearable gentleness, and my body reacts instantly. A quiver runs through me, deep and involuntary, so obvious I know he feels it before the bond even carries it. My breath catches on the edge of a sound I can't quite swallow down.

Onyx's eyes darken. ***Easy, Little Ember.***

I let out a shaky laugh that isn't really a laugh. "That's not helping."

I know.

The honesty would be funny if I wasn't two seconds from climbing him out of sheer desperation.

I force myself to focus on the part that still feels impossible. "I've never done… anything with another man," I murmur, my cheeks on fire for a different reason now. "I don't know how—I don't even know if I can—"

It is not simple, he says, and there's no mockery in it, just calm certainty. ***But your body already knows.***

"What do you mean, my body knows?"

The answer comes through the bond before he even speaks it, not as words at first but as instinct, ancient and certain, carried in the same place the dreams came from.

The bond changes mate-body to receive. To fit. To take what it needs and not break. A tiny smile touches his mouth, rueful and awed. ***I feel it every time I touch you.***

Every part of me understands what he's saying, but my brain still wants to reject it on principle. Because it sounds impossible and insane. There are only so many life-changing truths a person can absorb in a week before they start to resent the universe for piling on.

"You're saying my body is…" I stop, not even sure I can finish the sentence.

Making room for me, Onyx says gently.

I stare at him, hand still on his chest. Under my fingers, his body is solid and hot and impossible, more real than the rest of the room. My head is full of white noise and dream fragments and the memory of my own body giving way to him over and over in sleep.

It will stop hurting when the bond seals.

"How?" I ask, though I'm not sure if I'm asking about the seal, the mating, the way he'll handle me, or the way he can stand there looking at me like this and not be shaking apart too.

His eyes go darker, the blue sharpening into something that makes every nerve in me pull tight.

I will guide you, he promises. ***We go slow until slow isn't enough. My fingers, my tongue, whatever you need, until your body draws me in on its own. Afterward, the fever will fade. You will feel sated, grounded, right in a way nothing else can give.***

The bluntness of his words should shock me, yet arousal sparks instead, quick and embarrassing. My hips press forward of their own accord, and his breath hitches in response—a tiny victory that makes pride bloom where fear once sat. Still, doubt clings like thorns. "And if I change my mind? If it hurts too much?"

He lifts my chin, meeting my eyes with a steadiness that borders on reverence. ***Then we stop,*** he says firmly. ***Bond or no bond, consent remains sovereign. You set the pace; I follow.***

I nod, swallowing the knot in my throat, but the heat inside me pulses, greedy and relentless. I can feel a slick liquid beginning to gather between my ass cheeks—*God, am I imagining that?*—a strange humidity low in my belly as though my body already believes his promise. Shivers crawl beneath my hoodie, though the room feels tropical.

His thumb moves once more, and I jerk under it, proving the point so thoroughly that embarrassment flashes hot even through the fever. I drag in a shaking breath and stare at him. "And if we don't seal it?"

Sickness grows. Your sleep will worsen, your body will call to me harder, and your mind will fray. Not death, but suffering. The bond wants completion because you opened all thresholds.

All thresholds.

My cabin. My dreams. My mind. My touch. My body, apparently, whether I was ready to name it or not.

Panic rises, but Onyx feels it and immediately takes his hand away. The loss is awful. I reach for him before I can stop myself, fingers catching his wrist. I stare at my own hand on him, then up at his face. “Don’t leave.”

Never, he sends, so fast the word nearly cracks through me. ***Not unless you ask.***

“I’m scared,” I admit, and it costs me less than pretending.

I don’t know what I’m ready for. I don’t know what this makes me. I don’t know how much of this is biology, magic, fate, choice, or the forest deciding my life wasn’t complicated enough.

But I know this: when Onyx holds my hand, the world stops splintering.

I lean toward him before I can lose my nerve, pressing my forehead to his. His skin is warm, and his scent fills my lungs. My whole body aches with the need for more, but under it, finally, is something steadier.

“Take me to your den.”

OceanofPDF.com

21

Onyx

THE MOMENT HE TELLS me to take him to my den, the world narrows to a singular point.

The words are soft in the air, worn thin by heat and fear and trust, but they hit me with a force stronger than any antler-blow I have ever taken.

My mate looks up at me with his face flushed and damp, with his eyes too bright and his mouth parted on the edge of another trembling breath, and beneath all the fever and need, I feel the clean line of it in him.

He chooses.

“Onyx,” he murmurs, voice rough and fever-soft, and my name from his mouth still undoes me every time. “Please.”

I bow my head enough that my forehead nearly brushes his.

I have you, I send.

His eyes flutter shut, and relief moves through him so sharply it almost hurts to feel. When they open again, the fever still blazes there, but some of the panic has eased.

I do not ask him if he is ready again. He has already answered that, and too many repeated questions would only give his fear more places to hook in. He makes a small startled sound when I slide one arm fully under his knees and the other behind his back, but it is not protest.

His body comes up into my arms with frightening ease. He is heat, lean weight, and the familiar scent of sweat, and for one wild second, the pleasure of simply holding him like this almost staggers me.

Mine, the oldest part of me says, but not in the hard, possessive way that once made him run. Softer now. Mine to carry. Mine to keep safe. Mine because he has placed his living body in my hands and asked me not to fail him.

Lucas hooks one arm around my neck on instinct. His face tucks close to my throat, breath hot against my skin. I have to fight the urge to close my eyes and stand still with him forever instead of moving where we must go.

“You’re shaking,” he whispers.

The words catch me off guard, and I almost laugh. He is half melted with fever, aching, desperate, and on the edge of a change his human mind still barely understands, and he notices that my pulse is too fast.

Not fear, I tell him.

He shifts just enough to look at me properly, his expression dazed but intent through the heat. “Then what?”

Care. First time for me, too.

The realization moves over his face in a slow, startled flicker. He had not thought to place me inside this moment as anything but ancient certainty. His hand slides from my shoulder to the side of my neck, fingers brushing there in a weak, fever-warm touch that still somehow calms me.

“We’ll figure it out,” he says, and the irony of him saying that while half lost to bond-sickness almost makes me rumble with laughter. “I mean… you’ll figure it out. I’ll mostly be busy losing my mind.”

The dry edge in it, even now, saves me from disappearing into my own nerves. My mate can be burning apart and still find sarcasm. It is one of the many things I love already.

Yes, I tell him, shifting him higher against me so his weight settles better. ***You lose your mind. I keep us pointed the right way.***

That earns the faintest breath of a laugh against my throat, and the sound loosens something in my chest.

I walk out of the cabin with him in my arms, behind the line of pines, and the night gathers more thickly. We pass the split boulder where he first named me, the old meeting place that now feels almost ceremonial every time I cross it with him.

The old hollow where my den sits opens quietly at the end of a stony slope, hidden by the forest and shape of the land itself. From above, it looks like nothing more than a deeper shadow under a fold of rock and root, a place where the hill broke inward long ago and then let the forest cover the wound.

I shaped the entrance wider in some ages, narrower in others, depending on who hunted too near and how much of myself I wished to hide. Now it remains half concealed behind hanging roots, low branches, and a natural spill of stone. Only those who know what to smell for would ever find it.

The den has its own breath. Cooler than the open woods in summer, warmer in winter, carrying the scents of stone, old earth, dried herbs, fur, smoke sunk deep into rock, and me. So much of me that, even after all the days in his own den, I feel its impact on him at once. His breath catches, the bond flares, and need shivers through him in a bright wave.

“Onyx,” he whispers, and my name sounds different here, softer, almost reverent, as if the den itself changes what words can be.

Home, I tell him.

The single thought carries more than the word alone. Home. Den. Heart of my ground. The place where I sleep, where I keep what matters, where no human foot has crossed in longer than their calendars have existed. The place I bring him because the bond made the choice long before tonight.

I duck through the root-hung entrance and into the den. The main chamber stretches wider than the opening suggests, the old rock walls arcing up into darkness crossed by roots and the occasional hanging thread of dried moss.

I do not need light to move here, but small pale clusters of fungus glow faintly from a damp seam near the back wall, and moonlight filters in through a crack high above where the stone split in some distant freeze. It leaves silver across part of the floor and the edge of the nest.

My nest.

I built it over years, remade it each season, changed its shape as my life changed. At its base is a natural hollow worn smooth by older things than me. Over that I layered furs, dried moss, thick woven grasses from the marsh in summer, cedar boughs refreshed often enough to keep their scent alive, and soft bark stripped from fallen birch.

It is broad and deep, built to hold a body larger than mine, with room left for another pressed close. I have slept there alone through too many

seasons. Not tonight.

Lucas lifts his head enough to see it, and I feel the reaction through the bond before I hear it in his breath—surprise first, because some part of him must have expected something wilder or harsher: a pit of bones and rough hides perhaps, some monster's lair built from fear.

Then another feeling rolls in over that, softer and more dangerous. Emotion too tangled for one word. Relief. Want. Tenderness. The dizzy recognition that I made a place to keep precious things warm, and now I have brought him—my precious mate—to it.

"You have a nest," he says at last, voice gone almost hoarse with awe and fever.

Yes.

The answer comes with no embarrassment. Why would it? This is old and right because my kind make nests. We make places to sleep, to heal, to scent, to hold mates if we are lucky enough to find them. If anything, I feel only pride that he sees it and does not laugh.

I feel the shape of a smile against my throat before he whispers, "Of course you do."

My little mate.

I lower my head until my forehead touches his, careful and brief. Then, at last, I bend and lay him in the center of the nest.

He sinks into it with a soft sound, moss and fur giving under his heat-flushed body, the whole nest taking his shape at once as if it has waited for all its existence to know him. His copper hair spreads darkly over my furs. His shirt rides up slightly at the waist where I have to slide one hand free from beneath him.

I straighten slowly and look down at my mate in my nest, fever-bright and trembling and impossibly beautiful, and the whole of me narrows to that sight. My nest has never looked so right and so new at once.

He arches, eyes gone wide and dark. I kneel, hands braced on either side of his ribs, and lower until our mouths hover inches apart, breath tangling. He tilts his chin, lips parting, and I finally seal the distance. The kiss is molten—no shy hesitation, only the slick, desperate slide of tongues and the low, broken noise he makes when I suck softly on his lower lip.

"Please," he whispers against my lips, voice so choked the word barely shapes, but the bond thunderclaps approval. His thighs open around me and

the scent of slick drifting up from his body triples—sweet and dizzying—primal as biology recalibrates itself to the bond's directive.

I remove his shirt and drag my palms down his sides to the waistband of his pants, tuck fingers beneath, and pause again. Lucas nods hard, cheeks burning. I peel the fabric away slowly, baring the lean lines of his legs, and the flushed jut of his cock beading at the tip. The scent intensifies, dizzying even to me, and my mouth waters with need I do not try to disguise.

I run one hand up the inside of his thigh, spread slick with my thumb to ease the stretch already beginning at that hidden furrow below, and he jerks, keening low. Panic flickers in his eyes—too new, too sudden—and I still my hand, leaning to kiss the hollow beneath his ear and speak steadily.

Breathe, little mate. I taste the fear, but I will not hurt you.

"It's not fear." His voice wavers, half shame and half yearning. "It's going to break me."

I will hold the pieces, I vow, and brush a second finger gently through the slick. His head falls back, the tendon in his throat standing out taut, and a tremor passes through him from shoulders to toes. I drag both fingers up to his mouth, watch his lashes flutter when he sees them shine.

Taste, I say, wanting him conscious of how his body is already coaxing us forward. He parts his lips, and I slip the pads against his tongue. He sucks without instruction, eyes rolling, and the sound he makes lights the bond like lightning over summer trees.

The fever drives urgency through him; he lifts his hips, and I see his hole pulsing with the need to be filled. But I am patient, sliding down to settle between his knees, pressing slow kisses to the flat of his belly and lower, tracing every new tremor.

When my mouth closes over the head of his cock, Lucas cries out so sharply I feel the echo in my spine, and the bond flares with staggered relief —*finally, finally*. I take him deep and slow, swallowing until his hips jerk against the hold of my hands, then ease back, tracing the vein with my tongue.

"Onyx!" he keens, slipping his hand into my hair and thrusting into my mouth.

Each time I swallow down again, slick spills anew beneath my chin and his voice cracks, pleading. I move my mouth lower and spread him apart. Lucas sobs my name before I even put my tongue against his hole, and the sound nearly drags claws from my fingers again. I brace my hands against

his thighs instead, holding him open with a gentleness that costs me more than force ever would.

I lap my tongue over him once, and his hips jolt hard enough that I have to pin one thigh to the furs before he hurts himself. His fingers twist in my hair, and through the bond I feel the startled, mortified thoughts before he can bury them: *too much, too good, too strange, want more.*

You taste as sweet as nectar, Little Ember, I send, unable to keep the satisfaction from the words.

"Don't you dare sound proud right now," he rasps above me, but the command breaks apart on a moan when I press my tongue more firmly against him and thrust all the way in, elongating it as I enter.

Gods, he tastes like my beginning and my end.

I crawl up over him with slow care, making certain every part of him feels the weight and warmth of me returning. He watches my face as I move, watches my mouth because the shape has not fully gone back. I feel the wrongness of it in my jaw, the sharper teeth, the tongue too heavy behind them, the skull-bone memory pushing beneath my skin. When I settle over him, his hands come up to my face again, shaking against me.

I lean down and kiss him slowly this time, letting him taste himself faintly on my tongue, and the reaction that moves through him nearly unmans us both. His hands clutch my shoulders as I press my body down enough for him to feel the hard length of me against his thigh, before I lower myself back down, kissing his stomach again as I go.

"Onyx," he whispers, voice already fraying again.

I look up from between his thighs. ***Yes, Lucas?***

His cheeks darken. I feel the words before he says them, filthy and shy and desperate enough to make my cock throb against the furs. He wants my mouth on him again, but shame follows the want close behind, trying to smother it before he has to own it.

I will not allow that.

Ask me, I say, firm enough to give him something to push against.

His eyes squeeze shut, and he chokes on a laugh that turns into a moan when I hold him open again. His knees fall wider this time, and the sight of it carves straight through me. Trust looks different in humans than it does in my kind—softer, more breakable, but no less brave.

Lucas drags in a breath that stutters twice before it steadies. "Use your mouth again. And the… the other part… the longer and thicker tongue. I

want it in me.”

Pride hits me so hard my shape flickers.

My fingers dig into the furs beside his hips and come away clawed for an instant before I blunt them again.

Good little mate, I send, because he deserves the praise and because I am too full of him to keep it back. ***Brave for asking what he wants.***

“Don’t call me brave when I’m askin’ you to put your cryptid tongue in my ass,” he mutters, mortified and breathless.

The laugh that moves through me is not a human sound. It comes out against his thigh, low and rumbling, and he jerks under it with a startled curse. ***Especially then.***

He covers his face with one arm. “I hate you.”

No.

“No, I don’t,” he admits immediately, miserable with it. “Shut up.”

I kiss the crease of his hip. ***Never.***

Then I give him what he asked for.

I keep it slow, even when his body begs me not to. My tongue drags over him, slick and warm, gentling the puffy ring of muscle until his thighs begin to tremble against my shoulders. When I press inside again, Lucas’s back arches off the nest and his arm falls away from his face. His eyes are wide, stunned, almost offended by pleasure this sharp. He says my name with a harsh twist, and I answer by sliding one hand up his stomach and pressing my palm flat over his heart.

His heartbeat hammers against my palm, but after a few breaths, the rhythm changes. It does not slow—there is too much fever for that—but it steadies. His fingers find mine against his chest and grip them hard.

I work him open with mouth and tongue and patience, learning the give of him, the points where pleasure turns too sharp, the tremble that means *wait*, the ragged inhale that means *continue*. His slick helps, his body preparing itself with each pass, but I still add my fingers when he can take them. One first, slicked by him and me, sliding in beside the fading pressure of my tongue. His whole body clamps down and then melts around it, confusion and need sparking through the bond.

“That’s—” He breaks off, hips shifting. “God, that’s weird.”

Bad?

“No.” He laughs once, helpless and strained. “No, not bad. Just new.”

New is not an enemy.

“Tell that to my nervous system,” he says, and then swears hard when I curl my finger slightly.

His pleasure hits me like a struck match in dry brush. There. I find it, the place inside him that makes his body forget fear for a second. I touch it again, gentler, and his head falls back into the furs. His mouth opens around a silent cry, and the bond floods with astonished relief so sweet I almost bend over him and bite too soon.

I add another finger only when his body asks without words. Slow. Careful. Stretching him while my mouth returns to his cock—he needs the distraction, and I need the taste of him. He nearly climaxes the second I swallow him down again. I feel it rushing up, feel his body gather tight and bright around the edge, and I pull back before he falls.

He makes a wounded sound. “Why?”

Not yet.

“That’s cruel.”

Yes.

His head lifts enough for him to glare at me, ruined and flushed and furious in the furs. “You just admitted that way too easily.”

I lick him once, slow enough to make his glare collapse. ***I am honest.***

“You’re an asshole for edging me.”

Also honest.

He laughs again, and this time it breaks into a moan when I work my fingers deeper, scissoring carefully, opening him for what comes next. The bond-sickness writhes under his skin, but less violently now. I feel it changing, the sharp fever becoming molten and bearable. His body knows mine is coming and makes itself ready with a grace that humbles me.

I crawl back up over him with my fingers still inside, watching his face as I stretch him. His eyes are wet, but not from pain. His lips part, and his breaths come in uneven pulls. He looks young in this moment, not in years, but in the terrible newness of being cared for by something that could destroy him and chooses devotion instead.

I kiss his mouth. ***Tell me yes, Lucas.***

“Yes—God, yes, Onyx—!”

I curl my fingers, and his whole body locks, then melts. A sobbed exhale falls from parted lips. He rocks down instinctively each time I pull back, chasing the fullness already, and when I add a third finger he only moans, thighs falling wider, feet flexing against the furs.

I withdraw, removing my pants, slicking my palm along my own rigid length using my slick, and biting back the groan that spills when I press the head to his entrance. I pause, fist planted next to his shoulders, meeting his gaze because this moment matters more than any other.

Lucas lifts shaking hands and cups my cheeks, thumb smoothing a streak of sweat I did not realize had fallen. “I need you,” he whispers, and the bond roars triumphantly.

I push forward slowly, inch by careful inch, feeling him stretch, feeling his body welcome the breach with shuddering need. He breathes through parted lips, eyes locked on mine, fear swallowed by awe.

When I seat fully inside, he exhales hard, like the fever finally has space to leave. The heat in the bond cools into something immense and serene, ocean-deep, and for a heartbeat, the world quiets.

Just breathe, Little Ember. I am home.

OceanofPDF.com

22

Onyx

HIPS ROLL BENEATH ME, seeking friction, and I answer without restraint. My thrusts remain measured at first, letting him adapt, letting his body learn that I am not here to break him, but each slow withdrawal drags a choked sound from him until control becomes harder to hold.

I brace one hand beneath his knee and angle deeper; his eyes fly open, his mouth shaping silent curses, and slick pulses around us, easing every surge until the sound of skin meeting skin anchors all other noise in the den.

I capture his mouth in a kiss, raw and claiming, and in that moment the bond snaps tight around us like a clasp closing around bone. Lucas shudders once, full-bodied, and I feel it—the seal, the final lock—the heat dissolving inside him like a fever breaking under cold rain.

Ecstasy floods back through the link, doubles inside me, and for one dangerous second, my human shape flickers under the force of it.

My fingers dig into the furs beside his head and lengthen wrong for a heartbeat, tipped in dark claws before I force them blunt again. The ridges beneath my skin push up along my spine. Bone aches at my brow where antlers want to rise. My jaw strains around sharper teeth as I kiss him through it, swallowing his broken gasp before fear can find room between us.

Lucas feels the shift before he understands what it is. His body tightens around mine, not in refusal, but shock, and his hands fly to my shoulders as if he means to hold me inside in the shape I chose for him.

I drag myself back, piece by piece, breath rough against his mouth, my hair falling over his face as the old form claws beneath my skin. Not now. Now is too much. Not when he is soft and fevered and still learning that wanting me is not the same as being devoured by me.

Safe, I send hard through the bond, my voice inside him deeper than before, edged with the creature pressing too close to the surface. ***Safe with me. Still me.***

His eyes find mine, glassy and wild, and I see the moment he believes me. His fingers slide up to my face, trembling against my jaw where the bone has not fully settled back into human lines. His thumb brushes the faint ridge near my cheekbone, and that touch almost ruins me worse than his body does.

“Onyx,” he breathes, voice frayed.

My name in his mouth pulls another shift out of me. Blue light flashes across the furs for a split second, cold and ancient, then vanishes when I bare my teeth and force myself back down. My shoulders shake with the effort. My thrusts stutter, then deepen, and Lucas arches beneath me with a raw sound that makes the entire den feel too small to hold us.

The bond bursts open so wide that I see flashes of him from inside himself—my eyes above him. He feels me seeing and gasps, not in panic, but in shock.

“Was that me?” he asks, voice wrecked.

Edges, I answer, though even that comes out rougher than before. The word scrapes through the bond, shaped for no human throat. ***Strong feeling spills.***

His eyes search mine, and his face is so open that I lower my mouth to his forehead to keep myself from saying *mine* too hard through the bond. My lips touch him softly, but my breath leaves me in a growl I cannot fully smother. His hand tightens at my shoulder, and for a second my skin there roughens beneath his palm, gray and textured, the black bark markings spreading darker before they sink back into pale human flesh.

“I saw you,” he whispers. “For a second. I saw how you feel.”

And? I ask, because I need to know, though the answer might split me open.

His hands slide down my arms, squeezing once, grounding himself in the reality of me. His fingertips pass over my wrist right as it flickers wrong again, bones lengthening, nails sharpening, veins dark beneath the skin before I drag it back. He watches it happen. Watches me fight myself for him. His fear shifts into something heavier, something stunned and tender that makes my chest ache.

“You feel like you’re trying to hold a hurricane in your ribs,” he says.

I huff a breath against his skin, and this time the almost-laugh belongs to me. ***Accurate.***

After that, the fear has less room. Not none; I do not pretend it leaves him fully. Humans are made of many rooms, and some keep shadows even when doors open. But Lucas moves with me, cautious at first, then with more trust, hips lifting in small, searching motions that turn my restraint into a living thing with claws sunk deep in my back.

He says my name again and again, and each time, another piece of my true form strains for him. My shoulders broaden for a breath, too heavy for the human body. A strip of coarse dark fur rises along the back of my neck, then disappears beneath sweat-damp hair. My teeth sharpen against his shoulder before I turn my face away, panting hard into the furs, furious with myself and drunk on him.

Lucas catches my jaw and brings my face back. It stops me more effectively than fear could.

“Stay with me,” he says, and his voice shakes, but his hand does not leave my face. “Not away from me—*with* me.”

I go still above him, buried deep, every instinct snarling under my skin. The bond opens around his words and gives me the truth beneath them. He is not asking me to be less or to hide the struggle. He wants the truth of me, even when it frightens him.

I press my forehead to his. ***I am trying not to scare you.***

His laugh comes out rough and breathless. “You’re seven feet tall with a skull face and antlers sometimes. We’re kind of past that.”

The shock of amusement breaks through the pressure in my chest. I kiss him again, and this time when my mouth opens over his, my teeth are sharper for half a heartbeat. He feels it. His breath catches and his body tightens around mine with a fresh pulse of want so sudden that the den tilts inside my head.

My claws punch into the furs beside his head, my spine arches with the rise of coarse fur beneath skin. My jaw strains, half-human, half-wild, and the skull presses so close to the surface that my vision sharpens beyond the den, beyond the roots, to every living thing breathing in the dark outside. I freeze above him, horrified by the sudden strength in my own hands.

Lucas cups my face with both palms without hesitation. “You’re still here,” he says, turning my own fear back on me with wet eyes and a shaking mouth. “I’ve got you. Fuck, Onyx, I’ve got you.”

The words break the last lonely thing in me, and this time, the shift comes harder.

My jaw changes first; the shape of my mouth shifts to something less human against his shoulder, teeth lengthening, canines pressing carefully against his skin.

I do not bite yet. I dip my head, dragging my mouth along his cheek, and the old tongue rises without warning.

Veyr alun… Ehrna sathir.

Lucas goes still beneath me.

His hand slips from my jaw to my chest, palm flat over the place where my heart beats too hard for the body I wear. “What does that mean?” The question is quiet, almost afraid of the answer.

I look down at him and wish there were human words large enough to carry it without breaking under the weight. There are not; human language cuts meaning into pieces and makes things smaller so the mouth can survive them. So, I give him both the words and the wound beneath them.

Little flame, I tell him, smoothing my hand over his chest until my palm rests over his heart. ***I carry your ending.***

His brow pulls together. “That sounds…”

Terrible? I ask, the faintest thread of dry warmth moving through the bond because I feel his first thought before he says it.

His mouth trembles, caught between a laugh and something far more fragile. “Yeah. Kind of terrible.”

I kiss his cheek. ***I don’t mean your ending as in your death. Not while the breath remains in me.*** I say at once, leaning closer as his fingers press harder over my chest. ***It means the places where others stopped loving you end with me. The waiting ends. The wound where she left you ends. The part of you that learned to brace before a hand lets go ends here, because***

I take that hurt into my keeping. I do not erase it. I do not pretend it never cut you. I carry its end, so it no longer has to carry you.

His face changes so completely that I fear I may have said the wrong thing, even as his body still holds mine, hot and trembling and open beneath me. His mouth parts, no sound leaving at first as his eyes fill fully now. The first tear slips sideways into his hair, and he makes a sound so wounded that the predator in me goes silent.

All hunger bends around it. All old instinct kneels to the greater thing rising in my chest. My mate cries beneath me, and there is no shame, no weakness, no ugliness. Only pain as it leaves a place where it has been trapped too long.

My thumb moves over his skin, gathering the salt against my claw-blunted fingertip. I bring it to my mouth without thinking, tasting grief and relief and Lucas in one small drop.

He makes a sound then—not only pleasure, and not only pain. It is the sound of a man who has held a door shut with his whole body for too many years and finally feels someone stronger lean against it from the other side.

“Fuck,” he whispers, and the word breaks apart. His hand leaves my chest only to grab the back of my neck, dragging me down until his forehead hits mine hard enough to ache. “Onyx.”

I wrap my arms beneath him and hold. His body shakes around mine, and every tremor travels through the bond into me. I feel the part of him that hates crying. I feel the part that wants to apologize for it. I crush that part beneath my answer before it can form.

No shame, I say, and the command in it is old enough that the den itself seems to listen. ***Not here. Not with me.***

He turns his face, trying to hide against my shoulder, and I allow only enough hiding for mercy. I keep one hand in his hair and one over his heart. I keep him close enough that every breath he takes moves through my chest, too.

“You can’t say things like that,” he says, voice muffled against my skin.

I already did.

“You’re a nightmare.”

Yes.

Another broken laugh escapes him, and another tear follows. I kiss the corner of his eye before it can fall far, and the taste of it makes the creature in me soften so suddenly that the shift recedes for one impossible second.

My jaw eases. My claws dull. The antlers stop pushing against the inside of my skull.

Lucas's grief does what my restraint could not. It calls the guardian forward more than the predator.

I press my mouth to his forehead, then his cheek, then the corner of his mouth. Each kiss is slower than my body wants, but truer. He needs my hunger, yes. I feel that need in him. But he also needs proof that hunger is not the only thing I have. He needs to know I can want to devour and still choose to shelter. So, I shelter him with my body.

I let the bond wrap around him until his shaking eases, degree by degree. I let him feel my breath. My pulse. The ache in me. The truth that I am not disgusted by his tears, not burdened by them, not looking for a door out because he has become inconveniently human beneath me.

When he finally pulls back enough to look at me, his lashes are wet, and his face is flushed with embarrassment he has no reason to carry. He tries to scowl, because he is stubborn and wounded and beautiful in ways he does not understand.

"I'm blamin' the fever for this," he mutters.

I brush my thumb beneath his eye. ***You may blame whatever helps your pride limp away alive.***

His mouth twists. "Asshole."

Beloved, I correct.

His fingers slide deeper into my hair, pulling me down, guiding my mouth back toward his throat. The place waits beneath his pulse, warm and alive and chosen. His tears have not stopped completely, but they are quieter now, woven through the heat instead of drowning beneath it.

"You have to ask," he whispers. "Don't you?"

Pride fills me so suddenly I can hardly breathe.

My mate, half undone in my nest, still remembers the law of his own body. Still demands the threshold be named. Still gives me the gift of his choice with eyes wet, voice shaking, and spine unbroken beneath me.

Yes, I answer, and the bond bows around the word.

I am not fully human when I look at him; I know that. I feel the brightness in my gaze, the sharpness in my mouth, the shadow of the skull pressing beneath my face. I feel the antlers trying to split the skin I wear for him. But Lucas looks back at me and does not close his eyes.

May I mark you, Lucas?

His eyes fill again, but no fear comes with the tears now. His thumb brushes the corner of my mouth, right over the edge of a tooth too sharp to belong to a man, and his trust settles inside my ribs with such force that I nearly lose the shape entirely.

“Yes,” he says, clear enough that the den seems to hear it. “Yes, Onyx. I want your mark.”

This time, I do not hold all of myself back when the bond opens. I lower my mouth to his shoulder, still careful—always careful—and when my teeth break skin, the true form surges through me in fractured pieces. Claws, fur along my spine, lantern-blue light across the den, the weight of antlers in a body that has no room for them. A growl moving through my chest too deep for human lungs.

Lucas cries out beneath me with such stunned, shattering relief that the sound becomes part of the forest inside my bones, and the sickness breaks like a storm finally splitting over the ridge.

The mark burns beneath my mouth, not with pain alone, but with recognition. His blood, his scent, my teeth, our bond sealing. Aestrata’s old law moves through us, not as command now, but as completion.

His climax hits first, ripped from him with a sound I will never forget, and the rhythmic clamp around me tears my release loose a heartbeat later. I bury myself to the hilt, pulse after pulse, while the bond thrums satisfied around us, tasting salt and cedar and forever.

We ride the aftershocks until the shaking eases into languid tremors, until the fever leaves his eyes, until he lies boneless beneath me, stroking sweat-matted hair from my forehead with exhausted wonder.

I drag myself back into human shape with his name burning through me.

It hurts, but it is worth it.

My claws dull against the furs. The lantern-light fades. The fur along my spine sinks beneath my skin. My jaw softens until I can press my lips over the mark instead of teeth, licking the wound I made so it heals, feeling the last of the sickness leave his body in a shudder so deep it pulls one from mine.

When I finally withdraw from him, he winces but does not let go, pulling me down so we lie chest to chest. We breathe together, lungs syncing, and the den feels larger somehow, the air cooled, the world newly drawn into sharper focus. His fingers trace the markings on my shoulder, and I feel each brush like a promise.

How do you feel? I ask when words seem possible again.

He smiles, small and soft, eyelids drooping. “Right.” His palm finds my cheek. “I feel like I’ve been carryin’ a suitcase my whole life and finally put it down.”

Relief crashes through me so profoundly my vision blurs. I kiss his brow, taste salt there, and lie down next to him, pulling him close. Outside, dawn is still hours away, but the wild chorus begins early, and and Lucas listens with a faint curve to his mouth, eyes drifting shut.

Sleep, beloved, I tell him.

He hums acknowledgment, already slipping away, the bond now a low purr in the center of my chest. I hold him, feeling the even rise and fall under my arm.

He sleeps untroubled for the first time in three nights, and when I finally close my own eyes, the last thing I feel is the quiet certainty of the seal—complete, unbreakable, and shining bright as a new star reclaimed from counterfeit planes.

OceanofPDF.com

23

Lucas

I WAKE SLOWLY, WHICH feels strange enough that I lie still for a minute to make sure I’m not imagining it.

No fever, no pounding, frantic heat chewing through my nerves. No sharp ache curled low in my belly like a fist, and no sick, desperate pulse of need turning every breath into work.

Soft fur rests under my cheek, a heavy blanket tucked over my hip, and the faintest cool draft somewhere near my shoulders where the den breathes with the morning. I don’t open my eyes. I just stay there in that suspended place between sleep and waking and let my body report back.

Everything feels… quiet.

Not numb or empty; that would’ve scared me too. This is different. My body feels settled in a way I don’t think it ever has before, as if something that had been vibrating at the wrong frequency my whole life finally clicked into place.

I expect soreness when I shift my thigh. Some protest from muscles or skin or places that were definitely not used to Onyx, but all I get is a faint, deep awareness. Tender, maybe, but beneath it all, the bond.

It isn’t a taut wire anymore. It’s a low, living hum, steady in the center of my chest, warm as banked coals. I don’t have to reach for it to know it’s

there. It’s just part of me now, like breath or pulse.

I open my eyes.

The den is dim, but not dark. Morning light filters in through the split high above in a pale wash that catches on stone and soft moss and the edge of the nest beneath me. Everything looks quieter in daylight. Less mythical, somehow, and because of that, even more intimate. The furs are tangled around my legs and draped over my waist. My hand is curled against the place where Onyx is supposed to be—except he’s not there.

A dent marks where his body had been—a long, cold impression in the layered blankets and moss. But no dark hair, no blue eyes, no impossible body stretched beside mine, just the imprint of his body already cooling.

Something small and stupid sinks in my chest.

I mean, obviously he was going to get up eventually. The man—creature—whatever he counts as doesn’t exactly seem built for sleeping in until noon. He probably woke up hours ago and decided I needed rest. Rationally, I know all that. Emotionally, the first thing I feel is disappointment so immediate it hurts my chest.

“You’re embarrassin’,” I mutter at the empty nest.

The whole place is him. Not just his scent, though that’s everywhere, richer here than it’s ever been in my cabin or on the trails. It clings to the blankets, it lives in the walls, and it’s woven into the old nest itself. Lying here alone in the middle of all that feels oddly soothing.

I push myself up slowly, blanket sliding to my lap, and just… exist in my own skin for a second. There’s a dangerous urge to laugh because I’ve been bracing for pain since the moment this all started. But I feel good. Not just functional—good as hell and lighter, somehow.

I glance down at myself and immediately realize I am still very, extremely, fully naked.

Right.

The memories from last night come back in pieces and then all at once, not hazy the way I half expected them to be, but sharp and full and enough to make heat brush under my skin all over again.

His mouth. His hands. His tongue in places tongues have never been before. The sound of my voice and the exact second everything inside me settled when he pushed in fully and the fever just… broke. The word “*right*” slipped out after because there wasn’t another one.

“Jesus,” I whisper, dragging a hand down my face.

The motion draws my attention lower, and I look down. Skin marked here and there in ways that make my stomach flip. Faint bruises at my hips where his grip had tightened in the right moments. A mark near the inside of my thigh that I'm pretty sure is from his mouth. My whole body feels claimed in the gentlest, most overwhelming way.

"Pretty sure you should be freakin' out a little more, Dawson," I mumble into my hands, voice muffled.

I sigh and look around, but don't see my clothes anywhere. There are blankets. Furs. Moss. One shirt that absolutely isn't mine draped over a low stone near the nest, probably his stolen human-shape clothes, but no sign of my sweatpants or boxers or anything I came here in.

I wrinkle my nose. "Did he eat them?"

Fine. If I'm naked, I'm naked. There's no one here but me, and if there's one thing the last week has done, it's destroy any illusion that modesty matters much in the face of actual biological magic. I pull one blanket loosely around my shoulders, more for temperature control than shame, and climb carefully out of the nest.

The stone floor is cool under my feet, smoother in some places than others where centuries of movement have worn paths into it. Standing fully upright outside the nest, I get my first proper look at the den in the morning light.

It's… beautiful.

Not in the tidy, curated way humans like to make homes beautiful. There's nothing decorative in a conscious sense. No matching furniture, no framed prints on the walls, no practical little baskets labeled in a handwriting font. It's older than all that, built out of use and instinct and things gathered because they matter.

The main chamber opens wider than I realized in the half-dark, the rock walls curving inward and up in strange, natural lines where roots push through here and there, as if the earth is still trying to reclaim it from the inside. Moss grows in thick green patches along one wall where damp collects. Dried herbs hang in careful bundles from an old root that dips low near the entrance, the air around them green, sharp, and clean.

And then there are the walls.

At first I think they're just marks in the stone, discolorations where moisture ran, or minerals surfaced. Then I step closer and realize they're drawings. Not crude scratches—*actual drawings.*

They spread across one section of the den wall in layered, overlapping lines, some older and faded almost to nothing, some darker and newer. Charcoal, maybe. Burned wood. Pigment from crushed stone or plant.

There are animals drawn with the kind of accuracy that comes from watching them for centuries. Elk with their heads lowered in winter. Wolves crossing a ridge. A bear standing beside a river, one paw lifted mid-step. Trees shown as more than trunks and branches, their root systems carved beneath them, deep and tangled, as if the part above ground was only half the story.

Storms, fires, floods, and moons in different phases; the same mountain drawn again and again with slight changes. Human shapes too, fewer and farther apart at first, then more as the drawings move along the wall. Small figures with packs. Wagons. Axes. Cabins. Roads.

Time carved by a creature who outlived everyone he watched.

My throat tightens at the thought.

I'm no archaeologist, but even I can tell some of them are old enough that if anyone from the university saw them, they'd probably lose their minds on the spot.

That thought comes and immediately feels wrong, because just imagining strangers in here with lights and brushes and hushed, reverent academic voices makes something protective rise within me.

This feels private in a way that goes deeper than ownership. A record made by Onyx's hand for himself, maybe for others like him once, maybe simply because some things need to be marked somewhere if they're going to survive. The idea of anyone else laying claim to it makes my jaw tighten.

I walk slowly, taking everything in. Shelves, if I can call them that, are carved into natural stone ledges along one wall. Bundles of dried plants hang from roots and thin wooden pegs: yarrow, cedar, nettle, sweetgrass, mugwort, Labrador tea—of course—and a dozen others I recognize by shape or scent. Some are tied with strips of bark, some are placed in shallow stone bowls.

Mushrooms are dried in careful rows, nuts are stored in hollowed pieces of wood, and dark berries are crushed into something like paste and sealed under waxy leaves. Near the herbs, there's an actual row of glass jars—*glass jars*—full of dried berries, seeds, and things that look suspiciously like tea leaves.

I stare at it for a long moment, then laugh softly. “Oh, my god. You have an actual pantry.”

A whole ancient cryptid pantry, organized better than my kitchen. The image of Onyx—huge, ancient, and terrifying—carefully arranging jars in his den should not be this endearing. It absolutely is.

Everywhere I look, another small thing captures the essence of him in ways I didn’t expect. The practical streak. The instinct to make a nest but also a practical place. The strange mix of ancient creature and quiet domestic habits.

It’s all so… him.

I step along the wall slowly, arms wrapped loosely around myself, as I see more drawings. Some are rough, almost violent, scored hard into stone; others are delicate. Then I look closer and find something new between the old… Me.

It’s not a perfect portrait. It’s simple, etched with dark lines and softened with what looks like charcoal. A man crouched beside tracks near a porch foundation, one hand touching the ground. Red hair marked with a faint smear of mineral pigment. Freckles dotted across the face with tiny, careful points.

Ember-marks.

I stare until my eyes burn. *He drew me.* Not as prey or some claimed thing dragged into legend; he drew me reading the earth. The tenderness of that hits harder than waking up alone did.

The bond gives a sudden warm pulse, then, stronger than it’s been since I woke. I turn toward the den entrance when I feel that old, deep awareness moving through the connection between us.

Onyx steps through the entrance in his full form, and the sight of him still steals my breath. No amount of familiarity makes the first second I lay eyes on him any less stunning. He fills the opening entirely; he’s huge and completely right inside the den. The space itself is shaped to accommodate every impossible inch of him.

The bond hums to life with a sharpness that feels like someone plucked a string through my ribs.

Want rolls through it from him first—stunned and deep, followed by concern, relief, and that possessive warmth I’m starting to recognize even before it has words around it. He sees me standing there, naked in his den, and the force of his attention nearly knocks the breath out of me.

Heat rushes up my neck; the acute awareness of being looked at by a creature who last night took me apart so thoroughly I'm still finding evidence of it on my skin.

"Good mornin'," I say, because I'm committed to greeting impossible situations like they're mildly awkward breakfast meetings.

Better morning now.

The words slide through my skull like warm smoke, and I have to close my eyes for half a second. It shouldn't be this easy to miss him after he was gone for maybe an hour. It shouldn't feel this good just to have his attention back on me.

Then his whole body gives that faint shimmering shift I've gotten used to watching, the true shape folding inward, antlers, bone, and impossible angles softening and shrinking until Onyx stands in his human form just inside the entrance. Dark hair over his shoulders, blue eyes on me.

…and carrying fruits partially wrapped in leaves and a skin of water slung over one wrist.

Breakfast.

The realization does something stupid to me. "You got me breakfast."

He looks at the tray, then back at me, as if it should be obvious. ***Mate needs food after sealing. Sweet fruit. Water from a clean spring. No old dead chicken from cold box.***

I press my lips together, and my eyes sting because, of course, he had to ruin the tenderness by insulting my leftovers. "You're never lettin' the chicken thing go, are you?"

Too long dead.

"It was one day old."

Dead one day too long.

That makes me laugh outright, and the sound clearly pleases him because the low satisfaction in the bond deepens immediately.

He steps closer and sets the water down first, then opens the folded leaves to show blackberries, wild strawberries, slices of pawpaw, and something pale gold I recognize after a second as honeycomb.

I stare at it, touched in a way that feels almost dangerous. "You did all this while I slept?"

Onyx nods and watches me with bright, steady eyes. His gaze drops to my body before snapping back to my face, and the bond gives me one hot

flash of want so immediate that my breath catches. He tries to pull it back, and that makes me smile.

“Don’t start actin’ all polite now,” I tell him, taking one berry from the leaves. “Little late for that.”

The corner of his mouth almost moves. ***Mate beautiful in den.***

My face heats, but I don’t look away this time. “Yeah?”

His answer rolls through the bond, certain and reverent. ***Blessed.***

That word does it. It settles in my chest and stays there.

I eat the berry because I need something to do with my mouth before I say something too big for morning. It’s sweet and cold and perfect. Onyx watches as if my liking it matters more than the sun coming up, and maybe to him it does.

I woke up alone and felt hollow.

Now he’s here with fruit, water, impossible eyes, and a den full of proof that he has been alive and lonely and watching the world long before I ever found my way back to Sweet Rivers.

I reach for his hand, and he hands me the water first. Our fingers brush in the exchange, and even that small contact carries a pulse of heat that feels entirely different now. The need is still there, but it no longer feels like it’s consuming me from the inside. It feels like something we can hold without it ripping through either of us.

I take a long drink, realizing only then how thirsty I am. The water is cool and clean, with a faint taste of stone. I hand the skin back and take the fruit next, eyeing the pawpaw with narrowed suspicion.

“You raided my cabin, didn’t you?”

You were asleep. Some fruits were available. He doesn’t even try to deny it.

“That is not permission.”

No. But it is useful.

I shake my head, smiling into the bite of fruit because arguing feels pointless when he’s watching me eat with an expression that’s part satisfaction, part care.

“You left me alone.” The words come out quieter than I meant them to.

He nods, but looks regretful. ***I did not want to wake you. You needed sleep after the bond-sickness.***

“I know.” I rub my thumb over the waterskin. “I just… woke up, and you were gone.”

The bond hums with understanding then, the emotional equivalent of a hand smoothing down something ruffled. Not an apology exactly, because he doesn’t think he did wrong. More of a settling around the small hurt I didn’t mean to reveal.

Next time, he says***, I’ll leave scent stronger. Or wake you and ask.***

That quiet old care is back again, the one that keeps blindsiding me. Next time, not if. He says it like it’s already part of us.

“Okay,” I say softly.

He watches me eat another berry, then another, his gaze following the movement of my mouth for half a second too long before he looks back up at my eyes. That small falter sends another warm pulse through the bond, want stirring again on both sides, content to wait because now it knows it can.

I settle onto the edge of the nest, blanket around my hips and the leaf pouch in my lap. Onyx stays where he is for another moment, just looking at me in the den light like he still can’t quite believe I’m really here.

Neither can I, honestly.

In the quiet morning of his den, with Onyx in his human form holding out breakfast like this is the most natural thing in the world, I realize I don’t mind that reality at all.

OceanofPDF.com

24

Lucas

THE MOMENT I FINISH the last berry, Onyx's restraint unspools.

One second he's sitting next to me; the next he's on his knees between my legs, every inch of him coiled heat and sharpened intent. The leaf pouch rocks on my lap, a few blackberry seeds scattering across the blanket, but I don't have time to care. The bond flares rich and hungry, and his breath leaves him in a low exhale that warms my skin.

"Onyx," I gasp.

He slides his hands up the back of my calves, folding the blanket out of his way as he goes. The pulse of want hums through the bond, swelling hard enough to make me dizzy, but it's mellow compared to last night.

He noses against the inside of my thigh and inhales. ***Need you,*** he sends, having already decided that breakfast had a natural endpoint, and that endpoint was me.

"W-wait—"

Fed you, now I need to feed.

I swallow and my heart races as I watch him from between my legs; long black hair falling over one shoulder and blue eyes fixed on me with that steady, bottomless hunger that still feels careful. "You can't just say shit like that before noon."

His eyes flick up to mine, amusement threading through hunger. ***Sun position does not change the truth.***

"Of course it doesn't," I mutter, since this is what my life is now. I'm arguing with my cryptid mate about whether morning is too early for him to look at me like he's about to eat me.

His hands climb higher, slow enough to make it worse, palms sliding over the tops of my thighs and then back down, learning me again even though he had me shaking under him for half the night. There's no rush in him now, which somehow makes the heat worse.

My body aches in all the places he taught it to open, my shoulder is tender where his mark sits warm beneath the skin, and the bond is quiet enough that I can feel what is mine and what is his without everything turning into a storm.

He lowers his face to my thigh and kisses me there—just one soft press of his mouth—and my breath comes out broken. I watch him close his eyes, and I feel through the bond how much he likes my reactions.

"I'm sticky and dirty, Onyx," I say, and he runs his tongue up the length of my thigh, making me moan. "That was not an invitation."

Everything you are becomes an invitation when you want me, he sends, his broad hand sliding up my stomach. ***Touch me if you need.***

Those words undo me more than anything filthy would have. I let go of the furs and slide one hand into his hair, still being careful with him. Some part of me still treats him like I might do the wrong thing and insult an ancient forest creature during foreplay—which is not a sentence I ever expected to be relevant to my life.

His satisfaction is immediate, and he turns his face into my palm. I run my thumb along the side of his face, over the faint ridge across his cheekbone. I remember how he flickered between shapes under the force of everything we did, the claws in the furs, and the blue-white light of his lantern flickering from nowhere.

I remember breaking open under him as he whispered words in a different language, and I remember him holding the pieces of me. "Are you okay?" I ask.

I know he feels the meaning beneath the question; there's no hiding the layers. I'm asking about his control and the strain of holding human form.

Onyx's hand stills on my stomach, but he doesn't answer for a second. Then he leans forward and presses his forehead against the inside of my

thigh. The gesture is so intimate that my fingers tighten in his hair.

I am full of you, he sends, and I feel his breath over my skin. ***It is difficult to be still.***

That does something mean to my heart and something worse to my body. “Onyx, you really need to—”

Stop worshipping my mate? He asks, nipping at my skin. ***Never.***

I feel the exact moment his restraint shifts. He pushes me so I’m lying flat on my back and spreads me wider with a care that makes my hips want to fight him and obey him at the same time. The mark pulses once, and his eyes flick up to it immediately.

Can he feel that?

Onyx drags his tongue over the place where thigh meets hip, and every thought I have falls into the dark and dies. He hums—not quite a sound, more of a vibration that rolls from his chest into my skin—and my hips jerk before I can stop them.

The first touch of his tongue on my cock steals the air out of me. I make a sound that would be embarrassing, if embarrassment could survive pleasure this direct. His tongue is still mostly human-shaped at first, wet and warm as he licks over the head of my cock, catching the precum forming there.

My hand tightens in his hair, and he glances up at me through dark lashes, blue eyes bright with amusement and hunger.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I say, already losing the fight with my own voice. He takes me into his mouth in answer, and my head falls back against the furs. “Fuck—!”

It’s different from last night—everything is different from last night. I can feel every second cleanly, and how he’s enjoying me losing my mind. Not just wanting me, but enjoying the taste and weight of me on his tongue.

“Onyx,” I moan when he swallows me deeper, slow enough to make my stomach tighten. For a seven-foot nightmare, he’s way too fucking good at this.

The thought barely finishes before he proves he knows exactly what crossed my mind, because satisfaction rolls through the bond so thick and dark that my toes curl. He doesn’t pull away to comment; he only hums around me again, and the vibration drags straight through my cock and into the base of my spine until my hips jerk against the weight of his forearm.

He holds me down easily, not hard enough to hurt but enough to make the point that he can keep me exactly where he wants me while his mouth takes

me apart.

His tongue changes while he's still wrapped around me, the movement going from human-warm and wet to something longer, stronger, more controlled than any tongue has a right to be.

My eyes fly open, and I look down just in time to see him ease off me with a slick drag. His lips are parted, blue eyes fixed on me as that tongue slips out again, longer now, dark pink and too smooth, tapering in a way that makes my brain short out completely.

"Oh my God," I cry out.

Onyx's eyes burn brighter.

You like when the beast helps, don't you? he sends, and the words slide into me, rough and intimate, without shame or apology. ***You like knowing I can change for your pleasure. You like my mouth less human when it still worships you carefully.***

My cock kicks against my stomach, and he watches it happen with an expression so hungry I almost try to close my legs. I don't get far. His hands spread me open again, palms hot under my thighs, and he lowers his head before I can gather enough oxygen to pretend I'm not wrecked by the sight of him. His tongue drags over me from root to tip in one long, obscene stroke, and the sound that leaves me has no dignity left.

My back arches off the furs so hard my throat pulls tight around a broken cry. One of his hands slides up my stomach and presses flat over my ribs, keeping me there, keeping me grounded, while the other grips my thigh.

He doesn't take me into his mouth right away. He uses the changed shape of his tongue like he means to learn every sensitive place until my body stops being mine and becomes a map only he can read.

He flicks the tip of his tongue over the head, gathers the slick there, circles twice, and then the length of it curls firmly around the shaft while his mouth closes over the top again.

I make a raw sound and grab at the furs with one hand while the other stays in his hair because I can't let go of him. I need that. Need the proof that this is Onyx, my Onyx, under all the impossible pieces of him. Long hair tangled in my fingers, warm scalp beneath my palm, broad shoulders between my knees, and long tongue wrapped around my cock like a vine.

Good mate, he sends, the praise dark and rough as he works me. ***So hard for your beast. Let me taste all of it. Let me take what your body gives.***

I shake my head because it is too much, but my body has no loyalty to the gesture. My hips try to lift again, chasing him, and his mouth opens wider around me while his tongue tightens in a slow, dragging pulse. Every muscle in my stomach locks. The mark at my shoulder throbs, heat flashing through it with each movement of his mouth, and Onyx feels that too.

His eyes cut up, and the hunger through the bond turns primal enough that my whole body clenches. I groan, and he digs his fingers into my thigh hard enough to tell me he likes the sound. He likes me desperate and undone. He likes every honest, needy thing I give him before my brain has time to dress it up as something safer.

“Oh, fuck… Oh, God—!”

Onyx pulls off from my cock, dragging his tongue slowly over my balls, and my knees try to close around his head. He doesn’t let them; he keeps me spread and open under him, nose brushing the crease of my thigh, hair sliding over my skin while he breathes me in like I’m something he’s starved for.

I feel his restraint fraying at the edges again, then that tongue slides lower.

I go still for half a second, breath caught, nerves lighting up because I’m sore and he knows it. The bond catches my little flare of caution immediately. He pauses with his mouth against my inner thigh, his breath hot, his hands steady. He doesn’t ask with words; he just lets the question rest inside me, clear and waiting.

I swallow hard, staring down at him. My voice barely works when I answer. “Be careful.”

Those blue eyes soften without losing any of that wild hunger. ***Always.***

His fingers find the slick my body is already making—*which is weird as fuck, but yay for natural lube*—and his breath leaves him in a rough rush. He circles the rim with the tip of his tongue, soothing the tenderness with slick warmth until the tension in my thighs loosens by degrees. My head tips back, and I breathe through it, through the weirdness and the pleasure and the ache that doesn’t quite hurt because he won’t let it.

His tongue elongates further, slow enough that I feel the change as a steady slide of pressure rather than a sudden breach. My mouth falls open, but no sound comes out at first. The sensation is too strange, too good, too much in a way that short-circuits words completely.

He doesn’t thrust into me or force anything. He licks me open by patient degrees, using the length of his tongue to press just inside and then retreat, each pass slicker, warmer, more maddening than the last.

I start shaking, and Onyx groans against me, the vibration hitting everywhere at once.

Beautiful, he sends, voice thick through the bond, more beast than man now. ***Open for my tongue. Tender from my cock. Still needing me. Still giving yourself to me.***

There’s something devastating about the way he says it. Dirty, yes. Filthy enough that heat crawls up my chest and face. But under it, there’s reverence and pride. A kind of possessive awe that makes me feel less ruined and more chosen, which is deeply unfair when I’m spread out under him before breakfast has even been properly dealt with.

His hand returns to my cock as his tongue works me open and I nearly come right then.

The touch is firm and slick, his fist sliding from base to tip while the altered length of his tongue presses deeper, careful around the soreness, finding pleasure without turning it into pain. My fingers pull hard in his hair, and his reaction slams through the bond, a pulse of dark satisfaction so intense I feel it in my teeth.

Give it to me, little mate. Spend while my tongue is inside you. Let me feel you come apart while you still ache from taking me.

That fucking does it.

The orgasm rips through me so hard I barely recognize the sound I make. My body bows, thighs shaking against his shoulders, cock pulsing in his fist as he lowers his mouth back over me and swallows me down.

I come into his mouth, onto his tongue, into the bond, everywhere at once, and Onyx takes every bit of it with a deep, possessive sound that feels like being claimed all over again.

He doesn’t stop immediately, but he eases me down, and that somehow makes it worse. Better. I don’t know. My brain has left the forest entirely. He strokes me through the last pulses with slow, gentle passes, licking me clean with the same filthy devotion he used to break me.

When his tongue withdraws, I twitch hard and make a pathetic sound I would deny if I had any chance of getting away with it.

Onyx kisses the inside of my thigh, then my hip, then the soft skin below my stomach. Each kiss turns slower as he moves up me, his mouth warm

and wet, his body heavy with satisfaction. When he reaches my shoulder, he licks over the mark once, and I shudder so hard my hand slips from his hair to his shoulder.

Done, he sends, and the word is firm in a way my body does not appreciate. ***You are too sore for me.***

I blink at the den's ceiling.

The words take several seconds to reach the part of my brain that handles meaning. When they do, irritation sparks through the haze. Not real anger, more like my pride dragging itself across the floor with one arm because apparently it refuses to die even after what his tongue just did to me.

I stare at him hovering above me, long hair falling around his face, mouth wet, eyes too bright and satisfied. His cock is hard against my hip, obviously hard. Painfully hard, if the tension in his jaw means anything. And he's looking at me like he expects me to accept that he just wrecked me with his mouth and then intends to sit there nobly with an erection because I'm sore.

"No," I say.

His brow draws down. ***Lucas.***

The tone is warning and tenderness at once. It annoys the hell out of me.

I shove at his shoulder. I don't know what either of us expects, but it clearly isn't that. Onyx lets himself move because he has to; there's no other explanation. I know damn well I cannot physically push him anywhere he doesn't want to go. Still, he falls back onto the furs with a low, surprised sound, eyes widening as I straddle his hips.

The position sends a dull ache through me, enough to make my breath hitch, but not enough to stop. Onyx's hands fly to my thighs to steady me as if he's afraid I'll hurt myself sitting on him.

That is so irritatingly sweet I almost want to bite him.

You are sore, he sends again, and there is actual distress under the words now. ***No more taking.***

"I'm not takin'," I say, voice hoarse, still halfway dazed and annoyed at him for being noble while looking like something that crawled out of the darkest dream in the world and decided to learn tenderness. "I'm lookin' at my mate."

As I say it, I realize that I've never had time to look at him like this. Not really.

Onyx is massive even in human shape. I know that. I've known it since the first time he stood in the clearing and made the trees behind him feel small. But seeing him spread out under me does something different to my head.

Long black hair spills over the furs around his shoulders. His chest is broad, marked with those dark patterns that run over slate skin, down his ribs, across his stomach in branching lines that look too natural to be tattoos. They follow the shape of him, not decorative, not placed for beauty, but grown into him. Part of him.

My gaze moves lower, pulling his pants down as I go, and I freeze.

"Oh," I whisper when I notice the same markings continue downward.

Not just over his hips, or along the sharp muscle at his lower stomach. The dark, tree-growth patterns spread into places I somehow didn't get a proper look at last night. They curl along the root of his cock, branching over the heavy length of him in dark ridges that are not flat at all. The lines wrap, split, and sink into him.

My mouth goes dry as I stare. His fucking cock is ribbed—holy shit.

Then I look back up at his face with what must be blatant betrayal. "I did not feel *that* last night."

Something flickers in his expression. Surprise first, then confusion and a strange, almost shy restraint that has no right belonging to a creature who just had his impossible tongue inside me.

You were fevered, he sends carefully. ***And slick. And full of the bond. I held the shape softer.***

"You held the shape softer," I repeat, still staring down at him, then back at his body, because apparently my brain needs several passes to process this new information. "That's a thing you can do? You made your cock… smaller and less… like this?"

For you.

The answer knocks some of the annoyance out of me.

For me. Of course he changed his own body, restrained his own shape, softened ridges I didn't even know existed because he wanted my first time taking him to hurt less and be something I could survive and would want again afterward.

The tenderness of it is almost too much, especially with him lying under me, hard and trembling and clearly unprepared for me to be studying him instead of being tucked under blankets like a patient.

I drag my palm slowly down his chest, and his breath catches. The bond opens on instinct, and what comes through startles me. Not only arousal—that's there, thick and hot and close to breaking—but under it is disbelief.

He's shocked—actually shocked.

I lower my eyes again, letting my hand follow a branching pattern down his ribs. His body tightens beneath me. He does not move. He barely breathes. I trace over his stomach, then the narrow dip of his hip, then stop just above where the markings turn more intimate.

"Can I?" I ask, and my voice sounds different—softer now, less defensive. Still rough, but not from anger anymore.

Onyx's hands flex on my thighs. For one breath, I feel the oldness of him. The predator. The guardian. The thing that knows how to take, claim, protect, kill, devour.

Yes, he sends, and the bond floods with a need so intense I feel it roll through my own spent body in an answering pulse.

His cock is hot and heavy in my palm, the textured markings subtle beneath my fingers, ridges like raised veins of bark under skin. I stroke slowly, learning his shape the way he spent all morning learning me.

Onyx looks less controlled with his eyes closed. Less ancient. Less impossible. Still enormous, still marked, still not fully human in ways I'm beginning to crave instead of fear. His throat works, and his hands stay on my thighs, but he doesn't guide me.

"Look at me," I say, and his eyes open at once.

The obedience in that immediate response almost wrecks me. Not submission or weakness, but trust. He looks at me because I asked. I swallow hard and tighten my grip so I can hear his breath change.

"You've been taking care of me since this started." I lean down carefully, bracing my free hand on his chest. My body complains at the movement, but I ignore it. His hands slide to my hips at once, supporting without forcing, keeping me from putting weight where I'm tender. "Let me take care of you, Wildheart."

His pupils widen at the nickname, and the bond goes quiet in the way forests go quiet before something steps into the clearing.

You do not owe me this.

It is such an Onyx thing to say that my chest hurts. I bend closer, my mouth near his, my hand still moving slowly around him. "I know."

His breathing turns uneven.

You are tired.

“I know.”

Your body aches.

“I know.”

Lucas.

I kiss him before he can keep listing reasons to refuse the pleasure he clearly wants. His mouth opens under mine with a sound that is almost startled, and I use that softness, that broken little second of surprise, to stroke him more firmly. He groans into the kiss, hips lifting again, and this time I let him.

The weight of him in my hand, the strange texture beneath my palm, the pulse of his need through the bond—it all drags something possessive and protective out of me that I don’t know what to do with.

When I pull back, I look down at him, at the creature who has held me together with hands, mouth, teeth, old language, and patience that feels endless until I see how badly he is shaking beneath me.

I kiss him harder as my hand moves faster. Onyx groans against my mouth, and the sound turns less human halfway through. His hips rise into my grip with more force, and I shift my weight, straddling his thighs instead of his hips so I can give him what he needs without grinding soreness into myself.

I look after him the only way my shaky, overused body can.

With my hand. My mouth at his jaw. My lips dragging down his throat. My fingers learning his pace by every twitch of his hips and every growl he tries to bury. He is enormous under me, too much and beautiful with it, his cock heavy in my grip, markings dark against flushed skin.

A thick pulse of precum slides down his shaft, making the glide smoother, and his reaction is so violent he nearly bucks me off.

My eyes snap up, and I see his eyes are no longer fully human.

The blue burns brighter, pupils stretched strange, jaw sharper, teeth longer. His fingers have gone clawed against the furs but not against me—never against me. The sight sends heat through me even though I’m already spent and sore, because I know what that means now. I know the difference between danger and devotion wearing teeth.

The markings on his body darken beneath my hand, and his back arches from the furs with a rough, primal sound that rolls through my bones. His

hips thrust into my grip twice, then he catches himself with a snarl that sounds furious at his own lack of restraint.

Do not stop, he sends, the words ragged through the bond. ***Please, mate. Do not stop touching me.***

The plea hits me harder than any command would have. I stroke him faster, watching his face instead of my hand now because I need to see him. Need to see this creature, *my creature*, lose himself safely. He has watched me come apart again and again, has held my fear and my pleasure and my tears without once making me feel too much. Now I watch him try to survive being cared for, and it ruins me in a completely different way.

I lower my mouth to his chest, right over one of the branching marks, and kiss it. I feel his release building with a violence I feel through the bond before his body gives in to it.

"Wildheart," I whisper again. "Let go for me."

The first pulse is a warning, a hot shudder that locks his spine and makes his fingers clamp on my thigh, but his claws never pierce my skin. I keep stroking him, thumb dragging over the head, palm tight around the shaft, and his mouth opens on a sound that shakes the roots above us. His hips jerk up hard into my grip as he comes, spilling over my hand, thick and hot, his body bowing beneath mine while blue light washes the den in a bright, impossible flare.

Lucas.

My name rips through the bond with the force of a vow.

I don't pull away. I work him through it, slower when he shakes too hard, gentler when the last pulses leave him breathless and stunned beneath me. His markings fade back to their usual dark lines, his jaw softens, the light dims, but his hands remain on me, trembling, as if he forgot how to let go.

When he finally opens his eyes, the look on his face tightens my chest.

I wipe my hand on a nearby scrap of cloth with the same awkward practicality I use after repairing a trail sign, because if I think too hard about what just happened, I might combust. Then I lower myself carefully onto his chest, avoiding putting pressure on my ass, and tuck my face into his neck.

His arms come around me slowly after a stunned beat, then tighten.

You were beautiful, Wildheart, I send back through the mind-link this time, shy despite myself, letting him feel the shape of the name from my side. *My Wildheart.*

He turns his face into my hair, and the emotion that floods the bond is so intense I close my eyes against it. He loves it. I don’t need him to say that. I feel the name settle into him, the way it touches some place even older than Onyx.

He holds me like he is holding the word, too.

OceanofPDF.com

25

Onyx

MORNING STRETCHES THIN AND bright by the time I walk him back to his den.

He needs to go back; I know this. His human life has clocks, responsibilities, schedules, and pieces that make up his day. He has work, family, and other humans who will expect to see his face and hear his voice in certain places at certain times.

His life does not stop just because a forest creature claimed him as a mate. He belongs to me, yes, but he also belongs to his own life. If I am going to keep him at my side, I have to make room for those pieces instead of trying to swallow them whole.

Knowing that does not stop me from loathing it.

He is beside me now, dressed again in clothes I would rather he never needed, though I helped him find every piece and watched him cover skin I had only recently learned with my hands and mouth.

My mark sits hidden beneath his shirt collar, but I know exactly where it is. I feel it with each beat of his heart. It has changed his scent, not replacing Lucas, never that, but deepening him, threading him through with me in a way every creature in these woods will understand.

Guarded. Claimed. Chosen. Mine because he said yes.

He seems to feel some of it through the bond as we walk. He smells more like himself and more of me at once. It is an intoxicating scent.

“You’re doin’ it again,” he says, voice rough with amusement.

I lift my head slightly. ***Doing what?***

“Glowerin’ at my job.”

I do not deny it; there is no point. ***It takes you.***

His mouth twitches, which means the answer pleased him despite himself. “It gives me a paycheck.”

Those words mean little to me beyond the fact that they somehow tie him to his world, not mine. ***I would rather take you.***

His cheeks redden. “Yeah, I’m noticin’ a theme with you.”

There is no shame in that. ***You need your work, and my forest likes you there.***

That quiets him for a second because he knows what I mean. He has always known this place better than most of his kind. The forest shaped him long before I found him. It was one reason the bond took hold so violently when his scent first cut across my path. A mate of the land for a creature of the land. The old knowing in my bones recognized him before my mind finished understanding why.

He stops walking and exhales hard, rubbing at the back of his neck. “I don’t want to leave, either.”

I stop walking as well and put my hand on his face. Touch has already become a habit between us. Jaw, cheek, hairline, the side of his neck beneath his ear. Places where he opens quickly and without fear. His skin is cooler today than it was under the sickness, but still warm enough to send a low pulse through the bond.

Lucas leans into my palm at once, eyes lowering for half a beat before he catches himself and lifts them again. “You’re makin’ this worse,” he murmurs.

For me too.

That draws a brief, helpless smile from him. Good. I like every shape his mouth takes. I am learning them all.

We continue walking to his den, the morning cool and washed clean from the storm that moved through before dawn. Lucas breathes differently today—I hear it each time he takes in air, each time the scent of wet pine and cedar and his own home reaches him.

He does not let much silence settle between us. Humans do this when they are trying not to feel the full weight of something. They fill the surrounding air instead, hoping to soften the blow when it comes.

“So,” he says after a while, stepping over a root polished smooth by years of boots and rain. “Hypothetically, if I show up to work lookin’ suspiciously like I spent the night bein’ ravished in a cryptid nest, how much of that do you think I can blame on seasonal allergies?”

I glance at him. He is already watching me from the corner of his eye, waiting for the answer. Learning my rhythm.

Not much, I tell him. ***You smell satisfied.***

He chokes on his own breath. The sound he makes is worth every trace of the earlier irritation. He glares at me while heat floods under the skin of his throat and cheeks, and the bond catches all of it, pleasure and embarrassment braided together. “You can’t just say things like that.”

I can, and I did.

“That is not helping your case.”

What case?

“The one where I’m tryin’ to remain a functional member of society.”

I consider this as we pass through a stand of younger pines where the light goes striped and narrow between trunks. ***Why?***

Lucas actually stops walking long enough to stare at me. “Because, unlike you, some of us have to maintain reputations.”

This word I know better now. Reputation. The shape others make of you in their heads. The thing humans spend too much time feeding and defending. I have never once envied it.

My forest knows you, I say. ***Enough reputation.***

He blinks, seemingly surprised, then huffs out a laugh that softens before it dies. “That’s annoyingly sweet.”

I do not know annoyingly in this context except as a kind of affection he disguises as irritation. My speech gets better every day because of him, but his subtexts still carry extra teeth.

We reach the edge of his clearing too fast. It always feels wrong when the forest falls back, and the cut grass and hard lines of his human dwelling push up into the world.

The cabin squats there, familiar now, less threatening than it was when it first took him from me every night and more merely… annoying. The den-

that-is-not-my-den. The small wooden beast that swallows him under a roof instead of roots.

Lucas slows too, feeling it. The shift from forest to clearing echoes through the bond as reluctance, a small tightening in his chest that mirrors my own. I take some petty comfort in that. He may need this place, but he does not enjoy leaving mine any more than I enjoy surrendering him to it.

He turns on the bottom porch step to look back at me.

In daylight, his eyes show everything more clearly. The remains of sleep's softness, the faint nervous energy of returning to his human routines after a night that changed us both. The little line between his brows that appears when he is already thinking too far ahead and trying to prepare for every possible feeling before it hits. I know that line. I would smooth it with my thumb if I could keep him here long enough.

I close the distance before I've decided to do it. Lucas makes a low sound against my lips when I kiss him, more breath than voice, and then everything in him opens. He leans up into me without hesitation, and when I deepen the kiss carefully, he answers with a hunger that goes straight through the bond like lightning.

When I pull back, it is only because, if I do not, I will walk him backward into the cabin and not come out until nightfall. His eyes are open but dazed, ember-marks standing out sharply against the flush in his face, and the look he gives me then makes something low and possessive curl hard through my chest.

Lucas blinks at me, lips parted, eyes darker than before. "Okay," he says, voice rough. "That was…"

I lean in and press one more kiss to the corner of his mouth because I can now, because he allowed it, because restraint is easier when I know the path back. He exhales shakily.

Go work, Little Ember. Come back to me after.

He smiles at that, tired and private. Before he opens the door, he looks over his shoulder once, then disappears inside.

I stand there a moment longer with the taste of him still on my mouth, the bond glowing low and content in my chest, trying not to let the irritation return too quickly. It returns anyway.

The den-that-is-not-my-den has him again. The walls and roof and human things. I tell myself he chose to go in, that the cabin only holds him because

he has tasks there, clothing there, the routines that let his kind move through their days without breaking. This helps very little.

The forest takes me back, regardless. I turn and slip into the trees because standing in his clearing glaring at his house solves nothing except perhaps making a bird nervous.

The day passes poorly, but not in any true practical sense. I patrol my borders, check the higher ridge where storm runoff loosened a stand of young birch. Later, I drive a fox from too near a campground and carry one wounded rabbit to a sheltered burrow where it might live or might not, but at least it dies under root if it must. I move. I breathe. I exist in the old ways.

And I pine.

There is no better word now that Lucas has taught me so many of his. Pine—to ache with a person-shaped absence while still knowing they exist somewhere beyond the next hill. To feel one's own body continue with tasks while another part remains pacing at the edge of a bond, ears up, waiting for the moment distance closes again.

Humans need their space, Lucas said once when I pressed too close to his thoughts after a long day. I know this, and I respect it because I must. But knowing he needs space and feeling good about it are not the same.

Through the bond, I catch only small flashes from him as the day moves. Concentration. Mild irritation at paperwork. The quiet satisfaction of a trail properly cleared. Hunger around midday. A flicker of remembered heat every time his mind brushes back against the morning kiss. Each little piece feeds me and torments me in equal measure.

By evening, I am restless enough that sleep is impossible. After he sends that he's too tired to come to the forest, I do not even try for my den. Instead, I roam.

Night fits me best when I cannot settle. I take my true form under the moon and move the old routes that stitch my forest together, lantern dark on my antler because I need no light for this.

Up the north ridge first, where the rocks still hold a little warmth from the day. Down through the cedar hollow where the air is always cooler. Across the narrow creek by the stepping stones Lucas uses in dry months and leaps in wet ones, because I know the exact shape of his stride now and cannot stop thinking about it.

The pining eases only a little with motion. It never leaves.

Then, near the deepest hour of night, it changes.

A sharp pulse through the bond—Lucas is awake, and he's restless. Then a stronger emotion cuts through me hard enough that I stop mid-step on the slope.

Panic.

Fresh and immediate and threaded through his scent so sharply that it feels almost physical even at this distance. Every part of me goes still except the bond, which tightens toward him like a cord being yanked hard. I scent the air and sense Lucas clearly: sweat, need, and fear. He is out of his cabin—out in my forest—and moving quickly.

All the ease I had built around giving him space rips cleanly away. I run without thought or hesitation.

I launch down the slope and through the trees with all the speed this body was shaped for, branches whipping harmlessly off antler and shoulder, the ground flying under me in dark, sure strides. Lantern chain rattles once, then settles into the rhythm of my movement. Every breath I pull is his scent, every pound of my pulse answers his.

Why is he running through the forest alone at this hour?

The question snaps at me uselessly, because the answer matters less than getting to him. There can be explanations later. There can be teasing, even anger if I decide I am allowed it. Now, there is only the line of him pulling me onward, stronger, stronger, panicked enough that the scent cuts clear even over old moss and water.

The route he has taken startles me only when I recognize where it bends—toward my den. He knows the way toward my den even after not being lucid enough when I took him there last night.

My pace does not slow, but the shape of the panic in me changes around that knowledge. Lucas is not running blind from something. He is looking… for me.

I crest the rise above the den hollow and see him below. He is in the little open patch just outside the root-hung entrance, human and frantic and beautiful in the worst ways. Shirt half buttoned wrong, hair a mess, boots unlaced enough that he must have pulled them on in a hurry.

He is turning in a tight circle, scanning the dark, breathing too fast. The scent of his panic wraps the hollow so thickly it almost drowns the den itself.

Then he sees me, and relief hits him so hard I feel it before his face fully changes. It breaks over the fear in one immense wave, washing it flat, and then he runs straight at me with the careless, desperate speed of someone who has already decided the only thing that matters is closing the distance.

“Onyx!”

OceanofPDF.com

26

Onyx

MY NAME SPOKEN LIKE that almost makes me lose my footing.

I barely have time to stop before he reaches me. One second I am surging down the slope in my true shape, the next Lucas slams into me with trembling relief. His arms wrap as far as they can around my middle while my own go around him automatically. He does not seem to care what shape he finds; he only holds on tighter.

I bend over him instinctively, one hand sliding up into his hair, the other flattening between his shoulder blades to feel him properly under my palm.

I am here, Little Ember, I tell him, and the words come out rough because the panic-scent is still fading from my own body, too. ***What happened?***

He shakes against me. For one breath, I think he is cold, but then I smell salt.

Tears.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," he says, voice cracking against my chest. "I tried to sleep. I swear I tried. I was tired, and I kept telling myself I needed to stay home because I have work tomorrow, and I can't just—fuck, I can't just run into the woods every time I miss you."

The words tumble out of him fast, too fast, each one pulled from some place in him that does not understand why it hurts. I hold him tighter, not to trap, only to give his body a boundary when his mind has lost one.

“I couldn’t settle,” he says, and his hands fist in the coarse fur along my spine. “The bed felt wrong. The cabin felt wrong. Everything was too quiet, but not in a good way. Then I smelled you, or thought I did, and I just… moved. I was outside before I fully knew what I was doin’.” He drags in a breath that breaks halfway. “I needed you. I needed you so badly it scared me.”

The knowledge sinks its teeth into me so deeply that, for a moment, I have no human thought.

I shift carefully, letting the true form soften at the edges. The change is rough because his panic has my own instincts snarling, but I force it slowly enough not to startle him. When I am in human shape, I sink to my knees in front of him and keep my hands on his arms.

Lucas looks beautiful, miserable, and embarrassed by his own tears. He wipes at his face angrily, which only makes more fall. “I’m sorry,” he mutters. “This is so fuckin’ stupid. I don’t even know why I’m cryin’.”

I touch his face where his hand just was, catching the next tear with my thumb. The bond gives him my answer because my mouth still cannot.

Mate bond is newly sealed. Our bodies learned together, then woke apart. Heart does not know distance yet.

His eyes squeeze shut. “That sounds pathetic.”

No. I put more force into that than I intended, and he flinches only from surprise. I soften quickly, pressing my forehead to his. ***Not pathetic—new and raw. Human heart carrying old bond. It pulls hard before it learns soft.***

A rough sound leaves him. “I hate how much that makes sense.”

I know. You hate many true things first.

He laughs once, watery and broken. “Don’t make jokes when I’m havin’ a breakdown.”

I shrug one shoulder. ***You laugh. Less breakdown.***

“I hate you,” he whispers, but his hands come up and clutch at my shoulders.

No. You do not.

That draws another shaky laugh from him, and he drops his forehead against my chest. I wrap him in my arms again, still too warm for the night,

still large enough to cover most of him. His crying slows by degrees. Each breath comes easier as my scent truly fills him instead of merely the thin echo his body chased through the dark.

“I thought you’d be mad,” he admits after a while. “Or disappointed. I don’t know. I thought I was doin’ it wrong.”

I frown at that. ***Wrong?***

“This,” he says, one hand lifting helplessly between us. “Us. The bond. Wantin’ you and needin’ space; needin’ space and then panickin’ because I took it. I don’t know the rules.”

There are no human rules for this. I stroke my hand down his back slowly, learning what calms him now. ***So, we make ours. I only waited because humans need space.***

He lifts his head and looks at me, eyes red, mouth soft with a sad kind of humor. “Apparently this human is terrible at it after bein’ spiritually married to a forest monster.”

Spiritually married, I echo, tasting the phrase through the bond and finding it pleasing.

His eyes narrow weakly. “Do not latch onto that.”

Too late.

He groans, but the sound finally carries more embarrassment than pain. Good. Embarrassment means he is coming back to himself.

I cup the side of his face. ***We learn distance slowly, but not tonight. Our bond is still freshly sealed. I have pined all day for you, little mate.***

Lucas goes very still against me. His hands stay clenched in my shoulders, though, so the suspicion has no teeth. Not for me. “You pined?”

Yes.

“For me?”

I tilt my head, because even in this human shape, it seems like an unnecessary question. ***Who else would I pine for? The cold box?***

A laugh breaks out of him so suddenly it sounds painful. He presses one hand over his mouth, shoulders shaking once, and the bond flares with relief because the laugh is real, even with tears still wet on his cheeks.

“Oh my God,” he mutters against his palm. “I’m having a full emotional crisis in the woods, and you’re still mad at my fridge.”

It holds dead food too long and hums smugly.

“It does not hum smugly.”

It does.

He drags his hand down his face, and this time when he looks at me, the misery has loosened its grip. It is still there, tucked under his ribs, but it no longer has both hands around his throat. I hold his face between my palms and wipe away the damp tracks beneath his eyes with my thumbs.

His skin is cool from the night air and warm beneath it from running, from panic, from the bond that still has not learned how far two bodies can be without calling it harm.

“I really did try to stay home,” he says, quieter now, almost ashamed again. “I kept tellin’ myself I was being clingy and weird. Like, we sealed the bond one night ago, and I already can’t sleep by myself. That’s a lot, Onyx.”

Yes.

He gives me a tired look. “You’re supposed to say it’s not.”

But it is a lot, I send, pressing steadiness into the words so he understands I am not agreeing with the shame. ***A mountain is also a lot. A storm. A river after snowmelt. Big does not mean wrong.***

His mouth parts, then closes. The bond gives me the small stunned place inside him where my answer lands, and I keep my hands gentle on his face because he looks close to tears again for a better reason this time.

“Damn,” he whispers. “That was annoyingly good.”

I learn from you.

“You absolutely do not.”

I learn what makes you stop arguing.

“That’s not learnin’ *from* me. That’s learnin’ how to *disarm* me.”

Yes.

Lucas stares at me for a second before a shaky smile breaks through. “Menace.”

Your menace.

The flush that rises under his freckles is soft and immediate, and the bond gives me a quick flash of heat he tries to swallow down because he thinks this isn’t the right moment for it. I know enough now to understand humans often separate things into places where they think they belong. Sadness here. Want there. Fear on one side. Laughter on another. Lucas is especially bad at allowing them to touch.

The bond does not know those walls. It carries all of him at once, and I am beginning to love even the parts he tries to hide from himself.

His gaze drops to my mouth only briefly, but need answers in me. Not the frantic need from last night, or the sealing-hunger that burned through both of us until his fever broke under my mark.

This is quieter and almost worse. I have kissed him and thought of his mouth since, through ridge, creek, patrol, and every useless attempt to be patient.

Now he is here, salt on his skin, breath shaking softly, and I want to learn that human softness again. I lean in slowly, and he meets me halfway.

The kiss is different here than it was at his cabin. That one was morning, threshold, leaving, the bright sting of first learning. This one is dark, forest, return, the wet warmth of his tears still drying on his face. His mouth opens with a small, exhausted sound, and I take the invitation carefully. One hand slides to the back of his head while the other stays at his waist to steady him.

He clings, not desperately now, but firmly, as if he is proving to himself that I will still be here when the kiss ends.

So, I let him end it.

He pulls back only a little, forehead resting against mine, breath warm against my mouth. “Can we go inside?” he asks, then huffs a small embarrassed laugh. “Your inside, I mean. Your den. Not the annoying den.”

Pleasure moves through me so sharply that he feels it and looks pleased despite his swollen eyes.

My den likes you better.

He laughs again, and I rise before he can insist on walking. He starts to protest when I gather him into my arms, but then his body sinks into the hold as if it has been waiting for permission to be carried. I feel his embarrassment, but it is distant beneath relief.

“I can walk,” he mutters anyway, because he must.

I like carrying what came to find me.

He buries his face against my shoulder. “You say shit like that on purpose now.”

Yes.

His breath warms my skin in something close to a smile.

The annoying den does not win tonight.

OceanofPDF.com

27

Lucas

I CAN FEEL HIS satisfaction every second I stay wrapped around him. “You’re enjoyin’ this way too much.”

The corner of his mouth twitches. ***You came to my den in the dark because you missed me.***

My entire face goes hot. “That is a very loaded way to phrase what happened.”

Truth is loaded tonight.

I let out a laugh that comes out thin and breathless because he isn’t wrong, and that’s the worst part. I was pining—actually pining. All day. For a cryptid. An ancient forest guardian with antlers in one form and an unfairly good face in another.

I spent the evening lying in bed, restless and off-kilter, and instead of dealing with it like a normal person, I stomped through the woods in badly laced boots because I needed to see him.

I should be too old to have my whole nervous system hijacked because I slept one night away from the giant skull-faced forest guardian who bit me into emotional stability.

Apparently, I’m in my clingy era, which is something I will be taking up with the universe at a later date.

The bond is full of his satisfaction. It's warm and smug and pleased in that bone-deep way of his. He carries me through the root-hung entrance of his den with his arms locked carefully around me, and the whole time I can feel him enjoying my need like sunlight on old stone.

"You're very pleased with yourself," I mutter against his shoulder, because hiding my face feels entirely mature and necessary.

His answer moves through the bond at once, smooth and dry, far better than it had been even a few days ago. ***Little Ember came looking for me in the dark, wearing clothes badly and smelling of panic. I am allowed to be pleased.***

I lift my head enough to glare at him. "That is a wildly ungenerous summary of events."

Accurate summary.

"I was emotionally compromised."

Yes. And badly dressed.

The laugh catches me off guard, rough from crying and exhaustion. I hate that he can do that. I hate that he's figured out where the humor sits and keeps pressing it with one clawed little thought whenever I'm trying to be tragic. "You're gettin' too good at this," I tell him as he lowers me into the nest.

At comforting?

"At being an asshole."

His head tilts, and he gives me that adorable, puppy-eyed look again. ***Soft insult?***

I groan and drop back into the moss and furs. "I regret teachin' you anythin'."

No. You like when I learn you.

Heat climbs my neck so fast I have to look away. The bastard is right, which makes it worse. I do like it. I like that he remembers my words, my jokes, the small stupid things I say to keep from feeling too much all at once.

I like that an ancient creature born out of earth and night has decided my sarcasm is worth studying. I like that he knows when I need steadiness and when I need teasing to breathe again.

I'm in hell. Specifically, fond hell.

The den wraps around us with warmth, cedar, and the deep mineral scent of stone. My cabin felt wrong tonight, hollow, and too square, all its

familiar comforts turned strange by his absence. Here, everything in me settles so quickly it scares me a little. The panic that drove me out into the woods has quieted, but the need underneath remains, though it’s softer now, less frantic.

I don’t want sex. Not right now. My body still feels tender and changed from the sealing, and my mind is too bruised from scaring the hell out of myself. What I want is worse, because it sounds needier.

I want to be held.

Onyx doesn’t make me say it. He settles beside me in human form, but before he can lie down fully, I catch his wrist. He stills immediately, gaze dropping to my hand, then lifting to my face with his careful patience that has started to undo me every time.

“Can you change back?” I ask, voice quieter than I intended. “Your real form. I mean, if that’s okay.”

He goes still for the tiniest beat. His eyes search my face, maybe checking for uncertainty, for nerves, for any sign that I’m asking out of obligation instead of want.

“I want you,” I say before he can answer, and then I realize how that sounds and clear my throat. “I mean, all of you. Not just the version that fits better in human doorways.”

His expression softens in a way that almost hurts to look at. Warmth moves through the bond; a pleased, almost disbelieving satisfaction of being asked for something he once worried would drive me away.

You want to sleep with my true shape.

“Sleep near it,” I correct. “Probably not literally on top of it, because I do still value my spine.”

His amusement rolls through me in a deep wave that makes the corners of my mouth twitch up before I can stop them.

He steps back from the nest.

I sit up a little to watch, because I don’t want to miss it. The change is still impossible no matter how many times I see it. His human shape seems to loosen, then expand. Dark markings rise beneath pale skin, bark texture pushing through like the forest claiming him back. His shoulders broaden, his spine lengthens, and his height stretches until the den itself seems to make more room for him.

The skull presses forward and settles over his face, fused bone, weathered and pale. His antlers break free in black branches, heavy and beautiful, and

he lowers his head slightly to keep them from scraping the stone above. Claws lengthen. Fur lifts, coarse along his spine, and when his eyes burn pale through the skull sockets, my chest pulls tight with something that isn't fear at all.

Awe, maybe. Need, too. Love would be a reckless word this early, so naturally my brain grabs it and hides it under a tarp.

The den seems to breathe easier the moment he stands in his true form again, as if the room itself recognizes him more clearly this way. And God, he is beautiful.

Onyx lowers himself into the nest with exaggerated care, his huge body folding around me as if I'm made of glass instead of bad decisions and unresolved issues.

I crawl closer before he can finish arranging himself and press my chest to his side, one hand sinking into the thick black hair at his neck. He freezes for half a second, and the bond fills with such raw pleasure that I have to close my eyes.

"You can hold me," I murmur.

His arm comes around my back, massive and warm, claws turned away, his weight grounding me so thoroughly I almost hate how badly I needed it. My cheek rests against slate skin. His scent fills my lungs.

The bond hums low between us, warm and steady, and I finally understand that the ache in the cabin wasn't only loneliness. It was my body reaching for the place where it had learned to be safe.

I should sleep. I'm exhausted enough that my bones feel hollow, but being back here has woken up my curiosity instead. That's always been one of my worst traits. Give me a mystery and a bad emotional state, and I'll ask questions until someone threatens to sedate me.

So, I do the obvious, sensible thing.

I climb on top of him.

It's awkward because Onyx in true form is enormous, and straddling him is less like straddling a person and more like trying to sit on a warm, breathing boulder with antlers. His hand comes up to steady my hip, careful and firm, and the pale light of his eyes sharpens inside the skull.

Little Ember starts trouble when tired.

"I'm not starting trouble," I say, settling more comfortably over his lower ribs. "I'm conductin' an interview."

Same thing with you.

“Rude.”

Accurate.

I point at his skull. “You’re lucky you’re hot.”

The bond goes very still, then warms with pleased confusion. ***Temperature?***

“Oh, don’t you start.”

His amusement brushes through me, dry and wicked. ***Too late.***

I shake my head, smiling despite myself, and rest both hands on his chest where the bark-dark markings rise beneath my palms.

“Tell me about you,” I say, and the playfulness fades a little because I mean it. “How you came to be. Aestrata. All of it.”

Onyx quiets beneath me. Not in the wary way, but in the reverent way.

Then his voice fills my mind, low and rough, and clearer than it used to be, shaped by the bond until it feels less like words and more like an old story being remembered through marrow.

Aestrata walked the first forests when they were still wet from making. She saw the creatures of the world run and burrow and root and bloom, saw rivers carve their own mouths and mountains hold the bones of fire beneath them, and loved it all enough to fear what would happen when clever hands learned to cut faster than the earth could heal. So she shaped watchers.

She made us when the earth still had many untouched places. Not from a womb as humans come. Not born crying, but shaped and called. Root, bone, hunger, night-sight, storm-memory. She named my kind Cervari and set us where the land needed protection.

A shiver runs through me. “Guardians.”

Yes. Guardians of earth. Forest. Ridge. Old water. Places that remember before human names. We were made to keep balance, not peace. Peace is often a human word for wanting nothing sharp nearby.

I huff softly. “That’s uncomfortably fair.”

Balance has teeth, he continues, and emotion moves beneath the words, old and vast. ***Deer eats green. Wolf eats deer. Rot eats fallen wolf. Roots drink rot. Nothing wasted, and nothing taken for emptiness. My kind was made to stop wrong taking. Fire set for greed. Trees cut until hill bleeds. Blood spilled for pleasure. Waste without hunger. Cruelty without need.***

His hand tightens slightly on my hip. Not possessive in a way that scares me. Possessive in a way that says his whole existence was built around

guarding what cannot guard itself.

"And humans called you monsters," I say quietly.

Humans call many things monsters when those things say no.

That one sits in my chest for a while. I trace one raised marking down the center of him, following it until it disappears beneath the thicker fur at his ribs. "Were there many of you?"

Never many. Guardians do not gather like humans. Solitude keeps territory clear. We met sometimes at borders. Scent. Warning. Blood if needed. Silence if not.

"That sounds lonely."

His answer takes longer. ***It was what I was made for.***

The words aren't sad; that's what gets me. He doesn't send them with self-pity or bitterness. He sends them as fact, which makes their ache so much worse. I look down at him, this ancient guardian who has been alone longer than my whole bloodline has probably had surnames, and my heart goes dangerously soft.

"But Aestrata made mates too, right?" I say, because I need to understand the one mercy in all that solitude.

His eyes brighten faintly. ***Rare mercy. One scent, one soul-shape, one life that could root beside a guardian's. Not promised to all. Not expected. Only possible. Enough to make endurance less empty.***

My throat tightens. I try to make a joke because that's what I do when a truth gets too close to my face, but no joke comes. I just sit there on his chest with my hands spread over the markings of something ancient, and I feel the whole terrible weight of what it means that he found me.

Not because I'm special in some neat, destiny-approved way. I'm a tired ranger with relationship trauma and a mouth that runs when I'm nervous. But his body knew mine. His loneliness ended when he caught my scent on a trail.

"I'm glad," I whisper.

The bond opens gently. ***Glad?***

"That I came back here, and that you found me." I swallow, staring at my hands because looking at his skull might finish me. "Even if it scared the shit out of me at first. Even if I'm clearly not handlin' the transition with grace."

You came back.

"You keep saying that like it's the best thing I've ever done."

It is.

My eyes sting, and I let out a shaky laugh. “You are so bad for my emotional stability.”

No. I improved it.

“Debatable.”

You laughed while crying tonight. Improvement.

I drop my forehead against his chest and laugh again, because he isn’t wrong, and I hate him a little for knowing it. His hand moves up my back, careful claws brushing my spine without pricking skin. The touch is slow, repetitive, soothing in a way that finally makes my eyelids heavy.

“Keep talkin’,” I mumble.

About Aestrata?

“About anything.”

His voice settles into me, warm and low through the bond. He tells me about the first ridge he guarded, about snow so deep it buried young pines, about fires that cleansed and fires that destroyed, about mushrooms that grew only after lightning split old wood.

He tells me about a creek that used to run east before a landslide turned it south. He tells me about elk paths older than the town, about the way the forest sounds different before a hard winter, about Aestrata speaking not with words but with pressure in roots, animals gone quiet, green shoots rising where nothing should have lived.

I listen until awe becomes sleep.

Sleep, Little Ember, he sends, voice soft as moss and old as stone. ***I guard.***

For once, I don’t argue.

I fall asleep on the heart of the forest, with my mate’s voice guiding me down. My last clear thought is that I am absurdly, impossibly lucky.

OceanofPDF.com

28

Onyx

LUCAS FALLS ASLEEP WITH his cheek pressed to the slate of my chest and one hand buried in the fur near my ribs, as if even sleep wants proof of me.

I stay still beneath him long after his breathing deepens. In true form, stillness is easy. The forest taught me long before language did. I have waited hours beneath snow for prey to pass, days near a sick tree until the rot showed whether it would spread, seasons at borders where wrong scents drifted and vanished before I could find their sources.

My body knows how to become stone when needed. But this stillness is different, because my mate lies sprawled across me like I am ground he trusts not to shift beneath him. Every instinct I have wants to curl around him tighter until nothing in the world can reach him.

The den is warm around us, filled with cedar, moss, old earth, and the newly settled scent of our bond. His mark is hidden from my sight where he rests against me, but I feel it anyway, a steady pulse in the space between us. It no longer burns with fever—it hums. Whole. Rooted. A new thing learning its own shape.

Lucas sleeps more deeply here than he did in his cabin, body finally accepting what his mind fought all day. He came back. He needed me and

hated needing me, and still, he came. There is courage in that which he will not name for himself, so I keep it for him.

For a little while, happiness holds me. Then the old truth stirs under it.

I told him of Aestrata. I told him she made my kind from root, bone, hunger, night-sight, and storm-memory. I told him she named us guardians and set us in the places that needed teeth. I gave him truth enough to fill his eyes with awe and quiet his clever mouth until sleep carried him down.

But I did not tell him the other truth. I did not tell him about the one sprung from my same making.

The human word is twin brother. It sits oddly in my mind, shaped wrong around what we were, but it is the closest word Lucas will understand. Not brother by womb or childhood. Not shared parents, shared food, shared house, shared small human years. Cervari are not made that way.

We do not begin soft, helpless, crying beneath blankets. We rise from purpose. We are called out of earth and shadow, given hunger and restraint, given sight for dark places and teeth for things that harm the land. We are made alone because guardianship requires solitude.

But he and I were made from the same deep call; two answers to one wound in the earth. An aberration.

While I was the patient one, he was not.

The memory of him moves through me like a scent I cannot clean from stone.

Black antlers tipped red and heavier than mine, even young. Eyes too bright, too quick to follow the tremor of small things. A laugh that came through the bond between us as hunger sharpened into pleasure. He learned fear faster than I learned patience, and he liked the taste of it.

At first, I thought it was youth of making, a wildness that would settle once territory shaped him. All Cervari carry violence; it is not evil by itself. Teeth are not evil, laws are not evil, even death is not evil when it feeds what must live.

But there is death that feeds nothing. There is taking that leaves the earth quieter. There is hunger that does not begin in the belly but in delight.

The old word for what happened has no clean human shape, as human words are blunt in the wrong places. Feral comes nearest and still misses much. Madness sounds too mindless, frenzy too brief.

My people used Varkhyn. It carried the sense of a hunger turned wrong by its own reflection, of instinct overrunning law until pleasure and blood

became one thing.

It was what happened when a guardian forgot the line between culling and cruelty, between necessary death and delighted ruin. They eat humans not because the body requires meat, or because men came with guns or fire or poison and would not leave.

They eat because human fear pleases them, and the sound of human pleading becomes a bloody symphony.

The Varkhyn were the reason humans whispered about flesh-eating skull beasts in the oldest fireside dark. They were the origin beneath a hundred different legends, later flattened, mixed, and made into entertainment.

My brother became Varkhyn.

He disappeared long ago, and I let disappearance become a grave in my mind because the truth was too dangerous to hold without madness. I haven’t smelled his scent since our last fight, when he crawled away with a broken antler, and I haven’t sensed him since.

I lower my muzzle until it rests lightly over Lucas’s hair. He makes a small sleeping sound and shifts against me, fingers tightening in my fur. He has no idea that the stories he jokes about may wear a face tied to mine by first making.

He has no idea that when he asked whether another like me could be taking humans, I gave him the softer edge of an answer because I did not want terror to poison the first days of his trust.

He has a right to know. More than any human in Sweet Rivers, more than the lawman with his wall of names, more than Tom with his wary eyes and old warnings. Lucas is my mate. He is marked now. If the Varkhyn still lives, Lucas will not be merely another human scent in the trees.

He will be a beacon.

Jealousy in my kind is not small. In a Varkhyn, it is the deepest tree rot with antlers.

I will tell him soon. Not now, not while his body finally rests after sickness and sealing, not while his mind sleeps open and trusting against mine. If I place this in the dark now, it may crawl into his dreams, making him wake and reach for me with panic again. I will not make his mind a hunting ground for my guilt.

The promise steadies me enough to sleep.

I curl more carefully around him, claws turned away, antlers angled so they do not scrape stone, and keep my body between him and the den

mouth. The forest breathes outside. No wrong scent crosses the hollow. No old hunger moves close enough for my body to rise. Lucas sleeps, and after a long time of listening to his heart, I follow him down.



Morning wakes me with his voice.

Not the voice he uses for me when he knows I listen. This is quieter. Private. A mutter meant for himself, soft with sleep and wonder and that sharp human habit of explaining feelings to empty air because the feelings have become too large to sit in silence.

I do not open my eyes.

Lucas is on top of me again, though he has moved during sleep. He straddles the lower part of my ribs, one knee on either side, his weight warm and careful.

He thinks I am still asleep. This pleases me so much I become very still. He leans closer, studying the markings across my chest. I feel his fingertips hover above them, almost touching, then draw back as if he is afraid of waking me. I keep the bond soft and quiet, holding my amusement behind a stone wall so he will continue.

“This is insane,” he whispers.

Yes, I think, but I do not send it.

He exhales slowly, then lowers one finger to a raised bark-dark line near my sternum. His touch is so gentle that it enters me like water through moss. Pleasure unfurls under it. I keep my eyes closed with great effort.

“You’re actually real,” he murmurs, tracing the marking along its curve. “I keep thinkin’ I’m gonna wake up in my cabin, and this’ll be a fever dream, which would honestly make more sense than whatever my life is now.”

His fingertip reaches the thicker fur at my side, and he pauses. Then he touches it too, stroking once with a careful, curious softness that nearly makes my tailbone press into the nest like a pleased animal.

“Of course you’re soft here,” he mutters. “Because apparently the universe looked at me and said, *‘You know what this man needs after gettin’ cheated on? A sexual awakenin’ at thirty-five with a forest guardian Death-deer.’*”

That is where I almost lose my stillness.

Death-deer.

He has used this before, but never in this tone—low and scandalized and fond, as if he is insulting fate to hide the tenderness in his hand. His vocal twang sits in the words just enough to warm them, softened by city years but not gone. I like it most when he is tired. His voice comes closer to the place where he grew up.

He shifts his weight, still talking to himself. “Not even a normal sexual awakenin’, obviously. Couldn’t be some guy at a bar. Couldn’t be a nice divorced dad with a truck and normal hobbies. Nope, it had to be seven feet of ancient woodland giant with antlers, a skull face, and a pantry full of herbs like some cryptid grandma.”

Cryptid grandma.

I store this phrase for later use against him.

Lucas leans closer, squinting at one of the scars near my ribs where the marking breaks. His hand hovers over it, not touching. “What happened here?” he whispers, and the humor fades from him so quickly that my amusement softens with it. “You’ve got so many stories carved into you, don’t you?”

Yes. Too many.

His hand moves up toward my skull. He pauses before touching the edge of the fused bone, and I feel the little pulse of his uncertainty through the bond even though he tries to keep himself quiet. Then his fingers settle there, light as fern-shadow tracing a weathered ridge.

“Hi, terrifying face. Why are you so beautiful?” he whispers, then instantly winces at himself. “Jesus Christ, Lucas. Don’t talk to his skull like it’s a cat.”

I open my eyes, letting the blue glow show through the empty sockets, and he freezes.

For one perfect moment, my mate sits on my chest with his hand on the bone of my face, hair tangled, cheeks flushing brighter with each heartbeat, and the pelt slipping dangerously low because he forgot modesty while privately accusing me of being a Death-deer.

I let the bond open with warm amusement.

Sexual awakening with forest guardian Death-deer?

Lucas closes his eyes as if pain has taken him. “I hate the bond.”

No. You hate being heard.

“That is not better.”

It is accurate.

He opens his eyes and glares down at me, which would be more threatening if he were not flushed to the ears and straddling my true form. “You were supposed to be asleep.”

I was. Then mate began whispering strange honors to my skull. Terrifying face?

His mouth drops open. “You are absolutely not allowed to keep that.”

Kept already.

“Oh, my God.” He drags both hands down his face, which only makes the pelt slip another inch. He notices, swears under his breath, and yanks it higher while I politely do not send anything about how little the covering hides from the bond. “This is why I need privacy.”

Mind is den. Whispering aloud over my body is not mind.

He stares at me, and I send satisfaction.

He points at my skull. “You’re getting too smart.”

You like when I learn you.

His finger stays pointed, but the anger leaves it. Heat moves through him instead, shy and reluctant, and he looks down at my chest as if the markings have suddenly become urgent. “Maybe,” he mutters.

The word is small, but the bond knows it is large.

I lift one hand carefully and settle it at his hip, claws turned away. He inhales, but he does not move off me. His body is warm from sleep, his weight a living gift across my ribs. Morning sits on him softly, smoothing the panic from last night and leaving him curious, embarrassed, and mine in the way he chose.

Little Ember studies what is his, I send.

His eyes come back to mine fast. “That sounded possessive.”

It was.

“We talked about this.”

Still true. I am yours.

His mouth twitches despite himself. “You’re impossible.”

Here, I send, giving him the answer he taught me, and his face does that soft, helpless thing that makes every century before him feel worth enduring.

He lowers his hand to my chest again, palm spread flat over the place where my heart beats under slate skin and old bone. For a while, neither of us says anything.

The morning holds us. The den breathes around us. I can feel the truth waiting behind my ribs, heavy and necessary, the story of my brother and the Varkhyn coiled in the part of me that morning has not yet warmed.

I will tell him soon. But not before I keep this one gentle thing.

I lower my skull until it rests lightly against his palm.

I like when you look, I tell him.

His throat works, and his embarrassment turns tender.

“Yeah?” he whispers.

Yes. Mate sees. Mate stays.

Lucas’s hand tightens against me, and his smile comes slowly, crooked and tired and beautiful enough to silence the old dark for one breath longer.

“Well,” he murmurs, voice rough with morning, “I did say I had weird taste now.”

I let amusement curl through the bond. ***Good taste.***

He laughs, and I keep that too.

OceanofPDF.com

29

Lucas

APPARENTLY, THIS IS MY life now—sitting half-naked on top of an ancient forest guardian in his den while he compliments my taste like he isn't the terrifying thing every local kid was warned about around campfires.

The sound that leaves me is softer than I expected, less defensive than it would have been a week ago. Maybe that should scare me more. Maybe I should still be clinging to normal with both hands, trying to shove all of this into some category that makes sense under fluorescent lights, paperwork, and Parker's loud opinions.

But Onyx is beneath me, solid and warm and real, and I'm tired of acting like that doesn't answer more questions than it creates.

His skull rests lightly against my palm, the old bone cool compared to the slate skin beneath my other hand. I trace my thumb over one weathered ridge and feel the bond go quiet in that particular way I've started to recognize.

As if every part of him has turned toward the place where I'm touching him. That attention makes the nervousness in my chest shift into something steadier. It doesn't ask for permission from the version of me who thought

his life was supposed to go one straight way until marriage, kids, a house, and a ring polished all the rough edges off his wants.

Turns out, my wants had teeth hiding under them.

Or antlers, apparently.

I lean forward before I can talk myself out of it. Onyx goes still when my mouth touches the ridge of his chest, and pleasure moves through him in a deep, startled pulse, big enough that I feel it echo back into my own body. I press another kiss against him, lower this time, where the markings rise under my lips.

I drag my lips carefully along one line, then pause and breathe him in. Cedar. Stone. Labrador tea. The deep wild scent that belongs only to him, thick around me and already under my skin.

His hand flexes at my hip, and I lift my head enough to look at him. His pale eyes burn through the skull sockets, brighter than before, fixed on me with a kind of stunned hunger that makes my pulse kick hard.

“What?” I ask, and my voice comes out steadier than I feel. “You can dish it out but can’t take it?”

The bond gives me his confusion first, then the meaning clicks into place, gleaned from my own mind, and heat floods through him again.

Mate mouth on first body, he sends the words rougher than usual despite not being spoken aloud. ***Difficult.***

“Difficult how?”

His claws curl carefully into the moss instead of my skin. ***You make me forget stillness.***

That should not undo me the way it does.

I want that. I want the beast who can tear through bark and bone to forget himself under my hands. I want him shaken. I want him looking at me like my mouth is a danger he didn’t know how to guard against.

“Maybe I like that,” I say.

Onyx’s eyes flare.

I swallow, but I don’t backtrack. My heart is pounding, and the old habits are there, waiting to pull me into apology.

Sorry, too much. Sorry, didn’t mean it. Sorry, forgot I’m supposed to be confused and ashamed and stumbling behind my own body.

But I’m not sorry. Not about this.

I bend again and put my mouth over the center of his chest, just above the heavy beat I can feel through him. Onyx’s body gives one deep, involuntary

shudder beneath me. That does more for my confidence than any reassurance could. I kiss him again, letting my tongue touch the raised line crossing under his sternum.

The sound he makes is low enough to vibrate through my knees.

I freeze for half a second, not from fear, but pure stunned satisfaction. “Oh,” I breathe against him. “You liked that.”

Yes. Too much.

No hesitation, just truth offered through the bond like he can’t imagine why anyone would hide pleasure once it’s named. The honesty strips something open in me. It makes me brave in a way I don’t know how to be alone.

His hand slides from my hip to my lower back, holding me where I’ve chosen to be. The weight of it grounds me. I move slowly because there’s still newness everywhere, still a trembling awareness that I’m touching parts of him no one has touched like this before.

It makes me ache. Not just with want—though that’s there, steady and building. It also makes me ache with tenderness. Onyx has lived too long with fear as the only language people gave to his true shape. Teeth and warning and campfire whispers.

Don’t follow the light. Don’t answer your name. Don’t look too closely at the thing with antlers in the dark.

I grew up with those stories in the air like weather, and now I have his heartbeat under my mouth.

The relief that moves through him is quiet but real.

I move lower, following the path of his markings over the hard plane of him. It’s strange how quickly my hesitation changes shape when he responds. I’m still nervous, of course I am. I’m straddling a creature with claws longer than my fingers and antlers that could probably destroy my truck if he got irritated enough. But the nerves don’t feel like *stop*.

“You really like bein’ touched here,” I murmur, dragging my mouth along another line.

By you. Only you.

Possessive, tender, devastating bastard.

I breathe out slowly, then press my cheek to his chest because if I look at him too fast, I’m going to say something that changes the air. Maybe the air has already changed. Maybe it’s been changing since the first bundle on my

porch, since the first dream, since the first time I saw his lantern and felt fear reach for me with one hand while recognition reached with the other.

“I never thought I’d want this. Not this exact situation, obviously, because nobody plans for a forest guardian Death-deer, but I mean…” I huff, frustrated with myself, then lift my head to meet his eyes. “I mean you. Your body. Touchin’ you. Makin’ you feel it.”

Onyx’s focus sharpens so completely that the den feels like it holds its breath.

“I like knowin’ I can do that to you. I like that you get all ancient and terrifyin’ and then fall apart because I put my mouth on you.”

His hand tightens at my back.

I feel the full force of what that does to him through the bond, and it almost knocks the breath out of me. It isn’t only lust; lust would be easier. This is need braided with reverence, control straining under the shock of being wanted openly. I can feel him trying to stay still for me, trying not to overwhelm me, trying to give me this moment where I get to be the brave one.

That realization makes me softer, not less bold.

I run my tongue over the markings close to his heart, and this time, the reaction comes through both body and bond. His back arches slightly beneath me, his enormous frame shifting the nest, and the low sound he makes has no human shape. It runs down my spine like thunder. I follow it, kissing along the markings, bolder now, letting my teeth graze lightly over one raised ridge because I want to know what happens.

What happens is that Onyx nearly loses his mind.

His hand flies from my back to the furs, claws sinking deep. The whole den fills with the scent of him, sharp and wild and pleased, and the bond flashes with such stunned pleasure that I gasp against his skin.

Lucas. My name comes through him like a warning and a plea.

I lift my head, breathing hard, mouth tingling. “Too much?”

His eyes burn pale and helpless. ***Not enough. That is the danger.***

The answer sends a pulse of heat through me so strong I have to sit back. We stare at each other in the dim morning, both of us caught on the edge of something that’s been waiting since I woke on top of him and decided curiosity was safer than admitting I wanted him again.

My body knows what it wants, and for once, my mind doesn’t lag too far behind.

I run my hands slowly down his chest, watching him watch me, and the bond hums with every inch. “Then I guess we should be careful,” I say, my twang coming out a little stronger because my voice has dropped too low for city polish.

“But I don’t wanna stop. I wanna learn you,” I say, leaning down again, letting my lips brush the place where slate skin meets the dark rise of his markings. “And I want you to let me.”

The sound that moves through him is almost a surrender.

Yes, Little Ember.

His body settles beneath mine, not calm, never calm, but open in a way I recognize in myself. Trusting. Wanting. Ready to be undone carefully.

I smile against his chest.

“Good,” I whisper. “Then hold still for me.”

The bond goes silent for half a heartbeat. Then Onyx, ancient guardian of the earth, terror of old stories, my impossible beast, obeys.

It does something strange to me. Not because I think I’ve overpowered him. I haven’t. I know that down to my bones. Onyx could roll me under him with one hand, and could pin me without effort. He could decide this moment ends with me spread beneath him instead of hovering over his body with a mouth gone brave and a pulse gone stupid.

The power here isn’t that he can’t stop me. The power is that he can.

And he doesn’t.

The bond is open enough that I know holding still hurts in its own way. Not pain, exactly. Strain. Hunger turned into a tight leash. Want forced to kneel and wait.

For me.

Onyx’s whole body gives one hard pulse under my mouth when I flick my tongue over one of his nipples. His claws flex in the furs, but nothing else moves. The bond floods with dark heat, and under it, something almost bewildered.

He doesn’t know what to do with this. With being touched like he is the one being chosen. With my mouth moving over a body humans taught themselves to fear. With me not only staying, but also looking.

I drag my lips lower, following one of the branching black lines down his sternum and over the hard plane of his stomach. His skin changes under my mouth in small ways as I go.

Onyx's breathing turns ragged when I pause near the lower part of his stomach, where slate skin disappears beneath the thicker dark fur at his waist. This is where his body stops pretending any human comparison will help me. From here down, his true shape belongs fully to the forest.

His hips are broader than they look in human form, his thighs furred and strong on either side of me, joints bent in that almost-stag, almost-nightmare way that once made my brain go blank with fear. The fur brushes the inside of my knees. It's coarse at the top, softer where my fingers slide through it, and warm enough to make my palms tingle.

I look up at him. His eyes burn through the skull, fixed on me with an intensity that makes my stomach dip.

"You okay, Wildheart?" I ask, my voice lower than I mean it to be.

His answer comes through the bond in a rough pulse. ***Mate learning first body. I am not okay.***

Onyx gasps when I move my hands lower, my fingertips resting just above the fur-thick dip between his hips. There's no obvious human anatomy waiting between his thighs, and the absence stops me in a different way than fear.

I've had him heavy in my hand, and inside me. I know the lines down his stomach and the bark-like patterning that continues over his shaft. But this body is older than that one. More guarded. More hidden.

My fingers move slowly through the fur, and I find the seam by accident.

Hidden by the dark fur is a warm vertical slit framed by thicker skin and softer hair. Protected. Closed, but not flat. I brush my fingers over it, and Onyx makes a sound so deep the furs beneath me tremble. The bond flashes pleasure and a sharp edge of alarm, not directed at me, but at himself.

I look up at him. "Is this okay?" I ask.

The answer comes rough enough to scrape through me. ***Yes.***

I swallow and let my fingers drift closer.

His body reacts before I even part the fur around the slit. The seam twitches, slick gathering faintly at the opening, and my mouth goes dry in a completely useless way. Heat rises up my neck. I know my face is red; there's no chance it isn't. But I don't stop.

I stroke carefully around the edge, learning the shape by touch first, gentle pressure over warm, sensitive skin. The reaction that tears through him is enormous. Pleasure pours from him in a dark wave, thick and stunned, and it rolls straight through me until my body responds helplessly.

“Oh,” I whisper, staring down at my hand. “That’s really sensitive.”

His answer is barely shaped. ***Yes.***

I almost smile, but the look on his body stops me from turning it into teasing. He’s trying to hold still for me, and it’s costing him. His whole lower body is tense, thighs shifting under my hands, the hidden seam slickening beneath my touch.

The wetness surprises me. It beads slowly, carrying his scent so strongly that my head feels light. Cedar, rain-soaked bark, stone, dark green leaves crushed underfoot. Onyx, but deeper. More intimate. The first-body version of him, less softened for me.

And when my thumb glides carefully along the seam, the slit parts all the way, and I stop breathing.

His cock is bigger in this form. Thicker, heavier, and ridged with those same tree-growth patterns, but the texture is more pronounced. The slick coats him as he slides further free, the opening pulsing around the base.

My hand can’t close around him the same way as it could before. He’s too thick for that, too heavy. The sheath flexes at the base each time I stroke down, as if his body wants to draw him back and push him out all over again. The sight of it does something deeply unfair to my nerves.

Onyx’s skull tips back again. His throat works around a sound that never becomes human. His thighs tense around me, fur brushing my legs, and the den fills with his scent so sharply that my mouth waters.

“You were holding back a lot,” I say, because my brain apparently wants to state the obvious while I’m kneeling between his legs with my hand on his true-form cock.

His eyes lower to me through the skull. ***I made the first taking possible.***

That shuts me up. He told me he softened his shape for me. I understood, sort of. But seeing the full truth of him now—feeling the size and texture and heat of what his body keeps hidden—makes that first night different in my memory. He didn’t only restrain himself emotionally; he altered himself. For me.

I lean down before I can say something that cracks my voice, and I lick his cockhead before I can convince myself not to.

Onyx breaks his stillness with a low growl, skull tipping back, antlers scraping hard enough to send bits of root and soil pattering down around us. I don’t take much; I can’t because he’s fucking massive. But I don’t need to take all of him to learn him.

He tastes like strawberries—wild strawberries.

I feel him fighting himself, so I reach up blindly with my free hand and catch two of his fingers, guiding his hand to the back of my head. His claws retract before he touches me, and his palm settles into my hair with almost frightened care.

I drag my tongue along the underside, tracing one raised line as far as I can. His hand tightens in my hair, still too gentle to direct me, but no longer hovering uselessly in the air. Good. That's what I want. I want him involved in his own pleasure. I want him to understand that being touched does not mean he has to lie still like a creature waiting to be judged.

I take the head into my mouth properly, and hum. Onyx snarls above me, the sound shaking the den walls, and the bond floods with filthy, reverent hunger.

My hand moves where my mouth can't. The slick makes every stroke smooth, but the ridges still catch against my palm and tongue, making my imagination do unhelpful, vivid things about what that would feel like inside me. My body clenches at the thought, and there's no hiding that from the bond.

Onyx feels it. ***Little Ember thinks of taking true shape.***

Heat rushes up my chest and neck. I lift my mouth just enough to breathe. "Maybe Little Ember is busy."

The skull lowers toward me. His eyes burn bright enough to turn the whole den blue at the edges. ***Little Ember drips when he thinks of being opened by the beast.***

My face goes hotter, because yeah, I can feel the slick gathering between my cheeks again. I look down at him in my hand, and more slick spills from him as I stroke, gathering over my knuckles, dripping onto the fur at his lower belly. The scent thickens until my thoughts turn hazy. I lower my mouth again, taking the head, licking and sucking as much as I can manage while my hands work the rest of him.

His pleasure through the bond becomes almost too large to take. I feel every place I touch from his side. My mouth wrapped around him, hot and wet. My fingers sliding over the bark-patterned ridges. The strange shock of being wanted in a body he expected would frighten me. The awe of my stubbornness. The dark, possessive pleasure of watching me learn something hidden and choose not to stop.

When I slip my hands between thighs, a sharp twinge from last night catches low in my body. I stiffen, expecting the ache to spread when I rub my hole. It doesn’t.

The place where I’m sore warms instead. A creeping relief moves through me in a slow wave, easing the tender pull in my muscles and softening the bruised ache between my thighs. I pull out, breathing hard, staring down at the slick shining on my fingers.

Onyx lifts his head at once. ***Pain?***

“No,” I say, distracted, still staring at my hand. “Actually… the opposite.”

I rub my slick-coated thumb over my rim again. The warmth sinks in, and the tenderness fades. Not completely, not magically erased in a blink, but eased. Soothed—the ache is being coaxed closed from the inside.

My mouth drops open.

OceanofPDF.com

30

Lucas

MEDICINAL PRECUM. OF COURSE he has medicinal precum.

"Oh, you have *got* to be kiddin' me." I look up at him. "Your slick heals?"

The answer comes slowly, as if he has to sort through my meaning and then his own knowledge of his body. ***It helps mate take my body for the first time. Keeps harm from rooting. Eases torn places. Softens pain slightly.***

I stare at him, mouth agape, and he watches me carefully, both wary and confused. His body generates its own magical lube-slash-aftercare treatment —I guess the Aestrata was feeling thorough when she made him.

"You're built to look terrifying, and every time I get close enough, I find another part of you that's mindful."

The bond goes quiet, full of more feeling than either of us can say. ***Lucas.***

My name is full of warning. I already know what he's warning against. Me getting too bold and deciding the healing slick means I'm invincible. Me taking more than I can handle because curiosity and want have teamed up and murdered my common sense in the furs.

"I'll be careful," I say before he can start listing every reason we should slow down.

His claws flex. ***You say careful while looking at me like you intend to climb onto your beast and make him forget every old law.***

I don’t deny it. That alone makes his breathing change. ***Lucas—***

“I said I’ll be careful, Wildheart,” I say and sit back on my heels, using what he’s already given me to coat my fingers again. His smell is all over me now. Mouth, hands, thighs. My body responds eagerly to it, slickening in its own way from the bond.

I’m still human enough that the idea of taking him like this makes nerves climb my spine. I breathe through them. Fear is information, not a command. Onyx taught me that without ever saying it that plainly.

I reach back and press my fingers against my hole, still expecting it to hurt… but it doesn’t. The slick warms immediately, sinking into the soreness. My breath catches, not from pain this time, but from surprise. The healing isn’t numbness. It doesn’t erase sensation. It clears the sharp edges so I can feel everything else more cleanly.

I slide one finger in, and my body opens around the touch with a low, warm pull that makes my thighs tremble. Onyx’s entire body locks beneath me, and the bond floods with hunger so intense I nearly lose my balance.

He watches me open myself with his slick on my fingers, and I feel what it does to him. The sight hits some place in him deeper than sex. His mate using what his body gives. His mate trusting the true form’s strange protections. His mate preparing not through fever or sickness, but choice.

The sheath pulses around the base, more slick spilling over the fur, and his cock throbs heavily where it rests against his stomach.

I add a second finger slowly.

This time, the stretch feels easier. Not effortless, but different. My body still remembers being sore, but the slick works through that memory like warm water through stiff earth. The ache fades into heat, and the heat turns deeper. My head tips back before I can stop it, a moan leaving me in a low, shaky sound.

Onyx snarls, and I open my eyes again as the noise rips through the den and straight into my spine. ***Little Ember opens with my slick and thinks I will stay sane.***

“I didn’t ask you to stay *sane*,” I say, though my voice trembles enough to ruin the boldness a little. “I asked you to stay *still*.”

His growl deepens. ***Cruel mate.***

I like this power in a way that frightens me a little. I like having him beneath me, huge and shaking, his body older than my bloodline and still held there by my words. I like that I can make him suffer with wanting and know he'll thank me for the right kind of suffering.

My body feels warm and open, tender but not raw. The slick continues working, easing where it spreads, leaving me dizzy with the realization that taking him may not hurt the way I feared.

It will stretch—God, it will stretch. But the healing will keep the sharpness from becoming damage. His body gives me a way to survive the full truth of him.

I pull out my fingers and rise onto my knees above him. It takes effort because my legs have lost stability, and he reaches for me automatically.

Huge hands bracket my hips, claws gone, palms open. He doesn't pull me down. Doesn't guide me into taking more than I choose. He only steadies me, and the care in that, in a body so enormous, almost undoes me completely.

I grip the base of him with one slick hand, but even that isn't easy. He's too thick for my hand to close fully, ridged and hot and alive against my palm. I position him carefully, heart pounding so loudly I can hear it in my ears. The first touch of the head against my hole makes my body clench. Fear rises, yes, but it is tangled with want so tightly there's no separating them now.

Onyx feels both. ***We stop if pain speaks too sharply,*** he sends, his iron-steady voice low through the bond.

I nod, then remember he likes words when thresholds matter. "Yes."

His hands tighten slightly on my hips as I lower myself. The first inch takes my breath because the stretch is immediate. My body tries to resist for one panicked second, then the healing heat spreads through me again, easing the burn before it can become too sharp. I shake, both hands braced on his chest, head bowed, mouth open around air I can't quite use.

Then I sink lower.

Beautiful, he sends, the word barely coherent. The word makes me clench around him, and his claws punch back into the furs.

I stop instantly, panting. "Did I hurt you?"

His laugh through the bond is dark and wrecked. ***No. You pleasure me until my bones lose language.***

That is a hell of a sentence to process while I'm halfway impaled on him.

His restraint is a living thing beneath me. I can feel the beast in him trying to thrust up. I can feel the old mating instinct roaring at him to seat himself fully, lock deep, fill. But he doesn't. He holds still because I told him to, because my choice matters more than his hunger, because devotion in Onyx has always had claws turned inward.

I bend down and press my forehead to his chest, but the new angle shifts him inside me, and I cry out.

Pleasure slams through me without warning as one of those ridges drags right over my prostate. My hips jerk down another fraction on instinct, and that sends another shock through me so strong my arms almost collapse.

Onyx's hands clamp around me, steadying, not stopping. ***There,*** he sends, voice turning darker. ***I feel it. I know where the beast fills you sweet.***

My breath stutters. "Don't—don't say things like that right now."

He does not laugh; his hunger is too huge. ***I will say the truth while you take me. You are open around my first body. You are wet with what heals you. You are shaking because pleasure has teeth now, and you still want more.***

I whimper.

There's no other word for it. I hate that there's no other word for it, but that's what comes out of me. A wrecked, helpless sound that makes his body pulse inside mine and his slick spill hotter around the base.

I start moving. Not much at first. I can't take all of him yet, and the part of me that used to measure desire against proof of courage would have been stupid about that. Onyx isn't. The bond gives me nothing but awe.

He worships what I can take, not what I can't. So, I use the part of him inside me, rising and lowering in small, careful rocks, letting the ridges drag over that deep place with each motion.

My hands spread over his chest as pleasure builds in layers, fingers digging into the ridges there. His body is huge beneath me, furred legs braced, skull tilted back, antlers shadowing the root ceiling, cock hidden halfway inside me and halfway slick between us. He looks like a nightmare being ridden by a man who should have known better.

I do know better. I just don't care.

Then he grabs my thighs and lifts me up, thrusting up as far as he can go.

"Onyx! Fuck—!"

The world whites out.

It is not the same as me sinking onto him. Not even close. That had been a choice, my body opening around him with trembling courage and his restraint lying still underneath me like an animal with its throat in my hand.

My body spasms once, panicked by the sudden depth, and then pleasure rolls through me so hard my head drops back. The den blurs above us, roots and blue lantern-light and the shadow of his antlers all smeared together, and Onyx's mind pours through mine, dark and huge and satisfied.

Take it, Little Ember, he sends, and nothing in the words is soft except the devotion underneath them. ***Take the part of me you wanted. Take the beast that opened for you.***

I try to answer, but all that comes out is a wrecked sound when he lowers me slightly and thrusts up again, using his strength to give me more without forcing all of himself into me at once.

I feel every ridge, every pulse of him, every impossible inch my body has accepted because his slick keeps soothing the places that should have burned too much. My cock jerks against my stomach, untouched, and his gaze tracks the movement through the skull like he could devour the sight.

"Too much," I gasp, even as my hips twitch down another fraction.

The bond catches the lie immediately.

His hands tighten, lifting me again, not letting me collapse. ***Too much and still you come down for more. Sweet greedy mate. You shake on me, and still your body opens. You whimper like the taking is too deep, then you clench because you want it deeper.***

The shame that should answer those words doesn't come. Maybe he's burned it out of me. Maybe I've finally stopped believing wanting him makes me something I need to apologize for. I only shudder and spread my knees wider over his furred hips, letting him see exactly what his voice does to me through the bond.

I suck in air, shaking. "Do that again."

The upward motion meets my downward drop, seating himself deeper than before. My cry tears raw from my chest. He stops again for one heartbeat, and I slap my palm against his chest before he can drown himself in concern.

"Again," I beg, because there's no pride left. "Onyx, again. Like that."

His growl is almost pained. ***Greedy flame.***

"Yes," I gasp, and the admission burns through me in a way shame can't touch. "Yes, fine, greedy, whatever you want to call it, just do it again."

He starts lifting and lowering me in short, punishing strokes, letting gravity and his strength work together until I’m riding him without enough control to pretend I’m in charge.

Feel how deep I am. Feel how my body heals what it opens. Feel how safely I ruin you.

That is what does it.

My orgasm hits so hard I don’t make a sound at first. My whole body locks around him, pleasure dragging me under in a bright, brutal rush. Then the sound comes torn out of me—half sob and half his name, as I spill between us, my cock jerking untouched against the ridged plane of his body.

My hole clamps around him in pulsing waves, slick heat and healing warmth and pleasure all tangled so tightly I can’t tell whether I’m breaking or being held together.

His hips jerk, cock swelling inside me, slit pulsing hard, and I know he’s right there, too.

“Come for me, Wildheart,” I whisper, voice barely there as I clench around him. “I’ve got you.”

His hands grip me with a force that would frighten me if it were anyone else, but the claws are gone, and every ounce of that strength holds rather than hurts. He thrusts up once, hard and deep, seating himself as far as my body can take.

His release is different in this form too—*more*. Thicker. I feel it inside me in heavy pulses, each one making his body throb, warmth spreading through me to ease the strain even as he fills me again and again. The healing and the stretch and the release all tangle until I can’t tell where pleasure ends, and recovery begins.

I collapse forward onto his chest before he’s finished, and he catches me instantly. We fall back together, one arm wrapping around my back, the other supporting my hips so I don’t sink down too hard. Even in the middle of his own orgasm, he protects the places that might hurt. That knowledge punches through me so deeply that my eyes burn against his chest.

The bond floods with him: pleasure, love, disbelief, wild gratitude, the stunned ache of being taken by the mate who learned the hidden shape and called it his.

When the last pulse fades, I’m shaking too hard, breathless against his chest, body stretched around him, full of him, healed and sore and ruined in

a way that feels strangely clean.

His slick continues to warm inside me and around us, easing the places that took too much pressure, soothing the ache before it can deepen into pain. I can feel it working. That is the strangest part. Not magic in a sparkling sense; nothing pretty. More like root and sap and old instinct doing exactly what it was made to do.

Keeping me whole after the beast has had me.

Onyx's hand strokes down my back. ***Little Ember?***

I answer by patting his chest weakly, because words are a faraway concept right now, and I don't have a map.

The bond warms with relief.

After a long moment, his body gradually shifts beneath me. The ridges soften first, the thickness easing enough that I can take a full breath without feeling split open by it. I gasp when I feel his cum trickling out of me.

Onyx stills. ***Pain?***

I shake my head against him. "No. Weird. I'm full and feel your cum slipping out of me. Just give me a minute to feel weird."

His hand settles at the back of my neck, thumb moving slowly. ***Yes.***

A tired laugh slips out of me. "At least you admit it."

My body is old. Old things are strange.

"Your body is very, very strange," I murmur, turning my face enough to kiss one raised mark on his chest. "Also useful."

The bond gives me a flicker of confusion, then amusement, then a satisfaction so deep my toes curl despite every nerve in me being exhausted. ***Useful?***

I close my eyes, smiling against him because I can't help it. "You've got healing monster slick."

The smugness blooms through the bond with horrifying speed.

I groan. "Oh no."

Mate praises slick.

"I did not praise it. I described a function."

Mate is healed by my body and pleased.

"Scientific observation."

Pleased.

I'm too tired to fight him properly, and honestly, he's not wrong. The ache that should be growing sharper after what we just did is settling instead, fading into a heavy, pleasant soreness.

My body feels stretched, used, and cared for all at once. I don’t know what to do with that, so I keep my face pressed to his chest and hope he accepts hiding as a medical necessity.

He does not. His clawless fingers slide into my hair, gentle but firm, and tilt my head up. The skull looks down at me, ancient and terrible and far too satisfied. ***No hiding.***

I sigh, but the sound comes out soft. “Fine. Yes. I’m pleased.”

The bond brightens.

Ridiculous creature.

My ridiculous creature.

Slowly, carefully, he lifts me off him. Even softened, the withdrawal drags a hiss through my teeth, and distress flashes through him so fast that I press both hands to his chest at once.

“I’m okay,” I say, breathless. “Still okay. Just… feelin’ everythin’.”

Then he gathers me onto his chest, away from the part of him withdrawing back behind that protective seam. I feel his cock slip fully from sight beneath fur and slick-wet skin, hidden again by the slit that slowly closes as his body settles.

I watch it because apparently curiosity survives even exhaustion. Onyx notices, because of course he does.

Learning continues? he asks, amused and warm.

My face heats. “I’m a ranger. Observational skills are part of the job.”

You observe with your mouth.

I bite his chest. “I hate you.”

No.

“No,” I admit, closing my eyes against his chest and soothing the spot where I bit him. “I don’t.”

His arm tightens around me, and the den quiets. His true body stays beneath mine, furred legs warm against my side, slate chest steady under my cheek, skull lowered protectively over my head.

The lantern dims to a soft blue that paints the roots above us in calm light. I feel the bond settling too, no longer sharp with need, but full of afterglow and the strange tenderness of having crossed one more impossible bridge together.

I should probably be overwhelmed. I mean, I am, but there’s no panic waiting under it this time. Not even when I remember the size of him, the

hidden seam, the slick, the way his body changed and opened under my hand.

My Little Ember, he sends, softer now. ***My brave, foolish, hungry mate.***

I snort, eyes closed. “One of those was unnecessary.”

Foolish?

“Obviously hungry.”

His amusement rolls through me like a low purr, and I smile despite myself.

Rest now. We will go to the spring to wash when you wake.

I don’t know when I start falling asleep. One minute, I’m lying there with my cheek against his chest, fingers lazily tracing one of the ridges, listening to the den settle around us.

The next, my thoughts loosen, and the last thing I feel is Onyx’s hand covering mine, holding it over his heart as if he still cannot believe I chose to learn the body everyone else turned into a warning.

Before sleep takes me, I manage one more kiss against his skin. “Mine,” I whisper. “My beast.”

The words barely have sound, but the bond carries it anyway.

Onyx’s arms tighten around me, and his answer follows me down into sleep. ***Yours.***

Maybe later I’ll have a crisis about the biology of my sex life. Maybe tomorrow I’ll stand in the ranger station pouring coffee while Parker complains about paperwork and have to pretend I wasn’t enthusiastically riding a forest guardian’s true form less than twenty-four hours earlier.

Right now, I’m too happy to care.

OceanofPDF.com

31

Lucas

TWO MONTHS AFTER THE bond settles, I start getting greedy.

Not in a loud, dramatic way at first. Though I'd like to state for the record that nobody has ever become less dramatic by falling in love with an ancient forest guardian who can speak directly into their mind and has opinions about refrigerators.

It creeps in quietly, tucked inside all the sweetness we've built around each other since that morning in his den, inside the easy habits that would have scared the hell out of me if someone had told me about them a year ago.

Onyx touches me constantly now, not always with heat behind it, sometimes just because I'm within reach and he still seems faintly amazed that he's allowed.

His hand at the small of my back when we walk uneven trails. His knuckles brushing mine when he stops at my porch steps and waits for invitation even though he's crossed that threshold a hundred times by now. His head in my lap when he lets me comb my fingers through his hair, eyes half-shut, body too big for the couch and still somehow looking like he belongs there more than the furniture does.

We kiss. We touch. We sleep tangled together in his den or my bed, depending on which of us is being more stubborn about where I’m resting that night. We are so intimate it should probably come with a warning label, but we haven’t had sex again.

Not since I initiated it with him in his true form and learned the shape of his body in ways that still make me lose whole chunks of thought at inconvenient times.

I think about it too much. That’s probably the cleanest way to say it. I think about straddling a creature every story in Sweet Rivers warned us not to follow and feeling safer than I had in any human bed.

I think about how huge he was beneath me, how careful, how absolutely undone, and then I have to stand in my kitchen staring at burnt toast because my body has decided breakfast is optional when memories are available.

Onyx knows.

The bond isn’t wide open all the time, not anymore. We’ve learned privacy. Still, strong feelings spill. Want spills. Embarrassment spills worse because embarrassment is basically want wearing a stupid hat. Every time things go too far, Onyx pulls back. Not cruelly; that would be easier to be angry about.

He kisses me like it hurts him to stop. He rests his forehead against mine, breathing harder than he needs to, while the bond trembles with restraint so tight it makes my chest ache. He touches my face afterward, my hair, my throat, as if apologizing with every part of him.

Then he retreats into carefulness, into noble suffering, into that ancient martyr routine where he acts like wanting me too much is a weather event he’s personally responsible for containing.

He doesn’t want to lose control. I understand that, I do. He’s not a man in the ordinary sense, and even saying "ordinary sense" feels hilarious, considering I only recently discovered the word ordinary had been doing most of the heavy lifting in my life.

He’s Cervari. A guardian. A predator shaped by a goddess out of root and bone and old forest law, and when he wants, he wants with teeth.

I’ve never been with a man before him, much less a cryptid with antlers, a skull face, and a lantern hanging from one tine. I know how odd that sounds. I know there’s no casual way to say, “My sexual history went from

almost marrying a woman who cheated on me to letting an ancient forest creature rearrange my insides.”

Two months is a long time to be kissed like I’m sacred and then left aching because the thing kissing me is terrified of how badly he wants to keep going.

So tonight, I decide I’m bringing it up again. Calmly. Maturely. Like a grown man with a badge, a mortgage-adjacent cabin situation, and a supernatural mate who can feel when I’m being full of shit.

And if calm doesn’t work, I’ll pout. I am not proud, but I have assets, and I intend to use them.

By the time I’m heading back to the cabin after a late patrol, I’ve already rehearsed the conversation six different ways and ruined them all, which leaves me with precious few last-minute options.

Version one is very sensible and includes phrases like “mutual trust” and “communication,” which makes me sound like a pamphlet Parker would steal from the county health fair and read out loud in a terrible accent.

Version two is more direct, something like, “I want you, and if you don’t stop acting as if I’ll break, I’m going to lose my mind,” which is at least honest but possibly less constructive.

Version three is just me walking into his arms, putting my mouth against his throat, and letting the bond translate the rest.

That one has promise.

The air is cool, spring leaning toward summer but not quite there yet. The trees crowd close around the last curve of the trail, and the porch light glows ahead through the branches, small and yellow and human. Onyx is somewhere to my left, hidden deeper in the woods, though hidden feels generous when I can feel him through the bond like a warm hand resting low in my chest.

He’s not intruding. He hasn’t been, not since I told him I needed patrol to be patrol and not a guided romantic surveillance mission. Still, he’s close enough that the back of my neck knows him.

I’m just stepping into the clearing when I see the car, and my body stops before my mind does.

Silver sedan. Clean in a way nothing should be clean after making it up this road. City-clean. Out-of-place-clean. There’s a scratch along the back bumper that my brain identifies before I can stop it, because I once spent an

entire Saturday pretending I knew how to buff it out while she stood beside me laughing and drinking iced tea.

For one stupid second, time folds. Then it spits me back out when I see Hannah standing on the porch.

My ex-fiancée has one hand wrapped around her purse strap and the other tucked against her elbow like she's cold, even though the evening is mild. Her hair is shorter than it was when I left, cut just above her shoulders, and she's wearing the blue sweater she used to throw on when she wanted to look soft and harmless after a fight.

It's almost funny how little my body responds compared to how much I thought it would.

Five months ago, maybe this would've gutted me. Now, my first thought is that she's standing too close to my door. My second is that Onyx has gone very, very quiet in the trees.

Then his scent drifts in, Labrador tea and cold stone and warning. My pulse gives a startled kick because the emotion coming through the bond isn't simple jealousy.

It's territorial, yes, but layered under that is possessiveness. He remembers what she did to me. He knows the scent of the grief I carried when he first found me. To Onyx, she's the old wound showing up at my threshold and asking for hospitality.

Hannah sees me and steps down from the porch like she has the right. "Lucas."

Her voice hits some memory in me, but the memory doesn't open. It just lies there, dead and flat, a thing I used to mistake for home.

"What're you doin' here?" I ask, and my voice comes out calm enough to surprise me. There's a little twang around the edges, more Sweet Rivers than city tonight, probably because this place has sanded me back toward myself. "You didn't call."

"I did," she says, giving me a small, wounded smile. "You stopped answering."

"Yeah," I say. "Maybe you should've taken the hint."

Her expression flickers, but she pulls it back quickly. I used to know those flickers like the weather. Guilt first, then irritation, then the choice to look sad because sad worked better on me than angry.

"I know I should've warned you," she says, hugging herself tighter. "I just needed to see you. I couldn't keep doing this through voicemail."

“We weren’t doin’ anythin’ through voicemail,” I tell her, walking closer but stopping at the bottom of the steps. She is on my porch. I stay in the dirt. It feels important. “You were talkin’. I wasn’t answerin’.”

Her gaze moves over me, and I see her notice the changes. The beard a little fuller. The ranger uniform dirtier than city-Lucas ever let himself get. The mark peeking out from under my collar, obvious if you know what you’re looking for. Her eyes catch there, and I feel Onyx’s attention snap to the same place through the bond.

I glance toward the tree line without turning my head. There, between two pines, something darker than shadow watches. *Easy*, I think back, before remembering I don’t really know how to send properly unless I’m emotional.

But Onyx’s answer comes immediately, too controlled to be calm. ***She stands at mate’s den.***

Yeah, I noticed.

She wants inside.

Not happening.

His jealousy pulses hard enough that I nearly miss Hannah saying my name again.

“Lucas,” she repeats, softer now. “Can we talk inside?”

“No.” The word lands between us with satisfying weight.

She blinks. “N-no?”

“No,” I say again, and step onto the lowest porch step, not enough to join her, just enough to claim the space she’s borrowing. “We can talk out here.”

Her mouth tightens. “Are you serious?”

“Pretty serious, yeah.”

“It’s getting cold.”

“It’s spring.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I really don’t.”

She looks at me like I’m being cruel. I might be, but I find I don’t much care. The cabin is mine. My den, Onyx would say. My threshold. She doesn’t get to cross it because she drove all this way.

Hannah exhales, glancing around the clearing like the trees might side with her. “I made a mistake.”

I don’t answer right away. In the trees, Onyx’s presence expands. Not visibly. Not to her. But I feel it, the forest holding its breath around him,

every bird and insect suddenly aware of what waits beyond the clearing.

She hurt you, Onyx sends. ***She should not stand.***

I press my thumb against the porch railing until the wood digs under my nail. *Reel in your possessiveness, Wildheart.* The bond bristles, but I send the clearest feeling I can: *this is mine to handle.*

Hannah takes my silence for an invitation, which is just like her. “I ruined everything,” she says, her voice trembling in the exact place it needs to. “I know that. I’ve had to live with it every day since you left. I keep thinking about the wedding, about our apartment, about how stupid and selfish I was. I miss you.”

The words pass through me and don’t catch on. That’s the strangest part. I spent months imagining this conversation in different forms. I thought it would hurt more. I thought I’d rage or fold or ask questions that could never have answers good enough to matter. But standing here now, with Onyx in the tree line and his mark beneath my collar, all I feel is tired.

“You miss what I gave you,” I say. “That’s not the same thing as missin’ me.”

Her eyes shine. “That isn’t fair.”

“No,” I say, and a humorless laugh leaves me. “Fair was tellin’ me you didn’t want to marry me before you slept with my best friend for six months. We’re way past fair, Hannah.”

She flinches, and some old reflex in me twitches with guilt before it dies on arrival. Good. Let it stay dead.

“I was scared,” she whispers. “We were leaving the city, and everything felt like it was changing.”

“So you fucked Adam?”

Her eyes widen. “Lucas—”

“No,” I say, and my voice drops quieter, not louder. “You don’t get to make my reaction uglier than what you did.”

She sucks in a breath and wipes at her eyes. “Don’t say it like I’m a monster.”

A strange laugh almost breaks out of me at that, because “monster” has a very different shape in my life now, and Hannah wouldn’t last ten seconds under that comparison.

“I don’t think you’re a monster,” I say. “I think you’re someone who made choices and hated the consequences.”

Her tears spill then, and once, that would've wrecked me. Once, I would've stepped closer, lowered my voice, tried to make the room less sharp for her even while I was bleeding. Tonight, I stay where I am.

The bond hums with approval from the tree line. ***Little Ember has claws.***

That almost gets me. A laugh jumps in my chest so fast I have to cover it with a cough.

Hannah narrows her wet eyes. "Are you laughing at me?"

"No," I say, which is technically true. I'm trying not to laugh at the giant cryptid hiding in the woods and live-commentating my breakup closure.

Onyx sends a dry pulse of offense. ***Not hiding. Watching.***

You are literally in the trees.

Strategic trees.

I press my lips together and look down at the porch step like it's suddenly fascinating. If I lose it right now, Hannah will think I'm having a breakdown, and honestly, that's not the energy I'm trying to bring to this reunion.

She wipes at her cheeks. "Is there someone else?"

At the tree line, the temperature of the bond drops. Slowly, I look back up. "Why?"

"Because you're different," she says. "You're not even looking at me the same way."

"I'm not the same."

Her gaze drops to my collar again. "That mark. Did someone do that to you?"

Onyx's jealousy turns so hot and black-edged that my hand flexes at my side. ***She looks at my teeth on you.***

I should not react to that sentence the way I do. I should absolutely not feel heat curl low through my body while standing in front of my ex-fiancée, emotionally ending the last rotten thread of my former life. But apparently, my dignity packed up somewhere around 'hidden sheath' two months ago and has not sent a forwarding address.

"That's none of your business," I say.

Hannah's face hardens, grief slipping enough to show the anger underneath. "After everything we had, you can't even answer me?"

"After everything we had, you lost the right to ask what's on my skin."

I see the words slowly hitting her—the shock, the hurt, the anger. And maybe, somewhere under all that, the understanding that this isn't a door

she can talk her way open anymore.

Onyx watches, and I feel him fighting every instinct that tells him to step out, claim me in a language Hannah would never understand, and drive the old hurt from my den by sheer force of being terrifying.

I love him a little for not doing it. The thought lands before I can stop it, and the bond flares.

Oh, hell.

I glance toward the trees before I can help it, and the bond warms around the edge of my anger. Hannah follows my gaze but sees nothing. Of course she sees nothing. Onyx chooses what humans see, and right now he wants her to feel only the shape of being watched without getting proof.

She rubs her arms as a shiver moves through her, visibly gathering herself for one more try. “Lucas, please. I came all this way. I still love you.”

“I’m sorry you’re hurtin’,” I say, and the surprising thing is that I mean it. Not enough to take responsibility, not enough to open my door, but enough to recognize pain without letting it become my leash. “I really am. But your regret isn’t my emergency. You need to go home.”

Her eyes spill over. “Lucas—”

“No,” I say gently. “I’m not yours anymore.”

The bond behind me flares.

Hannah stares at me like she’s waiting for the man she knew to step back into my body and smooth this over. He doesn’t. Maybe he never existed the way she thought he did. Maybe I spent years becoming easier to love badly.

She wipes under her eyes, then nods once, trying very hard to be dignified. “I guess that’s it, then.”

“Yeah,” I say. “That’s it. Goodbye, Hannah.”

Her mouth trembles. For a second, I think she might argue. Then she steps past me carefully, not touching me. I move aside only enough to let her down the porch steps. She walks to her car, shoulders tight and head held high. I watch because not watching would feel cowardly. She starts the engine, backs out too fast, then disappears down the narrow road in a cloud of dust and old history.

For one second, all I hear is my own breathing.

Then Onyx comes out of the trees fast enough that I barely track the shift from shadow to body. One moment there is a skull-faced Cervari at the edge of the clearing, and the next he is crossing the open space in human

form, the shift folding over him mid-stride, antlers drawing in, skull melting back, slate skin giving way to pale skin marked with black bark lines.

He doesn’t look calm. He doesn’t look careful. His hair is loose around his face, his blue eyes too bright, his mouth set in a line that belongs to a creature barely holding the door shut on something ancient.

“Onyx,” I start.

He reaches me, hands framing my face with trembling care, and then his mouth is on mine.

There is nothing tentative in it.

The kiss hits like a storm crossing the ridge faster than the radio predicted, all pressure and heat and inevitability. He kisses me hard enough that my back meets the porch post, though one of his hands slides behind my head before I can hit wood. Even wild, even jealous, even burning with whatever he held back while Hannah stood near my door, he protects first.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

I grab his hair with both hands and kiss him back so hard my teeth catch his lip. He makes a rough sound into my mouth, not speech, not quite a growl, and the bond answers for him with a possessive roar that makes my knees feel unreliable.

Two months of restraint snap tight between us. Two months of being touched softly, kissed reverently, wanted carefully. All of it is here now, burning under his skin and mine.

He pulls back, breathing hard through his nose. His hands stay on my face like he’s afraid I’ll vanish if he lets go.

Mine, he sends again, but this time it isn’t only jealousy.

It’s terror too. It’s grief remembered. Hurt remembered. The scent of me from months ago, broken and humiliated and trying to pretend I had come home because it was sensible, because the job was good, because the cabin needed a ranger, because heartbreak can be turned into a career move if you’re stubborn enough.

Onyx had found me then. He had scented the wound before he knew the story. Now the person tied to that wound had stood on my porch and asked to come inside.

His hands tremble harder, so I cover one with mine.

“Yeah,” I breathe against his mouth, voice wrecked and rough with the twang that comes out when I stop polishing myself smooth. “Yeah, Wildheart. I’m yours.”

He kisses me again, deeper, rougher for half a second before he catches himself and shudders with the effort of holding back. His forehead drops to mine, his breath harsh against my lips even though he doesn't need air the way I do. His hands slide from my face to my shoulders, then to my back, gathering me in until there's no space left between us.

She stood at your den, he sends, and the jealousy in it is almost petulant beneath the danger. ***She looked at my mark. She smelled of old claim and regret.***

"She doesn't have a claim," I say, still breathless.

I know.

"You sure? Because you're vibratin'."

I dislike her, he practically growls.

A shaky, helpless laugh breaks out of me after everything. "Yeah, I picked up on that."

She made your scent hurt.

That wipes the humor off my face.

Onyx feels it and softens immediately, one hand rising to my shoulder, thumb brushing below the mark without touching it directly. His eyes stay locked on mine, bright and furious and worried all at once.

"She used to," I say quietly. "Not tonight. Not the same way."

He searches me through the bond, careful despite the storm in him. I let him. Not all the way into my mind, but enough to feel the truth. Hannah's presence bruised an old scar. It didn't reopen the wound. Not like before. Not enough to make me forget who I am now or who waits for me at the edge of the trees.

His anger shifts then, becoming something warmer and more shaken.

You thought— He stops, suddenly careful with the place he touched. The bond brushes that thought I had by mistake, the one that flared before Hannah left.

I love him a little.

My face heats. "Don't," I warn, but there's no bite in it.

His eyes go devastatingly soft. ***Little Ember thinks loud.***

"Little Ember is emotionally exhausted and should not be held accountable for stray thoughts during porch confrontations."

Stray thoughts often know the path home.

"Oh, shut up."

He already is, technically, which makes the look he gives me deeply unfair.

I kiss him because I need him to stop looking at me like that, and because I've been wanting to kiss him since before I found Hannah on my porch. This time, the kiss starts softer, but it doesn't stay that way for long. Onyx's hands spread across my back, and the bond fills with that word again, less growled now, more reverent than frantic.

Mine.

I pull back just enough to look at him. "You know," I say, my voice low, "I was gonna talk to you tonight before all this."

His focus sharpens instantly. ***Talk?***

"About us."

His hands still, and I feel the wall begin to rise, the careful restraint, the fear of his own want. Before it can settle fully between us, I slide my hands down his chest and hold his gaze.

"About how I want you again," I say, and my voice shakes, but I don't take the words back. "And how you keep pullin' away because you're afraid of losin' control."

Onyx looks at me like the porch has fallen out from under him.

I swallow, braver now because his jealousy already cracked something open and because I am tired of wanting alone in a bond built for two.

"I'm not askin' you to stop bein' careful," I tell him. "I'm askin' you to trust me when I say I know what I want. I'm not human-normal anymore, not after the bond, not after what we've already done, and even before all that. I'm still a grown man with a say in his own damn body."

I slide my hands down his chest to his waist, feeling the restraint still trembling under his skin. "You taught me thresholds, Wildheart. You taught me my 'yes' matters. So let it matter when I'm sayin' yes to this too. I want you."

I rise onto my toes and kiss the corner of his mouth, the way he kissed me this morning, because I can now. His forehead drops to mine, and a shudder runs through him.

You want me when I am jealous.

My face goes hot. "Unfortunately."

When I am wild.

"Yes."

When I am not only human shape.

My breath catches, and he feels it immediately. His eyes search mine with that terrible, tender focus that makes lying impossible.

I lift my chin. “I want all of you. That’s been the problem the whole time. We don’t have to figure it all out on the porch, but you’re comin’ inside—and I don’t just mean the goddamn cabin.”

The bond flashes bright with satisfaction so immediate I almost laugh. ***Annoying den loses again.***

I grin despite myself and take his hand, tugging him toward the threshold Hannah never crossed. “Yeah, Wildheart. Tonight, it loses.”

OceanofPDF.com

32

Onyx

LUCAS SLEEPS WITH MY marks on his skin. The sight should settle me —it does not.

He lies on his stomach in the center of the bed, one arm shoved beneath the pillow, the other hanging over the side as if reaching for the floor where I once slept because the bed was too soft and the den-that-is-not-my-den had not yet learned my shape.

The sheet is tangled low over his hips. His back is bare to me in the moonlight, broad and warm and marked in places where he asked me to put my mouth, my hands, my teeth. Not the sealing mark at his shoulder, but smaller claims scattered across shoulder, ribs, hip, the inside of one thigh hidden now beneath the sheet.

Human skin remembers easily. It blooms under wanting. He had wanted that tonight. He had looked at me with his face flushed and his voice rough, city polish gone almost entirely under the twang that comes when he is too tired to smooth himself down, and he had told me he wanted to feel me afterward.

I gave him what he asked; too much, perhaps.

I sit beside him on the too-soft bed and stare at the shape of my hand resting near his shoulder, careful not to touch, though I want to. If I touch

him, he may wake. If he wakes, he will look at me with those tired green eyes and ask what is wrong, and I do not know how to answer without bruising the warmth still sleeping in him.

What is wrong?

His old mate came to his den.

The thought rises ugly and immediate, and my claws press beneath the human shape of my nails. Old mate is not the right word. I know that. Lucas would correct me. He would frown, perhaps soften, perhaps sigh and say, *"She was my ex, Onyx, not my mate,"* and he would be right in every way that matters to humans.

She did not carry his mark. She did not know his true scent beneath soap and sadness. She did not hear the bond. She did not touch the deep place in him that answered me from first sight.

But she stood at his porch.

She looked at the door he had denied her.

She looked at my mark.

She smelled of old claim and regret, and the moment I scented her sadness curled around manipulation, something in me went dark.

I wanted to *remove* her.

Not only frighten her. Not only stand between her and Lucas. Not only make the clearing itself reject her until she returned to the road with no memory of why she came. I wanted my hands on the shape of the threat. I wanted her scent gone from his porch, his stairs, the air near him. I wanted the forest to swallow every trace of the pain she had left in him and give nothing back.

…but that is not like me.

I have killed. I will not soften that truth. Lucas knows some of it, though not enough. I have ended men who came with fire. Men who laid poison near dens, who shot wolves for sport and left them rotting because the body on the ground meant less to them than the story at the tavern. Men who crossed old boundaries again and again after warning, who tried to break land that had not belonged to them in any true way.

My violence has always had a root: protection, balance, and punishment, where punishment kept more harm from growing.

Tonight felt different. Tonight, when I kissed Lucas after she left, the bond roared with *mine* until I barely knew where thought ended and instinct began. He answered me—*Aestrata, help me*—he answered me so

beautifully. He pulled me into the den-that-is-not-my-den and told me he knew what he wanted, and the thing that had been pacing under my ribs for two months broke loose.

I held him. I marked him again because he asked for marks. I let him feel wanted without softness hiding the teeth beneath it. I was wild, and he liked me wild. He said my name as if it held him together and pulled me apart at once.

Lucas is not fragile. He is not something made to sit above a hearth and be admired from a safe distance. He is a man with strong hands, stubborn eyes, and a mouth sharp enough to cut fear into pieces he can laugh at.

He asked, and I listened. When he told me harder, I gave harder. When his breath caught wrong, I stopped. When his hand pressed flat to my chest, I stilled so quickly the bed creaked under the force of it. I did not hurt him beyond what he chose and wanted.

Still, the rage remains. It sits behind my teeth now that he sleeps. It tastes too close to something old.

My brother liked human fear. He liked the moment a human understood the old story had found them. He liked the sounds that came when soft bodies learned there would be no mercy. He became Varkhyn not in one great breaking, not in a storm of blood that made the earth cry out all at once, but by small permissions.

A little more delight in panic. A little less care for balance. A little hunger that had nothing to do with need. One day, perhaps, he looked at his own reflection in dark water and saw only what had always waited beneath.

I look at Lucas sleeping, covered in marks he wanted, and fear coils through me with a new face.

What if Lucas wakes the same wrongness in me?

No, not Lucas. That thought is cowardice. My mate does not create rot. He is not responsible for the shadows that move under my old bones. He did not put rage in me; he revealed where it had been sleeping. The bond sharpens everything. Want. Joy. Jealousy. Fear. If there is ugliness in the sharpened thing, the ugliness is mine.

I bend over him at last because leaving without touching him feels cruel, even if waking him would be worse. I press my mouth to the back of his shoulder, kissing those ember-marks lightly enough that he only shifts and sighs. His scent rises, warm and trusting. The bond reaches toward me in sleep, soft as a hand searching.

I almost stay.

My body argues better than my mind. Stay until morning. Let him wake under my hand. Let him laugh at the bed, at the way I hover like a guilty creature, at my hatred of his cold box. Let him call me Wildheart in that fond, quiet voice that makes all my ancient pieces lower themselves happily at his feet.

Tell him then. Tell him I was frightened by my own jealousy. Let him scowl and touch my face and say I am being an idiot in ways no forest goddess could manage better.

But the rage was mine before Lucas could soothe it.

I need Aestrata before I let my mate tell me I am still good.

So, I rise.

The bed barely moves when I leave it, though the softness clings to my feet like a weak bog. I stand in the dark of his room and look at him for longer than wisdom allows. The cabin is quiet. The cold box hums in the other room with its smug little throat. The squirrel in the eaves scratches once and then goes silent, perhaps sensing that tonight is not a night for crimes.

Lucas sleeps on.

I need words he can find when he wakes.

Writing is human and slow. I have learned some from watching him. He leaves notes to himself on paper near the door and then forgets to obey them. He makes marks for trail maps, for reports, for warnings other humans will understand. My hands were not shaped for pens, but this human form can hold one well enough.

On his small table beside the bed, I find a notebook and the pen he chewed while thinking two nights ago. It smells of his mouth. That almost stops me for a foolish moment. Then I sit on the edge of the chair, too large and too tense for it, and force my hand around the pen.

The first line is crooked. I stare at his name until the letters blur into meaning and ache.

I write slowly because if I let the bond carry the message, it may wake him, and I cannot trust myself to feel him panic and still go. The words are blunt. Poorly shaped. Mine, but less full than thought. He will understand. He understands me better than anyone has.

Lucas

I come back in few days. I do not leave you. Not angry. Never angry with you. I go to speak with deep earth. Something old woke in me tonight. Too much teeth. Too much ~~Var~~ mine. I must ask Mother if this is guarding or becoming wrong.

You are safe. Den is watched. I hear if true fear calls. Do not chase into deepwood. Deepwood does not know your feet yet.

Onyx

I pause, then add one more line because I can already hear his voice in my mind, hurt covered in anger, calling me dramatic and ancient and impossible.

I promise. I come back, Little Ember.

The letters are shaped wrong and the grammar is incorrect, I think, but I leave it. It is my voice more than perfect human marks would be.

I set the note where his searching hand will find it. Then I take the black stone from my pocket, the onyx he placed for me once on the porch when he thought apology could be offered to trees, and put it on the corner of the paper. He gave me that stone when he did not yet know he was naming me. It will hold the page. It will hold the promise, perhaps, better than ink.

At the door, I stop.

Leaving his den without goodbye feels like breaking a threshold, but waking him would make him reach for me. And if he reaches, I will stay.

I step outside before my resolve can wither into want.

The forest receives me coldly at first, or perhaps that is only my own fear. I shift before I reach the tree line, moving fast and running from the cabin, from Lucas’s sleeping scent, from the marks on his body and the note under his stone.

Human skin gives way. Bone rises. The skull settles over my face with a familiar weight that should comfort me. Antlers push into the night. Claws take the earth. The lantern hangs dark from its tine, silent and useless, because I need no light where I am going.

Deepwood lies beyond the paths Lucas knows.

Beyond the ridge, beyond the cedar hollow, and beyond the old creek turned south by landslide, there are places even I rarely walk. Not because they forbid me, but because they do not belong to ordinary patrol. The trees grow closer there, older, their trunks blackened with dampness and time. The ground remembers more blood. Roots twist over stones that have never seen human boots. Sound behaves differently. It does not echo. It sinks.

When the forest thickens, the speed I maintained becomes disrespectful. I slow; each step carries me farther from the parts of my territory that know my daily passage. The air cools until spring feels like a rumor told far away. Moss climbs the stones in thick, dark layers. Mushrooms glow faintly under fallen logs, pale as buried moons.

The bond stretches behind me, and it hurts. Every stride makes the distance between us a living thing. I feel Lucas sleeping still, unaware for now, his warm center dimmed by dreams. I do not close the bond. I would never shut him out fully. I only hold my side quiet so my fear does not crawl into his rest.

When the first old marker appears, I stop.

Three trees grown from one root, their trunks twisted around a stone split clean down the middle. No storm or human tool made that split. The earth opened it when my kind was still new enough to listen better.

I lower my head.

Aestrata.

Her name does not need sound. Sound is too thin for her.

The deepwood breathes, but nothing answers yet, so I continue.

The path is no path, but my body knows where to place itself. I pass under branches heavy with lichen, through a hollow where the air tastes of iron and rain though the sky is clear, over a stream so cold even my bones notice it. With every step, I feel my brother's memory waking behind my ribs. Not his face alone, but the feeling of him beside me in the first days of making, the same earth-call split into two bodies.

He laughed once when a human screamed. I remember looking at him and not understanding why the sound had pleased him so much. I understand too well now that pleasure can be dangerous.

Deep in the oldest fold of the forest, a circle stands where no tree grows. Roots ring it instead, rising from the earth and sinking back down like the backs of sleeping beasts. At the center sits a stone blacker than night, cracked through with veins of white quartz. Rainwater gathers in the cracks even in dry weather. Moss does not touch it. Animals do not cross the ring.

I step into the circle and lower myself to all fours, then lower still. Antlers to earth. Skull to stone. Claws buried in soil.

I have not come here in many human lifetimes. The silence presses down until even my thoughts become small.

Aestrata, I send into the roots beneath me. ***Earth Mother. Maker. I need to know what I am becoming.***

I close my eyes and push the truth down into the dark.

I wanted to hurt what hurt him. I wanted fear from a human who stood too near my mate. I wanted it before need, before balance, before law.

My claws sink farther into the soil. ***Tell me, Mother,*** I beg without sound, ***am I guarding my mate… Or am I turning into him?***

The deep earth wakes beneath my hands.

OceanofPDF.com

33

Lucas

IT STARTS FEELING WRONG on the first morning and becomes unbearable by the third.

By the second week, I'm standing in the middle of my own kitchen with cold coffee in my hand. The note he left me is still folded in my wallet like some kind of talisman, and I genuinely can't tell if I'm losing my mind or if I already did and this is just what the aftermath looks like.

He said he'll come back in a few days. A few days is not a fucking fortnight.

I've read his note so many times that the paper is soft at the creases. I read the crooked letters until his voice forms behind them even without the bond answering me.

I do not leave you. Not angry. Never angry with you. I must ask Mother if this is guarding or becoming wrong. Do not chase into deepwood. I promise. I come back, Little Ember.

The grammar is wrong, but the promise is clear. That makes it worse, because if the promise is clear and he still isn't here, then either something happened to him or he chose to stay away longer than he knew I could survive.

Both options make me feel insane.

The forest won't help me, either, and that hurts in a way I didn't know it could. This place has always spoken to me, not in magic or voices, but in the clean, grounded language of land. Tracks. Scent. Wind. Water. The logic of living things. Now I move through it like someone who used to know the language and suddenly can't read. Every trail I walk feels like it's keeping a secret.

It hides Onyx's den from me.

After work, before dark, I follow the paths I know lead nearest his den. I stand in the little hollow where I first learned the shape of the nest in the dark and find… nothing. Not just no Onyx, but no den.

I know where it should be. I know the split in the rock, the root-hung entrance, the way the ground dips just before the hollow opens. I know all of it with the certainty of muscle memory because I walked there more than once, slept there, and woke there.

But every time I follow that route now, the forest shifts just enough to mock me. The slope is there. The split boulder is there. The old cedar log near the creek is there. The den isn't.

It's like the earth swallowed it whole and smoothed the dirt over afterward.

The stone mouth becomes a wall of fern and root. The open patch outside it becomes a tangle of laurel so thick I can't push through without cutting, and I won't cut there. I walk the same line three times under a half-moon, muttering directions to myself like a man who has lost his mind and is trying to map it.

"Creek on the left, split cedar, rock shelf, twenty steps uphill," I say, voice too loud in the trees. "This is where it was. This is where it fuckin' was."

The forest gives me nothing.

No Labrador tea. No pressure in the bond. No dry little comment about my poor tracking. No pulse of amusement when I trip over a root and curse loud enough to make an owl launch itself out of a branch.

Nothing.

The mark stays on my shoulder, though.

That's what keeps me from tipping fully into *maybe I imagined him*. It's there every morning in the mirror, dark and healed and shaped too deliberately to be anything I did to myself. I touch it while brushing my teeth. I touch it at red lights. I touch it when Parker squints at my collar and asks if I got into poison ivy—a stupidly normal question that makes me almost laugh in his face.

"I'm fine," I tell him.

"You keep saying that," Parker says, looking unconvinced, "and yet you've got the haunted ranger vibe going on."

"Maybe that's just my face."

"Nah, your face is usually more emotionally constipated than haunted."

That should make me laugh. On a better day, it would. Instead, I look toward the office window where the trees shift beyond the parking lot and feel the empty place in me ache so deeply I have to set my mug down before I drop it.

Another week passes.

Then another.

A month after he leaves, the full moon comes up, fat and silver over the ridge, and whatever thin thread of dignity I've been using to hold myself together finally snaps.

I leave the cabin just after nine wearing boots, jeans, a flannel, a jacket, and the kind of emotional instability that should require a permit. I take my radio because I'm still a ranger, and apparently some pathetic part of me wants credit for being responsible while marching into the woods to yell at a supernatural boyfriend who may or may not be ghosting me via divine intervention.

I don't take my headlamp out at first. The moon is bright enough to turn the trail pale, and I hate how much it reminds me of the night he showed me his first face and waited for fear.

"I'm not chasin' you into the deepwood," I say to the trees, because if he's anywhere near me, he can damn well hear it. "I'm walkin' in a forest I'm paid to know. Completely different thing."

No answer.

I go farther.

Past the north trail marker. Past the creek crossing. Past the slope where the air usually cools before his den. The woods look almost too beautiful,

which feels insulting. Silver branches, black trunks, ferns shining like wet blades, the creek moving softly below. Everything calm. Everything whole. Meanwhile, my chest feels full of broken glass and bad ideas.

I stop where the den should be.

Nothing.

Not a scent. Not a hum. Not even the faintest brush of him against the bond.

The silence finally breaks me.

I sink down onto a fallen log because my legs won't hold me upright anymore. For a few minutes, I just breathe, shakily and too fast, while staring at the empty slope like if I look hard enough, it will give him back. Then my throat closes. I press the heel of my hand against the mark and hate that it's still warm, hate that my body still knows him even when he won't answer.

"What did I do wrong?" I ask, and my voice sounds small, which makes me furious. "Was it Hannah? Was it because I said yes and liked it when you were jealous? Because I did. I did like it, and maybe that's fucked up, but I trusted you. I thought you trusted me too."

The forest says nothing.

Tears burn hot before I can stop them. I swipe at them, angry with my own face, angry with the moon, angry with every story that ever said the woods keep what they take.

"You said you'd come back," I say, and the twang slips stronger through the crack in my voice. "You promised me, Onyx. You don't get to do this. You don't get to make me need you and then disappear like I'm supposed to be fine with a note and a rock!"

Still nothing.

No Labrador tea.

No warmth.

No Wildheart.

I laugh once, sharp and ugly, because the alternative is sobbing so hard I'll throw up. "Great. Perfect. I'm out here fightin' with trees again. That's healthy."

Then I see the light.

Blue-white, steady, hanging between two trunks farther down the slope.

For one second, hope hits so hard it wipes everything else clean. I stand before I decide to, but the light doesn't move closer. It hangs too high for a

flashlight and too still for someone walking, exactly the way the stories always said. My heart starts pounding, but not from fear.

"Onyx?" I call, and the name tears out of me before pride can stop it.

The lantern sways once.

That's it.

I take two steps toward it, then stop because something feels wrong. Not explicitly dangerous, but not the old sweet pull from the first nights. Just wrong enough to make my skin tighten.

"If that's you," I say, breath shaking, "come here."

The lantern remains where it is, and the hope curdles.

I stare at it, tears hot on my face, chest rising and falling too fast. "No. You don't get to stand there all mysterious and silent after weeks of bein' gone. You don't get to lure me deeper and make me chase you like I'm some idiot campfire story."

The bond gives me the faintest flicker then. Not warmth or an apology. More like attention sharpening briefly and then flattening again. It makes me furious.

"Fine," I snap, voice cracking around the word. "You wanna stay out there? Stay out there. I'm done beggin'."

I turn and storm out of the clearing before whatever tiny, wounded piece of me that still wants him to come after me can embarrass us both.

I don't run. I won't give him that. I stalk the trail back to my cabin, jaw locked and hands shaking at my sides, and if the bond flickers behind me at all, I don't acknowledge it. Every step makes me feel more humiliated.

I came into the woods under a full moon, heart half in my throat, ready to forgive everything the second he showed his face. And what do I get? A lantern in the distance. A fucking symbol. A gesture. Like I'm supposed to be grateful he deigned to watch me unravel.

By the time I reach the clearing around my cabin, the anger is hot enough to make me feel almost steady.

The porch light is on because I left it that way like a sad little beacon, and the sight of it makes the whole thing worse. There's the door he refused to cross until I invited him. There's the porch where Hannah stood and where Onyx kissed me like the word *mine* had replaced every language he knew. There's the top step where I left a black stone once, back when I was scared and sorry and stupid enough to think offerings meant something.

The onyx stone sits on the rail beside the door, where I've kept it since the morning I found his note. I bend, snatch it up so fast my fingers scrape the wood, and turn toward the tree line.

The forest stands there in perfect moonlit silence, tall and black and indifferent, and for one ugly, furious moment I hate it. I hate the tricks and the half answers, and the way it can feel so alive when I need it least and so dead when I'm begging it for one honest thing.

Something inside me breaks clean through.

"If you're gonna disappear," I say into the dark, my voice shaking harder than I want it to, "then take your damn stone."

Then I throw it into the forest as hard as I can.

It vanishes into the dark with a faint crack of stone against wood, and the sound tears a sob out of me so violently I have to grab the porch railing. I fold over it, shaking, breath punching in and out of my chest while the mark at my throat burns like it knows I've done something I can't take back.

"Fuck you," I choke out, though I don't know if I mean Onyx, the forest, myself, or whatever goddess thought this was mercy. "Fuck you for makin' me love you like this."

The words hang there, and no answer comes.

I stand on my porch until the sobs run out, until anger leaves me hollow and cold, until the night feels too big around the little square of light from my door. Then I go inside alone and lock the door behind me, even though the lock has never mattered less.

In bed, I keep one hand over the mark on my shoulder and stare at the ceiling until dawn.

The empty place in my chest stays empty.

And somewhere outside, the forest keeps what it knows.

OceanofPDF.com

34

Lucas

TWO MONTHS AFTER ONYX leaves, I stop looking like someone waiting and start looking like someone who should know better.

There's a difference. Waiting has a little hope in it, even when it's ugly. Waiting keeps one ear turned toward the woods. Waiting checks the porch before coffee and after work, keeps the radio charged during hikes that aren't really hikes, touches the mark at my shoulder like maybe the right pressure will make the bond answer. Waiting gets angry. Waiting yells. Waiting throws a stone into the trees and sobs so hard the porch railing leaves grooves in both palms.

Knowing better is quieter.

It gets up. It showers. It puts on the uniform. It signs whatever Sarah slides across the counter and lets Parker run his mouth about his busted sink, his mother's new boyfriend, the raccoon that keeps haunting Pine Hollow like an unpaid intern with a vendetta. It checks trails without loving them. It eats because bodies become everybody else's problem when they aren't nourished. It sleeps badly and wakes worse. It learns how to walk through the forest without letting the forest feel like home.

That's the part I hate most. Before Onyx, the woods were the one thing I understood. Even after Hannah, after the city, after coming home with my

pride dragging behind me like tin cans tied to a bumper, the forest had taken me back. It had smelled like damp earth, pine, cedar, river water, and something older than hurt. I used to step under the trees and feel my ribs loosen. Now every trail is a locked door.

The forest hides him so completely it starts feeling personal. The den is gone. The cedar hollow bends wrong. The creek crossing I know by heart seems to move under moonlight. No Labrador tea. No glimmer through the bond. No dry little comment in my skull when I trip, curse, or call a squirrel a tiny criminal in his honor and immediately hate myself for it.

It hurts in a way I can't describe to anyone. It doesn't ache like heartbreak did with Hannah. That was hot and humiliating, and mostly lived in my pride once the worst of the betrayal passed. This feels like I've got an organ that used to work and now doesn't, and every day I still wake up expecting my body not to notice the difference.

It notices, alright.

The lantern still appears sometimes.

The first few times, I talked to it—of course I did. I demanded things. Swore at it. Asked questions I already knew wouldn't get answered. Once I stood on the edge of the north ridge at dusk and shouted, "If you're here, then be here," so loud I sent a whole flock of birds up from the lower branches. The lantern swayed once and disappeared.

After that, something in me shut down. Now, when I see it, I ignore it.

Or I try to.

I keep walking. I keep my eyes on the trail. I breathe through the way the bond sometimes gives the faintest phantom throb in the same moment—not warmth, not real connection, just memory twisted into reflex. I don't talk to it anymore. I don't yell. I don't ask what I did wrong, because I already did that until my throat went raw, and all it got me was silence.

If Onyx wants to stand in the trees and watch me from a distance like some kind of ghost story he's no longer willing to star in, then fine. Let him. I'm done performing the wounded half of a conversation by myself.

Tonight the hike runs later than it should because a storm three days ago finally dropped a half-rotted birch across the east trail, and I end up staying past sunset to flag the blockage properly for morning crews.

By the time I head back toward my cabin, the woods are all dark silver and soft shadow, the moon just beginning to climb enough to wash the tops of the trees. It isn't a bad night, if I let myself be honest about it. Cool

enough to breathe easily, dry underfoot. The kind of night where once, not that long ago, I would've taken the long way home just to have more of it.

Now, I'm tired and want my couch, and maybe a beer I know I won't finish.

My flashlight is off because I don't need it on this stretch. I know the trail too well. My boots find the roots and dips automatically. The bond sits where it always sits now, cold and dead and useless.

Then it flares.

It hits so hard I stumble, one boot sliding in wet leaves. My hand flies to the mark at my shoulder as pain and heat and recognition tear through the frozen place in my chest. For one second, I can't breathe. The world whites out at the edges, and then everything rushes back at once: Labrador tea, cedar, stone, blood.

Blood.

I turn and see something at the edge of the trees… something moving *wrong*.

My first thought is not hope—it's terror.

The shape at the edge of the trees is wrong in a way my brain refuses at first. Too big for a man, too broken up by shadow to be fully Onyx's true form, and then it moves with this awful, uneven stutter that makes the hair on the back of my neck rise.

He's half-shifted. That's the only way my mind can make sense of it. Human shoulders under too much darkness. One arm more like his than a man's, claw-tipped and disfigured in the moonlight. Antlers not fully there but trying to be, ghosting above his head in fractured dark shapes that flicker in and out like the form itself can't hold. A face that looks too hollow.

The skull over his face is cracked along one side, or maybe it only looks cracked because blood has dried in black streaks across the weathered bone. One eye burns pale through the socket. The other flickers and dims as I watch.

The bond tears open between us, flooded and chaotic, and I feel him so suddenly after two months of nothing that my knees nearly give. Pain. Exhaustion. Hunger. Fear. And beneath it all, weaker than it should be but still there, is the shape I know better than my own breathing.

Little Ember.

The thought barely reaches me, then he tries to shift completely.

I have seen Onyx shift before. I have watched true form fold into human shape with strange, aching grace, antlers drawing in, skull softening, slate skin paling beneath bark-like markings.

This isn't that. This is a collapse.

His body buckles inward in pieces, as if something is forcing him through a doorway made of knives. Antlers shrink halfway and then jerk, skull melting around a face that can't fully hold. Black hair spills over his shoulders in wet tangles, full of leaves and blood. He drops to one knee in the mud, one hand braced hard against the ground, chest heaving.

I'm running before I decide to. "Onyx!"

His eyes find me, and the bond burns with a frantic relief so raw it steals my breath, even secondhand. I want to scream at him. I want to hit his chest. I want to ask if he knows what he did to me, if he knows what two months of a cold bond, false lanterns, and empty trails can do to a person who had already learned too much about being left.

But he looks destroyed.

"Lu…" He swallows like it hurts enough to blind him and tries again, eyes fixed on me with a wild, half-mad focus. "Lu…cas…"

I stop so suddenly I almost fall, and every thought in my head vanishes.

He said my name.

Not through the bond. Not as meaning pressed into my mind. Out loud. With his mouth. Broken, barely human, each syllable dragged over stone and blood, but mine. My name.

Then he pitches forward, and the world restarts.

I catch him awkwardly because he's still enormous in human form, and I'm not built to stop a collapsing forest guardian with one arm and a prayer. His weight drives me back a step, but I get both hands under him, one around his ribs, one gripping his shoulder. He's burning hot and shivering at the same time. His skin is slick with rain and blood. The Labrador tea scent pours off him so strongly it makes my eyes sting.

"Easy," I say, voice shaking hard enough that I hate it. "Easy, Wildheart, I've got you. I've got you."

His hand clamps around my forearm. Too tight for a second, then suddenly weak. His fingers leave smears of dark blood against my sleeve.

He mumbles something out loud again, though the words make no sense to me. A broken string of sounds, old and guttural, consonants that don't belong in any language I know.

“Varkh…ath…Aes…tra…” He coughs, and the sound tears through his chest. “Deep…root…blood…no…”

The bond flashes with images too fast to understand. Black trees. White stone cracked open. Antlers locked with antlers. Teeth in moonlight. A lantern burning blue under water. Something laughing in a voice that is not Onyx’s.

Then nothing but pain.

Blood runs from somewhere near his hairline and cuts down the side of his face. His lips are cracked. Dark stains run along his throat, shoulder, and ribs. His left hand curls and uncurls like he can’t feel all of it. His eyes keep slipping half closed no matter how hard he fights to keep them on me.

“Home,” he croaks.

The word breaks something in me. He doesn’t mean my cabin or his den. Me.

He means me.

I make a sound I don’t recognize and haul one of his arms over my shoulders. “You’re comin’ inside,” I say, and it comes out like an order because if I let it come out as a plea, I’m going to lose it right here in the mud. “You can pass out after I get you through the damn door, you stubborn, ancient asshole.”

His mouth twitches. It’s barely anything; a ghost of the dry humor I’ve missed so much I could scream.

Soft insult.

I almost laugh. I almost sob. What comes out is something in between.

“Yeah,” I choke out. “Soft insult. Keep walking.”

And he tries—God, he tries to walk, and that almost kills me worse than if he didn’t. He tries because I ask, because even half dead or whatever the hell he is, some part of Onyx still hears my voice and tries to answer, even though his legs barely hold.

I reposition and get one of his arms over my shoulders, hauling him toward the porch, step by brutal step. The cabin light grows closer. The Labrador tea scent grows stronger until it wraps around the whole clearing, rich and overwhelming, and under it is blood, old stone, deep earth, something rotten burned away.

He mumbles again, words I can’t catch. Not English. Maybe not any human language. Every few steps, his body shudders like it wants to shift

and can’t. Once, the shadow of an antler pushes under the skin at his temple, and he makes a low, pained sound that makes me tighten my grip.

“Don’t you dare die on my porch,” I say, fumbling with the lock while holding him up with my hip and shoulder. “I swear to God, Onyx, I will find your forest goddess and file the most aggressive complaint she’s ever heard.”

His head lolls against mine. Through the bond, weak as a hand pressed to glass, comes the faintest thread of amusement.

Aestrata… ignores… complaints.

It’s broken, fuzzy, and barely there. But it’s him.

I get the door open and drag him inside.

The cabin explodes with his scent the moment he crosses the threshold. Labrador tea, rain, blood, old stone, and that deep wildness I thought I’d never breathe again. My knees nearly give out from the sheer sensory violence. The bond surges once, hot and bright enough that I gasp, one hand flying to the mark as it pulses under my skin.

Onyx collapses before I can get him to the bedroom.

I go down with him because I refuse to let him hit the floor alone. We land hard in the narrow space between the couch and coffee table, my shoulder cracking against the rug, his weight half across me. I shove myself upright, gasping, and pull his arm out from under his body before he can hurt it worse.

His eyes are half open, unfocused. His breathing is shallow, too uneven. Blood is everywhere and not enough at the same time, because I have no idea where the worst of it is coming from.

“Onyx.” I drop to my knees beside him and press two fingers to his neck because human panic needs human checks, even if he isn’t human. His pulse is there. Too slow? Too fast? I have no baseline for ancient forest cryptid in human form after possible goddess-related wilderness trauma. “Fuck. Fuck, okay. You’re here. You’re here.”

He doesn’t answer, but the bond is alive now. Wild, flickering, full of static heat where it had been cold. It hurts almost as much as the absence did, because I don’t know what to do with it. I don’t know where he’s been. I don’t know why he shut me out. I don’t know what came back with him, what hurt him, what he ran from, or whether I should be locking the door against the forest or opening every window because his blood smells too strong in here.

I sit back on my heels, hands hovering over him, terrified to touch the wrong place. My anger crawls back, rising through shock.

“You were gone for two months,” I say, voice breaking harder now. “Where the hell have you been?”

Onyx lies unconscious on my cabin floor, bloodied and beautiful and impossible, his human face slack with exhaustion, his black hair tangled around him like shadow.

The scent of Labrador tea fills every corner of the room.

The bond flares, alive, wounded, and wild.

And I kneel there with his blood on my hands, more confused than relieved, more relieved than angry, more angry than I know what to do with, while rain begins to tap softly against the windows and the forest outside keeps its secrets one moment longer.

OceanofPDF.com

35

Onyx

I DREAM WITH MY eyes open somewhere far beneath waking.

The body Lucas dragged into his den-that-is-not-a-den lies slack on the softness I still distrust, lungs drawing shallow air scented with him. Yet I am not completely there. The body remains in his keeping because it must.

But the rest of me moves elsewhere through the dark seam between memory and fever, through the place where gods touch what they once made and unfinished things still reach toward their first shape.

His scent threads through the dark like smoke under a door. Pine. River water. skin. grief. anger. The mark at his shoulder burns faintly against the bond, and that burn tells me I am not lost. My mate is near. He is alive, and did not follow the lantern.

That last truth is the one I hold hardest.

Lucas did not follow.

The dream pulls me down into the deepwood again, and this time I understand I am dreaming while I stand inside the memory. Lucid, Lucas would call it. A dream that knows itself; a strange human phrase for a thing my kind used to call walking the old root twice.

The air tastes of rain that has not yet fallen, iron from wounds that are not yet open, and the terrible pressure of Aestrata’s attention moving

underground. I had come to her afraid of myself. That fear returns with the memory, but exhaustion dulls it.

I see my true body kneeling in the circle, skull pressed to the black stone, antlers bowed low, claws sunk into soil. I remember the rage I carried there.

Her standing at Lucas's porch. *Her* eyes on my mark. *Her* old claim-scent wrapped around regret. I had wanted her gone from his world in a way that frightened me after because the wanting had not been clean. It had not smelled of balance. It had smelled of pleasure at the thought of erasing what had hurt him.

Aestrata had answered slowly.

Not with words. She never answers like humans want gods to answer. No bright mouth in the sky, no soft hand upon the head. She answers through weight. Through root pressure. Through the way every buried thing in the earth turns its face toward the one asking and forces truth through bone.

When her presence rose beneath me, I felt smaller than a seed, older than fear, and young as the first day I opened my eyes beneath trees that no human had named.

You fear hunger, she pressed into me.

I had no mouth-speech there. I had no need for it. ***I fear liking it.***

The roots tightened around the circle, not holding me prisoner but holding me still. Soil cooled beneath my claws. My rage rose out of me like sickness drawn from a wound. Not removed or forgiven but shown. She turned it under her vast, unsentimental knowing, and I saw its shape without Lucas's scent or Hannah's tears or my own jealousy creating fog around the edges.

I had not wanted to eat her fear; I had wanted to end Lucas's pain. The difference mattered, but the difference was not enough.

Aestrata showed me my brother then, not as he is now, but as he was when the wrongness first began. He had been beautiful once in the way storms are beautiful from far away.

Black, red-tipped antlers, pale eyes, a skull face sharper than mine, the same first earth-call moving through him and splitting sideways into laughter when humans screamed.

Guardians feel rage, Aestrata told me through stone and root. ***Varkhyn feed it.***

I stayed in that circle while the moon changed and changed again above the branches. Days passed, perhaps more. Time's behavior is distorted in

the deepwood. I did not know Lucas suffered. That ignorance is a knife in me now, but in the memory, there had been only the Mother beneath me and the slow, painful work of letting her teach my instincts a cleaner shape.

Possession is not wrong by itself, she showed me. A wolf is possessive of den. A tree is possessive of light. A river is possessive of path until stone forces change. A mate bond carries *mine* because *mine* can mean shelter, recognition, duty, and chosen closeness.

But *mine* becomes rot when it stops hearing the answering *yes*. *Mine* becomes Varkhyn when the beloved turns into prey, and the world narrows to *taking*.

Lucas had taught me thresholds. Aestrata carved the lesson deeper.

When I finally rose from the stone, my body shook as if winter had lived inside it. I carried less rage but not less love. That surprised me. I thought to be healed of possessiveness might mean being emptied of the part that wanted Lucas with old teeth. Instead, the wanting was cleaner. Still fierce. Still rooted. But his choice sat in the center of it like a living flame I was made to guard, not smother.

Go back gentled, she told me. ***Hold the line. Teach him the difference between claim and cage.***

I turned back, and every step toward Lucas felt easier than the last because I knew now what had happened in me, and I knew it would not harm him. I would tell him. I would kneel if I had to in his human way and place the whole ugly truth in his hands because he deserved nothing less than the clean shape of me.

My lantern hangs dark from my antler, and I am weak, though I did not admit it then. Aestrata's healing had scraped me hollow. My claws dragged through moss once or twice where my steps should have been clean. I thought only of Lucas.

I imagined his anger first, because anger would be fair. I imagined his voice with that rough little country edge sharpened by hurt, calling me an idiot, an ancient asshole, and Wildheart only after he forgave me enough to make it sting.

Then I smelled myself where I had not walked.

My body stopped before my mind understood—Labrador tea. My scent, but wrong. Thinner. *Mocking*. Woven with old blood.

I turned too late.

He came out of the trees not in full beast form, but in the ugly in-between he always favored once Varkhyn took him. Shoulders too broad and misshapen. Skull half showing beneath too-taut skin. My brother was larger than I remembered, or perhaps memory had softened him to spare me.

His skull face was darker, bone stained in old red where rain never washed clean. Black antlers spread wide, cracked at the tips and wrapped with strips of things I refused to name. His fur hung thicker along his spine, matted in places. His eyes burned too bright, fever pale and joyous.

He had the shape of Cervari and the scent of ruin.

Brother, he said, and the word came out spoiled.

I did not answer with the same tenderness. I widened my stance and let more of my true form rise because the healed place inside me had no illusions. Aestrata may have cut out the rot in my possessiveness, but she had not made me gentle toward everything wearing antlers. ***You should have stayed gone.***

His laughter cracked the forced silence around us. ***You found one.***

Lucas flickered through the bond at the same instant, distant but alive, and my brother's head tilted sharply as he tasted that too. There was no way to hide it. Not after the seal. Not after the bond brightened my scent through the whole range like a second moon.

The rage—that which Aestrata had just cleaned—stirred to life, and he scented it. I knew he did. His head tilted, delighted.

There he is, my brother sent. ***Not so healed. Not so holy. Still teeth under bark.***

I should have retreated—not from fear but from wisdom. I was weakened from everything I had endured with the Earth Mother. Yet the moment he tasted Lucas's name in the air, every lesson about restraint had to fight the ancient truth of protecting mate from threat.

You will not speak of him, I warned.

He stepped closer. ***I have already called to him, but he would not come deeper.***

Pride and horror struck me at once. My mate, wounded and abandoned in all the ways I had promised never to repeat, had still trusted the wrongness in his skin more than grief. He had not followed, even after I left him cold. Even after I gave him silence instead of return. He had chosen not to be led by a light wearing my shape.

Lucas.

My brave, furious Little Ember.

The dream-self in the memory growled, and the real sleeping body somewhere in Lucas's cabin must have moved too, because I feel his hand on my chest through distance, faint in my waking-not-waking.

He is not yours, I sent.

My brother smiled inside the skull. I felt it though no human face showed. ***No? He carries your mark and your scent. He called for you with tears in his throat. He belongs to what answers, and you left him hungry, brother. I only offered a light.***

Then I understood the shape of his want. Not simple murder and not only cruelty.

Jealousy.

The bond had changed the forest. My finding Lucas had woken old rot and given it direction. My brother did not want Lucas as mate in the sacred sense because Varkhyn do not honor bonds. He wanted what had chosen me, if only to prove the choice could be spoiled. He wanted Lucas's fear, yes, but more than that, he wanted my mate's trust broken open in his teeth.

He is mine too, my brother sent.

The world went red.

I do not remember lunging, but I remember the impact. Antler against antler. The crack of bone. Claws in bark, then flesh, then stone. We hit the ground hard enough to split roots. I was weak from Aestrata's circle; he was not. He fought like hunger given a body and laughed when my claws opened his side. He bit into my shoulder and drank blood as if blood were proof.

The trap closed while we fought.

Roots, not Aestrata's roots, but dead ones twisted by him, soaked in old kill-scent and threaded with stolen lantern light. They rose from the ground behind me and locked around my antlers, my arms, and my throat. I tore three apart, but six more replaced them. The blue-white light of his lantern burned above us, and the flame made the world tilt.

He is already half feral for you, he sent, muzzle close to my broken skull. ***I could make the other half easy.***

I tried to reach Lucas through the bond, but nothing passed. Deepwood swallowed the call, or my brother did. I do not know. That ignorance dragged across the next stretch of memory like claws through my own

chest. Bound beneath roots that smelled of old humans and rotting worship, I felt days turn and could not count them.

Sometimes my brother left. Sometimes he returned carrying scents I did not want to know. Sometimes he spoke of Lucas seeing the lantern and refusing it, his voice growing uglier each time.

Your mate is stubborn, he told me once, crouched close enough that his breath crawled over my face. ***I like that. It will make the break sweeter.***

Lucas threw the onyx stone into the forest, and that was the moment the roots weakened. I do not fully understand that part. The stone struck wood, and Lucas's grief broke open around the words, "*Fuck you for makin' me love you like this*," and the bond flared so violently that my prison shuddered.

The name he gave me had weight; his love carried more. My brother was not there when I eventually escaped, which was worse than if he had been waiting. I crawled with half my strength gone and blood in my eyes, tearing myself loose from roots that kept pieces of my skin and fur. I ran through the deepwood and out of it, following the bond not as a path but as a beacon.

By the time I reached Lucas's clearing, I could barely hold shape, but I saw him. The dream begins to thin there, the memory becoming too close to waking to hold its own shape much longer.

I feel the couch under my body before I fully leave the old root-dark. I smell Lucas's den-that-is-not-a-den over the prison stink. Labrador tea rises stronger. The bond, now no longer muffled by deepwood, opens in one raw flare that is half relief and half pain.

Before it all dissolves, one last image remains. My brother in the trees beyond the prison mouth after I escaped, too far to catch, one antler broken and jagged.

Then darkness folds.

I turn in the dream, antlers lowered, rage clean now, bright as lightning over black trees.

No. Lucas is not bait. Not prize, proof, or meat for old jealousy. He is my mate because he chose me. If my brother comes wearing my light, my scent, my shape, or my name, I will teach the forest the sound a Varkhyn makes when balance finally closes its teeth.

Above me, in the waking world, Lucas says my name. This time, I answer through the bond.

Weak. Broken. Alive.
Little Ember.

OceanofPDF.com

36

Lucas

FOR THREE DAYS, I’VE kept Onyx alive in my cabin and still have no idea what I’m doing.

That’s not me being dramatic, either. I know first aid. I know how to stop bleeding, how to wrap a sprain or set a splint, how to recognize shock in a hiker who swears he’s fine while his lips are blue and his ankle points the wrong way. I know when to call for a rescue team, when to keep someone warm, when to make them drink, when to tell them to stop arguing because the mountain doesn’t care about their ego.

I am useful in a crisis when the crisis is human shaped. Onyx is not human shaped, even when he looks close enough to fool someone in low light.

I get him onto the bed the first night through a combination of panic, swearing, leverage, and the kind of strength people get when the alternative is letting someone they love bleed all over the floor.

Love. I don’t let myself say it out loud while I’m half carrying, half dragging him down the hallway, but it’s there, beating incessantly under my ribs.

By the time I get him stretched out on top of the blankets, my shirt is soaked with rain and his blood, my hands are shaking, and the whole room

smells so strongly of Labrador tea that I nearly break down before I even find clean towels.

I strip off what I can without hurting him worse. His pants are torn. His skin is marked with cuts I don’t understand, long red-brown lines that look more like roots burned into him than claws. The worst wound is at his shoulder, deep and ugly, with dark bruising spreading beneath the skin. I clean it with warm water because I don’t know what else to do.

I don’t use antiseptic at first because I have no idea whether human chemicals will help him or poison him or offend some ancient forest law and make my night worse. I talk to him while I work because the silence feels like it’s trying to swallow me.

“You’re a real pain in my ass, Wildheart,” I tell him, pressing a towel to his shoulder while his head lolls against the pillow. “You know that? Two months of nothin’, then you show up bleedin’ all over my rug like this is a normal way to reconnect. There are healthier communication styles.”

No answer—not out loud, or in my head.

The bond flickers sometimes, weak and feverish, like a lamp with a bad wire. It’s better than the cold. God, anything is better than the cold, but it scares me in a whole new way.

I get flashes that aren’t words. Pain. Dark roots. Blue light. My name, broken and dragged through his throat. Once, the shape of my own porch from his point of view, and then the feeling of rage so old it makes my teeth ache.

He stays in his human form because I think his body is too weak to hold anything else. That’s my best guess, anyway. His antlers don’t break free again, and the skull doesn’t return, but the truth of him keeps showing through in broken little ways.

His nails go dark and sharp when pain takes him too deep. The bark-like markings along his ribs rise under my hands, then smooth out again. I don’t sleep much, either. By morning, I’m running on coffee, fear, and resentment.

That’s when the forest starts helping. Yeah, I know how that darn well sounds, but I’m not sure what else to call it.

The first time it happens, I’m on the porch with blood under my nails and a mug of still-steaming coffee I haven’t drunk from yet, staring out at the tree line. The air is wet and cool. Birds are too quiet. I’ve got half a mind to

start yelling again when a scent cuts through the Labrador tea clinging to the cabin.

Yarrow.

I know yarrow. Any ranger worth his boots knows yarrow. Except I don’t remember any growing this close to the cabin. A narrow path between ferns seems to open where there shouldn’t be one, just beyond the woodpile. Not dramatic. Not glowing. Just visible in a way it wasn’t a second before. I stare at it for so long my coffee goes cold.

“This better not be another lantern situation,” I mutter.

The forest says nothing, which is very on brand.

I follow it anyway because apparently that’s the kind of man I am now, though I take the radio, a knife, and enough irritation to power a small town. Ten yards in, I find yarrow growing in a pale cluster near a fallen log.

Beside it, cedar tips. Farther on, plantain leaves, broad and clean. Nettle near the creek, though I curse that one with feeling when it stings my wrist due to my own stupid mistake. Each thing reveals itself when I need it, as if the forest is highlighting an apothecary list.

I don’t like how much I trust it. I like even less how right it seems.

Once, around dawn on the second day, the bones under his temples push through hard enough that I see the shadow of antlers beneath the skin before he shudders and folds back down into himself with a sound that makes my stomach turn.

Later, Onyx’s breathing steadies when I press crushed yarrow and plantain against the smaller wounds. Cedar steam helps with the fever that isn’t fever. I boil nettle because I remember enough herbal-use basics to know tea might help, then laugh like a lunatic in my kitchen because I am making medicinal tea for a cryptid with instructions from a forest that spent two months gaslighting me.

“You and I are gonna talk,” I tell the trees through the open kitchen window. “Not now, because I’m busy keepin’ your favorite antlered disaster alive, but eventually.”

A breeze moves through the branches.

I choose to take that as attitude.

The fifth day comes gray and heavy, rain tapping soft fingers against the roof. I’m sitting beside the bed, one hand wrapped around Onyx’s wrist because I’ve gotten obsessive about checking his pulse, when the bond changes.

It doesn’t flare this time; it warms. Slowly, carefully, like something wounded lifting its head and seeing daylight. I straighten so fast the chair legs scrape the floor. “Onyx?”

His fingers twitch under mine… then his eyes open. For a second, he just stares at the ceiling, dazed and unfocused, blue eyes too bright in contrast to his exhausted face. Then his gaze turns and finds me.

The happiness that hits through the bond nearly knocks me out of the chair.

It’s huge. *Staggering.* So pure and relieved that it punches the breath right out of my chest. Onyx makes a broken sound, not quite speech, not quite a sob, and reaches for me with clumsy hands.

I go to him before I can think better of it. He drags me down onto the bed with a strength that should be impossible for someone who spent three days bleeding and five days unconscious, but I don’t fight him.

I land half on his chest, careful of his shoulder, and his arms close around me like the world starts and ends at my back. His face presses into my hair, his body shakes once, and the bond floods around me, warm and wild.

Little Ember. Here. Here.

“I’m here,” I say, and my voice cracks so hard I barely recognize it. “I’m here, you stubborn bastard. You scared the hell out of me.”

His arms tighten. ***Missed. Hurt. Came back.***

I close my eyes, anger and relief tangling until neither has room to breathe. “Yeah, well, you’ve got a lotta explainin’ to do.”

That pulls a flicker of dread through him. I lift my head and look at him. His face is still wrecked. Pale, bruised, bloodless in places, black hair tangled across the pillow.

The markings under his skin are duller than usual, as if some light inside him has been banked low. But his eyes are open. He’s here. He’s looking at me like seeing me is a miracle he almost lost.

“Where were you?” I ask, and I don’t soften it because I can’t. “For two months, Onyx. Where the hell were you?”

Pain moves across his face, and I think he’s going to answer through the bond in words. Instead, he lifts one shaking hand to my cheek. His thumb brushes under my eye, gentle enough to make the hurt in my chest split wider.

I show. Easier. Truer.

I should be wary of that. I probably would be if I hadn’t spent weeks desperate for any answer. I nod once. “Okay.”

The bond opens, and the room disappears. Not fully. I still feel the bed beneath my knee, his hand on my face, and the warmth of his body under mine. But another place rises inside me, dark and root-deep.

I see a black stone circle in the oldest fold of the forest, roots twisting like sleeping beasts, and Onyx bowed there in his true form with his skull pressed to the earth. I feel his fear of what my ex standing on the porch woke in him.

The rage. The possessive desire to erase what hurt me. His terror that liking that rage might make him rotten.

Then Aestrata.

Not a physical woman in shape or anything my mind can turn into a clean picture. She is pressure under the soil, old and unsentimental, a presence so vast it makes my human bones feel temporary.

She doesn’t comfort him; she shows him. Possession as shelter. Possession as rot. Rage as protection. Rage as hunger. Choice sitting in the center of mine like a flame he’s meant to guard, not smother.

I see him rising, changed but weak, then I see the blue lantern.

Wrong.

Everything in me knows it before the memory tells me. Wrong scent. Wrong light. Wrong waiting.

I see the other one, and my stomach drops.

They have the same ancient shape—skull, antlers, pale eyes, lantern. But where Onyx feels like the earth holding its breath, this thing feels like a grave that’s laughing. Blood stains the bone of his face. His antlers are wrapped in strips and tipped red. His joy is disturbingly bright, spoiled, and terrible.

Varkhyn.

Brother.

Feral.

The words come with the images, and I feel Onyx’s old grief twisted with horror. His brother, sprung from the same making, turned wrong. A flesh eater not from hunger but pleasure. The reason stories of skull-faced monsters grew teeth in human mouths. The reason the lantern on the ridge never came closer.

Then I see myself from the thing's stolen light. Me in the forest, two weeks after Onyx left, hollow, furious, and wrecked enough to beg a lantern to be him. The blue light hangs between trees, waiting.

I don't follow, and the Varkhyn watches, hating that I won't come deeper.

Cold spreads through me as I understand how close I was—close enough that if grief had stepped one foot harder than instinct, if anger had made me reckless, if I'd followed that light because I needed Onyx more than I trusted the wrongness in my gut, I might not be here.

The memory shifts to Onyx fighting his brother, then ending up trapped. Roots twisted around antlers and limbs. His brother crouched close, laughing through a skull mouth, saying I was his too. Saying I'd follow Onyx even if I wouldn't follow the lantern. Saying the break would be sweeter because I was stubborn.

I come back fully to the cabin with a gasp.

My hands are locked in the blanket, and my heart is pounding so hard it hurts. For a few seconds, all I can do is breathe and stare at him while the last images fade behind my eyes.

"Oh my God," I whisper.

His hand stays on my cheek, though his fingers tremble. ***I should have told before.***

I sit back slowly, not pulling out of reach, but needing enough space to understand my own body. The room looks too normal. Rain at the window. Towels on the dresser. A bowl of crushed herbs on the nightstand. My bed, my floor, my damn cold box humming faintly down the hall like the world has any business continuing after what I just witnessed.

"That thing was in the forest with me," I say. "That wasn't you."

Onyx closes his eyes. ***No, it wasn't.***

"I thought maybe it was. I thought you were standing there and refusing to come closer."

The pain that moves through him is immediate and brutal. ***I know.***

My throat tightens. "The forest hid your den from me."

Yes, but not to punish or to keep you from me. Forest knew wrong lantern hunted near my path. It hid my den so you would not find the route he watched. It made you angry because anger turned you home. It protected.

That lands hard.

All those nights I thought the woods were mocking me, erasing him, keeping me out because he asked it to or because I had somehow failed some ancient test. All that grief. All that rage. The forest had been closing doors because something worse was waiting for me to find the wrong one.

I press one shaking hand to my face. “I was so close.”

You did not follow.

The words come through the bond with a force that makes me look up. Onyx is watching me with awe, fierce and golden beneath the weakness. Pride in me so strong it warms the mark at my throat.

You hurt. You wanted me. You thought light might be me. Still did not follow. Brave mate. Smart mate. Angry, loud, badly dressed through woods, but did not follow.

A broken laugh bursts out of me before I can stop it. Tears come with it, because apparently that’s where my emotions live now. “You can’t compliment me and insult my crisis outfit in the same breath.”

I can. I did.

“You’ve been unconscious for five days. Maybe take a break from bein’ a menace.”

His mouth twitches faintly. It’s barely there, but I see it, and it nearly breaks me open. Then the humor falls away. He lifts his hand again, not touching this time, waiting. I meet him halfway and press his palm to my cheek because I’m tired of pretending I don’t need it.

I am sorry, he sends, and the words are rough with everything he cannot fit into them. ***I left to keep you safe from what woke in me. I did not know he waited. I thought he had died—his scent was nowhere in the forest for years. I did not know the bond would close. I did not know you would suffer so long. I should have told you about him before. I should have trusted you with the ugly truth.***

The bluntness of it almost undoes me more than any eloquent apology could. No excuses. No trying to soften it with grand, ancient logic. Just the simple truth that he should’ve told me and didn’t.

“Yeah,” I say, and my voice cracks on the one stupid syllable. “You should have.”

I close my eyes. The anger is still there—it doesn’t vanish because his reason was good or because the danger was real. I was alone with a cold bond and a haunted forest, and some part of me is still standing on that porch throwing a stone into the dark.

But he came back broken. He came back saying my name with a mouth that had never known how.

“I’m still scared. And angry. And relieved enough that I kinda hate you for it.”

His thumb moves once against my cheek. ***Soft hate?***

I laugh again, wet and helpless. “Don’t push your luck, Wildheart.”

The bond warms at the nickname, immediate and tender. I lean down carefully, avoiding his shoulder, and press my forehead to his. His breath shakes. Mine does too. The mark on me hums, not cold now, not silent, but alive and aching between us.

“We’re gonna talk about all of it,” I whisper. “Your brother. The Varkhyn. Aestrata. The forest hidin’ shit from me like an overprotective nightmare. You disappearin’. All of it. No more deciding what truth I can handle.”

His eyes close, and the shame in him dips deep. ***I will try.***

I stay there, forehead against his, until the rain softens and his breathing steadies. For the first time in two months, the bond answers every breath I take.

It hurts.

It heals.

It does both, because apparently that’s us now.

And outside my window, the forest stands quiet, no longer empty, no longer cruel, but watching over the den it once hid from me because I was too heartbroken to know the difference between a lantern and a trap.

OceanofPDF.com

37

Onyx

I WAKE BEFORE LUCAS because his cabin is noisy even when it pretends to sleep.

The cold box hums in the other room with smug persistence. Pipes mutter in the walls. The roof ticks softly as the morning chill gives way to the first pale warmth beyond the windows. The squirrel in the eaves scratches twice, pauses, then scratches again with the confidence of a repeat offender. I make a note to speak with it when my strength returns fully. Lucas said I may not interrogate his squirrel, but Lucas says many things he does not mean to enforce when properly distracted.

He sleeps beside me in the bed, one arm thrown across my stomach, cheek turned into my shoulder, his mouth softened by rest. The bed is still wrong, too soft beneath my spine, too shaped by human ideas of comfort, but his weight makes it tolerable. More than tolerable. His body anchors me in the form I have been trapped inside for too long, and even discomfort becomes something I can endure when his breath moves warm against my skin.

Human form hurts this morning.

I need the forest.

More than that, I need my true body back under sky, above root, and in cold air. Need the antlers to settle where they belong. Need the skull. Need the larger lungs and deeper balance and the way the full form lets my thoughts spread more cleanly through the bond.

Staying folded into this human shape too long feels like wearing a shirt that's been soaked through and dried stiff against the skin. Useful once. Uncomfortable now.

Lucas will understand that. He has gotten very good at understanding the difference between what I want and what I need, even when he doesn’t like either.

Before I move, I look around Lucas’s room properly.

At first, I only see human clutter. A shirt thrown over the back of a chair. Boots beside the wall. A trail map folded haphazardly on the dresser. A water glass with his fingerprints on it. Towels darkened by old blood, stacked in a basket because he has not had time or will to wash them yet. Then I see the herbs.

They are everywhere.

Yarrow bound in a strip of cloth on the bedside table. Plantain leaves drying near the window. Cedar tips in a chipped bowl beside a mug stained green-brown from steeping. Nettle hanging upside down from a cabinet knob where he must have forgotten it. A paste of crushed leaves under wax paper, smelling of forest medicine and Lucas’s impatient hands. There are roots too, cleaned and wrapped, some I know grow only near the second creek beyond his usual path. He must have found those while I slept.

No. The forest showed him.

The realization settles through me slowly, deep enough that I close my eyes.

While I lay here weak, while my bond flickered and my wounds tried to decide whether to close, the forest guided him. It opened little paths. It brought him yarrow and cedar and leaves for drawing heat from torn places. It kept him from the wrong lantern and then helped him heal me when I returned broken to his den.

I had thought of the cabin as the annoying den, the little human structure that stole him from the trees and kept him behind walls. Yet the forest reached through those walls for him. It trusted him with green things. It answered his fear with what his hands could use.

Aestrata’s world recognized my mate.

Pride moves through me first, then tenderness. Then shame, quieter but still there. He suffered because I left him without enough truth, but he healed me anyway.

Lucas shifts against me, his hand sliding over my ribs, fingers curling lightly as if some sleeping part of him is checking whether I am still there. The bond hums at the contact, warm now, no longer cold or locked away. I lower my mouth to his hair and breathe him in. Pine, sleep, skin, and smoke, but the sharp, clean edge of worry is not yet gone. Beneath it, my mark and the deeper scent of our sealed bond.

I kiss his temple. He stirs but does not wake. So, I kiss the corner of his eye next, then the bridge of his nose where ember-marks scatter over pale skin. His face scrunches faintly, and his hand tightens on me.

"Mm," he hums, voice sleep-thick. "If the cabin's on fire, let it burn."

Amusement moves through me. ***Cold box might enjoy flames.***

His eyes open a slit. "Don't threaten my fridge before coffee."

It still hums smugly.

"It keeps food from poisoning me."

Barely.

He groans and tries to roll away, but I catch him by the waist and pull him back gently. He lets me, because his body still knows mine before his pride wakes fully. I softly kiss his mouth then, relearning the shape I thought I might never reach after the roots held me down in the deepwood. He exhales into it, tension slowly spilling from his shoulders, and the bond warms with his relief.

He is still afraid; so am I. But here, with his lips parting beneath mine and his fingers sliding up to the back of my neck, fear has room alongside wanting, and neither one needs to devour the other.

When I pull back, his eyes are open, green, and tired and tender enough to make my throat ache. "You're really here," he says, like he hates that he still has to check.

Here, I send, pressing my forehead to his. ***But I need the forest and my true shape. This body has held too long.***

He wakes more fully at once. His gaze sharpens, moving over my face, my shoulders, the healing lines beneath my skin. "Are you hurtin'?"

Some. Not danger, just a cage feeling.

His mouth tightens, and his hand strokes down my chest as if soothing the body he can see while thinking of the one he cannot yet. "Okay. We'll

go.”

We.

The word pleases me more than it should.

He dresses quickly, though not well, because he keeps watching me as if I might vanish between one blink and the next. I do not tease him for that. Not yet. Some fears deserve quiet until they loosen.

He grabs a jacket, boots, and his radio, because even heartbroken, furious, and half undone by ancient forest problems, Lucas remains a ranger down to the marrow.

I stand in the center of his room and endure the human shape a little longer, because watching him move through the morning is worth the pain. At the porch, he stops and looks toward the trees. For a moment, his scent changes. Old hurt. The memory of blue light, silence, a thrown stone, no answer.

I touch the back of his hand, letting the bond carry my apology before words can form.

He laces his fingers through mine and squeezes once. “Don’t start apologizin’ with your whole face, Wildheart. I haven’t had coffee, and I’ll cry ugly.”

The nickname moves through me like sunlight under bark.

Your ugly crying is brave.

“That is both sweet and deeply rude.”

Both can be true.

He huffs, but his hand stays in mine as we enter the trees.

The forest receives us differently now. It no longer hides the way it did when the Varkhyn watched. The path opens in small signs, not obvious to human eyes that do not know how to love the ground, but clear enough for Lucas. Ferns bent away from a narrow trail. A cedar bough lifting in the wind, though no wind touches the others. Labrador tea scent returning in faint threads ahead of us, mine and not mine, the forest offering it back like a peace token.

Lucas notices. His throat works once, but he says nothing.

When we reach the deeper stretch beyond his cabin clearing, I cannot hold the human body another moment. I step away from him into a patch of morning light. Lucas stops without being told, his gaze staying on me.

Watch? I ask, because I know he wants to and because asking matters.

His answer comes low. “Yeah. I wanna watch.”

The want in his scent thickens as I let the shape break open.

Relief hits first. Bone unfurling. Spine lengthening. The skull rising back over my face like armor returning to a warrior’s frame. Antlers push through with a deep ache that becomes pleasure when they clear the skin and take on their weight.

My shoulders broaden, slate returns, bark-dark markings lift, and claws sharpen while fur rises along my spine. The air widens, and the forest speaks in a hundred small voices my human ears cannot hold.

When I stand in my first body, I breathe properly for the first time since escaping the deepwood. Then I feel desire move through the bond so abruptly I turn my skull toward him.

He stands a few feet away, lips parted, eyes traveling over me with an open hunger that shocks me into stillness even now. Even after everything. Even after he touched my skull and called me beautiful, some old part of me expects fear and recoil when a human sees this body in daylight.

Lucas gives me none of that. He looks at me like I am wanted, and the force of it nearly bends my knees.

Little Ember sees the first body and thinks very loud, I send, because awe makes me tender and flirting gives me teeth enough to survive it.

His face flushes immediately. “I do not.”

The bond betrays him with another warm pulse of lust. I lower my head slightly, the lantern chain shifting against one antler, though the lantern remains dark. ***Liar.***

He points at me, but it has no power when his face is that bright. “You just came back from bein’ kidnapped by your evil brother. Maybe don’t use your recovery mornin’ to bully me.”

Not bullying. Observing my mate wanting me.

His jaw tightens, and his face goes crimson at once.

There. There is the fluster I love. The heat up his neck, the tightening of his mouth, the little offended flash because he knows I have put him on the spot, and he hates how much it pleases him.

I send amusement through the bond slowly, letting him feel how beautiful he is when want and embarrassment fight under his skin. He looks away toward a tree, then back, and instead of retreating into embarrassment, he does something new.

He smiles.

Slowly.

Dangerously.

“Well,” he says, voice rougher, “maybe your mate has eyes.”

My heart skips a beat in my chest. Lucas notices and grows braver. He steps closer, gaze sweeping over me again, less shy this time.

“And maybe he missed lookin’ at you. All of you. The antlers, the skull, the markings, the fur here.” He lifts one hand, stopping just short of the line of fur at my chest until I lower enough for him to reach. His fingers sink into the coarse thickness of my hair, and pleasure moves through me so sharply my claws curl into the soil. “Yeah, definitely missed that.”

Lucas.

His name leaves me with both warning and wonder.

He looks up at me from beneath his lashes, and there is still tiredness in him, still grief around the edges from the weeks I left him empty, but this morning has made something reckless in him too.

We could have lost one another. Now he stands close enough to touch my true body and chooses not to waste the wanting.

“You wanna know what else I missed?” he asks.

The bond tightens.

Tell me.

His fingers drag lightly through the ridges crossing my chest. “This. How you feel under my hands. The way you go all still when I touch you. You could tear the woods apart, but you’re tryin’ not to move because I’ve got my mouth on you.”

The forest drops away, and there is only Lucas. Only his hand on my chest, his scent warming, his voice low and rough with boldness I have seen in pieces before but never like this. He knows he can affect me. He knows, and he is choosing to use it.

I love it so much I nearly forget how to stand.

Mate has become dangerous, I send.

His smile flickers, proud and nervous at once. I shift my weight, lowering further until we are closer to level, though even crouched I loom over him. He does not step back. His hand slides higher, over the edge of my skull near my jaw, then down again to my throat.

“I missed that. Missed touchin’ it. Missed you lowerin’ your head when I put my hand there like you trust me with the most terrifyin’ part of you.”

His gaze follows his own touch as his hand trails down my chest, the dark ridges, the scars, the breadth of me in true form. He swallows, and through

the bond comes memory: his mouth on my markings, my claws in the furs, the stunned pleasure of being touched where no one had ever dared.

“I missed the way they feel under my mouth.”

Lucas, I send, and his name is warning, plea, and worship.

His eyes lift to mine. The crimson is still there, but so is something steadier, something that survived fear and came back less willing to waste wanting. “I missed the rest of you too.”

He looks down at the lowered shape of me, the furred power of this form, the protected seam his hands once found, hidden now but known between us. Heat flashes through me so suddenly I nearly shift my weight back from the force of being wanted by this human man who had no map for loving a creature like me and chose to learn anyway.

“I missed findin’ you there,” he says, voice low, rough, and so honest the bond pulses hard between us. “I missed your body openin’ for me. I missed how slick you got, how it felt on my hands, how it made you shake when I touched you. I missed takin’ you in this shape, and I missed bein’ taken by you. I missed bein’ full of you so badly I got mad about it.”

I forget how to breathe.

Perhaps I do not need breath in this form the way humans do, but the body still tries and fails.

Lucas stares up at me, red-faced and shaking now, but proud too. Defiant amid his embarrassment. He offers me the truth because I spent two months before giving him restraint and calling it care.

I lower my head until the edge of my skull rests against his forehead, and his one hand stays in my hair. His breathing is fast but not frightened. The bond is hot, yes, full of want and memory and all the ways this could lead us back to a den, but beneath it is trust. There is always trust, even when fear snarls at the edges.

You want my true body again, I send, each word careful around the violence of my want.

His throat works. “I want *you* again.”

In this shape. Are you sure?

He presses his forehead harder against my skull. “Wildheart, I have been sure for weeks. I’m just done politely sufferin’ about it.”

I brush the side of my skull against his temple, the closest thing this mouth can make to a kiss. He shivers and leans into it. ***You understand what saying this does to me?***

His breath shudders over the skull. “I’m startin’ to.”

I may become smug.

That surprises a laugh out of him, bright and rough and alive. “May?”

Already.

“Yeah, I figured.”

I let the bond open enough for him to feel my pleasure, my stunned awe, my want held leashed but no longer hidden like shame. He inhales sharply, but he does not retreat.

You fluster beautifully, I tell him.

“There it is,” he mutters, trying to glare while still flushed nearly to his ears. “Put me on the spot and enjoy the show.”

Yes.

I close my eyes for one breath and let the forest hold us. Then Lucas rises onto his toes and presses his mouth to the lower edge of my skull, a kiss where others would see only nightmare. The want that moves through me is enormous.

So is the gratitude.

Little Ember, I send, voice low through the bond. ***If you keep saying what you missed, I will need to take you back to my den.***

His pulse jumps, but his smile does not falter.

“Good,” he says, bold and shaking and mine by every choice that matters. “But I was hopin’ you’d be more primal and take me right here in your forest.”

OceanofPDF.com

38

Lucas

THE SECOND THE WORDS leave my mouth, the entire world seems to stop breathing.

Onyx goes still in front of me, and I mean still in a way that makes the trees around us feel restless by comparison. The bond doesn't go quiet. It goes deep—so deep I feel my stomach drop out. His skull stays against my forehead, cool bone to overheated skin, and for a moment, I only hear the rough pull of my breathing and the low creak of his antlers shifting through the branches above us.

I should be careful.

I should be thinking about how much he's been through, how much we both have. How his evil bastard of a brother kept him from me and left the bond feeling cold and empty for so long that I stopped sleeping more than a few hours at a time.

I should be practical because I'm a ranger and a grown man and not the sort of person who looks at a seven-foot cryptid in the middle of the woods and thinks, "*Yes, right now, against the nearest tree, please.*"

But the truth is, I've been careful for months.

I've been careful with fear. Careful with grief. Careful with the bond when it went thin and distant. Careful with hope, because hope got mean

after the first few weeks and started biting every time I let myself believe he would come back.

I ate. I worked. I answered Parker’s questions with enough sarcasm to keep him from noticing too much. I visited my sister. I checked trails that didn’t matter and filled out reports I barely remembered writing. I functioned because that’s what people do when the world rips their heart out but leaves their hands intact.

Now Onyx is here—here, alive—and he’s looking at me like I just put my hand on the leash of every old instinct in him and snapped it in half.

His huge, clawed hand closes around the back of my neck, careful enough not to cut, rough enough that my breath leaves me in a hard rush. He drags me closer until my chest hits the coarse fur and ridged slate of him, until I have to tip my head all the way back to keep looking up at the skull face hovering over me.

His lantern chain rattles once against his antler, though the flame stays dark, and that tiny metallic sound makes my whole body tighten because it feels like a warning bell that only *I’m* stupid enough to run toward.

You ask the forest to witness, he sends, and his voice in the bond is lower than before, less amused now, dragged through something old and hungry. ***You ask the beast to stop walking you back to softness. You ask to be taken where roots hear, where bark remembers, where every creature knows my mate came back to my hands and wanted the claws nearby.***

My mouth goes dry.

All I can do at first is stand there with my pulse pounding under his hand and my fingers twisted in his hair. The words I said are hanging between us, real now, impossible to shove back under jokes or embarrassment. I asked for this—not the den, not the nest, not the furs and roots and warm darkness where everything feels contained.

Here. Open forest. Morning light. A tree at my back. His true body in front of me, massive and alive after weeks of fearing I’d only ever feel the ghost of him through a dying bond.

His skull dips, and he drags the edge of it along my cheek, then down to my shoulder, where the mark he gave me pulses under the skin. My body answers with a shiver I can’t control, and I know he feels it. The bond catches every stupid, needy pulse of me and feeds it back to him until his chest rumbles with a sound that travels straight through my hands.

Say yes again, he demands. ***No brave mouth running ahead of frightened body. Say it while my teeth are at your mark.***

My knees almost go. I swallow once, hard, and force my voice out. “Yes. I want you right here. I don’t want gentle. I want you to take me here in this body. I want your true form. I want you rough. I want to feel that you’re back every time I move tomorrow, and I want you to stop treating me like I’ll shatter if you grip me too hard.”

Onyx growls.

The sound rolls through the clearing and sends birds scattering out of a nearby pine. His hand leaves my neck only to slide under my thighs. I barely manage a breath before he lifts me, and my boots leave the ground as if I weigh nothing.

Instinct makes my legs wrap around him. My arms lock around his neck, one hand burying in the thick hair there while the other grips the edge of his skull because there is nowhere else to hold that feels real enough.

He carries me two strides—that’s all it takes.

My back hits the tree with a rough thud that knocks the breath out of me and sends a sharp flare of heat through my stomach. Bark bites through my shirt and into my shoulder blades, grounding me so completely that I almost groan from that alone.

Onyx presses in immediately, his true body caging mine, furred hips between my thighs, claws braced in the trunk on either side of my head and sinking into bark with a crack that makes my cock throb so hard I have to swallow a groan. The sound of the bark splintering is obscene in a way nothing human could ever be.

I love it.

God help me, I love it so much my face burns.

There, he sends, almost vicious with satisfaction. ***There is the want my mate tries to make polite. Bark at his back. Legs around his beast. Heart hammering because he knows I can hold him up and take him apart without letting him fall.***

My hips roll against him before I decide to move, and my breath stutters. The protected seam between his furred hips is still hidden, but I feel him through the bond, feel the immediate pulse there. I can feel the slick gathering, the hidden part of him stirring under fur and heat because I’m wrapped around him and asking for the true body.

My own body answers too. Since the bond changed me, there's no need for slow coaxing the way there used to be. The slick comes with want now, warm and humiliatingly eager, easing the places that once needed his fingers and mouth and patience. It gathers between my thighs, slicking me before he's even opened my jeans.

I have a feeling that the bond did something else to my body other than creating natural lube—something that changes the way I take him inside of me. Because, let's be real: my insides would be my outsides if it wasn't for something supernatural happening to me.

I lean forward as much as his body allows and press my mouth to the bone near his jaw. "You got me, Wildheart."

Onyx's restraint fractures. One clawed hand leaves the tree and goes to my shirt. Fabric rips down the front in one clean, brutal pull, buttons snapping into the leaves below. The cold morning air hits my chest, and I arch against him, legs tightening around his hips.

He grinds into me once, forcefully enough that I feel the hidden weight of him pressing through fur and slickness beginning to emerge.

The growl turns rougher as he shoves the tattered shirt off my shoulders until it hangs uselessly around my wrists. His huge hand follows immediately, palm dragging down over freckles, over muscle, over the places where months of missing him turned me sharper around the edges. He touches my ribs and stills for the smallest second.

I feel what he feels—the changes in me, the weight lost, the exhaustion carved under my skin, the body that kept going but didn't thrive without him.

A dark, furious ache moves through the bond.

My mate grew thin without me, he sends, and the words come out rough enough to hurt. ***My flame burned alone. No more.***

My eyes begin burning so fast I get angry at them. "Don't make me cry before you fuck me against a tree."

His head lifts. For one second, those pale eyes pin me so completely I forget how to breathe.

Cry if it comes, he sends. ***Take me if it comes. Beg if it comes. There is no shame in my forest.***

I grab at him, dragging one hand up to the edge of his skull, the other buried deep in his hair. "Then stop talkin' and show me you missed me."

I'll make the empty weeks leave your body one thrust at a time.

He sets me down, then undoes my belt and unhooks the buckle with frightening efficiency for a creature with claws. Denim and my briefs are dragged down, and I kick off my boots along with them. He lifts me again, my cock hard and slick at the tip.

Onyx's eyes flare behind the skull when he sees me like that—naked, legs around his furred hips, back against bark, already wet for him. It would embarrass me if I had enough shame left for it.

His grip tightens beneath me, lifting me higher against the tree until I'm angled the way he wants, thighs spread around his body, my weight entirely in his hands and against the bark.

Weeks without my hand and you are still ready so fast. My brave mate likes being held where he cannot pretend he is untouched by me.

His fingers find the slick first. The contact makes us both freeze, because so much of it coats me. He drags two fingers over me—claws sheathed—not entering, only spreading the slick, feeling how my changed body opens at the thought of him. My hips jerk against his hand.

Aestrata carved a path for my body, he sends, awe darkening into hunger. ***Made my mate wet for the taking. Made him able to call the beast and not bleed for it. My greedy little ember.***

I bite back a sound and fail. His fingers press inside me with almost no resistance, slick easing the stretch immediately. I moan, low and helpless, head knocking back against the tree. He curls them, finding the place that makes my legs tighten around him, then taps it, making me shudder again.

I love him like this. God help me, I do. I love the roughness when I can feel the care beneath it. I love the way he orders me and still checks every shift of pain.

Still know you. Still remember where my mate breaks sweetly. I still remember how to make this body beg before my cock even touches it.

"More," I get out.

The bond goes hot enough to make me dizzy. ***Tell me what more means.***

The words are darker now. Dirtier. Not a tease, but a demand for truth. I swallow, eyes squeezed shut. My pride kicks once, weak as hell after two months of missing him. "You know what it means."

Say it, or I keep you on my fingers until you spend from nothing.

A full-body shudder runs through me.

The worst part is, he would. And I would let him. I'd come with his fingers inside me and his hand around my cock and probably spend the rest

of the day too dazed to look him in the eye. But that isn't what I need most.

"I want your cock," I say, voice rough and stripped bare. "Please, Onyx, I need your real one."

His lantern ignites above me, blue light spilling over bark and leaves. His fingers withdraw, leaving me empty and clenching, and I gasp at the sudden loss.

The protected seam of him presses against me now, slick and hot where his body has opened. I feel the emergence more than see it, because there's no space between us, only fur and heat and the heavy push of him sliding free from the hidden place at the front of his true form.

He pulls my ass cheeks apart and breaches me with a stretch so intense my mouth opens with a strangled sound. My hands clamp down on him, one in the hair at his neck, one around the edge of his skull, fingers digging uselessly against bone.

The slick works instantly, softening the edge before it can become an injury, but it doesn't make him small. Nothing could make this feel small. He's thick and ridged and impossible, forcing my body to open around the true shape I begged for, and the shock of it makes my eyes water.

Onyx does not stop. He slows, but he does not stop, because I asked him for his true form. His arm tightens under me, holding me up, taking my weight when my thighs start to tremble. He feeds himself into me inch by inch, steady and rough-edged, his own breathing gone ragged against my neck. The ridges drag through me, each one stretching, catching, and passing deeper, slick heat easing the way.

The tree presses into my back.

His body presses into my front.

There is nowhere to go.

I love that. I love that something bigger than me can pin me down and take what he wants.

Onyx surges deeper with a growl that breaks through the clearing. The stretch flashes bright, not pain exactly, but close enough to make my fingers tighten. He feels it immediately and shifts his angle, supporting me higher, easing the worst of the pressure while still driving forward.

With me, he commands. ***Breathe. Open. Take what you called home.***

I do. I breathe into the grief of weeks without him, into the relief of his return, into the violent sweetness of being held up by the monster everyone warned me about and knowing no one has ever kept me safer.

When he seats himself fully. I choke on his name.

Full isn’t a big enough word—it’s not even close. He fills me until my thoughts scatter, until my legs lock harder around his furred hips, until my spine bows off the tree and his arm has to drag me back against him. The ridges sit deep inside me, pressing in places that make my whole body shake.

His cock pulses, the hidden sheath at the base flexing against me, and the sensation of being held there, stretched around his first body in the middle of the forest, burns every lonely night out of me in one brutal wave.

Onyx stays still for one breath—only one. Then I move my hips, or try to, and he takes it as permission.

The first thrust slams me back into the tree hard enough that bark bites my shoulder blades, and my breath leaves in a broken cry. His arm keeps the impact from hurting, but not from registering.

I feel all of it. The scrape, the weight, the stretch, the drag of his ridges as he pulls back and drives in again. My head falls back, mouth open, and the sound that comes out of me belongs to someone far less concerned with dignity than I used to be.

Onyx makes a low, satisfied noise against my throat.

Yes, he sends, and the word is dark enough to make my body clench around him. ***There. That is the sound I crave. That is my mate with bark at his back and the beast inside him.***

My legs tighten around him, heels digging uselessly, and I hold on because there’s nothing else to do. Every drive of his hips lifts me slightly, pins me, fills me, pushes me back into the rough trunk until the world narrows to nothing more than sensation and the bond blazing between us.

This isn’t gentle. It isn’t careful in the soft way. It is careful in the Onyx way, where his strength is everywhere and so is his restraint. He is rough because I asked. He is wild because I need him that way. But underneath every brutal thrust, he’s still tracking me with terrifying precision.

My breath catches too sharply when the angle changes, and pleasure detonates inside me.

I moan loudly, not caring who hears, and the forest answers with a rush of wind through the leaves. Onyx growls, repeating the angle, each thrust driving the ridges over that deep place until sparks race down my legs. My cock is trapped between us, rubbing against the coarse fur and hard slate of his lower body, and every movement sends more heat through me.

I’m going to come too fast.

The realization barely forms before Onyx catches it.

Spend for me. I have waited through weeks of emptiness for my mate to break open around me again.

That shouldn’t make me emotional while he’s fucking me against a tree, but of course it does, because nothing about us comes cleanly separated. Want, grief, fear, love, anger, relief—it’s all one thing now, one terrible, perfect, Gordian knot that no blade could slice through.

I press my mouth to the side of his skull because I need to kiss him and can’t reach him properly any other way.

“Missed you,” I choke out. “Fuck, Onyx, I missed you so much I hated the whole damn forest for havin’ you when I didn’t.”

I feel his pain as the bond convulses, enormous under the hunger. The guilt of being taken. The rage at his brother. The memory of fighting his way back through whatever dark had held him away from me. His cock drives into me repeatedly, and his mind wraps around mine with one brutal truth.

I came back to you.

My eyes sting. “Yeah.”

I will always claw my way back.

Relief rips a sob out of me. “Fill me,” I whisper, wrecked and shaking. “Fill me. I want it. I want to feel you after.”

Onyx lets out one last earth-shattering growl, and my orgasm hits on a thrust so deep I nearly scream. My body clamps around him, cock pulsing, pleasure ripping through me in hot, blinding waves that leave me shaking against the tree.

He snarls my name through the bond, through his chest, through the forest itself. His hips snap forward once, twice, and then he buries himself as far as I can take him and holds there.

“Lu…cas—” he says out loud, and his release comes with a sound that doesn’t belong to anything human. It rolls through his chest and into mine, into the tree, into the ground.

His cock swells inside me, and the first pulse of him is hot and heavy, and my body locks around it. He fills me until the last of the months apart feel burned out of the space between my ribs. Until the only thing left is him. His claws tear down the cedar beside my shoulder, bark splitting under the force he refuses to put into me.

Even at the height of it, even while his body is clearly trying to keep me, he holds the danger away from harm. His claws stay in the tree. His arm stays under me, grounding me, telling my body how to receive what he gives. I feel the old instinct in him, huge and wild, but I also feel the choice wrapped around it.

Me.

Always me.

I cling to him through it all.

When the last pulse fades, I sag against him, boneless and shaking.

My head drops to his shoulder, or the closest shape of it, breath dragging raggedly out of me. My legs are still wrapped around him, but there's no strength in them now. His cock remains inside me, swollen and slowly softening, slick warmth spreading through the deep ache and turning it into something bearable, something almost sweet.

The tree is rough behind me. His body is hard in front of me. I'm trapped between the two and have no desire to move.

For a while, there's only breathing. His, deep and ragged. Mine, uneven and ruined. The bond, full and bright and pulsing with so much relief, makes my eyes burn again.

I press my face into the hair at his neck and inhale him, that wild first-body scent, stone and cedar and dark leaves and the faint medicinal note I'll always associate with being found.

Onyx shifts his weight slightly, and I hiss before I can stop myself. He goes rigid. ***Pain?***

I lift one hand and smack weakly at his chest. It probably feels like being scolded by a leaf. "Don't you start."

His worry does not move. I breathe through the sensation, taking stock. The stretch is there—God, the stretch is everywhere. My back stings from the bark, my thighs are trembling, and I'm going to feel him in places I don't have polite names for. But under all of it, his slick is working, warm and strange, easing the sharpest edges, keeping soreness from turning into real pain.

"I'm okay. Just full." Dark satisfaction curls through his worry, and I feel my face heat even after everything. "Do not get smug while you're still inside me."

His skull lowers until its edge brushes my cheek. ***Impossible.***

I close my eyes and laugh once, breathless and shaky. "Yeah. I know."

He begins to withdraw with the kind of care that feels almost absurd after the way he just fucked me. Inch by inch, slow enough that I feel every ridge on the way out. My hands tighten in his hair, and he pauses each time my breath catches too sharply.

The slick keeps soothing the raw pull, but the sensation is still intense enough that I have to rest my forehead against his chest and focus on breathing.

I'm naked, skin scraped, face flushed as he adjusts me. My pants lie somewhere next to my boots, my shirt torn, my hair probably a disaster. I am objectively a mess, but Onyx looks at me like I hung the moon off his antlers.

The intensity shuts me up.

By the time he's fully out of me, I feel sore, yes, but not wrecked in the way I should. Used, stretched, exhausted, full of aftershocks, but whole. He keeps me lifted for another few seconds, as if he doesn't trust the ground with me.

"Onyx, put me down," I murmur.

Your legs are weak.

"They're attached to my body, so I noticed."

He ignores that and lowers me with absurd gentleness. My feet hit the earth, and my knees immediately try to make his point clear. His arm tightens around my waist before I can sag.

I glare at his skull because I know his smugness is rising again. "Do not."

The blue eyes brighten. ***Did not speak.***

"You thought loudly."

Mate's legs agree with me.

I huff as he picks me up again and carries me away from the tree. I get one glimpse over his shoulder as we move. The cedar is scarred. Deep claw marks bracket the place where his hands were, bark stripped in long grooves, pieces scattered at the roots. My back probably looks like I lost a fight with it too, but seeing those marks sends a possessive, satisfied heat through me.

Proof. The thought slips out. Onyx stills mid-step and his skull turns toward me. I close my eyes. "I didn't say anything."

Thought very loud.

"Unfortunately, I'm aware."

Mate likes the marked tree.

I keep my eyes shut because dignity is easier when I can’t see his smug skull face. “Mate is recoverin’ from bein’ pounded against it within an inch of his life, and his hole is probably a fist-sized gape. Maybe don’t cross-examine him.”

The bond warms with amusement and dark pride, but he doesn’t tease me more. He carries me to the creek instead, moving through the trees with that impossible ease, his huge body agile around branches and uneven ground. My head rests against his chest, and I listen to the heavy rhythm of his heart, slower than mine but no less alive.

At the water, he kneels with me still in his arms.

The creek is cold and clear, sliding over stones with a quiet sound that feels too gentle for the state I’m in. Onyx lowers me onto a patch of moss warmed by stray sunlight and keeps one arm behind my back until he’s sure I can sit without collapsing sideways. I could tell him I’m fine, but that would be a lie, and he’d know, so I let him fuss.

He dips one hand into the creek, shakes off the worst of the cold, then brings it to my back. The water hits the bark scrapes first, and I tense. Onyx stops immediately.

I sigh. “It’s fine.” His pale eyes fix on me through the skull. I soften my voice. “It stings, that’s all. And it’s cold.”

He waits one more second, then continues, cleaning the scratches with slow, careful passes. He touches the places where the bark broke skin, where dirt clings to sweat, and the contrast makes me ache worse than the sex did.

A few minutes ago, he was a beast driving me into a tree while I begged him not to stop. Now, he’s cleaning my scrapes like each one offends him personally.

“You know I asked for rough, right?” I murmur.

His hand stills. ***Yes.***

“And you know I liked it?”

His eyes burn brighter. ***Yes***.

“Then stop glarin’ at my back like the tree committed a crime.”

The bond gives me a dark pulse. ***Tree held you too harshly.***

I stare at him, then I laugh, tired and helpless. “You were the one holdin’ me against the tree.”

I held you correctly.

“Oh, yes, of course,” I say, looking away so I can roll my eyes.

He lowers his skull toward my shoulder and licks carefully over one scrape with a tongue that is much too warm and much too strange. I jolt, more from surprise than pain, and then feel the sting fade beneath a soft, healing warmth. Okay, so that heals too.

I close my eyes. “You’re ridiculous.”

Useful, he sends, with a smugness so immediate I regret every word I have ever spoken. ***Mate said useful before.***

“I was delirious.”

Mate says many true things when full of beast.

My face goes hot. “Onyx.”

His chest rumbles. The sound is pleased, but his touch stays gentle. He cleans me with water and tongue and careful hands, moving from my chest to my back, then lower with enough respect that my body doesn’t tense.

When he reaches between my thighs, his touch turns almost reverent. He wipes away slick and cum with cool water, then uses his own warmth to soothe the places that received him. There’s no shame in it because he doesn’t leave room for shame. He treats the aftermath as seriously as the act itself.

My throat tightens as I watch him kneel there in his true form, skull bowed, antlers casting long shadows over the creek, claws careful against my skin. Terrifying, every inch of him. Gentle, every inch of him too.

Eventually, Onyx lifts me again. I don’t protest because walking feels ambitious, and I have no interest in pretending otherwise. He collects my clothes and carries me back toward the den.

He’s careful with my legs, careful with the torn remains of my clothes, careful with everything except the smug satisfaction still humming under his skin.

“I feel that,” I mutter against his chest.

Feel what?

“Your ego.”

Ego is a human word.

“Your whatever-the-hell equivalent, then.”

Pride.

“Yeah, that. I feel that.”

His answer comes with shameless warmth. ***Mate wanted primal taking in forest by my first body. Mate screamed for me. Mate liked marked tree. Pride is correct.***

I press my face into his hair and groan. “I miss when you couldn’t use full sentences.”

Another deep rumble moves through him, and the bond fills with amusement. ***No, you do not.***

I hate that he’s right.

The den welcomes us with mossy warmth and the deep familiar scent of home. Onyx lowers me into the nest as if I haven’t just encouraged him to ruin me against a cedar.

He pulls the furs around me, checks my breathing, checks the mark at my shoulder. I let him because it calms him. Because I’m learning that sometimes care isn’t only for the person being touched.

His true body crouches beside the nest, lantern dim now, eyes watching me too closely. I reach for him, and he comes immediately, lowering his skull into my hands.

“My Wildheart,” I murmur, thumbs tracing the weathered bone. The bond is full, almost painfully so. I stroke along the skull ridge. “I missed my monster.”

He closes his eyes and lets out a content sigh. ***My living flame. My mate with teeth in his wanting now. My ranger who asks the monster for more and means it.***

The bond hums low and warm between us, full enough that the weeks apart feel less like an open wound and more like a scar we can touch without bleeding.

OceanofPDF.com

39

Onyx

A WEEK AFTER I return to Lucas, my brother begins speaking to me through the forest.

Not with mind-speech. His messages are older than words, carved in signs a human would walk past without seeing.

A strip of bark peeled from the wrong side of a cedar trunk. Three stones stacked on a deer path where no water placed them. A rabbit laid whole beside the creek, unbitten, its neck broken cleanly and its body arranged with its paws facing north. Antler marks scored too high on a pine and too deep to be elk. A blue thread, torn from something human, and tied around a branch near the border of Lucas's work route.

Each marker says the same thing in a different shape.

I am here.

I know where he walks.

I can wear your trail.

The worst part is not the threat; it is the scent.

There should be one. Every living thing leaves proof of itself. Fox, vole, deer, bear, crow, man, rot, rain, hunger, fear. Even old stones hold memory when pressed long enough.

My brother once had a scent like mine and not mine, same deep making, same old earth beneath him, but soured by pleasure in fear. The Varkhyn should reek of wrongness. He should foul the air when he passes, leaving the forest with a taste so bitter that every root turns away. Now my brother carries no scent of his own anymore.

I thought the absence of his scent was because he had left or died. Now I understand he has learned to empty himself. To move through the forest without the old rot of Varkhyn clinging to him, without blood-joy, without the bittersweetness of fear he used to wear like a second pelt.

When he wants to be known, he borrows and copies.

He uses my scent.

He copies it so well that the first time I find Labrador tea near a place I have not walked, my body stills as if the earth has vanished beneath my feet. Then I see the marker above it: four claw marks in a maple trunk, curved in the pattern he once used when we were newly made and not yet enemies.

A private sign. Brother-sign. Cruel because it remembers a time before rot and uses that memory as a hook.

He has learned to wear my trace. That means the forest can warn me only through things he cannot mimic. Silence too sudden, birds rising before he arrives, moss bending away from the ground where no scent lingers, or old trees tightening their roots around the places he touches. It may be enough for me, but not for Lucas.

Lucas walks the woods with my mark on him, and my scent woven into his skin.

My brother wants him.

Not as mate—never as mate. The thought is poison. Varkhyn do not understand the bond except as something to spoil. He wants Lucas because Lucas chose me. Because Lucas would not follow his lantern even when grief had hollowed him.

My Little Ember looked at a false light and turned away again and again. That refusal wounded the Varkhyn’s pride. My brother wants his fear now. His trust and his break.

I will not allow it.

This becomes the root of many mistakes.

At first, Lucas finds my guarding endearing. I can tell because he rolls his eyes while smiling, which means he is annoyed in a way that warms him.

When I walk him back to the cabin and circle the clearing twice before letting him enter, he leans against the porch rail with tired amusement and says, “You checkin’ for assassins, Wildheart, or did a squirrel look suspicious?”

All squirrels look suspicious, I send, crouching near the woodpile where a fresh little track crosses damp dirt.

He laughs, and the sound loosens the tension in my shoulders. “You say that like you don’t fully mean it.”

I fully mean it.

“Yeah, that’s what worries me.”

When I scent around his truck before he drives to work, he crosses his arms and watches me with that soft-eyed fondness that makes my instincts puff themselves up like proud birds.

“You know,” he says, “most boyfriends just say drive safe.”

Boyfriend, I echo, because I like the word in his mouth even if it is too small.

He mutters something about ancient cryptids being emotionally exhausting, but he kisses me before climbing into the truck, so I know I have not done wrong yet.

Yet.

The line moves slowly.

I follow his patrol routes farther than I used to. I leave my own markers near the edges, not to claim him from himself, but to warn my brother away. I walk beside the cabin in true form after Lucas sleeps, testing every shadow and scent.

By the sixth day, Lucas grows quieter around it.

I should notice sooner. I do notice, perhaps, but I call it tiredness. I tell myself his silence comes from the strain of knowing the Varkhyn exists, from work, and from the old human life still tugging at him.

I do not call it the weight of my own fear pressing too close because that would require stepping back, and stepping back feels impossible when my brother is marking trees with my scent.

We are in his cabin, which no longer *only* feels annoying to me. It still steals him, yes, and the cold box remains a smug abomination, but my scent lives in the floorboards now. It is partly den now because he made room, and I learned not to hate every wall for existing.

Lucas’s phone lights up on the kitchen table. I dislike it immediately because the glowing rectangle has brought interruption too many times. Lucas glances at the screen, and the bond tightens with duty before his hand even reaches for it.

“It’s Tom,” he says, already answering. “Hey. Yeah, I’m here.”

I stand by the counter and listen. Tom’s voice comes thin and flattened through the device, but the meaning is clear enough.

Storm damage reported near North Ridge Service Road. A section of trail washed out. Campers may have ignored closure signs. Reyes asked for Ranger confirmation before sending deputies farther in because the road is half mud and all bad idea.

Lucas’s face changes as he listens. This is his work-face. Focused, steady, pulled inward around decisions. I loved it once. I still do. Tonight it frightens me.

“Yeah, I can check it,” he says. “I’m closer than Parker, and he’s off rotation anyway. I’ll take the truck as far as the service gate and hike the rest if I need to.”

No.

The word hits the bond before I intended it to. Lucas’s eyes flick to me, but he keeps his voice calm for Tom. “Give me twenty minutes. I’ll radio once I’m at the gate.”

No, I send again, harder than before.

Lucas’s jaw tightens. “Yep. I’ll be careful.”

He ends the call and sets the phone down slowly. The cabin goes quiet except for rain ticking at the windows. “Try that again,” he says.

The warning in his voice should stop me. It does not. ***North Ridge is marked.***

His expression sharpens, and he frowns. “Marked how?”

Brother-sign. Not safe.

“Onyx, half this forest isn’t safe.”

This is not half forest. This is where he wants you to go.

Lucas drags a hand through his hair, copper strands sticking up in every direction. He is tired, and I know that. I can smell it on him. Rain, work, irritation, and the lingering ache of old abandonment. “We don’t know that.”

I know his markers.

“Yeah, and I trust that, but I also have a job.”

Job can wait.

His laugh is short and humorless. “No, it can’t. That’s not how emergency calls work. You know how important my job is. People depend on me.”

Another ranger can go. Not always you.

“The other ranger is forty minutes out, and if there are people up there, forty minutes matters.”

I stifle a growl because I know this is important to him, but I cannot help the dread I am feeling. ***Your job takes you into his reach. You are not going.***

His eyes narrow, and the bond sparks with irritation so quick and hot it stings. “I’m sorry, was there a meetin’ where you became my boss?”

I look at the small kitchen, the table, the door, the rain-dark window. His den is too small for the amount of danger outside it. His body is too soft for my brother’s claws. His human life has too many openings, too many calls, too many duties that tell him to walk into places where wrong light waits.

I am trying to keep you alive, Lucas.

His mouth tightens. “I know.”

Then listen to me.

The moment I send it, the bond stiffens, and Lucas goes very still. He’s not afraid; he’s angry. Real anger, no humor softening its edges. He looks at me like I have stepped somewhere I promised not to put my foot. “You don’t get to tell me to listen like I’m a dog refusing a command.”

Shame moves under my ribs, but fear snarls over it. ***You are not a dog. You are my mate.***

“And I’m a ranger.” His hand cuts toward the badge hanging on the back of a chair, the uniform shirt half-dried from earlier. “I was a ranger before you found me, Onyx. I was a person before the bond, before your mark, before the forest wrapped my life in antlers and ancient family drama. I can’t stop doin’ my job because your brother is sendin’ creepy tree mail.”

Creepy tree mail is a threat.

“It’s all a damn threat now!” he snaps, pulling at his hair. “Every trail, every call, every shadow, every damn phone buzz. You scent my truck. You circle my cabin. You follow my routes—”

He uses my scent, I say, finally, because fear breaks the secret open badly instead of cleanly. ***He leaves marks where you walk. He wants you to trust what smells like me.***

Lucas drops his hand, and for a moment, I think the truth will bring him to me. I think he will understand that the shape of my fear is not madness, not an insult to his competence, not distrust of his strength. It is knowledge. It is every old law in me screaming that my brother has already touched the outer edge of our life and found amusement there.

Then Lucas's face changes, and I know I have made the second mistake.

"How many marks?" he asks. I do not answer quickly enough. His laugh is quiet and humorless. "How many, Onyx?"

The bond tightens between us. I lower my head, not enough to submit, not enough to hide, but because the truth feels heavier than my skull. ***Several.***

"Several," he repeats, and the word goes hard in his mouth. "And you didn't think to tell me or show me how they looked?"

The old instinct rises in me, the need to make him understand danger first and hurt second, but Lucas's anger burns too brightly for that. ***I removed them.***

"That is not the same damn thing!" he snaps, the sharpness of it cracking through the quiet. His hand lifts, then drops again, shaking slightly. "You don't get to erase the scary part and call that honesty."

I try to find the correct words to explain why I did it, but the only thing that makes sense to me is, ***I was protecting you.***

"No." He steps toward me, not back, because Lucas has never had the instincts of prey, no matter what shape humans gave him. "You were decidin' what I got to know. *Again*."

The accusation lands deep because it is true enough to hurt. ***I did not want fear in you.***

He scoffs. "Well, congratulations. I'm furious instead."

Fury I can handle, the worst part of me thinks. Fury is alive. Fury fights. Fear freezes. But that is not the thought of a mate who trusts his human to stand beside him. That is the thought of an old guardian trying to sort Lucas into the safest place like a precious thing instead of a grown man with his own teeth.

"I know you're scared," he says, the words rougher now, and somehow the kindness buried under them hurts worse than if he'd been cruel. "I know you have reasons. But you don't get to make my whole world smaller because your brother wants me. I already had one person lie and make

choices for me while pretendin’ it was love. Don’t you dare become another one.”

I want to answer. I want to tell him I still wake in memory of roots holding me while my brother speaks of Lucas following my light. I want him to see the blue thread on the branch, the rabbit, the scent that was mine but not mine. I want to put every sign in his hands until he agrees the north ridge can burn or flood or swallow fools whole before I let him walk into it.

But that is the problem—I want to *make* him.

The realization cracks through me, cold and sudden.

Lucas sees something change in my face. His anger falters for a heartbeat, not gone, but worried beneath it. “Onyx.”

I close my hands into fists, claws pressing beneath human nails. ***I am guardian and protector, Lucas. I am not used to sharing burdens; I am used to removing threats. I cannot lose you—not to him, not to anything.***

He shakes his head. “You don’t get to use that to cage me,” he says.

The word hurts worse because it is deserved. ***Cage is not—***

“It is when every choice I make gets measured against your fear first.”

My panic turns bitter on my tongue. I step back this time, giving him the space I should have given before, but he is already moving. He grabs his jacket from the chair and shoves one arm into it, then the other, movements furious.

He snatches his radio off the table, checks the battery with hands that only shake a little, and heads for the door. Without thought, I move between him and the door.

Wrong.

Wrong at once.

Lucas, please understand, I send, softer, horrified by myself, but his eyes have already gone distant in the way humans do when hurt becomes armor.

“Move.”

I move out of his way, but not fast enough to hide the fact that I blocked him. Nothing can erase that. I reach toward him through the bond, not to stop, only to touch, to apologize, to explain. He shuts off something in himself before I reach it. Not the bond entirely; he cannot and would not. But enough that I feel the door.

It is worse than any shouted word.

“You wanna keep me safe?” he says, turning at the threshold. His eyes are bright, furious, and hurt. “Then let me breathe.”

The words stop me more completely than claws in my chest would have.

He steps onto the porch, and I follow one pace behind, unable not to, and he looks back with a warning so sharp even my instincts flinch. “Don’t follow me, Onyx,” he says. “I mean it.”

The ridge—

“I heard you.” His voice breaks a little, and I watch him force it steady. “I heard all of it. Now you hear me.”

I stand inside the open doorway, every part of me straining toward him. He goes down the porch steps into the rain, and it feels like tearing off one of my own antlers.

He crosses the clearing fast, shoulders hunched against the downpour, flashlight beam cutting through the dark toward his truck. He does not look back again. The engine starts. Headlights flare across the trees, across my body, across the doorway, then he drives away toward the service road, toward North Ridge, toward the place my brother marked with my scent.

I remain at the threshold because chasing him now would make his words meaningless, and his words matter even when fear hates them.

Let me breathe.

I close my eyes and lower my head.

Aestrata, I think, though I do not know if she listens this close to human walls. ***Teach me the difference between guarding and holding too tight before my fear drives him further than my brother ever could.***

OceanofPDF.com

40

Lucas

I'M IN SUCH A bad mood the following morning that Sarah Knox takes one look at me over the top of her coffee mug and decides not to say good morning.

That tells you something, because Sarah treats silence the way some people treat poison ivy. Useful from a distance, suspicious up close, and absolutely not something to touch unless there's no other option.

She watches me cross the ranger station lobby, jaw tight enough to crack a molar. Then slowly lowers her mug, eyes narrowing as I shove through the little half door behind the counter and head for the back office where the radios live.

I feel her attention follow me, sharp and maternal in the least soft way possible, but she lets me pass. Wise woman. I'm one wrong word away from taking out my feelings on a trail maintenance schedule, and nobody deserves to see that.

The worst part is that I understand Onyx.

I do. That's what keeps making me angrier, because if he were being cruel, if he were trying to control me because he liked control, I could set that down cleanly and call it what it was. But he's scared. He's ancient and

powerful and terrifying enough to make every animal in a mile radius go still when he gets angry.

He’s scared because there’s another thing like him in the woods, a wrong thing, a thing wearing stories that should’ve belonged to him but got twisted.

He’s scared because I’m human enough to break.

I understand that. I even love him for part of it, which is inconvenient as hell when I’m trying to be furious. But for days now, he’s been everywhere. Not physically all the time, no, because Onyx has learned enough about human personal space to hover from the trees instead of directly over my shoulder.

The difference is mostly academic when your mate can make every bird shut up by standing menacingly behind a cedar. I’ve felt him on patrol. Felt him near the cabin. Felt the bond twitch every time the radio cracked, every time Tom gave me a route, every time I took my truck toward North Ridge like I was personally driving into a bear trap with a neon sign. Concern first, then warning, then that low, possessive pressure he tries to soften before I notice.

I noticed. Of course I noticed.

And last night, when the call came in about two hikers missing off North Ridge, and he stood in my doorway, human shaped and too still, telling me not to go, something I’d been pushing down finally bubbled up.

The hikers were real; the danger was real. I’m a ranger before I am anybody’s mate, and the fact that Onyx looked shattered when I thought that doesn’t make it any less true. Two people were lost in the cold and the dark while he asked me to stay so he could guard me.

So, yeah, I’m mad. I’m also feeling guilty. It’s a great combination. Very healthy. Extremely dignified. I recommend it to nobody.

The station smells like burnt coffee, printer heat, damp canvas, and old wood, all of it more irritating than usual. Parker is at the equipment table when I walk in, sorting trail flags into color-coded bundles. He glances up, sees my face, and whistles low under his breath.

“Well, hell,” he says, leaning one hip against the table. “Who kicked your dog?”

I open the metal cabinet harder than necessary and start checking the first-aid packs, even though I checked them yesterday and the day before

because apparently stress turns me into a man who alphabetizes gauze. “Don’t have a dog.”

“Your truck, then.”

“My truck’s fine.”

“Your coffee?”

I pull out one pack, unzip it, and count bandages with more force than the bandages deserve. “Coffee’s fine.”

Parker’s gaze stays on me. I can feel it, and for some reason, that makes my shoulders crawl. We’ve known each other too long for him not to hear the lie sitting under every word, but today, his concern lands wrong.

He comes closer, boots quiet on the scuffed floor. “Luke.”

I hate that tone—the gentle one. The old friend one. The one that makes me remember being younger and stupid in this town with him, drinking gas station slushies in the parking lot and talking like life would wait for us to get around to it.

I shove a roll of medical tape back into the pack. “Parker.”

“What’s goin’ on?”

“Nothin’.”

“Yeah, and Sarah’s a ray of sunshine.”

From the front, Sarah calls without looking back, “I hear both of you, and I resent being dragged into whatever masculine constipation is happenin’ back there.”

Parker’s mouth twitches, but his eyes stay on me. “See? Even she knows somethin’s wrong.”

“I had a long night,” I say, because that’s true enough to wear as armor. “We found the hikers around two in the mornin’, one mildly hypothermic, one with a sprained knee, and enough bad decisions between them to fill a pamphlet. I’m tired.”

His expression softens. “Yeah, heard about that. Good work.”

I shrug. The praise hits the bruise from last night. Two people are home because we went out. Because *I* went out and didn’t let fear choose for me. But I keep seeing Onyx in my doorway, blue eyes too bright, hands loose at his sides.

He moved because I asked; because even terrified, he let me leave. I know that should matter. It does matter. It just doesn’t untangle the fact that he tried to stop me first.

Parker rests a hand on the table near mine, not touching me. “This about your mystery person?” My head snaps up, and he lifts both hands slightly. “Hey. You don’t have to say anythin’. I’m not pryin’.”

“You are literally pryin’.”

“I’m pryin’ gently.”

“That doesn’t make it better.”

“No, but it makes me charmin’.”

I almost smile. Almost. Instead, I zip the first-aid pack closed and reach for another one. “I’m fine.”

Parker studies me for a beat too long, then lets out a slow breath and looks away. “Okay.”

Something about the way he says it makes my irritation falter. It’s too easy. Parker normally worries a subject until it bites him or gives up. This time, he lets it drop, and I should be grateful, but my gut gives a little twist.

I sigh. “Thanks. It’s just—”

“Ranger station?” The radio on the desk. “This is Jonah Miller. Can anyone hear me?”

My heart lurches, and the first-aid pack slips out of my hand and hits the table. I cross the room in three strides and snatch the radio off the charger, thumb jamming the button hard enough to hurt. “Jonah, it’s Lucas. I hear you. Where are you?”

Static spits back. “Uncle Luke?” Jonah’s voice returns, shaky and breathless. “I’m, uh, I’m near North Ridge. Lower creek crossing, I think. The split pine one. I fell in, and I think I messed up my ankle.”

My chest tightens so sharply I have to close my eyes for half a second.

North Ridge.

Fuck.

I grip the radio. “Okay. You’re doin’ good. Are you out of the water?”

“Yeah,” Jonah says, then hisses like he moved wrong. “Yeah, I’m out. I’m soaked, though, and it’s cold as shit. Sorry. Mom says I’m not supposed to say curse words over a radio.”

I almost laugh. He sounds so painfully like himself for one second that it nearly breaks me. “I’m not tellin’ your mom if you don’t. Can you see the split pine clearly?”

“Yeah. Big one with the lightnin’ scar, right? Creek bends left after it.”

“That’s the one.” My brain is already mapping the route, distance, access points, the fastest way in by truck before we cut on foot. “Any bleedin’?”

“I don’t think so. Just my ankle. It hurts bad, and I dropped my pack in the water like an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot,” I say too quickly. The idea of him being out there after months of refusing to go near those woods does something to my throat. “Y’hear me? You did good callin’ in. Stay where you are. Don’t try to walk on it. We’re comin’.”

“Okay,” Jonah whispers. “I… I was tryin’, y’know? I thought maybe if I just went a little way, I coulda—”

“I know,” I say, and my voice drops because suddenly I am so proud of him I could almost fall apart right there in the station. “I know, kid. And I’m proud of you. We’ll be there soon.”

The radio crackles again, and then Sarah is already moving, grabbing the logbook while Parker reaches for the first-aid kit I dropped. Tom’s office door opens down the hall, his brows drawn low, his body shifting from old-ranger stiffness to command with a speed that reminds me why everyone still listens when he speaks.

“Location?” Tom asks.

“North Ridge lower creek crossing, split pine,” I say, grabbing my jacket from the chair. “Twisted ankle, wet, conscious, cold. I’m the closest familiar. Parker and I can take my truck up service road three and cut in.”

Tom nods once. “Go. Sarah, get Reyes looped in and keep the channel open. Lucas, you call if anythin’ changes.”

“Will do.”

The second I say it, the bond stirs—a hard pulse of alarm from somewhere deep in the forest, like he felt the shape of my fear before he knew its name. I shut it down as much as I can because if he feels North Ridge and Jonah and panic together, he’ll come tearing through the woods like judgment with antlers.

And after last night, I don’t know what that would do to us.

I hate that I have to think that.

Parker is already at my side with the first-aid kit and emergency blanket. He’s quieter than usual, face pale. I know it’s concern because Jonah is my nephew and Parker knows what that kid has been through. Sarah looks at me as I pass the front desk, and her expression has softened into something that almost undoes me.

“Bring him back,” she says.

I offer a nod. “I will.”

Outside, the air is too bright and too cold. The sky is a hard, washed-out blue, and the wind moves through the station lot with the faint smell of wet leaves and exhaust. Parker tosses the kit into the backseat while I climb behind the wheel. My hands shake once on the steering wheel before I force them to steady.

Parker gets in beside me and shuts the door. “You good to drive?”

“No,” I say, starting the truck. “But I’m drivin’.”

The tires spit gravel as I pull out too fast, the station falling behind us in a blur of weathered wood and Sarah standing in the doorway with the radio still in her hand. I take the county road fast, then the turnoff toward service road three, every bump in the old track jolting through the truck.

Parker braces one hand against the dash but doesn’t tell me to slow down. Usually, he’d make a joke about me driving like I’m auditioning for a low-budget action movie. Today he only looks out the windshield, jaw tight.

“He’ll be okay,” he says after a minute. “He called in. He knew the landmark. That’s good.”

I nod too sharply. “Yeah.”

“He’s smart.”

“I know he’s smart.”

Parker glances at me. “Luke.”

My grip tightens on the wheel. “He hasn’t hiked in months. He’s been scared of those woods since Ava, and he finally tries, he finally gets himself out there, and he falls into a creek at North Ridge. I mean, Jesus Christ, it’s like the place waited.”

The words leave a bad taste in my mouth because some part of me almost believes them.

The bond pulses again, and I feel Onyx far off, but not far enough. His concern presses against the edge of my mind, trying to find room. Last night sits between us like a slammed door. I don’t have time to open it. I can’t manage his fear and mine at the same time, not with Jonah soaked and hurt by a creek that’s already swallowed too many stories.

Not now, I think, though I’m not sure whether I send it or only wish I could.

Parker’s voice lowers. “You’re gonna get him. He’s gonna be pissed and embarrassed, and you’re gonna pretend not to fuss, and then you’re gonna fuss anyway.”

I huff a humorless breath. “Probably.”

“And he’ll try again.” I glance at him despite myself. Parker’s eyes stay on the road, and he’s a hell of a lot calmer than I am. “Maybe not right away. But he will. Kid’s got Dawson stubbornness. It’s obnoxious.”

I swallow and look back at the road as branches scrape along the passenger side. “Yeah. He does.”

The service road narrows, ruts deep from last week’s rain. I park where the track washes out, leaving the truck angled near a stand of young birch. Parker grabs the first-aid kit before I can, and I take the emergency blanket, radio, and a coil of rope because habit is habit even when panic is chewing through my ribs.

The forest closes around us the second we leave the truck.

North Ridge has always felt different. Even before Onyx, before blue lanterns meant anything other than old ghost stories and trauma, this part of the woods had a watchful edge. The trees grow tighter here, roots raised and knuckled under the soil, rocks slick with moss.

The creek runs below us somewhere, louder than it should be after only a little rain, hidden by slope and fern until you’re nearly on top of it. The air smells of cedar, cold water, damp leaves, and something faintly sweet that makes every muscle in my body lock.

Labrador tea.

No.

Not now, Onyx.

My head turns before I can stop it, searching between trunks, but there’s nothing. No skull in shadow. No blue flame. No sense of Onyx directly near me, only the bond flickering with unsettled static beneath my own fear.

Parker stops a few steps ahead and looks back. “You smell somethin’?”

I blink. “What?”

He looks at me with a raised brow. “You stopped and sniffed the air. Did you smell somethin’?”

“Uh… No, I don’t smell anythin’.” *Did I do that?*

His expression is unreadable for half a second, then he nods. “C’mon, creek’s this way.”

I should be leading. I know that. This is my call, my nephew, my route. But Parker moves with certainty, and my head is full of Jonah’s voice, Onyx’s alarm, and the sweet scent around us. I push forward, catching up, boots slipping once on wet leaves.

“Jonah!” I call as we descend toward the crossing. “It’s Lucas. You hear me?”

No answer. The creek grows louder.

I try the radio. “Jonah, this is Lucas. We’re close to the split pine. Give me a shout if you hear me.”

Static and nothing else.

“He may have set it down,” Parker says behind me now. “Or the battery died.”

“Yeah.”

His voice is still too calm. I hate that thought the second I have it. Parker is helping; he’s carrying the first-aid kit and came with me without hesitation. He’s being calm because I’m not. That’s how it works. That’s how partners work.

So why does the back of my neck feel wrong?

We reach the split pine. The water rushes below, shallow but fast over dark stone, cold enough to numb a foot in minutes. Mud churns near the bank. Ferns are crushed in places. A broken branch hangs low over the water.

But Jonah isn’t there.

I stop so abruptly Parker nearly bumps into me.

My mind tries to correct the picture, to put Jonah where he belongs. Sitting against the pine, soaked, shivering, and furious with himself. Curled near the roots, ankle swollen, face brightening with relief when he sees me. Radio on the ground beside him. Pack caught in brush.

None of that is here.

“Jonah?” I call, louder now, and my voice cracks against the trees. “Jonah, answer me!”

Nothing.

My heart starts pounding in my throat. I step closer to the bank, scanning mud, stones, disturbed leaves. There are tracks, but too many half prints and smears to make sense of quickly. The mud near the crossing is torn up, but not like someone who was waiting while injured for rescue. More like someone moved through with purpose and then covered the worst of it badly.

Cold slides under my skin.

I turn toward Parker, every instinct suddenly awake and snarling. “Parker, what the hell is going—”

Pain explodes across the back of my skull before I can turn, so bright it erases the creek, the trees, Parker’s face, everything. My knees buckle, and for one impossible second, I’m still standing and falling at the same time, my body trying to understand a command it didn’t hear.

The bond flares.

Onyx.

His fear slams into me from somewhere distant, sudden and savage. I try to say his name, but my mouth won’t work.

The ground rushes up. Mud hits my palms, then my shoulder, cold water soaking through my sleeve. My vision breaks into pieces: brown creek, black root, Parker’s boots, the edge of my own hand clawing weakly at the earth. The sound of a crackling radio.

Through the bond, something tears open, wild and furious.

Mine.

Then darkness folds over me before I can answer.

OceanofPDF.com

41

Onyx

I KNOW THE MOMENT Lucas goes quiet—not silent.

Silence is something I understand. Silence can be rest, stalking, listening, the patient hold of roots beneath winter soil. Silence can be the den after Lucas falls asleep with one hand on my chest, his breath warm and steady, his mind tucked safely behind the soft door of dreams. Silence can be trust.

This is not silence. This is absence.

One moment, the bond holds him at a distance, narrowed because he is angry with me for letting my fear speak too much like a command, and I let him leave with that anger still raw between us.

I feel him throughout the day as a guarded warmth I am careful not to press against, because Lucas Dawson is not a creature to be handled by closing fists, and I have learned that love can bruise when it mistakes itself for shelter.

So, I keep away. I stay in the trees. I track the wrong scents near North Ridge and grind my claws into bark until cedar splinters under them. I wait for him to come home angry and alive.

Then the guarded warmth cuts off.

I stop, and the forest stops with me.

A raven lifts from a branch and does not call. A vole freezes under leaf litter. Wind moves through pine needles, but the sound arrives dull, far away, as if the world has dropped itself beneath water. I stand halfway up a slope above the creek, one hand braced against a hemlock, skull turned toward the shape of the bond inside my chest.

Lucas?

Nothing answers.

Not sleep, not privacy, not even the firm human wall he puts between us when he needs to think without me sensing it. This is wrong—this is a door slammed from the outside. My hand tightens against the hemlock until bark breaks beneath my claws.

Lucas!

The bond jerks and distress floods through me abruptly, ripping a snarl from my chest before thought can form. Pain. Shock. Confusion. The taste of wet leaves, creek mud, fear flaring bright, and betrayal so sharp it cuts through the distance. Then a blow. White impact. His mind twists toward me, reaching on instinct.

I'm sorry, Wildheart.

My name comes broken before darkness swallows him.

I run. No decision exists between the feeling and the motion. My body becomes speed, claws tearing into earth, antlers slashing through branches too slow to move aside. Birds explode from trees as I pass; deer bolt and scatter. The forest tries to speak, tries to offer direction, but panic roars too loudly inside me, a storm with Lucas's last flash of pain at its center.

I follow the bond at first, but it's wounded, muffled, and twisted under something old and rotten that clings like black sap. North Ridge, creek, split pine, the shape of his fear. I tear toward it, but when I get there, the crossing is empty.

Lucas's scent is there, bright and familiar and wrong with blood at the edge. But it breaks apart too quickly, muddled under Parker's human scent, under crushed fern, under Labrador tea.

My scent—no, not mine.

I lower my skull to the ground and breathe so deeply the mud trembles under my mouth. Labrador tea, yes, but flat. Stolen. Worn like a dead pelt. My brother's trick. Rage tears through me so hard the bond shudders.

Lucas had said to let him breathe; now there is blood in mud and no mate at the creek.

I circle the crossing twice, too fast, then force myself down to stillness because panic makes a poor tracker, and I cannot fail him because my fear is louder than his trail. Parker’s footprints. Lucas’s heavier boots. Another mark near the alder, not foot, not hoof, claw pressed lightly into soil as a signature and insult. Drag signs begin, then vanish beneath a spread of false scent so thick it burns.

I follow and lose him within twenty paces.

I follow again and find only my own stolen ghost.

My brother has not only taken Lucas; he has made the forest smell like me.

I tear through every likely path from the creek to the old quarry gullies, every deer trail, every forgotten hunter cut, every dry wash beneath limestone ridges. I search high and low. I climb rock faces with claws and drop into ravines hard enough to crack stone.

I break apart hollow logs, shove my skull into old mine vents, rake aside brush so fiercely roots recoil. More than once, I catch Lucas, or think I do, and lunge after it only to find false Labrador tea smeared on bark, his scent placed like bait, then cut off. My brother plays with grief the way he plays with fear in humans.

I stop calling only through the bond and begin roaring his name into the trees, though Lucas cannot hear the old sounds in human ears. I try mind-speech again and again until the bond burns.

Little Ember. Lucas. Answer.

Anger comes back sometimes, not his, mine reflected from walls I cannot see. Fear comes back once, so faint I nearly doubt it, and I run until my legs tear through bramble and stone. Nothing. Empty slope. Moss bent away from a place where wrongness stood. Blue thread tied to a branch like a smile.

I crush the branch in my fist.

The forest begins to look frightened of me.

That knowledge reaches through the rage in fragments. Small animals burrow deep. Trees draw sap tight. Even the old roots near North Ridge, roots that knew my claws before Lucas’s great-grandfather drew breath, hesitate before touching my path.

I am not hunting now; I am unraveling. My antlers ache with the force of too many impacts. Blood runs down one shoulder from tearing through

tight stone. The lantern at my antler swings dark and useless, striking bone in a rhythm that sounds like accusation.

I return to the creek crossing because I have nowhere else. The mud still holds the shape of loss. I drop to both knees near the split pine and bow my skull until it touches wet earth. The old pride breaks. It breaks without ceremony, without dignity, without any witness but roots and water.

“Moth…er,” I force aloud, though human words are not what she made my first body for. The sound comes wrong through skull and teeth, low and torn. “Aestrata. Pl…please.”

I dig my claws into mud until cold water fills the grooves.

I failed him. I failed my mate. You shaped me for guarding, and I have lost the only thing I was not allowed to lose. Please help me find him before there is no pulse to follow.

OceanofPDF.com

42

Lucas

THE FIRST THING I understand is that I am not on the ground.

My thoughts come back disjointed, scattered and slow, like somebody dumped them on the floor and kicked half of them under furniture. There is pain first. A heavy, pulsing, nauseating pain at the back of my skull that rolls forward behind my eyes every time I try to blink.

My shoulders scream next, and then my wrists, and then the rest of my body finally starts reporting in with the kind of enthusiasm I really could've lived without. Cold air sticks damply to my face. Something drips nearby in slow, patient ticks.

I jerk fully awake, and the motion tears a sound out of me before I can swallow it. Rope bites deeper into my wrists, rough and wet where skin has already split. My arms are bound above my head, not just tied but hauled up, stretched until my shoulders scream.

My toes barely brush the ground when I point them down, and even that little contact sends pain through my spine because my body is hanging wrong, weight dragged through joints that were never meant to hold me like this. The air tastes like rust and old water. Like rotting wood and earth, opened and left to sour.

A mineshaft, my mind supplies slowly, with a ranger's dull, horrified certainty. Old support beams. Narrow rock walls. Damp streaks blackening the stone. Dust, clay, iron, a sagging ceiling where roots have found cracks and curled through like fingers. A lantern sits on an overturned crate a few yards away, its battery light too white.

My head lolls forward, and bile crawls up my throat because the movement sends pain flashing brightly behind my eyes. "Fuck," I rasp, and my own voice sounds like it belongs to someone dragged out of a creek and beaten with a shovel.

North Ridge. Jonah's call. The split pine. Parker behind me.

Parker.

I lift my head too fast and almost black out from the pain. A groan catches in my throat, half swallowed because something inside me still thinks giving pain a voice is dangerous. When my vision clears, a scrape of boots pulls my attention sideways.

Parker is here, and he's pacing.

For one second, relief tries to happen because my brain sees *friend* before it catches up. Parker. Sandy hair damp with rain. Park Ranger jacket streaked with mud. Hands shaking at his sides.

My oldest friend in Sweet Rivers. The idiot who hugged me in the equipment room when I came back, who made too many jokes and knew too much about my silences and once stole my fries in tenth grade and nearly got stabbed with a plastic fork for it.

Then I remember his boots behind me at the creek. I remember turning and pain exploding at the back of my head. The relief dies so completely, it leaves nothing behind but cold awareness.

"Parker," I say, and my voice cracks around his name.

He stops pacing and just stares at me. His eyes are wrong—too wide and too shiny—feverish with something that makes my skin tighten. Relief flashes across his face, then it twists into resentment so fast I wonder if I imagined the first part.

"What the hell is goin' on?" I ask, but my voice comes out hoarse and raw, barely mine. "Where's Jonah?"

He looks away. The movement sends a cold spike through me. My heart tries to claw its way up my throat, and the bond, distant and muffled, strains toward the fear so hard I almost feel Onyx on the other side of it, but it's just the shape of him, alarmed and reaching.

I grab for him inside myself, but the bond slips. Something is blocking it.

"Parker," I say again, and my voice steadier on his name this time. "Where is my nephew?"

He turns back, and for one breath, I see my friend. The boy I knew. The man who sat across from me at the ranger station pretending vending machine coffee wasn't a hate crime. The one who made jokes when things got too heavy. Then his mouth tightens, and that version of him disappears again.

"Jonah is fine," he says, too quickly. "Jesus, Lucas, he's fine. He really did go out hikin', okay? He really did fall, but before I could call in that he wasn't here, Sarah radioed to let me know that someone dropped him off in front of the clinic. Weird, but whatever. It doesn't matter. He called at the perfect time, so I used that openin' to get you here."

Rage and confusion cuts through the fog in my head. The pain in my shoulders is bad enough to blur the edges of the room, and my head is still pounding from whatever blow took me down. But that sentence seems to cut through all of it.

Dropped him off. In front of the clinic.

"What the fuck does that mean?" I snap. "Dropped off by who?"

"No one knows, but he's alive," Parker waves it off, as if that ends the conversation. "Unconscious, but alive after I convinced him to come up here and be brave. That's what matters, isn't it?"

I stare at him, breathing hard, the bond still slipping uselessly under whatever damp, sweet wrongness has wrapped around it. "You *used* him?"

He shrugs. "I was already trying to figure out how to get you up here, and then little traumatized Jonah was easy enough to manipulate into being brave again, since he wants to follow in his Uncle Luke's footsteps. I mean, come on. You have to admit the timin' was funny, almost like the woods wanted it."

The ropes creak as I strain against them. Pain rips through my shoulders, but I barely feel it under the sudden urge to get my hands around his throat. "You son of a bitch. He trusted you!"

Parker looks at me as if I've hit him harder than he hit me a few minutes ago. Then his expression shutters, and the stranger wearing my friend's face is back again. "He's alive. You should be grateful."

I bare my teeth at him because my hands are tied and my body is useless, so it's the only weapon I have left.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he says, stepping closer again. “You don’t get to look at me like that. You don’t know what it’s been like. You don’t know what it feels like to be chosen by somethin’ old and powerful, to hear him out there, to see that light and know it came for you.”

My stomach turns. “What are you talkin’ about? What did you do?”

“I helped,” Parker snaps, and the word cracks across the mine. He closes the distance between us in three fast strides, rage and nerves making his movements jerky. “That’s what I did. I helped, Lucas. I’ve been helpin’ for months, and you come back here actin’ like you know everythin’ because you’ve got a badge and a sad little cabin and everyone lookin’ at you like you’re some sufferin’ hometown hero.”

I stare at him, trying to put the pieces together while pain chews through my shoulders. “You’re not makin’ a lick of sense. What did you help with? I don’t—”

His fist hits my stomach before I can brace, and the air leaves me in a violent rush. My whole body swings from the rope, wrists screaming, boots scraping uselessly against dirt. I gag around nothing, head dropping forward, vision flashing white at the edges.

Parker stands close enough now that I can smell his sweat, his fear, and under both—faint and terrible—Labrador tea.

Not Onyx.

“Why did you have to come back?” Parker asks, his voice shaking with rage that sounds rehearsed and raw at once. “Do you have any idea how long I waited? How long I listened? How long I did everythin’ right? Then you show up, and suddenly he doesn’t care about me. Suddenly it’s Lucas, Lucas, Lucas. He only wanted routes you’d take. He only wanted to know where you went alone. He wanted me to get you out here.”

I lift my head slowly, and the mine seems to tilt. “He,” I say. “Who are you talkin’ about?”

His expression changes, almost reverent now, and that scares me worse than the punch. “My mate.”

I stare at him, every bruise, every ache, every rope-burn suddenly far away beneath the roar starting in my ears. Parker watches my face like he wants to see understanding and hates me for getting there too slowly.

“The Lantern Stalker,” he says.

The mine narrows around me.

Onyx’s old fear. The wrong scent in the northern gullies. His refusal to let me go near North Ridge. The way he stood in my doorway, terrified and commanding, telling me the ridge was marked. How Parker went quiet in the truck, and how he knew where to walk. Jonah’s call coming at the perfect time. Labrador tea on Parker’s skin like stolen perfume.

Onyx’s brother.

“Oh my God,” I whisper.

Parker flinches like I’ve insulted him. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Parker,” I wheeze, “that thing lied to you. He’s not your mate.”

He hits me again, this time across the face. Pain explodes through my cheek. My head snaps sideways, and blood fills my mouth where my teeth cut the inside of it. The swing makes the ropes twist, turning me away from him for a second. I blink hard, force the dark spots back, and lift my head because if I let it hang too long, I might not get it up again.

Parker is breathing heavily. “You don’t know anythin’!” he yells. “You never did. You left. You left this place, left all of us, then came crawlin’ back when your city life spat you out. And he chose you. Why? Why are you so special?”

The question is raw enough that for a second, pity tries to rise.

Ava. Mark. The missing persons wall in Sheriff Reyes’s office. Red string, photographs, and Tom’s hollow-eyed warnings. Dogs refusing creeks. Lights in the trees. How many times had Parker stood beside me while I looked for answers he already knew were buried under the wrong monster?

“Wait…” I whisper, horrified as realization seeps in. “What exactly did you do for him?”

“I didn’t kill anybody,” he says too fast. “I just helped sometimes. Gave him routes. Told him when patrols changed. Left gates unlocked. People wander off all the time around here, Lucas. You know that.”

Even as he’s telling me this, my mind refuses to comprehend it. “You fed people to him.”

His face crumples with anger. “I love him.”

“No,” I say, and this time my voice is hard enough to cut. “You loved feelin’ chosen. You loved being close to somethin’ powerful. You loved thinkin’ you were different than the people on that missin’ wall. But you were never his mate, Parker. You were useful.”

His face slips into anger because shame is too honest. “You don’t understand what it feels like to be chosen by somethin’ like that.”

I laugh once, bitter and breathless despite the pain. The sound enrages him.

“What?” he demands.

“Nothin’,” I say, and blood slides over my tongue. “Just real funny you sayin’ that to *me*.”

Parker’s eyes narrow. “He said yours was weaker.” His mouth curves with mean satisfaction. “Yeah, he told me. Said his brother got soft. Said he put a mark on you and called it sacred because he was too weak to take what he wanted. Said when he was done with you, he’d kill him too. Eat him, probably. He hates him, did you know that? Your monster has a brother, and his brother is better at bein’ what they are.”

The bond jerks inside me. Somewhere far away, Onyx’s alarm becomes rage.

“What does he want with me?” I ask, keeping my voice steady because panic would make Parker feel powerful, and I am not giving him that if I can help it.

Parker scoffs, but something nervous moves under it now. “What do you think? He wants his brother broken, but he wants you to hurt first, because that’s what you deserve for makin’ him forget me.”

I stare at him, and whatever pity tried to live in me dries up. “You stupid son of a bitch,” I say, and keep going because if I’m about to die in a mine, I’m doing it with my mouth. “You helped somethin’ kill people because it made you feel special. You stood there at that creek and watched me panic over my nephew, and you still think this is about love?”

“You don’t get it!”

“I get it better than you do,” I snap, and the ropes burn my wrists as I lean toward him as much as they’ll allow. “I’ve seen the difference. I know what a guardian feels like. I know what a bond feels like. Whatever’s comin’, Parker, it ain’t that. You didn’t find a mate, you found a predator that figured out you were lonely enough to open the door.”

His face goes white, then something moves in the tunnel behind him. Parker turns with a relieved little breath, like God himself has walked into the mine to prove him right.

I look past him, and every brave thing in me goes still.

For a second, I think I know what’s coming because I know Onyx’s true form. I know the massive antlers, the fused skull, the long limbs, the terrible grace of a Cervari body moving through darkness like it owns every shadow. I know how the forest goes still around him, not because it is dead, but because it is listening. I know the scent of Labrador tea when it means home.

This thing brings the scent with it, and it’s all sorts of wrong.

It steps into the lantern light slowly, similar enough that some ancient part of the shape makes my heart lurch. But the resemblance ends there.

Onyx looks like the forest made itself a guardian and gave him teeth because mercy needs protection. This thing is a wound that learned to stand upright.

Its skull is stained dark around the mouth. Its antlers are jagged and uneven, wrapped in strips of cloth that swing softly when it ducks under a low beam. Its body is leaner than Onyx’s—stretched unevenly, bark markings warped into dark gouges that look less grown than carved. Its eyes glow through the sockets, pale and hungry.

The forest is not in it—that is what terrifies me most. It’s the absence and deadness around it. The mine feels colder because it enters, but not with earth-cold, nor with cave-cold. With the cold of something that has eaten every good purpose it was ever given.

Varkhyn.

Its mouth opens beneath the skull. “Well,” it says. The voice that comes out is rough, wet, and pleased while horribly capable of shaping human words. “There is the little ember.”

The sound makes my skin crawl. Onyx fought for my name with a throat that didn’t know how to carry speech. He croaked it like it cost him blood. This Varkhyn speaks easily. Smoothly. Human language is just another stolen thing hanging from its antlers.

Parker smiles shakily. “I brought him.”

The creature doesn’t look at him. Its gaze stays on me. “Yes,” it says. “You did.”

My mouth is dry, and my pulse pounds so hard the rope seems to throb around my wrists. I reach for Onyx through the bond, but terror and pain scramble everything. All I manage is a faint, broken thread.

I’m sorry.

The Varkhyn tilts its skull as if it hears the shape of the attempt. “He won’t reach you fast enough.”

The creature walks closer, each clawed footfall soft in the dirt. I try to pull back, but there is nowhere to go. The ropes creak above me. Pain lances through both shoulders. My pulse hammers so hard I can feel it in the mark at my shoulder.

The Varkhyn notices the mark, tilts its head, then reaches out. I jerk away as much as I can, which is almost nothing. One claw touches the scar, cold and slick with old blood. Revulsion slams through me so violently I gag.

“Brother writes pretty promises,” the creature murmurs. “Soft guardian. Soft teeth. Soft mate.”

“Don’t touch me,” I grind out.

It laughs, and Parker shifts. “You said you were just goin’ to scare him.”

The Varkhyn’s claw drags lightly along the edge of the mark, and I can’t stop the shudder that tears through me. “Did I?”

Parker’s voice goes higher. “You said you just needed him gone,” Parker says, and fear enters his voice now, late and useless. “You said you’d take him and then we’d leave. You said he wouldn’t suffer much—”

The creature turns its skull toward him at last, and he stops talking.

“No,” Parker gasps. “No, wait, you said—”

The Varkhyn’s hand moves so fast I barely see it. One moment Parker is standing there with his mouth open, confused and horrified, and the next the creature’s claws are buried in his chest. Parker makes a small sound, not a scream, more like he has been surprised by cold water.

His eyes drop to the place where the monster’s arm enters him, and then lift again, searching that skull face for mercy he has spent years helping deny other people. Parker chokes. “But I’m—”

The Varkhyn leans close. “Useful.”

Then it tears sideways.

My stomach heaves, and I turn my face away, but I can’t turn far enough. The creature drops him to the ground with no more care than discarded rope. Parker lands in the dirt a few feet from me, eyes open, neck bent at an angle no living person can hold.

He was never its mate; he was bait. A tool. A lonely man who wanted to be chosen so badly he mistook being used for being loved. I hate him. I hate him so much I can barely breathe around it. But watching him crumpled there, staring at nothing, I also feel the awful waste of it.

Then the monster turns back to me, and all pity dies under the weight of survival. It steps over Parker’s body and comes closer.

The mine seems to shrink around us. My arms shake so badly that the ropes tremble above me, but I force my head up. I won’t die looking away. I won’t give it that.

It leans in until its skull fills my vision. “You smell like him,” it says.

I spit blood at its feet. “Good.”

Its eyes brighten. “Brave,” it says, almost fondly. “I will make that last.” It lifts one claw and presses the tip against my stomach, not breaking skin yet. “Slow first. Pain teaches the bond to scream. He will hear some of it. Not enough to find, but enough to know.”

The cold in me becomes absolute.

“Then I open you,” it continues, voice soft with pleasure, “and leave enough life that he smells you dying before he reaches you. I’ll tell him you begged, and how his little ember went out calling for him.”

“No,” I whisper, and it isn’t fear this time. It’s fury.

The claw presses harder, skin parts, and pain blooms hot and bright. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from making the sound it wants.

The monster hums. “There. Already learning.”

The bond strains, distant and wild. Onyx is out there. I know he is. He felt something—he has to have felt something. But the false Labrador tea is thick in the air, layered over stone and old roots and mine-damp wood. The creature planned this. It knows how to hide me from him.

I try to send one clear thing through the bond. Not fear, pain, or even the image of this place, because I can’t hold it steady enough. I send one last apology.

I’m sorry, Wildheart.

Sorry for leaving angry. Sorry for making him think the last thing between us would be that doorway, that argument, my voice telling him to move. Sorry for not listening better. Sorry for every time I thought his fear was only suffocation and not also a map of all the things that could reach me when he couldn’t.

Sorry that he will feel this. Sorry that I may become another hollow place inside him.

The bond answers with something too far away to understand.

A roar, maybe.

The monster smiles beneath its skull as if it feels the attempt. “Oh,” it says. “He heard that.”

My throat tightens as it trails its claw upward, tearing shallow fire through my shirt and skin.

I pull against the ropes until my wrists burn slick, but I hang there, helpless, with the wrong lantern burning blue-white in the dark and the monster wearing Onyx’s almost-shape leaning close enough that its rotten breath touches my face.

I’m going to die here. And there is nothing I can do to stop it.

I lift my chin anyway, because if helplessness is all I have left, I can still make it look him in the eye.

The creature’s claws spread against my stomach. “Now we begin.”

OceanofPDF.com

43

Onyx

WIND SHIFTS.

For one impossible moment, Labrador tea rolls over the crossing, rich and sweet. I lift my head too fast, but it’s not Aestrata.

My brother stands across the creek.

He has taken a shape between first body and something worse, taller than me by a hand, leaner, wrong in the proportions as if hunger stretched him where guardianship should have held him steady.

His skull is darker than mine, stained a brown red around the muzzle, antlers jagged and uneven, one tine broken and wet. Fur hangs in clotted ropes from his shoulders. His lantern dangles, cracked from one antler, a sick blue flicker trapped inside glass blackened by old smoke.

Blood covers him.

So much blood.

It dries in lines down his chest, shines fresh across his claws, darkens the fur around his mouth. My mind refuses the meaning for less than a breath, then he tilts his skull.

I rise slowly. ***Where is he?***

My brother’s jaw opens beneath the skull, showing teeth slick with red. ***Your mate?***

All I can smell is blood, false Labrador tea, and the rot of him.

Where is Lucas?

He laughs, and the sound has the old shape of him buried somewhere deep beneath the corruption. He lifts one bloody hand and drags a claw along his muzzle.

Your little ember tasted as delectable as his fear smelled.

There is no thought after that.

I cross the creek in one leap, and we collide with enough force to shatter the bank behind him. My antlers slam into his, black bone against stained jagged bone, and the crack rings through the ridge. He laughs into my face as my claws tear into his side. He rakes his own claws across my shoulder, deep enough to open me, but pain cannot reach me where I have gone.

I drive him backward through alder and fern, snapping saplings under our weight. He twists with Varkhyn quickness, all wrong angles and hunger, and slams his skull into mine hard enough that sparks burst across my sight.

Too slow, he hisses. ***Always patient. Always waiting.***

I hook one antler beneath his and wrench. Bone grinds. He shrieks, delighted more than hurt, and drives a knee into my ribs. We roll down the slope, tearing mud loose, claws carving furrows in earth. A rock catches my back.

He lands above me and snaps for my throat, but I shove my forearm between his jaws, feel teeth sink through fur and flesh, then curl my claws into his neck and rip.

He springs off me laughing, blood steaming in the cold air.

He cried, my brother says, circling. ***Your little human. So brave at first. Then so quiet.***

I rise, breath dragging through my teeth.

Poor thing. He thought you left him again.

The words cut because they are shaped to, and my brother lunges while they land. I catch him poorly, his antlers scraping along my skull, one tine slicing near my eye socket. We crash into the split pine hard enough that the old lightning scar splits wider and bark explodes around us. The tree groans.

I seize his shoulder with one hand and slam him into the trunk again, again, again, until the air fills with splinters and blood. He laughs through it, claws digging into my ribs, dragging downward.

Mate, he mocks. ***Sacred. Chosen. Crying meat with a pretty throat.***

Rage gives me strength, but rage alone is stupid. He wants me blind. He wants me to spend myself against him while Lucas fades somewhere hidden.

Lucas.

The name strikes through the red.

I feint left, let my brother catch my movement, then drop low and drive my antlers up under his guard. One tine punches beneath his ribs. He howls, finally more pain than laughter, and we go down together into the creek.

Water closes over my skull. Cold shocks through wounds. He thrashes, claws gouging my back, jaws snapping near my throat again, but I shove his head under with both hands.

The creek rejects him.

That is the first sign of Aestrata.

The water darkens around his skull, then surges upward, not a natural current but old will, forcing mud into his mouth, around his eyes, beneath the cracked edges of bone. He tears free with a roar, but roots erupt from the bank behind him, thin at first, then thick as wrists, wrapping around one hind leg.

My brother looks down, and for the first time, fear crosses him. But it's not enough.

He rips one root apart, then another, but more rise. The forest that hid from his false scent now touches him directly and recoils in fury. Moss peels away from stone under his feet. Cedars shudder. The creek climbs his legs like hands.

Mother chooses favorites, he snarls.

I slam into him before he can free himself.

We go through the low brush and into the old deer path beyond, his trapped leg tearing loose only because flesh gives where roots will not. He leaves pieces of himself behind and still laughs, mad and shrill, striking my jaw with enough force to send me sideways into stone. My vision flares white. He is on me before it clears, claws at my throat, his skull pressed close to mine.

She loved you best, he spits. ***Lonely one. Patient one. Good guardian. I made them remember us.***

You made them fear us!

I made them follow! He presses harder, claws searching for the place between armor and flesh. ***Your mate followed nothing. I called with your***

scent. I held your light. I wore your wanting. He turned away. So, I took him another way.

I drive my claws up beneath his jaw. He jerks back, but not far enough. My grip closes around the underside of his skull, fingers sinking into old cracks and corrupted flesh. He slashes across my chest, opening me, but I hold. He bucks, antlers scraping against mine, lantern swinging wildly, blue flame stuttering with each movement.

You should have stayed gone, I growl.

Then I wrench.

Bone cracks, and he screams, the sound shaking birds from trees for a mile. He twists free by tearing himself against my grip, leaving black-red blood across my hands. He stumbles toward the quarry path, laughing again, but weaker now, one side of his skull hanging at an unnatural angle. I follow with the terrible clarity that comes after rage has burned everything unnecessary.

He turns at the edge of the old quarry hollow, where stone drops sharp into shadow. ***Kill me then, brother. Your mate still dies slowly. You can hold two corpses tonight.***

The bond flickers. It’s so faint and so far beneath blood and false scent that I nearly miss it.

Lucas is still alive, but he doesn’t have long. My brother sees the recognition move through me, and his laughter stops. Then he attacks with everything left.

The final clash breaks the ground under us. Antlers lock, unlock, strike. Claws tear. Teeth snap. We slam through a dead cedar and spill onto the quarry stones, both bleeding, both limping, both too ancient for the human world and too furious to fall.

He goes for my lantern. I let him think it matters. His claws close around the chain, yanking hard enough to tear the metal into my antler, and in that moment, with his throat exposed beneath the ruined skull, I surge forward and bite.

Not as predator—as executioner.

My jaws close around the corrupted throat of the thing that began beside me. His blood floods my mouth, foul with old death and stolen fear.

He laughs around it even then. Even as I shake him once, hard enough to break what Aestrata should never have called. Even as roots burst from the quarry edge and wrap his limbs, holding him not for me but for judgment.

Even as his cracked lantern swings loose and strikes stone, glass splitting, blue flame guttering into smoke.

His voice comes through blood in a wet, fading rasp. ***Too… late.***

I tear his throat out, and the forest goes silent.

His body convulses once beneath mine, claws scraping stone. The false Labrador tea scent rises in one last thick wave, sweet enough to choke, then collapses like a lie losing the mouth that spoke it. Under it comes rot, deep and black, then old earth as the roots tighten. His lantern cracks fully. The stolen blue light dies, and his scent goes with it.

Lucas's pulse comes through the bond so weakly I almost mistake it for my own fear.

I stagger away from my brother's body, nearly falling when my torn side pulls. I do not look back. The forest can take what remains. Roots already slide over him, not tenderly, not in burial honor, but as containment. A Varkhyn returns to the earth the way poison returns to soil after long work: slowly, bitterly, watched by every root that knows what he was.

Pain arrives now, trying to claim me. Shoulder torn. Ribs open. Skull cracked along one edge. One hind leg dragging. I do not care. I lower my muzzle to stone, breathe Lucas, and follow.

Down the old quarry path. Across broken shale. Through bramble thick with my brother's blood. The forest opens too late, but it opens, roots drawing back, moss bending toward the trail, every living thing pointing now that the false scent is dead. Lucas's pulse trembles in the bond. Faint and fading, but still there.

Hold, Little Ember. I send the thought with everything left in me, but no answer comes.

The path ends at an old mine mouth half hidden behind newly fallen rock. Wrongness clings around it but weakening now, unraveling without my brother feeding it.

Lucas's scent seeps from the dark, thin and terrible. Human fear. Rope. Blood. The mark at his throat burning distantly. His pain is so faint it has become almost peaceful, and that frightens me more than screaming would.

I tear the entrance wider. Stone cuts my hands, roots snap, and earth showers down my skull, but I force myself through and into the dark.

I see him, and for one heartbeat, I cannot comprehend what I see because the mind refuses shapes that would end it.

Lucas hangs by his wrists from the ceiling in the old mine, bound and bloodied, head fallen forward, copper hair dark with sweat and blood, body too still above the stained ground.

His pulse flickers once through the bond.

Almost gone.

The roar that tears from me shakes the mine walls, splits dust from the beams and sends every root in the dark recoiling from my grief.

OceanofPDF.com

44

Onyx

I RUN WITH LUCAS dying in my arms.

The world has no other shape now. No ridge. No creek. No old quarry hollow behind me with broken stone and blood on the rocks. No brother’s corpse being swallowed by roots somewhere in the ruined dark. No Parker dead on the mine floor, no ropes cut by my claws.

I tore through the hollow and found my mate suspended like an offering to cruelty.

There is only Lucas, limp against my chest, his blood soaking into my fur, his head tucked beneath my jaw. I cannot stop checking that he is still there, still warm, still breathing in shallow, wet pulls that do not sound strong enough to hold him.

I can feel his life thread fraying inside the bond. A thin, golden thing dragging against darkness, strand by strand, breaking where I cannot reach. The mark on his throat burns under blood. His pulse flutters beneath my palm each time I shift my hold, too faint, too far apart, a trapped bird beating itself against bone.

I push strength through the bond until my own body shakes, but it slides away from him like water poured into cracked stone. I send warmth.

Mine. Here. Stay.

Every word I have, every old root of my language, every shape of devotion my kind was made to carry. Nothing holds long enough. He slips and slips, and I run harder.

Branches break against my antlers. Rain and leaves lash my skull. My wounds open again, my brother's claws and teeth tearing fresh beneath the strain of each stride, but pain has no meaning if it is not Lucas's pain.

The forest opens before me with fear and grief because it knows what I carry. Ferns flatten under unseen wind, thorns pull back, roots lower themselves like bowed heads. No human has set foot where I am going. No boot, no tool, no prayer spoken with a human mouth has crossed the old boundary of Aestrata's hollow.

Humans are not forbidden because she hates them. It is a place that remembers too much, and human bodies are brief things, bright and breakable, easily crushed by old attention.

Lucas is no ordinary human; he is mine. He is marked by forest, by bond, by choice, by teeth, by every stubborn refusal that kept him from following the false lantern even when grief had hollowed him nearly to the bone.

And I am not above begging.

I cross the first root-marker without slowing, though the air thickens so violently it presses against my chest. I snarl through it. Not in challenge—never at her. A plea with teeth because I have forgotten gentler languages. The trees twist closer, trunks black with old rain and time. The scent of deepwood rises around us, cold moss, buried stone, dark soil, old blood that is not rot but memory.

Lucas makes a small sound in my arms, barely more than breath, and the sound cuts me open more surely than my brother's claws. "St…ay," I force out.

The word tears my throat. I have spoken so little with this human shape, and less in true form, but I drag the sound out anyway because the bond is fraying and mind-speech keeps slipping off him.

He needs something to hear with human ears. He needs his name. My voice is ruined, still raw from the first time I forced it around him after escaping the deepwood, but I speak because silence has hurt him enough.

"Stay, Lu…cas," I croak, each syllable breaking over teeth and bone. "Stay."

His lashes do not lift.

The bond dims.

No.

The word shakes the trees. It leaves me through mouth and mind and claw striking earth. “No.”

I reach the old stream that guards the second boundary and plunge through it. The water is black and cold enough to bite even through my true body, splashing over Lucas’s boots, his torn jeans, the blood at his side where the Varkhyn’s claw opened him while promising slow pain.

The sight of that wound nearly makes me fall. I have packed it with moss and pressure and what little forest craft I could steal in the frantic moments after cutting him down, but the blood keeps coming. Not fast now, but worse. Slow and steady, as if his body has grown too tired to fight the loss—or there is not much more to lose.

I remember him hanging in the mine. I remember his eyes when I broke through the rock shelf, dazed and half gone, yet still finding me. I remember him trying to smile because even dying, Lucas wanted to comfort me first.

The hollow opens.

The stone circle waits at its center, blacker than night, ringed by roots rising and sinking like the backs of sleeping beasts. The quartz veins glimmer faintly beneath the moon, and rain does not fall here though it falls everywhere else. The air is not empty. It is held.

Aestrata is already listening.

I stumble into the circle and fall to my knees with Lucas in my arms.

My antlers strike the earth, and my claws dig into soil. I shelter him against me with both arms, bending my skull over his face to shield him from nothing and everything.

His skin has gone too pale beneath the ember-marks. His hair is wet and copper-dark against my forearm. There is blood at the corner of his mouth, blood on his shirt, blood beneath his nails where he fought the ropes, fought terror, fought long enough for me to find him.

“Mot…her,” I say aloud, and the word is broken, ancient, terrible in my throat.

The circle does not move.

“Mother,” I say again, louder, because I do not care if my voice splits itself apart. “Aestrata. Hear… me.”

The roots tighten around the circle, and Lucas’s breath catches, then stutters.

I press my hand to his chest. “No. No, Little Em…ber, no.”

The bond shows me the thread fraying thinner. I lower my head until the skull over my face rests near his brow. My voice collapses into something rough and wet, but I keep speaking because the speaking is all I have left.

“Take me. G-give him my years. Give him my root. Give him… my b-breath. I have walked… long enough. I have… guarded enough. I have seen… rivers move and… t-towns grow, and men make roads… over deer paths. Take all of it.”

The ground remains silent, and the panic in my chest rises so violently that I nearly crush him against me. I loosen my arms at once, shaking, terrified of my own strength even now, even with the cleaned rage Aestrata gave me and the Varkhyn dead by my hands.

“Please,” I say, and this word is smaller.

Human.

Pathetic.

I do not care.

“Please. He is young. He came back to the f-forest when grief broke him,” I sob, my voice and speech getting stronger as grief takes me. “He learned your paths. He listened when the wrong light called and… did not follow. He healed me with what you s-showed him. He loves this land, even when it hurts him. He loves… me.”

My voice fails on that last word as the truth of it fills the circle anyway.

Lucas loves me.

He said it with blood in his teeth and the Varkhyn’s shadow still in the air, trying to send an apology through the bond while preparing to die alone. He had thought of me first. Even then. Even after I left him cold for a month. Even after I crowded him with fear until he told me to let him breathe. Even after the world gave him every reason to regret the bond.

I bend over him, rocking once without meaning to.

“Take me,” I beg. “Take my lantern. Take my antlers. Take… the s-shape you made. Take the guardian and leave the man he chose. Let him wake. Let him hate me for the bargain if he must. Let him live angry. Let him live without me. Let him *live*.”

The stone beneath us warms, and Lucas’s fingers twitch against my arm. I freeze, watching as his lashes flutter.

“Lucas,” I breathe, and the name comes out almost clear because terror makes miracles from ruined throats. “Lucas. Open your eyes. Please.”

He looks at me then; his beautiful moss-colored eyes are unfocused and glassy with pain, but open.

He sees the skull first, I think. The true face bent over him, blood and rain and cracked bone, antlers spread above us like black branches against the pale hollow light. Then he sees me under it, or through it, or in the only way Lucas has ever seen me since the first true seeing. Not as a monster, as a story, or as a warning. As Onyx.

His mouth curves faintly, and he smiles.

The sound that leaves me is not a roar. It is worse. A broken, sobbing thing I did not know this body could make. I press my forehead to his, careful of the skull, shaking so hard the lantern chain rattles against my antler.

“Stay,” I say. “Stay, Lucas. Stay.”

His hand moves slowly, dragging through blood and torn fabric until he finds my wrist. He cannot grip hard. His fingers only rest there, warm still, living still, and I bend lower as if that small touch could command me.

“Onyx,” he whispers.

My name in his mouth is the first sunrise.

“I am here,” I say, the words rough, uneven, forced through a throat that wants to be silent and a heart that refuses. “Here. Here. Keep eyes open.”

He blinks slowly, and I feel the effort of it through the bond. “You’re talkin’,” he murmurs, each word thin enough to break.

“Yes. For you. Please keep eyes open.”

A tiny breath that might be a laugh leaves him, then becomes a wince. “Bossy.”

“Yes,” I say immediately, because I will be anything if it makes him stay. “Bossy. Menace. Ancient asshole. K-keep eyes open and insult me.”

His smile weakens, but it stays. The bond flickers warmer for one impossible heartbeat.

Then his eyes drift.

“No,” I say, panic cracking the word. I touch his face with shaking claws drawn back as far as they will go. “No sleep. Look at me. Look—Lucas.”

He forces his gaze back. There are tears in his eyes now, and I think they hurt him. Everything hurts him. Breathing hurts, staying hurts, dying hurts. I can feel the thread pulling thinner and thinner, and all my strength means nothing against it.

“I’m tired,” he whispers.

“No.”

“Wildheart…”

I sob again, bending over him like I can cage his soul inside my ribs if I hold close enough. “No. You call me that and stay. That is rule.”

His fingers stroke weakly against my wrist. “Since when do you make me follow rules?”

“Since now.”

He breathes carefully, shallow and wet. His gaze moves over me, unfocused but tender, and it looks too much like goodbye. I make a low sound and press my hand over the wound at his side as if pressure can hold back fate.

“Don’t,” I say. “Do not l-look like leaving.”

His eyes soften. “I love you,” he says.

My heart is close to shattering. He has said it through the bond in a hundred ways. I have felt it in his hands, in his anger, in the way he refused the lantern. It was in the way he healed me, in the way he dragged me into his cabin and forgave nothing cheaply but stayed anyway.

But this is the first time he gives it to me with his human mouth while death waits close enough to eavesdrop. I shake my head because I cannot hold it. “Do not say it like leaving.”

“I love you,” he says again, a little stronger, stubborn even at the edge. “And I hate that you’re makin’ me say it while I look like roadkill.”

A sobbing laugh tears out of me. “Beautiful.”

“Liar.”

“Mate.”

His smile trembles. “Yeah.”

“Mine,” I say, but it is not a claim now. It is a plea. It is the cleaned truth Aestrata carved into me. Shelter. Recognition. Chosen closeness. The word breaks around him. “Mine. *Stay.*”

Lucas looks past me at the roots, the stone, the hollow no human has seen, and something thoughtful moves through the pain on his face. Even now. Even now, his mind reaches for meaning because Lucas has always loved the world by noticing it properly.

“I love you like I love the forest,” he whispers, each one dragged from some deep place in him. “Not easy. Not safe in the way people mean safe. It’s bigger than me… and older than me, and it doesn’t explain itself just because I’m scared. But it’s home anyway. Even when… it’s dark. Even

when it takes me apart. I still know the difference between being lost in it and belongin' to it."

I cannot breathe.

He turns his eyes back to me, and they are fading.

"You're like that," he murmurs. "You scare me sometimes. You make me mad as hell. You leave muddy footprints everywhere and bully my fridge."

"Lucas," I beg. The words are too much and not enough, because they sound like a man arranging his love neatly before he leaves it behind.

"But you're home," he says. "You're home in the only way that ever made sense after everythin' else went wrong."

I use the last of my strength to shift into the man form so I can hold him properly. I press my mouth to his forehead, again and again, not knowing where to put all the grief tearing through me. "Stay in home with me. P-please. Please, Little Ember. Keep eyes open. Do not go where I cannot follow. Please do not leave me."

His hand slips from my wrist to my chest, palm flattening weakly over the place where my heart pounds too hard. "Find me again," he whispers.

"I found you. You are here. *Stay here*."

"Onyx."

"No—!"

His eyes close.

"Open," I plead, voice shredding. "Open eyes. Lucas. Open."

They open halfway, only because he loves me enough to try.

I pour myself through the bond. Every memory. First scent on the trail. Copper hair in evening light. His hand on my skull. His laugh when I called the pillow immoral. His fury on the porch. His mouth saying *Wildheart*. His body warm in my den. His mark beneath my teeth. His stubborn, beautiful refusal to follow a false light.

Stay.

Stay.

Stay.

His breath catches as the thread frays to one shining strand.

I scream for Aestrata with all that I am. Not in words now, not in any language that can fit inside mouth or mind. I scream as guardian, as mate, as the creature she shaped from root and bone and hunger and night-sight and then cursed with enough love to kneel helpless in her hollow.

I offer everything again. My years. My form. My name. My lantern. My place in the forest. My afterlife if such a thing waits under her roots. I offer the rage she cleaned, the balance I kept, the brother I killed, the grief I will carry if she refuses. I offer even the bond, though the thought rips through me like self-murder.

Lucas exhales softly, almost peacefully. His eyes stay on mine until they cannot… then the thread breaks, and Lucas goes still in my arms.

The bond does not vanish; it collapses inward with such silence that my mind cannot understand it.

For one heartbeat, I do nothing. I wait. His chest *will* rise. His eyes *will* blink. His fingers *will* curl in my fur. He *will* call me an idiot for looking like the world ended when it only tripped.

But there is nothing. His beautiful eyes are open; he kept them open for me, but nothing lies behind them. No life. No ember.

"No," I breathe. I shake him once, too gently to move more than his hair. "Lucas."

Nothing.

"No," I say again, louder, and then I am sobbing over him, clutching his body to mine while the hollow blurs and breaks around me. "No. No. No! Give him back! Give him back! Take me, I offered! Mother, I offered!"

I hold Lucas tighter and sob without shame, because there is no pride left in a world where my mate is dead in my arms. "There is no life… no life for me without him… *Please*—!"

I can feel the Earth Mother look down at us, and the chapter of my life before her answer ends there.

OceanofPDF.com

45

Lucas

I THINK I'M DREAMING.

That's the first mercy of it, I guess. Dreaming makes more sense than dying, and my mind reaches for it with both hands because there are only so many impossible things a man can accept before he starts sorting them into categories just to keep from screaming.

Forest monster boyfriend-slash-fated mate. *Fine*.

Ancient goddess. *Fine*.

Evil brother with a lantern and a taste for human fear. Horrifying, but *fine, apparently.*

Dying in Onyx's arms after being strung up in a mineshaft by my best friend while said evil brother monologued about eating me and killing Onyx. That one feels a little harder to file under fine, so my brain goes with *dreaming.*

It feels like one at first. There's no pain, but that should be the first warning.

No tearing heat in my side. No burning in my wrists where the ropes bit through skin. No swollen throb at the back of my skull. No blood crawling up my throat, no cold stone under my knees, no darkness of the mine pressing around me. I'm standing upright, which is bold, considering the

last thing I remember is trying hard to keep my eyes open while Onyx begged me to stay.

The ground beneath my boots isn’t ground, exactly. It’s black soil and moonlight and water all at once, firm only because I expect something to hold me. Roots pulsate under the surface like slow veins.

Above me, there’s no sky, only a darkness crowded with stars too close together to be stars. They pulse like seeds buried in winter, waiting for the world to remember them. The air smells like rain on hot stone, cedar smoke, fresh-turned earth, and Labrador tea so faint it feels more like memory than scent.

“Onyx?” I call, and my voice doesn’t echo.

Nothing answers, and the panic comes back. Not a full-bodypanic. I don’t have enough body for that, or maybe I have too much. It’s deeper, colder. A soul flinch, if that isn’t the most dramatic thought I’ve ever had. I turn in a slow circle, searching for antlers, blue eyes, a skull face, anything familiar, but the dark only watches with roots and stars and patient silence.

Then the world breaks open.

Not like shattering glass. More like a book being flung wide by hands too big to care about pages.

Images rush past me, and at first, I can’t understand them. They move too fast, whole centuries breathing and dying between one blink and the next. Forests rise where there should be nothing but raw earth. Ice retreats from stone. Rivers cut deeper into valleys. Trees burst upward, die, rot, feed their own children. Storms tear ridges open. Fire blackens miles of land and green returns through ash. The speed makes me dizzy, but I don’t fall. I’m not watching from outside. I’m inside it. I’m everywhere the forest remembers.

Then I see him.

Not Onyx as I know him—not fully.

A shape stands in the first dark of the world, where trees are so young they look almost startled to exist. He is not born; he is made. The soil opens under a moon with no human name, and a body rises from root and bone and night. Slate skin forms over muscle. Dark markings crawl up arms and ribs like bark remembering the trees it came from. Antlers push through, small at first, then wider, black and wet and shining. A skull settles over a face that hasn’t learned loneliness yet. Pale eyes open in the sockets, and the forest around him inhales.

Onyx.

Except not Onyx.

The name I gave him isn’t there yet. He has another name, one I can’t hold all at once. It isn’t a word exactly. It tastes like deep stone, blue flame, frost in cedar boughs, the sound of an elk moving through fog, and the first spark hidden in rotted wood before fire knows it exists. It has too much root in it for my human tongue. Too much earth.

Still, I know him.

My chest aches with it, though I don’t know if I have a chest here. He turns his skull toward something beyond my sight, and the vision widens as another rises from the earth near him.

His brother.

Same making, same first breath, same terrible beauty before rot found him. They stand together in a forest no one has named, not touching, but aware of each other the way storms know mountains. Onyx’s attention moves outward, into the trees, the creek, the soft bodies sleeping in burrows. His brother’s attention lingers on movement. On heartbeat. On fear before fear has reason.

The images speed up.

Onyx walks.

That’s the simplest way to describe what becomes almost unbearable to watch. He walks through centuries—alone more often than not. He learns the boundaries of territory by blood, flood, and fire. He drives men with axes away from groves too old to fall for greed. He stands unseen while children gather berries at the edge of his woods, letting them go because their hunger is small and honest. He appears before hunters who kill and waste, before men who laugh while setting traps meant to maim, before those who take more than they need and call it right because they have hands clever enough to hold weapons.

He is terrifying but merciful more often than the stories would ever admit.

And he is lonely.

God, he is *so* lonely.

The visions don’t soften that for me; they make me feel it. The great hollow years. The winters with snow deep enough to bury the mouths of caves. The summers when storms split old pines, and he stands in the rain

afterward, one hand on the wounded trunk as if he can comfort what will still die.

The long nights when his lantern burns blue for humans who need warning, not lure, and they run from him with prayers and curses and stories that turn him into hunger because fear is easier to pass down than gratitude.

He watches human lives flicker.

A girl leaves flowers beside a stream after he saves her brother from wolves, though she never sees him. She grows old. Dies. Her grandchildren cut the flowers she planted for a fence.

A boy sees his lantern and turns back from a flooded crossing, later telling everyone a demon tried to trick him. The boy becomes a man. The man becomes bones under a churchyard stone.

Rangers come long before I do. Some careful, some arrogant, some kind. Onyx learns their paths. He learns badges, tools, guns, voices on radios, the stubborn human need to name everything so it feels less wild. But he never steps close enough to be known.

The loneliness isn't loud; that's what breaks me. It isn't dramatic. It doesn't roar through him every night. It settles and becomes normal. It becomes the shape of his days. He doesn't think, *I am lonely*, because what would be the point? A mountain doesn't spend all winter weeping because it has no hand to hold. It endures. Onyx endured so long he mistook endurance for peace.

Then the vision shows me the first evening he saw me.

I see myself from the trees as I get out of the truck after my first day, heart bruised all to hell, trying not to show it. I'm standing next to the truck, looking up at the sky and sighing. Damn, I look tired. Sad too, in that particular way I thought I'd been hiding from everyone, like if I kept my shoulders squared and my mouth flat enough, nobody would notice I'd come home with something in me caved in. But Onyx noticed.

The world inside him changes; there is no other way to say it. Everything in him goes toward me. Not ownership or hunger, not the way stories make wanting sound like something with claws and no heart, but recognition. A soul turning its head after ages of silence because somewhere in all that dark, a voice finally said its name without speaking.

He watches me step onto the porch, and the loneliness he has carried for centuries doesn't vanish. It cracks, and light gets in through the split.

My own chest aches so sharply I press a hand to it. I don’t know how to survive seeing myself through him. I don’t know how to survive the enormity of being wanted before I was brave, before I was kind, before I did anything but stand there exhausted and heartbroken in front of an old cabin. He looked at me at my lowest and saw a spark, not a project, a consolation prize, or a wounded thing he could own. A spark.

“Oh, Wildheart,” I murmur, and my voice doesn’t sound like mine anymore. It sounds smaller.

The visions flicker, and I see his offerings. The first bundle. His shame when I run, gathering the gifts from my steps because he thinks he has hurt me beyond repair. Him burning them beneath a lightning-split pine and keeping the white stone. Him waiting without pushing into my dreams because he believes my fear matters more than his ache.

I felt so abandoned later. I felt so stupid, hollow, and unwanted when he left, but here he is at the beginning, choosing restraint again. Here he is loving me before I understood the shape of him, making himself smaller in my life because he thinks my fear deserves more respect than his loneliness.

I want to reach through the vision and grab him. I want to shake him and tell him I’m coming back, that I’ll put the stone on the step, that I’ll touch his skull someday and call it beautiful, that he won’t always have to stand at the edge of everything he wants.

Then I see myself placing the onyx stone on the step, and I see his joy—so much joy over a rock. So much joy that I make a broken sound and press both hands over my mouth, furious and tender and wrecked in a place beyond tears.

I didn’t know. God, I didn’t know. I thought I was giving him an awkward apology, a clumsy little human offering because I didn’t know how else to say I was sorry for running, sorry for fearing him, sorry for wanting to see him again even though every sane part of me said not to.

But to him, it was proof. It was an answer. It was me reaching across the dark with one black stone and saying, *I’m still here. I’m still thinking of you. I haven’t shut the door.*

“Did I really die?” I whisper.

The question barely leaves me before it starts tearing itself apart inside my throat. Because suddenly, I don’t only want the answer for myself; I want it for him. I want to know what I did to him by dying. I want to know how much of Onyx is still kneeling somewhere with my body in his arms.

The visions slow, and darkness gathers itself in front of me. Someone appears where the roots twist thickest under the speckled yet starless sky. She is not the impossible blur I half saw when Onyx held me in the hollow. Here, she chooses a shape I can look at without coming apart.

She stands tall and barefoot on the black soil, her deep ebony skin holding the shine of rainy nights and midnight stone. Her hair falls around her in thick, living ropes of black curls threaded with tiny pale leaves and seeds. Antlers rise from her head, not bone like Onyx's, but dark branches tipped in new green. Her eyes are the color of earth after lightning splits it open—green-white and ancient—but they hold warmth too, the warmth of soil that takes the dead and still grows spring.

Aestrata.

My knees want to buckle, but I stay standing because she looks at me as if kneeling isn't what she brought me here for.

"Lucas Dawson," she says, and her voice is everything under the ground speaking at once, but somehow also a woman's voice, low and rich and close. "Little Ember, he calls you."

Hearing it from her should feel ridiculous, but it hurts instead. It punches right through me, because that name is Onyx's mouth against my skin, Onyx's mind in mine, Onyx looking at every freckle like I'm a fire he's been trusted to warm his hands near.

"Is he okay?" I ask, because apparently, I can stand in front of the Earth Mother after maybe dying and still lead with the emotionally stable option. "Onyx. Is he alive?"

Sorrow crosses that vast face, causing a faint crinkle between her brows. "He lives."

I breathe out, and I don't realize until then that I was holding anything. Then her words catch up.

He lives.

Not *he is okay.*

Not *he will survive this whole.*

Not *he is waiting for you, and everything can still be fixed.*

The darkness moves beside her and becomes another vision of Onyx kneeling in the stone circle with my body in his arms. Lifeless, pale, and bloodied. The sight of it makes me stumble back, but there is nowhere to go. Onyx shakes in his true form, cracked skull and broken antlers and blood-matted fur, his lantern rattling against the tine with every tremor.

He’s this huge, terrifying, ancient thing every wrong story in Sweet Rivers ever tried to turn into a warning… and he is falling apart around my corpse. He begs with mouth and mind and body and offers everything. His years, his form, his guardianship, his place in the forest, and his life for mine.

He was lonely before me, but this is worse. This is loneliness with memory.

My throat closes when I see he’s shifted into his human form and is holding me closer, pain forcing him through a smaller shape so he can press my body against a chest that feels more human. His black hair falls over his blood-streaked face, and when his mouth opens, the sound that comes out isn’t the silent bond-voice I know. It is broken speech, raw and impossible.

“No. No. No! Give him back! Give him back! Take me. I offered! Mother, I offered!”

I jerk toward him without thinking. My hands reach for a vision, and they pass through nothing. The sound I make is humiliating, but I reach again because instinct doesn’t give a damn about rules. Onyx is right there, begging over me, and I can’t touch him. I can’t put my hands on his face and tell him I hear him, that I’m watching, that he has to stop offering pieces of himself like they’re meaningless just because grief has told him there is nothing else left.

“He can’t,” I say, and my voice sounds useless even to me. “Don’t let him do that. Don’t take him.”

Aestrata watches the vision with me. “He offered freely.”

“I don’t care,” I snap, turning on a goddess because fear has apparently burned the last of my survival instincts clean out of me. “He doesn’t get to die for me because he feels guilty. That’s not noble. That’s him bein’ a stubborn, self-sacrificin’ asshole with antlers.”

It shouldn’t be possible for a dead man’s heart to break, but mine does. It breaks with a pain so physical I fold one arm around my middle. I have seen Onyx furious. I have seen him jealous, possessive, terrified, tender, smug, confused by basic household appliances. I have seen him on his knees before, but never like this.

“There is no life… no life for me without him… Please—!”

The plea cracks on the last word.

I can’t stand it.

“No,” I whisper, and then I’m crying, or something like crying, because tears come hot down my face even in this in-between place where my body might be dead and my soul apparently still has opinions. “No, Wildheart. Don’t you dare. Don’t you make me be the thing that ends you. Don’t you love me like that.”

Aestrata turns her gaze to me, green-white and ancient, and I hate her a little in that moment because she is calm enough to let me watch.

“He loves you as he knows how,” she says.

“Then teach him better,” I say, voice breaking.

Onyx bows over my body again, his forehead pressed to mine, his black hair spilling across my bloodless face. His lips touch my temple, my cheek, the corner of my mouth, each kiss more devastating than the last because they are goodbyes he is refusing to name. His hands keep moving over me, checking for a pulse that isn’t there, smoothing my hair, touching the mark at my shoulder.

I press both hands to my mouth again and sob into them.

“I’m here,” I choke out, uselessly. “I’m right here. Please. Please, Onyx, look at me.”

He clutches my body harder and begs the Mother who made him to unmake him if that is the price. For a long moment, Aestrata says nothing, then her mouth curves.

It’s small, but it changes the whole dark around us. “He is my most stubborn child.”

The vision fades, but the ache of it stays in my chest. “What happened to me?”

Aestrata sighs. “My corrupted son wounded what your body could not mend,” she says, and the soil beneath her feet shifts with each word. “Your thread broke before he reached my hollow. Your bond held the shape of you long enough for farewell, but not life.”

I hear the sentence. I understand it. I still cannot make it fit.

“So, I’m dead.”

“Between,” she says. “For this breath.”

I look down at myself, and I don’t know whether to laugh or scream, so I do neither. “Is this where you tell me there’s a lesson?”

Her gaze sharpens with something almost amused. “No. Lessons are for those with time to waste pretending they do not know the truth.”

“Right,” I say, because what else do you say to that? “Efficient.”

She steps closer, and the roots under her feet lift slightly, not grabbing, just reaching. “When I shaped him from root and bone, I placed mercy in a creature made for solitude. Not promise, but possibility. A soul-shape that might come if endurance did not harden fully into stone. Many of my children never found it. Some found and were refused. One rotted before such mercy could matter. He is my only Cervari child left now, and the only one who has found happiness as he did.”

My chest hurts in a way death apparently does not prevent.

“I cannot return you as you were,” Aestrata says. “Your human body ended. To send you back unchanged would be to lie to flesh, and flesh does not survive divine lies for long.”

My hands curl slowly. “But you can send me back.”

“Yes.”

There’s the dangerous little opening. Aestrata stands before me, beautiful and terrifying, and the dark around us holds its breath.

“You have a choice, Lucas Dawson,” she says. “The first is peace. You may move beyond root and blood to the heaven your heart can understand. Those you loved and lost will not be pain there. Your fear will end. Your wounds will end. The forest will be memory without hunger, beauty without threat.”

That sounds like rest, and God knows I am so tired.

Then she raises her other hand, and I see something else.

Onyx alone in the hollow after I’m gone. Not screaming anymore, but worse—empty, with his great skull bowed. My body held against him until dawn and after dawn and after the forest itself starts mourning around him. His lantern dark. His antlers lowered. The bond collapsed into a wound that will never fully close.

“Stop,” I breathe, horrified, and the image fades.

“The second choice is life with him, but not as you were. You would return changed, bound to forest and guardian law. Human still, because your heart is human and I will not steal the shape of what he loves. Cervari also, because no ordinary human body can hold the life I would give back.”

I think about the mark at my shoulder. The herbs the forest showed me. The way I knew the false lantern was wrong even when grief begged me to believe otherwise. The way the woods used to feel like home before they felt like locked doors, and then like protection I was too hurt to understand.

“What would that mean?” I ask.

“Years,” she says. “Many, if you choose them well. Not immortality—I will not condemn either of you to endless wandering after love becomes grief again. You and he will guard together. Live together. Age slowly by human counting. You will remain until both your lives are fulfilled and both are willing to lay the work down.”

The words move through me at a glacial pace, but I understand what she means.

Not forever. Not Onyx becoming human by cutting out every ancient piece of himself that made me love him in the first place. Together as guardians. Live the same, in the ways that matter, and not the same at all.

“You said his first name earlier,” I say, because my brain grabs the strangest thread when the whole damn universe is unraveling in front of me. “His real one.”

Aestrata smiles again. “You heard what you could hold. His first-name is not sound alone. It is the root I called when I made him.”

“Can you say it?”

She studies me for a long moment. “I can. You cannot keep all of it yet.”

“Yet?”

“That depends on your choice.”

I swallow, though my throat isn’t dry. “Say it anyway.”

The name enters my mind but isn’t a word. It is a forest waking under frost. A black antler against the moon. A blue flame refusing to die in rain. My mind catches one small edge of it, enough to make my eyes burn.

Vaeronyx.

Onyx is inside it; or maybe Onyx was always the part of it I could reach.

“Vaeronyx,” I whisper, and the name roughens in my human mouth, incomplete and still true enough that the roots beneath me shiver.

Aestrata’s eyes soften. “He will weep when you say that.”

“Yeah,” I manage. “He does that a lot lately.”

“He has had reason.”

My laugh comes out cracked. “So have I.”

I look toward where the image of Onyx broke apart holding me. I think of heaven, whatever shape mine would take. My mother’s kitchen maybe, before grief touched it. A river that never floods dangerously. My father’s laugh if memory is generous. Peace. No pain. No terrifying antlers in the dark. No Varkhyn. No blood. No bond so deep it can gut me from the inside.

Then I think of Onyx calling my pillow immoral.

Onyx watching me like I taught daylight a new trick.

Onyx standing at the threshold because my choice mattered more than his wanting.

Onyx's mouth forming my name for the first time.

Onyx begging me to keep my eyes open.

The decision is already made before I find the words. Maybe it was made when I refused the lantern. Maybe when I placed the black stone on the porch. Maybe on the first night I looked at a skull-faced thing in the trees and knew shock before fear.

Fear finally rises in me but not fear of the future. Fear of change, of waking wrong, of losing the plain human parts Onyx loves. My sarcasm. My temper. My stupid attachment to coffee and my truck and my fridge, which is not smug no matter what that ancient asshole says. "Will I still be me?"

Aestrata lifts her hand. She waits before touching me, and that matters. God help me, it matters so much that this goddess made of roots and old stone still pauses at the edge of my face like consent is older than language.

I nod. Her palm comes to my cheek, and warmth moves through me. Soil-warm. Sun-through-leaves warm. Blood-warm. The kind of warmth that knows death intimately and still chooses growth with both hands.

"You will be Lucas Dawson," she says. "Ranger. Brother. Uncle. Stubborn little ember with mud on his boots. You will love coffee too much and danger too personally. You will argue with my child when he holds too tight. You will laugh when he is strange. You will remain the one who knew a false light from a true one even when heartbreak made the false one tempting."

I gasp when the mark at my throat burns, then blooms. Not pain exactly, but too much sensation, spreading down through my chest, along my ribs, into my spine. Roots. Fire. Moonlight. Teeth. My heartbeat slows, then doubles, then finds a rhythm that feels both familiar and newly ancient.

I smell Labrador tea so strongly I nearly fall forward into her hand. Beneath it, I smell the hollow. The stone. Onyx's blood. My own body waiting somewhere below the waking world.

Aestrata's thumb strokes once beneath my eye. She smiles, and this time there is unmistakable tenderness in it.

“I chose well for him,” she says softly. “My last Cervari child. My lonely one. He needed a mate who would not worship his teeth and forget his heart, nor fear his teeth and refuse his heart. He needed someone brave enough to stay and human enough to argue.”

“That sounds like you gave him a problem on purpose,” I whisper, though my voice shakes.

“Love often looks like that at first.”

“Great. Very comfortin’.”

Her smile deepens. “You are afraid.”

I nod again. “Yeah.”

“Good. Fear keeps the foolish from mistaking new power for wisdom.”

The warmth becomes light. It pours through me until my bones feel transparent, until every memory I have of myself lifts and settles again in a new order. I see my cabin, my porch, the onyx stone striking a tree and breaking grief open. I see Onyx kneeling in the hollow, holding what’s left of me, sobbing against my hair. I feel the bond ahead, collapsed but not gone, waiting like a tunnel full of buried fire.

Aestrata lowers her hand from my face to my shoulder, over the mark Onyx gave me. “Go back, Lucas Dawson,” she says.

The ground falls away, and for one terrible second, there is nothing but darkness, rushing root, and a sound like antlers striking stone. Then the bond flares so violently I understand fire from the inside.

I reach for it—or him.

Vaeronyx.

The name leaves me without sound… and Aestrata sends me back.

OceanofPDF.com

46

Onyx

LUCAS IS DEAD IN my arms, and the world does not end.

That is the cruelty of it. The roots still move in slow breaths around the stone circle. The deepwood still watches. Somewhere far beyond this hollow, rain still touches leaves, rivers still worry stone thinner, and animals still turn their faces into sleep. The forest does not split open and swallow the sky. The mountain does not crumble into grief because one human heart has stopped beneath my hand.

I know this because I can feel it all: the broad, living body of the land continuing under me, mercilessly whole, while mine has become a hollow place with Lucas-shaped silence at its center.

He is still warm. That lie keeps me breathing for longer than I should. His body holds warmth because bodies do, because death does not take everything in the first instant, because cruelty understands timing. My hand rests over the wound at his side, useless now, blood drying under my claws.

His head is tucked against my chest, copper hair matted with rain and blood. It is as if he only sleeps, has merely exhausted himself with too much stubbornness and will wake furious at me for looking tragic before breakfast.

The bond is not gone in a clean way; it is collapsed inward—a ruined den where warmth lived. I keep waiting for one flicker, one spark, one annoyed little pulse because he hears me thinking something dramatic and cannot resist correcting me.

Nothing answers.

The tears have dried on my face, leaving stiff trails down my cheeks. I did not know tears could dry and still keep falling somewhere inside. I thought grief would move like storm or hunger, loud enough that the body knew what to do with it. Instead, it settles in my chest and grows heavier. The sobs leave me, and what remains is worse, a silence so complete that even rage cannot find a root.

My brother is dead. The Varkhyn is gone. The false lantern has cracked. The old threat that hunted Lucas is returned to earth and judgment. Balance has closed its teeth at last.

Balance can go rot.

I bend lower over Lucas and breathe him in because there is still scent, and scent is memory before thought can ruin it. Pine, river water, smoke, old leather, salt, blood. Beneath it all is the bright, living note that made me stop on a trail months ago and understand that every year before him had only been waiting in disguise.

That brightness is dim now, fading at the edges, but I chase it like a starving thing. I breathe until my chest hurts. I breathe until my claws curl into the soil. I breathe until memory comes whether I want it or not.

Lucas on his porch the first evening, tired and heartbroken, looking into the trees because some part of him felt me watching, though he did not know my name. Stepping around the bundle I left instead of kicking it away, running from my first face, then placing a black stone on his step.

Meeting in the dream, naming me Onyx, giving a human sound to a thing too old for his mouth and making me want to kneel before him for it. Touching my skull for the first time, his hand careful, his fear honest but not cruel, his thoughts louder than he believed because *beautiful* spilled through him before shame could catch it.

I rock once, though there is no comfort in motion, and the memories do not stop. My last memory of him burns, and no matter how I push it away, it comes clearly.

Lucas furious in his cabin, telling me to let him breathe because love held too tight becomes another kind of cage. Lucas in the mine, bound and

bleeding, still refusing to give my brother the satisfaction of breaking. Lucas dying in my arms and telling me he loved me like the forest, not easy, not safe in the way humans mean safe, but home anyway.

Home.

The word has no place to live now. No home.

His cabin will be empty. The annoying den will hold his mug beside the sink, his boots by the door, and the shirt he threw over a chair and forgot because he had a talent for making disorder look inhabited. The cold box will hum smugly for no one. The squirrel in the roof will commit crimes unchallenged because Lucas is not there to forbid interrogation.

Parker is dead, Jonah will learn his rescue call was used as bait, and Mel will lose her brother after already watching her son come back from horror with half his youth missing. Tom will stand in the ranger station and stare at the forest like an old enemy finally took the one man he hoped might understand it.

Human grief will spread in circles from this hollow, and I will have caused part of it by leaving, by hiding truth, by believing I could carry danger alone and keep Lucas outside its teeth.

I press my mouth to Lucas's hair. "I am sorry," I say aloud, because I can speak now and hate the gift because it came too late to keep him listening. My voice is rough, broken from begging, but the hollow receives it. "I am sorry, Little Ember. I learned too slowly. I held too tight. I left too long. I found you too late."

The stone circle stays silent because Aestrata has stepped back, or perhaps she still stands beyond sight, watching with the patience of roots and gods. I cannot lift my head to look.

I asked, I offered, I gave her everything I knew how to give, and still Lucas lies quiet against me. There is nothing left to ask with, nothing left to trade. The bargain was refused, or accepted in some form I do not understand: either way, his chest does not rise.

"Take me anyway," I whisper, closing my eyes. "There is nothing for me now."

Desolation is not darkness—I know darkness. Darkness has depth, scent, shelter, living things moving within it. Desolation is a field after fire when even ash has gone cold. It is the deep winter hollow where no animal dens because some old wrongness has poisoned the ground. It is a lantern

without flame, an antler without skull, a guardian without territory, because territory means nothing if the one I guarded is gone.

I feel myself stepping into it, not with feet, but with whatever remains of will. The forest can keep my body for a time. It can place me at borders. It can move my limbs when danger comes. Perhaps I will still kill what harms the land. Perhaps I will still frighten fools away from floodwater and fire. But Onyx, the name Lucas gave me, is already kneeling here, dead beside him.

A hand touches the side of my face, and for one impossible moment, I do not understand.

The touch is light. Weak. Barely pressure at all, fingertips brushing near my jaw where Lucas always liked to rest his hand. My mind rejects it. Grief makes ghosts from wanting. The body remembers what it cannot have and sends lies through nerves as mercy.

I do not move because if I move and the hand is not there, if I break this last cruelty open and find only air, I will become something the forest may have to bury beside my brother.

The fingers stroke again.

Not air; warmth. A thread in the bond sparks.

Tiny.

Golden.

Alive.

I open my eyes and see Lucas looking up at me.

His face is pale and streaked with blood, his lips parted around a breath so shallow it would not stir dust, but his eyes are open. Moss-colored. Tired. Full of pain, wonder, and a strange soft amusement that belongs to him so completely that the hollow tilts beneath me.

His hand rests against my jaw, trembling with the effort of staying there. “Hi,” he whispers.

The word breaks reality.

I make no sound at first. I cannot. My body forgets every function except staring. The bond, once ruined and collapsed, flares like dawn forcing itself through roots after the longest winter ever suffered.

It hurts. It is glory. It tears through the hollow center in me and fills it so violently that I nearly drop him, then clutch him closer with a terrified care that shakes every limb. His heart beats beneath my hand—slow, strange, stronger than before, not the same rhythm, but there.

Living. *Living!*

"Lucas," I breathe, and his name comes out clearer than it ever has, whole and shaking. "Lucas."

His smile flickers. "Yeah. That's me, Wildheart."

I start to sob.

It is not dignified or controlled. It tears out of me as if the roots beneath the circle have dragged grief up by the throat and forced it through my mouth. I fold over him, shaking, holding his body against mine while he makes a faint protesting sound because I am crushing him, and I immediately loosen my arms with a frantic apology.

Then I am on my knees more fully, bowing over him, bowing to the stone, bowing to the roots, to the air where Aestrata stood, to the whole merciless, miraculous earth.

"Thank you," I say, and the words come again and again, broken and rough. "Thank you. Mother, thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Lucas's fingers move weakly on my jaw. "You're shakin', baby."

I laugh through a sob, and the sound is so wrecked it barely resembles laughter. "You were dead."

"Yeah," he murmurs, blinking slowly. "Didn't love that."

A broken, helpless sound leaves me. I press my forehead carefully to his, and warmth meets me. His living warmth. The mark at his shoulder glows under blood, not with visible light at first, but through the bond—a deep ember-gold threaded now with green-white rootfire. I can feel it in him. Not only the bond returning, but something else. Change woven through flesh that was human and is still Lucas, but no longer only what he was.

My body stills enough for him to notice. He searches my face, then whatever expression he has learned to read beneath it. "You feel it."

Yes, I send first, then force the word through my mouth because I need him to hear me in every way I have. "Yes."

He breathes in carefully, wincing a little, though the wound at his side is no longer bleeding, and the torn fabric and the blood remain. Beneath it, when my shaking hand moves close, I see the skin knitting with faint lines like pale bark beneath freckles. Not healed fully, not untouched, but alive by some law older than death. His wrists bear rope marks, raw and dark, but small green-gold threads move under the skin there too, closing what would have scarred badly.

“What happened?” I ask, and the question comes out incomplete because too many questions are inside it.

How are you living? Where did she take you? What did she ask? What did she change? Did it hurt? Are you still mine? Are you still yours? Will you forgive the world for sending you back different? Will you forgive me for making the choice necessary at all?

Lucas swallows, and I feel the motion through the hand I still keep near his throat without quite touching the mark. “I think I was between,” he says, voice rough and slow. “Not alive or fully gone. I thought I was dreaming at first, because apparently dying is confusing as hell, which feels rude.”

Tears blur my sight again.

He is making jokes.

He is alive enough to make jokes.

I nearly thank Aestrata again, but Lucas’s hand pats my cheek, weak and bossy. “Look at me, Wildheart.”

I obey at once.

His smile softens at that, though his eyes shine with pain and exhaustion. “I saw things. Your things, I think. The past, fast as lightnin’ but slower somehow. I saw when she made you.”

Lucas’s gaze drifts for a moment, not away from me, but inward toward something immense. “I saw you rise out of the earth—you and him. I saw the forest before people named it. I saw how long you walked alone.” His voice thins, and his fingers curl faintly against my jaw as emotion moves through him, deep and aching and not pity, never pity. “God, Onyx. You were so lonely.”

I want to turn from that, but I cannot, because Lucas holds my face with barely enough strength to lift his hand, and still I cannot deny him anything.

“I did not know another way,” I say, each word hard-won.

“I know.” His eyes come back to mine. “That made it worse.”

The bond carries what his body cannot. Images returning through him in softer flashes. My offerings. My den. My long winters. His own face seen through my first morning wonder. The black stone on the porch. My joy, so immense, over that simple apology that embarrassment warms him even here, even half-reborn in the old hollow.

“She showed me while you were holdin’ me,” he says, and I close my eyes. Lucas’s thumb strokes the bone beneath it. “I saw you breakin’ apart, Wildheart, and it nearly killed me again.”

“I offered everything I was.” The words scrape out. “She should have taken me.”

“No.” His voice gains a thread of strength there, stubborn enough that relief nearly drops me again. “No, she shouldn’t have. I yelled at her about that, actually. Might’ve called you a stubborn, self-sacrificin’ asshole with antlers.”

For one second, joy is too sharp to bear. Then I laugh, truly laugh, though it breaks apart at the edges. “To Aestrata? You yelled at the Earth Mother?”

“Yeah. In my defense, I was dead.”

I lower my head carefully until it rests against his temple, overcome with joy. The image of Lucas scolding the Earth Mother on my behalf settles into me beside all the sacred things I have ever known.

“She gave me a choice,” he says after a moment. “I could move on. Heaven, I guess. Peace. No pain. No more ropes or mines or evil Death-deer with boundary issues.”

A growl slips out of me before I can stop it. His mouth twitches. “Yeah, I wasn’t a fan either.”

“What choice?” I ask, because I know and do not know, because the change in him hums beneath my hand and the fear of it is not rejection but awe.

“To be with you and stay by your side,” he says, “as guardians.”

The word enters me like root through stone.

Guardians.

I stare at him, unable to hold the meaning. Lucas, who was human. Lucas, who loved coffee, bad jokes, ranger forms, and his ridiculous cold box. Lucas, who had already given so much to the forest by loving it honestly. Lucas, who died because my brother wanted to spoil what chose me. Lucas, now breathing in Aestrata’s hollow with rootfire under his skin.

“She said not immortal,” he continues, watching me carefully. “Years, though. A lot of them, maybe. Until both of us decide we’re fulfilled. Her wording, not mine. Very goddessy. But together… still me. Also… not only me, I guess.”

Fear moves through the bond then—his this time—small and deeply human beneath all the new power. Fear that he has lost something, and I will look at him and grieve the change more than I rejoice the life. Fear that I wanted Lucas as he was and may not know how to want what Aestrata returned.

I make a sound low in my chest and gather him closer, slow enough not to hurt him but firm enough that he cannot mistake it.

“Lucas Dawson,” I say, forcing every syllable clear because he deserves no broken half-speech now. “Ranger. Mate. Little Ember. Still stubborn. Still mouthy. Still badly dressed.”

A shaky laugh leaves him, and tears spill from the corners of his eyes. “You absolute menace.”

“Still mine by forest law and choice,” I continue, and my voice trembles there. “Still yours before mine. Still the one who stayed. Still the one who came back.”

His face crumples, and he turns it into the side of my neck, not caring that I am covered in blood. I hold him while he cries, and the bond fills with both of us—no longer collapsed, no longer cleanly what it was. There are roots in it now. Green-white light threaded through gold. The forest breathes along the edges, not intruding, not taking, but recognizing.

“What else did she say?” I ask after his sobs ease, because I can feel one more truth tucked inside him.

He pulls back just enough to look at me. “She told me your first-name. Well, I received part of it.”

My heart shudders on a beat because no human can hold that name, not fully. Lucas watches me with those tired green eyes, and something in them has changed, only a little. A faint depth in the pupil. A glimmer when the hollow light catches. Human still; Lucas still. But old root has touched him, and old root remembers what human minds forget.

“Vaeronyx.”

My own name strikes through me like lightning entering a tree and making it live instead of burn.

I bow over him before I can stop myself, forehead to his chest, shaking again. No one living has spoken that name to me since the Mother—no one could. My brother spat pieces of it once in mockery and broke them into ugliness.

Lucas says it with awe, with love, with a human mouth remade just enough by forest to carry the first edge of what I was before solitude, before stories, before Onyx.

“You’re cryin’ again,” Lucas whispers, though he sounds close to it himself.

“Yes,” I say into him. “You keep doing impossible things.”

His hand drifts into my hair, fingers weak but present. “You showed up in my life as a skull-faced forest guardian with a lantern. You don’t get to complain about impossible.”

I laugh softly and lift my head. “Aestrata chose well.”

His expression changes, tender and wry. “She said that too.”

“She did?”

“Yeah.” His thumb brushes the edge of my jaw again. “She said she chose well for you. Her only Cervari child left.”

The grief of that moves through me slowly. My brother dead by my hand. My kind gone. The old loneliness ending not because the past hurts less, but because Lucas returned changed and living in my arms. I look around the hollow, at the roots, the stone, the place no human foot has touched before him, and understand that Aestrata did not only give him back to me. She made a new law where the old one had ended.

My mate breathes.

My mate chooses.

My mate will guard beside me.

I lower my mouth to his hair, then to his brow, then to the corner of his eye. “Thank you,” I whisper, not to Aestrata now.

Lucas closes his eyes briefly. “For what?”

“For choosing me when peace was offered.”

He is quiet for a moment, and when he opens his eyes again, the green is wet and steady.

“Peace sounded nice,” he admits, because Lucas is too honest to make love prettier than truth. “I was tired—I’m still tired. But peace without you felt like walkin’ out of the forest before sunrise and never lookin’ back. I couldn’t do it.”

The bond warms until it hurts. “I love you,” I say aloud.

His breath catches, and his face softens enough to make every wound in me irrelevant. “Yeah,” he whispers. “I love you too, Wildheart.”

I hold him there while the hollow breathes around us. His life grows stronger by slow degrees, each heartbeat steadier, each breath deeper. He is still wounded, still weak, still newly remade in ways neither of us understands, and I know there will be fear after this. Anger too, perhaps. Questions, changes, grief for the ordinary human life that ended in the mine even though Lucas did not.

We will return to his family, his station, his town full of missing persons walls and explanations no one will believe. We will face all of it because he chose life, and life is never one miracle alone.

It is aftermath. It is duty. It is coffee and bloodstains and arguments about doors. It is learning how not to hold too tight. It is letting him breathe while staying near enough that he knows I am there.

Lucas shifts in my arms and winces. Every thought in me snaps to him. “Pain?”

“Some,” he says, and then, because he is himself, he adds, “Dyin’ and getting forest-rebooted isn’t as restful as advertised.”

“I will complain to Aestrata.”

He gives me a weak, crooked smile. “She ignores complaints, remember?”

“Not yours.”

That makes him laugh, though the sound hurts him and makes me growl in worry until he pats my chest.

“I’m okay,” he says, then seems to consider honesty and sighs. “No, that’s a lie. I’m not okay, but I’m here.”

“Here,” I repeat, because the word is sacred now.

He looks past me toward the path out of the deepwood. The hollow’s green-white light touches his face, catching on freckles, blood, and the faint new markings beginning to branch from the bite at his throat. His gaze turns tired in a way that does not frighten me now because the bond holds steady beneath it.

“Onyx,” he says quietly.

“Yes, Little Ember.”

“Take me home.” I lower my head closer. His hand presses against my chest, over the heartbeat he chose. “To our den.”

The words move through me with such force that for a moment I cannot answer. Our den. Ours, because he returned from death with forest in his blood and still wants the place where my scent and his have learned the same walls.

I gather him carefully, one arm beneath his knees and the other behind his back, lifting him against my chest as if he is made of ember and root and every fragile, fierce thing the earth has ever asked me to protect. He rests his head below my jaw, exhausted but alive, and the bond curls warm around us as the deepwood begins to open its path.

“Yes, Little Ember,” I tell him, voice rough but whole.
I step out of Aestrata’s stone circle, carrying my mate toward home.

OceanofPDF.com

47

Lucas

THE FIRST THING I notice is that the dark is not dark anymore.

That sounds wrong, even inside my own head, because I've known forests at night for most of my life. I've walked them with a headlamp and without one, with a radio clipped to my shoulder, with rain slipping down the back of my collar, with moonlight cutting everything into silver and black.

I've loved them in the way a human man loves something larger than him, which means I have always loved them with one hand on my ignorance. I knew the trails. I knew the names of trees, the habits of deer, and the smell of weather coming. I knew how to read broken fern, the heel of a boot in mud, the bent grass where someone left the path because they were scared, drunk, or stupidly confident. I knew enough to think I knew something.

Now Onyx carries me out of Aestrata's hollow, and the forest opens around us like a living thing that has been waiting for me to learn its language.

Not words exactly. More like sensation with roots under it.

The trees are not just trees anymore. They're pressure, memory, thirst, age, patience. Each trunk holds a different kind of silence. Cedar hums low

and resin-rich, stubborn and clean, old grief braided into strength. Pine rises sharper, needled and bright, all green breath and watchful height. The oaks farther off feel heavier, slower, their roots sunk deep enough to remember storms that would have terrified me if I had stood under them as a man and nothing more.

Moss is not only softness on stone. The creek beyond the hollow is not just water.

And I feel all of it.

Not as thoughts shoved into my skull, not as the bond with Onyx, but as a second awareness settling under my skin. A root-sense and body-sense. Something in me touches the ground even though I am in Onyx's arms, pressed against his chest, too exhausted to stand, and the forest touches back.

I should be terrified, but I'm too awed to remember fear properly.

My cheek rests against the fur at Onyx's throat, and every breath fills me with Labrador tea, rain, blood, old stone, and him. Not him as one scent anymore. That's the next impossible thing. Before, Onyx smelled like the forest had chosen one fragrance and written his name with it.

Now I can smell the notes. I can smell where deep earth lives under his skin, the blue flame resting dark and coiled in his lantern, the old root of Aestrata's making beneath the blood and torn fur, the ancientness of him not as an idea but as a real thing pressing against the world with every step he takes.

His heartbeat is huge beneath my hand. It's slow, powerful, not human, and definitely not strange to me now. Mine answers differently than it used to.

That almost makes me lift my head, but I'm too weak, and Onyx feels the tiny flinch through the bond before I can decide whether to hide it. His arms tighten very carefully around me, as if he is terrified of breaking what death just returned.

"Pain?" he asks aloud.

The word comes out rough and low from his throat, even with the skull fused over his face, still not smooth, still shaped with effort, but clearer than before. It hits me all the way down. Onyx speaking with his mouth still feels like watching an eclipse happen in my kitchen—impossible and holy and weird enough that some tired, half-panicked part of me wants to ask whether this comes with side effects.

“Not exactly,” I say, and my voice sounds wrecked, softer than I meant it to. “Everything’s just… loud.”

He slows at once. The motion is so immediate, so sweetly panicked, that I slide my fingers weakly through the soft fur at his chest. “Not bad loud,” I add, because he is already gearing up to blame himself, Aestrata, the moon, and maybe the fridge somehow. “Just big.”

Onyx lowers his head toward me. “You feel forest,” he says, and it isn’t a question.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “I think so.”

His emotion moves through the bond, careful and enormous. Wonder first. Then grief. Then fear under both, because he is already imagining every way this might overwhelm me, every way the gift might feel like theft once shock fades.

I turn my face enough to press my mouth to his collarbone. It’s barely a kiss, more breath than pressure. He stills anyway, and the forest stills with him.

That is when I understand something. Not fully. I don’t know if I ever could fully understand, not even now, not even with this new root-bright thing waking inside me. But enough.

Onyx is not from the forest in the way a person is from a hometown, not from it the way I’m from Sweet Rivers and can point to a hospital, a street, a mother’s house, a school gym, and say *there, there, there, that made pieces of me.*

Onyx *is* the forest.

Not every tree, creek, stone, or mossy hollow. But he is its teeth, warning, memory given body, and restraint when rage would be easier. Its shadow watching from beyond the firelight, terrible enough to scare cruelty and tender enough to carry one dying human into the only place no human should have been able to go.

I thought he was beautiful before. God, I was so wrong.

Before, I saw shape. Skull, antlers, slate skin, bark-dark markings, lantern flame, long claws, the impossible line of him under moonlight. I saw a nightmare and wanted to touch it. I saw the kind of monster stories get wrong because humans always decide fear is more important than truth. I saw my mate and called him beautiful because he was.

Now I can feel the forest through him. The beauty is not on him—it *moves* through him.

Every step he takes sends a tremor of recognition through roots under the soil. Every breath pulls the damp night into his chest and gives back something older. The lantern hooked to his antler isn't burning right now, but I can feel the blue flame sleeping there.

When his claws touch earth, the ground knows him. When his shadow passes over fern, the fern bends, not in fear but in acknowledgment. Even wounded, even exhausted, even carrying me like I am the only fragile thing left in the world, he is magnificent in a way that makes my throat ache.

My hand lifts without permission and rests against the side of his skull, and he comes to a complete stop. I feel his attention turn inward toward me, startled and soft, as if that touch still has the power to surprise him after everything.

“Lucas?” he asks.

His voice. My name. I will never get used to it, and I hope I never do.

“You’re beautiful,” I say, and the words come out before embarrassment can organize itself. Maybe death burned some of that out of me. Maybe Aestrata dug around in my dignity while she was rearranging my biology. Or maybe I’m simply too tired to pretend the truth needs permission. “I know I’ve said that before, but I didn’t know what I was lookin’ at. Not all the way.”

Through the bond, I feel disbelief rise in him. Not insulted disbelief or confusion. It feels older and sadder. A creature made to endure terror still unable, after all this, to believe I can look at his first shape and not flinch.

Mate sees through new eyes, he sends, because the thought comes easier than speech, threaded with wariness. ***New eyes may be confused.***

I huff a laugh against him, and it hurts my ribs enough that I wince. Onyx growls immediately, all concern, and I rub my thumb against his skull in apology.

“New eyes are seein’ a lot, yeah,” I say. “But they’re not confused about you.”

He starts walking again, the path out of the deepwood revealing itself in pieces. I know, somehow, that if I were alone, I still couldn’t walk it freely, not yet. Maybe not ever without him.

Aestrata allowed me in with Onyx, and Onyx carries me out. The old place doesn’t belong to me simply because I survived its touch. That feels right, not cruel. The forest isn’t a house where every door opens because I

moved in. It’s a living country with laws older than welcome mats. Still, the trees no longer feel like strangers.

One root lifts slightly from the earth as Onyx approaches, making room for his foot.

I stare at it. “Did that root just move out of your way?”

“Yes.”

“Does it do that often?”

“When respectful.”

I turn my face against his chest to hide a smile. “You’re tellin’ me even roots have better manners than my fridge.”

“The cold box has no manners.”

“It’s an appliance.”

“Then it should learn from roots.”

I laugh, then groan because laughing pulls at places that are still knitting themselves back together with divine-forest nonsense. Onyx makes a low, alarmed sound and pauses again, but I clutch at him before he can spiral into worry.

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” I say, then sigh because the bond immediately gives me away. “Fine, I am extremely not okay, but I’m alive, and the laugh was worth it.”

“Worth pain?” he asks, incredulous and offended.

“Sometimes.”

His answering feeling is so deeply unimpressed that I almost laugh again and decide I enjoy living too much to risk it.

By the time we leave the oldest part of the deepwood, dawn has started touching the higher branches. Light filters through mist in long, pale streams, and the whole forest changes under it.

I see dew on spiderwebs as tiny chains of fire. I hear beetles moving under bark. I smell a fox half a mile away, a rabbit farther still, the mineral bite of stone warming slowly after night. My own blood smells wrong and familiar at once. Human, but changing. Under it is something green-white and root-bright, not replacing me so much as moving into rooms I didn’t know my body had.

I should ask what I look like, but I’m not ready for that answer. His thumb strokes once over my hip where he holds me, careful around wounds already sealing. He doesn’t force comfort into the bond. He simply stays

there, present and warm, letting me have my silence without treating it like distance.

That alone nearly undoes me.

When his den finally appears, it doesn’t hide. The slope opens where it should. Ferns bow away from the stone mouth. Cedar hangs over the entrance, wet, dark, and fragrant.

I remember the weeks I searched for this place and found nothing but wrong turns and humiliation. I remember thinking the forest had rejected me, or that Onyx had asked it to erase him from me. Now I feel the reason in the shape of the ground. Protection layered over grief. Doors closed because something wearing his scent had waited for me to choose the wrong one.

“I was so mad at it,” I whisper.

Onyx doesn’t ask what I mean. He looks toward the den entrance, then lowers his skull enough that the edge brushes my hair. “Forest knew. Forest accepted.”

“Generous of it.”

“Forest has known anger longer than humans.”

He ducks into the den carefully, turning his antlers with practiced ease even while carrying me. The first chamber smells like him, like cedar, moss, dried herbs, old stone, and the faint lingering trace of every night I slept here before everything went wrong. I feel the den recognize us as we enter; that should be impossible. Instead, warmth moves under the packed earth and stone as if the place exhales.

Home.

My eyes burn.

Onyx carries me to the nest and lowers me with such care that I want to scold him for acting like I’m made of wet paper, but the words don’t come. The furs and moss take my weight, soft and familiar, and I close my eyes for one second because the relief is too much. His arms leave me slowly and reluctantly. I feel him hovering, a storm of worry and exhaustion and love.

The air changes, and I open my eyes.

Onyx stands a few feet away, still in true form, his body filling the den with shadow and dawnlight. He looks at me for a long moment, as if confirming I am there, breathing, awake, not another cruel image sent by his brother. Then he lets the shift take him.

I’ve seen him shift before, but not with these eyes.

Bone folds like moonlight sliding under water. The skull softens and sinks, not disappearing but becoming the architecture beneath his human face. Antlers draw inward with a deep ache that echoes faintly through the bond, and I feel how much it costs him to tuck that grandeur beneath skin.

Slate fades into pale flesh, though the markings remain, curling over his chest, ribs, arms, throat, all the way down in lines that now seem less like tattoos and more like old tree rings translated into a body.

Fur melts back, claws become long fingers, and black hair spills over his shoulders as he stands barefoot in the den, bruised, bloodied, impossibly tall, and breathtaking in a completely different language.

I can’t help but stare.

Even worn thin by grief and battle, even with healing wounds crossing his chest and one shoulder badly wrapped in moss, his mouth curves faintly. It isn’t smug—he’s too tired for full smugness, which is probably good because I’m too newly alive to survive it.

“You look,” he says aloud, voice rough but steadier than before.

“I have eyes,” I murmur.

“You said this before.”

“I’ll probably say it again.”

He comes down into the nest beside me, moving slowly because his body hurts and mine does too. The moment he settles within reach, I lean toward him. He catches me carefully, arranging us until I’m against his chest and he’s half sitting, half lying back against the stone and furs.

Human warmth surrounds me. Human arms, mostly. But the forest is still in him, still under every breath, and now I can feel it better. He is not less Onyx like this. He is compressed Onyx. Doorway-friendly Onyx. Onyx folded into a shape that can fit beside me in bed and kiss me without a skull getting in the way, though I have made my feelings about the skull pretty clear.

For a long time, we just hold each other.

There is no hurry, which is strange, considering death and rebirth and terror and all the things waiting outside this den. But the stillness is not empty. It is full to the point of overflowing. His hand rests between my shoulder blades. Mine lies over his heart. The bond curls between us, changed and alive, gold threaded with green-white, root and ember, his

pulse and mine finding each other in a rhythm that is almost frightening in its rightness.

I press my ear to his chest, and his breath catches.

His arms tighten with restraint, not possession. He's still learning that, and I feel him learning it even now. Holding, not trapping. Guarding, not caging. Keeping close without stealing air.

"I felt you die," he says, and the words are low. "I do not know how to stop seeing it."

I lift my head, even though the movement pulls pain through my side, and meet his eyes. They are bright blue in human form, too bright, the lantern's flame looking out of a man's face. I touch his cheek with fingers that still look like mine except for the faint new lines under the skin near my wrist, pale and branching, almost invisible unless the dawn catches them.

"Then don't stop yet," I say.

His brows pull together. "Lucas—"

"I'm not saying live there forever," I tell him, because he needs the whole thought or he'll turn it into another weapon against himself. "But don't punish yourself because it's still there. It happened, and you saw it as it happened. Maybe we let it be awful for a while instead of pretendin' love can tidy it up by breakfast."

He closes his eyes, and his face turns into my palm. "I'm very tired of awful," he says.

That almost breaks me because it's so simple and honest. Not ancient, not guardian, not balance with teeth. Just him; just my Onyx, exhausted.

"I know," I whisper. "Me too."

He opens his eyes again. "You came back."

"Yeah."

"You chose."

"Yeah."

"You will stay?"

I give him a look. "You askin', or is this one of those statements where you pretend you're not terrified?"

His mouth shifts. "Both."

God, I love him.

The thought moves through me cleanly this time. No deathbed edge or panic, or goddess standing in front of me offering peace. Just truth in a den

full of cedar and dawn and the man-shaped forest holding me like I am both miracle and problem, which, to be fair, might be accurate.

“I’ll stay,” I say. “Not because I’m trapped here, or because Aestrata rewired my life and handed me a dramatic new job title. I’ll stay because I chose you. I will always choose you, Onyx.”

His breath shudders.

“And because this is home,” I add softly, looking around the den. The walls, the shelves of herbs, the old drawings, the furs, the nest, the place where I first woke after the bond sealed and thought I’d stumbled into the private heart of a creature no one had ever really known. “Our den, right?”

“Our den,” he says.

His hand moves up my back, slow and careful, and I feel every inch of it differently now. My skin seems to wake ahead of his touch with a deep awareness that makes my breath catch. The bond answers, low and golden green, and Onyx goes still when my scent changes.

Of course he notices. He always notices.

My face warms before he says a damn thing, which is annoying because he hasn’t even had time to be smug.

“Little Ember,” he murmurs, and the name is rougher when spoken, less smooth than through the bond, but it lands even harder.

“Don’t,” I warn weakly.

“I have said nothing.”

“You’re thinkin’ loudly.”

His eyes brighten. “Now you complain?”

I huff, but there’s no heat in it. My hand is still on his chest. His heart is still beating under my palm. I slide my fingers slightly, following one of the dark markings down toward his ribs, and he watches the movement like it is dangerous.

Everything feels fragile and enormous at once. I died and came back changed, then he carried me home. We should probably be discussing practical concerns, like what the hell I’m going to tell my family, whether my eyes glow now, and how I’m supposed to handle a ranger shift if the forest keeps trying to communicate meaningful emotions through moss.

Instead, Onyx’s thumb brushes the side of my throat, just above the mark, and the want that moves through me is quiet at first… then not so quiet.

His nostrils flare.

I swallow. “I’m alive.”

“Yes,” he says, voice thick.

“I need to feel that.”

His hand stills, and the seriousness in his face deepens, desire pulled sharply under concern. “Pain?”

“Some,” I admit. “Not there. Not like that. But I’m not askin’ you to do anythin’ that hurts me.”

“Then what?”

The question is careful, but our bond isn’t. It warms and opens, and I know he can feel what I mean before I say it. Kissing. Touching. Skin. The slow return to my body after leaving it behind. Not rushing past what happened, not trying to bury terror under want, but letting want prove something too. That we’re both here, and my body belongs to me again—changed or not—and I can choose what happens inside it.

I lean closer, and his gaze drops to my mouth. “I want you to kiss me,” I say.

The breath leaves him like I have touched a wound, only this one heals. He lifts his hand to my face and stops there, waiting. Still asking, even after everything. Especially after everything. I cover his fingers with mine and press his palm against my cheek.

“Kiss me, Wildheart.”

He kisses me so softly at first, it almost hurts more than hunger would have. His mouth meets mine with reverence, with fear, with a restraint that trembles because the memory of my lifeless body is still too close behind his eyes.

I kiss him back until he believes me and his shoulders lower. Until the bond warms enough that the den seems to breathe around us. Until my hand slips into his hair and his quiet sound breaks against my mouth, half relief, half need.

The second kiss is deeper. His lips part mine, and the taste of him spreads through me, rain and blood and Labrador tea and life. My new senses catch everything at once: the heat of his skin under my palm, the salt at the corner of his mouth, the faint mineral trace of Aestrata’s hollow still clinging to both of us, the way his breath stutters when I press closer.

I shift into his lap slowly, awkwardly, careful of my side and his wounds, and his hands go to my hips at once to help, to steady, never to force. The position makes the bond flare. His eyes open against mine, startled by my choice even now.

I smile because I can feel his wonder. I can feel the forest in him, the man in the forest, and the mate who still doesn’t understand that all his shapes are beautiful to me.

“Lucas,” he whispers.

I rest my forehead against his, breathing him in with lungs that died and came back changed enough to know the truth better than before.

“Yeah,” I whisper back. “I’m here.”

OceanofPDF.com

48

Onyx

“I’M HERE,” HE WHISPERS again, because he felt me break the first time he said it. He knows I need the repetition, even if needing it leaves me ashamed. “I’m here, Wildheart.”

Wildheart.

He named a part of me I did not know had survived all those centuries. He reached into the thing humans called *monster, warning, death in the trees, Lantern Stalker,* and found heart there. Not a gentle heart or a safe one. A wild one. Teeth and roots and old law, but heart still. His hand at the side of my face taught me that before Aestrata ever put a voice in my throat.

…then I watched that hand fall from my wrist in the stone circle.

My breath breaks.

Lucas feels it through the bond before the sound leaves me. His hands come up, one to my cheek, the other to the back of my neck, fingers sliding into my hair as if he can anchor me there. I am in human form, folded small enough to hold him without bone and skull between us, but the true body presses beneath this one. Antlers ache under skin. The skull remembers his cooling brow. The bond remembers the thread snapping.

His mouth brushes mine. “Hey,” he murmurs. “Look at me.”

I do, and it is almost unbearable.

He is too alive. That thought makes no sense, but it fills me anyway.

His eyes are too bright in the dim warmth of the den, green touched now with green-white that appears when the bond stirs. His freckles stand out against skin still pale from dying, each ember-mark familiar and newly sacred. The mark I gave him lies beneath my thumb, warmer than before, threaded with Aestrata's rootfire. His mouth is swollen from kisses, his hair a copper mess, his body heavy with exhaustion, need, and stubborn living.

I saw this body without life. I held it, begged over it until my voice tore itself into speech. I offered the forest everything, and still he left.

My eyes burn again.

Lucas's face crumples a little in response, not with pity—never pity—but with the same grief reflected back in human shape. "Onyx."

"I felt you leave," I say aloud.

The words come slowly. My mouth can shape them now, but each one still feels like pushing roots through stone. I use them anyway because Lucas deserves every language I own. Mind-speech is easier, fuller, but spoken words touch the air between us, and he died with my mouth begging him to stay. I need my mouth to tell him this too. "I felt the bond collapse. I held you, and there was no answer."

His eyes shine. "I know."

"No." My hands tighten, then loosen at once when I remember my strength. "No, you know because you saw. You do not know inside me."

He swallows, and I feel the small hurt of that, because I have made it sound like I am alone in the memory when he carries his own. I press my forehead to his again, trying to repair the shape of the words.

"I do not mean you cannot understand," I say, voice rougher. "I mean there is no place inside me that did not become empty."

Lucas exhales shakily before he kisses me again.

This kiss is not the first soft beginning of what comes next. It is grief answering grief, his mouth firm and warm against mine, his hands steadying themselves in my hair. He kisses me as if he can crawl into that empty place and light a fire there with his own stubborn breath.

I make a sound against him, broken and low, and my arms go around him before fear can tell me how easily bodies fail. He is careful with himself when he shifts closer, but he does not treat himself like something ruined. He moves with intention, slow and aching, until his chest presses to mine

and his thighs frame my hips and the whole changed warmth of him settles over me.

The bond opens slowly—green-white and gold. Root and ember. His life touching mine in careful waves, letting me feel what his body cannot say all at once.

I am alive.

I chose this.

I chose you.

A sob moves through me before I can stop it.

Lucas pauses immediately, drawing back enough to search my face. His breathing is uneven, his gaze dark with want and concern, and that mixture undoes me more than either thing alone.

“We can stop,” he says.

I shake my head too quickly, then force myself to slow. If I answer from fear, he will hear it. If I answer from hunger only, he will hear that too. This bond has become less forgiving of hidden things since Aestrata touched him. Perhaps it is not the bond. Perhaps he has simply become better at seeing me.

“No,” I say, and my hand rises to cup the side of his face. His skin is warm. Living. I stroke my thumb beneath his eye and let the wonder of that small motion steady me. “I want, but I need slow because my remembering is… sharp.”

His mouth softens. “Mine too.”

I close my eyes for one breath, shame and tenderness moving together. “Then we go slow.”

“Yeah,” he whispers, voice laced with fear. “Slow sounds good.”

I kiss him again, and this time I do not rush toward taking. I learn. I return to what he taught me before the Varkhyn tore time apart. Lucas’s hands move down my chest, and I breathe in sharply. He stops at once, the bond flaring with question.

“Good,” I say before worry can root in him. The word is not enough, so I press the feeling through the bond too: *good, wanted, loved, overwhelming because his touch still teaches my body that tenderness can be survived.*

His mouth tilts faintly, not quite a smile but close. I cover his hand with mine and press it harder to my chest. My heart pounds under our joined palms, too strong, too frightened, too grateful. “Here.”

He bends and kisses the place above it. The tenderness of that small act ruins me. Tears slide down my face again, silent at first. I try to turn my head, but Lucas sees—of course he sees—and makes a soft, scolding sound.

“Don’t hide from me.”

“I am not hiding.”

“You are absolutely hidin’.”

“I am turning slightly.”

“That is hidin’ with extra steps.”

A laugh breaks through the sob in my chest, cracked and helpless. He smiles against my skin, and the bond warms with the pleasure of making me laugh, even as we’re both still wounded enough to bleed from memory. Then his mouth moves higher, to my throat, my jaw, my cheek, kissing the tear tracks there with a care that feels like worship and argument both.

“I love you,” he says between those kisses, the words not dramatic now, not deathbed or divine choice, but quiet and present.

I close my eyes, and another tear slips free. “I love you,” I say back, and the spoken words shake because they are still new and too large. “I loved you before I had the voice to say it. I loved you when you ran. I loved you when you came back. I loved you when you were angry. I loved you when you did not follow the light.”

I let my hands learn him again. He gasps softly, and the sound goes through me, not as triumph, but as relief. His body can still answer. His pleasure still has a voice. His life is not only breath and heartbeat; it is sensation, choice, desire, irritation, laughter, tenderness. It is Lucas shifting in my lap, wincing, cursing softly, then glaring at me before I can worry.

“I’m okay,” he says, and I lift my brows. He sighs. “Okay, I’m not okay, but that was more stiffness than pain, so don’t make your tragic face.”

“I have no tragic face.”

“You have at least four.”

“I have one face.”

“You have one human face and somehow still four tragic versions of it.”

I stare at him. He stares back, exhausted, smug, and alive.

The bond floods with my love so strongly that his teasing expression falters. He feels it because I do not hide it this time. I let him have all of it: the terror in the mine, the horror of his stillness, the first impossible spark when his hand touched my skull again, the gratitude that still kneels in me

before Aestrata, the awe that he chose a life with me over peace without pain.

I let him feel the part beneath language, the ancient part, the guardian and the creature and the man he is teaching me to be.

Lucas's eyes fill. "Damn it," he whispers. "Warn a guy before you do that."

"No."

His laugh trembles. "Asshole."

"Soft insult?"

"Very soft," he says, and kisses me before the sob can take either of us.

The kiss deepens slowly, and I follow where he leads. He touches my face when memory makes me tense. I touch the mark on his shoulder when fear makes him drift. Each time, the bond answers. *Here. Here. Here*.

We are careful with pain and less careful with tenderness. He lets me ease him down into the furs, and for one terrible heartbeat, the sight of him lying beneath me flashes into the image of his lifeless body in my arms.

I freeze.

Lucas sees me vanish into that memory. He reaches up and takes my hand, placing it over his beating heart.

"Stay with me," he says. "I came back to you, Wildheart."

I bow my head over our joined hands and breathe until I can feel only the heartbeat under my palm. Then his other hand comes to my hair, gentle, patient, and I understand that this is how we survive it. Not by pretending the memory has no teeth, but by putting living proof beside it again and again until the teeth learn they are not the only truth.

His mouth opens under mine, and the taste of him is alive enough that a broken sound claws out of my throat.

His clothes come off slowly—I cannot bring myself to tear anything from him right now. I lift the fabric over his head with both hands, smoothing my palms down his arms afterward, checking without meaning to, counting what death tried to steal.

The dark rope marks have faded under Aestrata's work but have not vanished. I brush my mouth over one wrist, then the other, and Lucas's breath catches above me. Grief rises in him, then tenderness, then need. He does not pull away. I kiss the inside of his wrist again because I am not ready to forgive the world for putting marks there.

I kiss him harder, not rough yet, but deeper, needing his mouth open, needing his breath against mine, needing the living heat of him to answer the place inside me where his absence still screams.

He kisses me back with the same ache. His arms wrap around my shoulders and pull me down until my weight rests over him. I hold most of it away, but he makes an unhappy sound through the bond and drags me closer.

His body opens under me with a heat that startles both of us. The change Aestrata made in him answers me on its own, with the sweet scent of his slick gathering between his thighs. It seems the forest itself has taught his body how to welcome mine. The bond flares with Lucas's shock, then embarrassment, then a wave of want so deep it steals my breath.

I pull back enough to look at him. His face is flushed beneath the ember-marks, his mouth swollen, eyes bright with tears and arousal. His throat mark glows faintly beneath my shadow, warmer now, braided with the new rootfire in him.

He knows what I have discovered. A tremor runs through him, and slick spills warmer where my hips press close, his altered body making him ready without my fingers, without coaxing, without the old fear of stretch coming first.

Awe moves through me so hard it becomes another tear.

Lucas's expression changes immediately. "Hey. Don't look at me like that."

"I saw you dead," I say, because the words will not stay buried. "Now your body opens for me. Now it lives so much it makes a path."

His hand slides down between us, not to hide himself, but to touch my wrist and guide my palm lower. I follow because he asks without words. My fingers reach where he is wet for me, and he gasps. He is soft in some places and newly different in others, human skin over Cervari change, his body keeping both truths without apology. I stroke carefully through the wetness, and his hips lift into my hand.

The movement breaks something open in my chest.

He is alive enough to want.

Alive enough to ache.

Alive enough to be impatient beneath me, his fingers digging into my back, his body slicking my hand with each slow touch.

I bend and kiss the new markings at his side, the place that had been torn open, the place where death entered and failed to keep him. Lucas shudders, though not from pain. Through the bond, I feel the strange sensitivity there, not wounded now, but charged, as if Aestrata's rootfire remembers being called into his flesh.

I kiss it again, and his body arches beneath mine. His breath breaks apart, and the slick against my hand grows hotter.

I could worship him for hours. I want to. I want to touch every changed line, learn every new response, press my mouth to the proof of his survival until the memory of his blood loosens its jaw from my throat. I need slow. My grief needs time to kneel beside his living body and understand that breath continues.

But Lucas needs something else. I feel it building before he says a word. Tenderness warms him, yes, and love holds him open to me, but beneath both, a rougher want starts to pace.

Death has handled him, an old power remade him, and forces neither of us can fully name carried him back from the edge.

He does not want to be touched like glass forever—he wants to feel strength answer strength. He wants my love with teeth in it. He wants the proof that I know he is not only rescued, not only wounded, not only the body I almost lost.

He wants to be taken as the mate who came back changed and still chose my hands.

His legs tighten around my hips. "I need to feel you," he says. "Not like I'm breakable. Not like you're scared of me disappearing if you move wrong."

My hand tightens in the furs beside him, and he feels my fear answer. "I died and I felt pieces of it too. But I'm here now. I'm not asking you to forget it. I'm asking you to remember I survived."

A tear drops from my jaw to his chest. He looks down at it, then back to me.

"Love me like I survived, Wildheart," he whispers.

I kiss him with a sound that is almost pain. My mouth finds his with no gentleness left to spare for hiding. Not rough enough yet to answer the demand fully, but no longer only careful. He moans into me, and the sound loosens the last cold grip around my ribs.

His body knows mine when I line myself up. No preparation is needed, but I still pause at his entrance because I will always honor thresholds. Wetness gathers thick around the head of my cock, his altered body opening, eager in a way that makes my true form press under my skin.

His hands slide to my hips, and I enter him slowly.

The first push steals both our breath, and his body takes me with a heat that feels both familiar and new; slick enough that the stretch comes easier, but not less intense.

He is changed inside too, softer where he once had to fight tension, warmer, responsive in small pulses that grip me as if his body remembers the bond's shape and wants to draw me deep. I stop when only the head is inside, shaking so hard my arms tremble.

Lucas lifts his hips and another inch slides in.

My eyes close, tears spilling faster now. Pleasure hits, yes, deep and heavy, but grief rides inside it. I remember the weight of him in my arms when there was no answer. I remember begging roots and stone. I remember the Varkhyn's blood on my claws and my brother's death-scent in the air. I remember killing the threat and feeling no triumph because Lucas was too still for victory to mean anything.

I sob.

There is no dignity in it. The sound tears free as I sink deeper into him, and I have to bury my face against his neck because the feeling is too large.

Lucas wraps himself around me at once, arms hard around my shoulders, legs tight at my hips, holding me inside and holding me together in the same breath. His warmth takes more of me, his body easing open with each trembling inch, and he kisses the side of my head while I cry into his skin.

"I've got you," he whispers, voice breaking. "I've got you, Onyx."

I push the last of the way inside. His body accepts me fully, wet and tight and hot around every inch, and the bond floods so brightly I lose sense of the den for a moment. There is only Lucas surrounding me—breathing, heart pounding against my chest, alive enough to take me to the root.

He waits until my breathing steadies, then his hips roll beneath mine. A low growl breaks through the remains of my sob. Lucas feels it and trembles.

"There," he whispers, and his voice is no longer only gentle. "That's my beast."

I lift my head.

He is looking up at me with wet eyes, flushed cheeks, and a hunger that has stopped asking to be hidden. The green-white light in his gaze pulses once, answering the gold in the bond, and I feel the half-Cervari part of him stir around me.

His body grips mine harder, making the slide obscene and effortless when I move without meaning to.

I cup his face with one hand and press my forehead to his. “Alive,” I say, the word cracking. “Mine alive.”

His breath catches. “Yours alive.”

The pace deepens by degrees, the sound of each thrust growing wetter, more intimate, filling the den with proof that he does not need to be coaxed through pain to take me now.

He takes because his body chooses. Because the forest remade him with a path to meet mine.

My true form strains closer for a heartbeat before I pull back. Lucas sees, and desire flashes through him instantly, bright and reckless. His nails drag down my back, not enough to hurt but enough to summon the beast under my skin.

“Don’t hide,” he whispers and reaches between us, gripping my hip, and urging me deeper when I thrust. The motion pulls a rough cry from his own throat, but the bond gives me the truth before worry can stop me.

Good. More. Harder than this. Let me feel the living parts answer. Let me feel strong enough to take you.

My breath leaves me in a harsh rush. “Lucas.”

“I don’t want only gentle,” he says, each word low and shaking. “I want gentle because you love me. Then I want rough because you know I can take it.”

A growl gathers low in my chest, and his body clenches around me in answer.

I pull almost all the way out, then thrust back in harder. Lucas cries out, head pressing into the furs, his whole body arching beneath me. The bond flares with pleasure so immediate and clean that my fear loses its footing. I do it again, harder than before, but not uncontrolled. The sound he makes is torn and beautiful, his body taking me with a hungry pulse that drags a snarl from my throat.

There is my mate.

Not dying or broken.

Taking.

Wanting.

Alive.

My hands grip his thighs and push them higher, opening him beneath me. His body folds willingly, strong arms hooking around my shoulders, fingers fisting in my hair as I begin to move with the roughness he asked for. Each thrust drives him into the furs; hard enough that his breath breaks on every stroke.

My hunger finally rises without shame.

Lucas loves it. I feel it, and the knowledge makes me wilder.

His half-Cervari body answers mine; the new markings at his ribs glow stronger when I hit deep. His mark pulses. His eyes flash green-white when pleasure catches him hard enough to make his mouth open without sound.

I grip him hard enough that he feels held down, claimed, known. He spreads wider for me, and the bond fills with fierce satisfaction that almost belongs to my kind now.

Mate. Mine. More.

His answer is a broken moan, no cleverness, no defense. Only truth through the bond. “Yes, yours! Want all of you!”

The beast in me answers when I lower over him, caging him fully, and thrust harder.

His cry fills the den, and the sound breaks the last shard of terror in me. I press my mouth to his, swallowing the next one, and he kisses me back with desperate, open heat. My hips snap into him again and again, deep enough that his hands scramble for purchase along my back.

His changed body gives me everything I need to take him like this without hurting him. The knowledge feeds something primal and reverent both. Aestrata made him to survive me. I do not know whether to thank her or curse her for the price, so I bury the thought in Lucas’s throat and take him the way he asked.

“Mine,” I growl aloud, and the word finally fits my mouth.

Lucas’s eyes snap open.

The sound of it spoken, not sent, goes through him like a strike. His body clamps so hard around me I nearly lose rhythm. His hands seize my face, dragging me close, and his forehead presses to mine as he breathes through the shock of pleasure.

“Say it again,” he whispers, wrecked.

I drive deep, saying each word as I thrust. “Mine. You. are. *MINE*.”

His cock jerks between us, untouched except by the drag of our bodies, and he spends with a cry that sounds more stunned than anything, as if pleasure has found a new path through him and taken him by surprise. The bond bursts open with gold and green-white light, and for one terrible, beautiful second I feel his life everywhere.

I break with him.

My hips stutter once, then drive home. I hold him open beneath me, buried to the root, climaxing with a sound that tears through my chest. Release floods through me, through him, through the bond in heavy pulses. I spill inside him while his body grips and shudders around me, taking every wave, drawing me deeper as if the new part of him knows how to keep what is mine there.

My forehead drops to his shoulder. I sob once, not from grief this time, but from the unbearable relief of being inside a living body that was almost taken beyond reach.

Lucas holds me through it. Even shaking beneath me, he holds me.

He wraps his arms around my neck, fingers tangled in my hair, mouth pressed to my temple while the last of our pleasure moves through us in fading waves.

The den settles slowly, roots creaking softly above us. My breath comes hard against his skin. I am still inside him, and I do not want to move. Moving feels too much like leaving. Too much like the first inch of absence.

Lucas knows. His hand slides down my back, slow and sure. “Stay,” he whispers.

I close my eyes.

The word is a mercy I did not know how to ask for.

I stay buried in him, careful with my weight, one hand under his thigh and the other over his heart. It beats beneath my palm, strong and strange and alive. His body flutters around me, sensitive after release, but he does not push me away, and he keeps breathing.

I lift my head to look at him. His face is flushed and damp with sweat, eyes still shining, hair a mess against the furs. The green-white light has faded from his pupils but not disappeared completely. It lives there now, quiet and waiting, a reminder that he crossed somewhere human feet are not meant to cross and came back with the forest in his blood.

Beautiful. Changed. Mine.

I kiss the corner of his mouth, then his cheek, then the mark at his throat. His breath shivers when my lips touch it. The mark answers beneath my mouth, warm and steady, no longer only my claim but something deeper now, bound to Aestrata's remaking, to the life she rooted back into him.

I ease out only when his body tells me it is ready, and even then, I move so slowly he exhales through his teeth and grips my shoulder. Slick and spend slide warm between us. My chest tightens at the sight of it, not with possession alone, but with awe. His body made a place for mine. His changed life met my old one and did not break.

I gather him into my arms before cold or shame can find him. I watch him fall asleep against me, alive and marked and remade, his mouth softened, his body heavy with spent pleasure and trust.

My tears start again, silent this time, but they do not tear me open the same way.

I am still afraid. I may always carry the memory of his life slipping from him. But now I carry this too.

I press my mouth to his hair.

"My life," I whisper aloud, shaping the words carefully for him even though he sleeps. "My living flame."

And finally, with his heartbeat against my chest, I let myself rest.

OceanofPDF.com

Epilogue

Lucas

A YEAR LATER, I still haven’t shifted.

You’d think the biggest adjustment after dying, meeting a goddess, and coming back half-Cervari would be the glowing eyes, or the heightened senses, or the fact that I can now hear a raccoon trying to open a trash bin from half a mile away and immediately know it’s doing so with criminal intent.

You’d probably assume the hardest part is the forest talking to me in root-pressure and scent, or the way my body heals too fast now, or how full moons make my bones ache in a way that isn’t pain so much as a question waiting patiently under my skin.

But no. The hardest part is that there’s another body inside me, and I am terrified of meeting it.

Aestrata says there is no rush, though she says it in ways that make me feel like the forest is being lovingly passive-aggressive. Sometimes a cedar cone drops directly in front of my boot when I’m spiraling on patrol, and I know, with absolute clarity, that the Mother of Root and Bone is telling me to stop pacing. The real message is softer: this is my choosing, my life, and my shape. The forest will not drag me toward myself before I’m ready.

Onyx says that’s fine. He says it with the calm of something ancient enough to know that fear can be a doorway and not a locked room, which is beautiful and infuriating. Sometimes I want him to be less wise and more conveniently pushy so I can blame him for my own panic. He never does.

Every full moon, when the ache starts under my skin, he watches me with that patient, skull-deep stillness of his and waits for me to choose. If I say no, he only presses his forehead to mine and sends warmth through the bond until the pressure eases. If I joke, he lets me. If I get mean because fear is making a mess of my mouth, he listens beneath it and doesn’t make me apologize before I’m ready.

A lot has changed in a year, but Onyx being an understanding menace remains one of the universe’s great constants.

I’m different now. Mostly the same, which is the strangest part. I still burn toast when I’m distracted. I still hate paperwork with the kind of spiritual commitment usually reserved for holy wars. I still curse at trail closure signs when tourists ignore them, as if the signs themselves have failed morally by not tackling hikers at the knees.

I still drink too much coffee. I still get defensive when Onyx insults my fridge, which he now calls the arrogant cold shrine with the solemnity of a priest naming a demon.

My hair still curls when it rains. My freckles still darken in summer. My mother still cups my face between both hands when she hasn’t seen me for more than a week.

But there are some changes I can’t hide. My eyes catch light wrong in the dark now. Not a full glow unless I’m emotional or deep in the trees, but enough that Jonah once dropped an entire bowl of popcorn when I turned toward him during movie night.

The mark at my shoulder never faded. It deepened, actually—dark at the center where Onyx’s teeth first sealed the bond, with pale green-white branching lines spreading just under the skin like roots under snow. There are more markings at my wrists, my ribs, along my spine, faint unless the moon is high or Onyx touches them with too much feeling in his hands.

My senses sharpened until the first few months became a personal vendetta against scented candles, gasoline, and every teenager who thinks body spray is a substitute for bathing. My body heals faster now. Not instantly but fast enough that Sarah Knox has started watching me with narrowed eyes whenever someone says I’m “lucky”.

And the forest knows me. That’s the part I can’t explain to anyone except Onyx, and maybe Jonah, because Jonah listens differently now. The woods don’t speak in sentences, but I feel their moods. I know when rain is coming because the roots tighten hours before the sky admits anything. I know when a trail is wrong, when the air has been disturbed by fear, when an animal is injured, when a tourist is about to do something so spectacularly dumb that even the moss seems tired of their bloodline.

It makes me a damn good ranger. Better than good, honestly.

Tom retired six months after everything happened, though he claims it has nothing to do with finding me halfway up North Ridge in the middle of a storm, eyes glowing faintly, telling him the creek would flood in twenty minutes when the forecast said clear. The creek flooded in seventeen.

He never asks how I knew. He only stared at me afterward, tired and sharp-eyed under his old ranger hat, then told me, “You know these woods better than I do now, Lucas. Don’t let that make you arrogant.”

“Was that sentimental?” I asked.

“No,” he answered.

Sarah cried when he handed me the head ranger keys. I almost did too, but I have a reputation to maintain, and unfortunately that reputation already includes dying, coming back weird, and yelling at printer jams, so I take what dignity I can get. Parker would’ve made a joke—that thought still hurts.

It doesn’t hurt cleanly. I don’t think it ever will. The official story is that Parker Matthias was a serial killer who used Sweet Rivers’ old Lantern Stalker legend to lure people into the forest. When Reyes and the state investigators searched Parker’s place, they found enough evidence to make the story stick so neatly no one looks beyond it.

Photographs. Trail notes. Old patrol schedules. Souvenirs from the missing, hidden behind a false wall in the basement. Ava’s bracelet. Mark Hasting’s ranger badge. A fake lantern rigged with blue-white light and a remote switch. Maps with creek crossings circled. A notebook full of names, dates, and symbols copied from the Varkhyn’s markers, though no one else knows that part.

The town needs Parker to be the whole monster, so I let them have that.

Parker did those things. He opened gates, shared routes, and listened when something rotten told him he was special. He betrayed Jonah’s fragile trust and used his fear. He helped a predator turn human loneliness into bait, and no amount of old friendship cleans that blood off his hands.

Part of me wants to hate him cleanly. Another part remembers my best friend laughing too loudly in the ranger station equipment room, pretending he hadn't missed me. Both parts live in me now, but I've learned not everything gets resolved just because the evil thing dies.

Jonah handles it better than I expected and worse than he pretends. He doesn't remember who brought him to the clinic or why he was unconscious when they found him. He was furious when he learned Parker manipulated him, then devastated, then furious again because grief loves repetition.

But he comes back to the woods. Short walks with me at first, then longer ones. Eventually, with Onyx too, which is a sentence I couldn't have imagined saying without needing to sit down.

I came out to my family in my mother's kitchen with both hands wrapped around a coffee mug I didn't drink from. I told them I love someone, and that someone is a man. Not just a man, exactly, which is where the explanation got complicated.

Onyx appeared at the edge of Momma's back garden in human form, wearing the black shirt I bullied him into because introducing my ancient forest guardian mate to my family shirtless felt like asking too much of everybody's blood pressure.

Jonah took one look at him and said, "You're the good one," and Onyx went so still I felt his stuttered breath through the bond. Mel looked confused, and Momma told me I'd better explain this in a way that doesn't give her a stroke.

I laughed, face red and heart beating way too fast. "So. Funny story…"

It is not, in fact, a funny story.

We didn't tell them everything, but they know enough now. What Onyx really is and what he's done for the town. We told them about our bond and that the forest is stranger than they thought. Parker was not the whole darkness, but the rest of it is gone. I nearly died—we kept the fact that I really did die from Momma—and I changed, but I'm still me.

Momma believed that last part first. Mel took longer, because sisters are obligated by ancient law to distrust anyone who makes their brother smile like an idiot. Then Onyx fixed her back fence without being asked, helped Jonah rebuild an old birdhouse Ava once painted, and sat through an entire family dinner while wearing shoes with the expression of a martyr.

By dessert, Momma had given him a second helping of cobbler and told him he's too thin, which is hilarious because Onyx is built like a myth that does manual labor.

Jonah loved him immediately. Not in a casual way either, but in a deeply annoying, hero-worship way that makes Onyx terrifyingly pleased with himself. They go hiking together now, and Onyx teaches him which signs to trust, which silences to respect, and how to tell the difference between fear that warns and fear that cages.

In return, Jonah teaches Onyx card games, slang, and how to text, which is a betrayal I am still processing. My ancient forest mate's messages are short, intense, and emotionally weird.

Onyx: Home?

Onyx: Eat, Lucas. Coffee is not food.

Onyx: Squirrel crimes in roof again.

Once, he sent me a picture of the fridge with the caption: **Watching.**

This is my life now, and I'm so darn happy.

Not safe in the simple way. Not normal—never normal. But happy in the way that matters, with moss in my boot treads, a Head Ranger badge on my chest, an ancient mate helping me repair the cabin board by board, and a family that has made room for a barefoot nightmare with blue eyes and very strong opinions about household appliances.

Which brings me to tonight.

The full moon sits high over the ridge, swollen and bright enough to silver the moss at my feet. Onyx waits in the clearing above the creek in his Cervari form, massive and still between the pines, lantern hanging dark from one black antler.

He shifted before I got here because I asked him to. If I'm going to do this, I want him as he first was. As he truly is. Skull-faced, antlered, slate-skinned, with fur along his spine and legs, and beautiful enough that the old stories should be ashamed of themselves.

He lowers his skull when I step into the clearing. The bond between us is warm, careful, listening.

No rush, he sends.

"I know."

You may stop.

"I know."

You may wait another year.

I laugh, but it comes out shaky. “Trying to talk me out of it now?”

No. His amusement brushes me gently. ***Trying to give a door many hinges.***

“That is a terrible metaphor.”

Which you understood.

“Unfortunately.”

His skull tilts, and the moon catches along the weathered bone. ***Little Ember ready?***

My hands shake. I let them. I’ve spent a year pretending I’m not scared of this body under my skin, and I’m tired of making fear sit pretty for appearances. The ache is already there, rolling through my spine, my wrists, the mark at my throat. Not pain, but invitation. The forest waits around us, holding itself quiet, and somewhere deeper than thought, Aestrata is present without standing over me.

“My choosing,” I whisper.

Onyx lowers his head farther until his skull touches my forehead. ***Yours.***

I close my eyes.

The shift begins like moonlight under my skin. My freckles warm first—every one of them. Across my face, shoulders, arms, chest. The heat spreads until they darken from copper to ember-rust, bright and strange, not erased by what I’m becoming but claimed by it.

My hair pulls, and I suck in a sharp breath as it lengthens around my face, copper-red curls spilling down beneath a pressure building over my skull. My jaw aches. My teeth sharpen. My spine bends, stretches, remembers a shape I’ve never worn and somehow have always carried.

The antlers come with pressure so intense I nearly swear, except the sound that leaves me is not human enough for words.

Onyx’s concern flares, but I push back through the bond, clumsy but clear. ***I’m okay.***

Then the skull settles over my face.

I expect terror. I expect to feel buried. Instead, the night opens.

The skull is bleached bone with a warm orange tint, like old ivory left under autumn sun. It fits me—it fits as it grew from every human thing Aestrata refused to take away. My eyes see through the sockets, sharper than any headlamp; they see every leaf vein and moth wing clear in the moonlight. My hair hangs longer beneath it, wild copper under pale bone.

Fur grows along my legs, thick and orange, deep as fox fur in shadow. My hands lengthen into claws. My legs change with a strange, staggering bend,

and for one horrible second, I almost panic because gravity itself feels rewritten.

Onyx doesn't catch me, but he stays close and lets me find my feet. I love him so fiercely for that, it nearly topples me anyway.

When the shift settles, the forest exhales, and I stand there in my other body, trembling and alive. I'm not Onyx's mirror. I only have a few pale growth-ring marks, faint across my chest and arms, nothing like the ancient dark patterns on him. My freckles are still there, darker now, ember-scattered across changed skin. My skull is my own, my fur is orange, and my body feels wrong and wonderful—too big, too sharp, too aware, and somehow more mine than fear ever let me imagine.

Holy shit, I send.

Onyx's awe pours through the bond so hard my new knees almost give. ***Beautiful,*** he sends. ***My ember. My mate. Beautiful.***

I wish I could kiss him.

The longing hits me hard, sad, and sweet because this skull has no human mouth for that. Onyx feels it and steps closer, slow enough that every movement asks. I meet him halfway. Our skulls touch, bone against living bone, and the contact travels through me like lightning finding root.

Not a kiss, but somehow just as intimate. His skull slides along mine in a careful caress, antlers angling around mine, his breath moving over the orange-tinted bone of my face. I lean into him with my whole strange body, rubbing my skull against his like a contented cat.

This is weird, I send, because I can only endure awe for so long before I start throwing rocks at it.

Onyx's affection curls around me. ***Good weird?***

He makes that huff-laugh again, and it warms me down to the new fur on my legs. ***Yeah, really good weird.***

We stay that way while the moon washes the clearing silver. Then restlessness rises in my new legs. They want slope, moss, and speed. They want to learn the forest from the ground up and the wind from the front. I turn my skull toward the trees, and joy sparks so suddenly it startles me.

I want to run.

Onyx feels it. His head lifts from mine, and though his skull cannot smile, I feel the expression through the bond. Ancient amusement. Bright pride. Something playful enough that my newly shaped body wakes even more. ***Do you want me to chase you, Little Ember?***

The question lights up every old dream inside me. I lower myself awkwardly, claws digging into damp earth, my new body gathering beneath the moon. ***You better keep up, Wildheart***.

Then I launch myself into the trees.

The first stride is clumsy as hell. Let's be honest: beautiful magical transformation or not, I have brand-new legs and the confidence of a man who has fallen on perfectly ordinary trails before coffee. My front claws hit moss, my hind legs push too hard, and I nearly send myself straight into a fern bank like a heroic idiot.

Onyx's amusement follows me immediately, which is rude considering this is my first night with backward-bending monster legs and antlers.

Don't you dare laugh.

I would never.

You are literally laughing inside my head.

Yes.

I find the second stride is better, the third is almost graceful, and by the fourth, the forest catches me. It shows me where my feet belong half a heartbeat before I place them. *Root there. Stone there. Fallen branch to leap, not avoid. Slope to take low, claws digging deep.*

My body learns faster than thought, and the awkwardness breaks open into speed. Moonlight flashes across my skull, ferns whip past my legs. The air tears past me, full of pine, moss, water, and life.

Onyx runs behind me, beside me, everywhere around me. We both know he could catch me, but he doesn't. That makes the joy sharper.

I run laughing through a body that cannot laugh the way my human one can, and the sound comes out rough and wild and perfect. I am happy. Not because the past is gone, or every wound is magically healed clean. I'm happy because I am alive, and I am wanted, and the part of myself I feared has turned out to be another way the forest loves me.

Onyx surges up beside me, black antlers cutting the moonlight. He turns his skull toward mine, and I feel his delight, his relief, his love.

Little Ember, he sends, voice thick with feeling. ***You are happy.***

He lets me run farther, and I glance back through moon-silver darkness. ***I am. I am so ridiculously happy, Wildheart.***

The truth of it almost hurts. Right now, under this full moon, in this body I feared, with Onyx behind me and the forest opening ahead, I am happy.

Then Onyx lunges.

I shriek through the bond, which comes out in my body as a rough, startled bark—deeply undignified and apparently hilarious to both of us. He catches up in two powerful strides, not slamming into me, just brushing his shoulder against mine hard enough to turn me off path. I correct by instinct, snapping around a cedar, and suddenly we are running side by side.

For one impossible stretch of moonlit forest, we run together as the same kind of miracle in different colors: his black antlers and shadowed fur, my copper-tinted skull and orange ember-fur, his ancient tree-ring markings, my darkened freckles and new root-light.

He is old forest. I am the spark that chose to live inside it. He is the last guardian Aestrata had left. I am the strange new answer she made because love refused to follow a false light and death was not allowed the final word.

Onyx surges ahead, then wheels around a fallen pine and waits in the path, skull lowered, playful challenge rolling through the bond. I skid to a stop clumsily, claws carving up damp earth, and glare at him through my orange-tinted skull.

Show-off.

Older legs, he sends, smug as sin.

I lower my head because apparently antlers make certain arguments very tempting. ***Don’t make me use these.***

His delight floods the bond. ***Small antlers.***

I scoff, not even sure why that feels insulting. ***Excuse me?***

Beautiful small antlers.

I charge him.

He lets me hit him, because of course he does, because the menace knows exactly when I need to feel strong. Our antlers clack together lightly, more play than fight, and the sound rings through the trees. I push. He gives ground with exaggerated effort that I absolutely do not appreciate.

I know you’re faking.

Yes.

Asshole.

Mate.

That word still gets me, even like this.

I stop pushing, suddenly overwhelmed again. Onyx feels the change and carefully lowers his skull to mine. We stand in the trampled moonlit ferns, breathing hard, bodies strange and wild and alive. The ache under my skin is gone. The question is answered. This shape isn’t a monster waiting to eat the human parts of me. It’s another room in the house of myself, one I was scared

to open because so much had already been taken and changed without permission.

But this was mine.

My choosing.

Race you home, Wildheart, I send.

His head turns toward me, and the bond flashes with wicked joy. ***You will lose.***

Probably. I crouch, claws digging into damp earth, new body coiling under moonlight with a thrill so bright I almost laugh again. ***But you'll chase me.***

Onyx lowers himself beside me, huge and beautiful and mine, every old shadow in him lit by the bond we both chose. ***Always, Little Ember.***

I spring forward before he can count, because I'm still Lucas Dawson and cheating at a forest race with my ancient mate feels both reasonable and necessary. Onyx roars behind me, delighted, offended, and already gaining.

The forest was my first love.

I loved it before I knew it had a heart watching me from between the trees. I loved it when it scared me, when it saved me, when it took me apart and gave me back changed. I loved its dark, its mud, its rain, its stubborn silence, its refusal to explain itself just because humans get nervous.

Then the forest gifted me with the man born of it—the monster, the guardian.

The full moon shines over us, the trail opens beneath us, and my happily ever after has claws in the dirt, antlers in the dark, and laughter moving through the bond like a blue lantern finally leading me home.

OceanofPDF.com

Epilogue

onyx

TONIGHT, I TAKE LUCAS on a date.

I use the word carefully because it is human and therefore more complicated than it first appeared.

A date is not only walking together. We do that every day. It is not only food, though Mel explained once that food helps, especially if the other human is nervous and pretending not to be. It is not only looking at each other with wanting. If that were the whole requirement, then most of our life together would count, and Lucas would spend even more time telling me to stop staring at him while he is trying to brush his teeth.

A date, as I understand it now, is an intentional offering of time. A chosen small ritual. A way of saying, *I have made space for you inside this brief life and want you to see how carefully I prepared it.*

I have prepared this badly, perhaps.

Lucas walks beside me through the trees, suspicious because suspicion is one of his love languages. He wears boots and a jacket, and he has left his radio at the cabin only after looking at it for a long moment and muttering that Sarah would skin him with a stapler if she found out he took ranger business on a date.

He is officially not working tonight. This is difficult for him. It is also difficult for me, because emergencies happen whether humans schedule dates or not, and because my first instinct remains to know every place danger might stand before it chooses to have teeth.

But the forest is quiet. It breathes around us in silver and shadow, awake beneath the full moon. It knows what I have planned. It has known for days because I asked the old cedar near the split rock to hold back the wind if it could. I cleared fallen branches from the path, and placed moss over sharp stone where Lucas might kneel or sit, though he would complain that I assume too much about his knees.

The forest helped in small ways. Ferns stay low. Roots do not catch his boots. The Labrador tea blooms pale near the trail even though it should not be so thick here this late in the season. Aestrata does not speak, but once, as I passed this place before sunset, one white petal fell directly into my hand.

That is approval, I think.

Or warning.

With Aestrata, both may share roots.

The clearing appears between the pines ahead, and my chest tightens with memory before I can command it to loosen. The split rock sits near the center, dark and silver under moonlight, its crack full of moss and tiny ferns.

This is where Lucas first came close to me without dreaming. Not the first moment he saw my true face, but the first place he stood before me while awake and chose to stay. Human then. Stubborn, embarrassed, hungry with questions, and afraid but angrier at himself for being afraid.

He touched my face here. He put his hand on the human shape I made for him and looked at me as if I were not only a thing to survive. Later, he touched my true skull here too, and he called me beautiful.

A creature can endure thousands of years and still not be prepared for one human hand.

Lucas slows when he realizes where I have brought him. The bond shifts, a warm ache of recognition moving through him. His eyes catch the moonlight strangely now, moss-green deepened by the green-white rootfire Aestrata left threaded inside him.

He is still mostly human tonight, though the full moon makes the half-Cervari shape under his skin restless. His ember marks are darker across his nose and cheekbones. He is alive—mine by choice, his own before mine.

The forest's and Sweet Rivers' and his family's, and every annoying human responsibility he insists on carrying even when he is tired.

He turns in the clearing and looks at me with narrowed eyes. "This is suspicious." I make my face calm, but his eyes narrow more. "That is your suspiciously calm face."

"I have one face," I say.

"You have at least twelve, and this one says you've either done somethin' romantic or committed light property damage."

"I repaired the porch."

"That does not answer the question."

"The porch was property damage before I repaired it."

He gives me a look, and amusement moves through the bond despite his suspicion. "You're dodgin'."

"Yes."

He blinks, clearly not expecting honesty that quickly. "Okay. Bold strategy."

My hand tightens around the ring in my hand, and its edges press into my palm. I am not wearing shoes, which Lucas has decided is a hopeless battle and now only argues about in front of his mother because he enjoys watching her scold me.

I am in human form because this is a human ritual and because I want my mouth for it. Speech still costs me more when emotion rises, but tonight, I need every word to stand on its own legs. I need Lucas to hear them with his ears, not only in the bond where he already knows too much.

He feels my nerves, and his expression changes at once, teasing folding away into concern. He steps closer and places a hand on my arm. "Onyx," he says softly.

"Yes," I answer too quickly.

His mouth tilts, but his eyes are gentle now. "What are you doin'?"

"Standing."

"Ancient forest guardian, last child of Aestrata, menace to refrigerators, and still the worst liar I've ever met."

"I did not lie. I am standing."

The expression on his face is the one he calls *'done with your bullshit, Death-deer'*. "Wildheart."

The nickname undoes one of the knots in me and tightens another. I look at him beneath the full moon, at the man who died and came back, the

ranger who argues with trail signs, the mate who touches my skull like worship and then tells me I’m being overdramatic before breakfast. He is smiling, but only barely, because he knows this matters. He can feel it pressing through me no matter how carefully I hold the bond.

I draw a breath, and the clearing goes quiet in a way that feels deliberate. Behind the pines, farther back where the shadows gather thickest, his family waits.

I can hear Jonah shifting his weight from one foot to the other, excitement making him terrible at stealth. Mel breathes through her nose as if already trying not to cry. Lucas’s mother stands very still, one hand pressed over her own ring, the one she still wears for his father.

They are downwind because the forest helped me place them there, though Lucas’s new senses are sharper than they were, and I worry he will catch them too soon.

He does not, because his whole attention is on me. That alone nearly breaks my plan.

“I was made for solitude,” I say, and my voice comes low, rough, steadier than my hands. “Aestrata shaped my bones for guarding, not for wanting. I thought wanting was hunger. I thought closeness was a thing other creatures had because they were not built to endure alone. Then you came back to the forest.”

The bond warms and opens, carrying his tenderness before his face can hide it.

“You were hurt,” I continue, because if I stop now, I may lose courage and simply hand him the ring like a strange crow leaving a shiny object on a porch. “Angry. Too tired. But still looking at the ground, still noticing tracks, and still loving the place that would frighten you later. I scented you, and the world changed so quickly I did not understand it. I wanted to keep you before I knew your voice. I wanted to guard you before you gave me permission. I made mistakes because wanting became fear in me, and fear has old teeth.”

Lucas swallows. “You learned.”

“You taught me.”

“I yelled a lot,” he murmurs, and his mouth trembles with the effort of keeping the joke small.

“You taught loudly.”

A quiet laugh escapes him, already wet at the edges. He knows something is coming now. I can feel his heart beating faster through the bond, human rhythm and rootfire rhythm together. I love both. I love every version of his body, every shape Aestrata returned and every shape that was always him.

I step closer. “We are mated. Marked. Bonded. Chosen by each other and witnessed by the Mother. No human vow can make us more true than we are.”

Lucas’s eyes shine. “That sounds ominous.”

I offer a small smile. “But humans like more.”

He blinks at me and tilts his head, a frown creasing his brow. I remember when I did not understand why humans needed symbols for truths already known. Rings and names written on paper. Ceremonies beneath roofs, before kin, before gods they may or may not believe are listening.

I understand better now.

“You have rings,” I say, lifting my hidden hand slightly but not opening it yet. “You make circles for promises because your lives taught you how precious chosen time is. A small mark outside the body to speak what the bond knows inside.”

Lucas looks at my closed fist. “Oh…” he says, very quietly.

“I know you do not need it,” I continue quickly, because I know his heart, and I know he might tell me we are already enough if he thinks I doubt it. “I know you are mine by choice, and I am yours by all laws that matter. But I have watched humans join lives. I have watched your mother touch the ring she still wears for your father. I have watched Mel look at Aaron’s hand when he leaves for work. I have watched you look at rings in windows when you think I do not notice.”

His first tear falls, and alarm flashes through me so quickly that I nearly forget every word I practiced. “Sad?”

He laughs once, broken and soft, wiping badly at his cheek. “No, you impossible thing. Keep going.”

“Your face leaks when not sad.”

“My face is overwhelmed, Onyx.”

“Is that good?”

“Right now? Very good.”

I am not fully reassured, but I obey, and I open my hand.

The ring rests in my palm, catching moonlight from above and forest-shadow from below. The band is dark, shaped from the onyx stone Lucas

once threw into the trees while sobbing because grief had made him believe I would not return.

The forest kept it, but I found it months later tucked beneath fern roots near the cabin clearing, cracked but not broken, as if the earth had held it until I was wise enough to understand that thrown-away things are not always unwanted.

Set into the dark band is the pale river stone from my second offering, the one I placed on his porch when I had no voice for apology and no right to ask him to understand me. Time and polishing revealed its hidden fire. White and blue and green and a hint of orange like sunrise caught underwater.

“It was opal,” I say quietly. “Hidden under river skin. I kept it before I knew why. The onyx you gave me. The opal I gave you. Naming and apology. First bridge.”

Lucas looks at the ring, and the bond between us goes still in that trembling way it does when he feels too much and has not yet decided whether to make a joke, curse at me, or cry. I feel his family watching us, scents cloaked by the forest, and I lower myself to one knee.

The moss beneath me is soft because I asked the clearing to be gentle. The split rock rises behind Lucas, the place of our first waking closeness, and the moon hangs above him like a witness too large for any human church. I look up at him, at his tears, his ember marks, his trembling mouth, his life shining through everything death failed to keep.

“Lucas Dawson,” I say, and his name is sacred because he was the first one who taught my mouth to shape love instead of warning. “Little Ember. Ranger. Mate. My home and my chosen path.”

The bond opens enough that I feel his heart stumble, and I almost stop because part of me still believes tenderness can hurt him if it arrives too quickly. But Lucas does not look away. His tears spill, and he lets them. He stands in the clearing where we began and gives me the whole truth on his face.

“Will you take this ring and let humans see what the forest already knows? Will you marry me?”

He covers his mouth with one hand. For one terrible heartbeat, he does not answer. I know he will. I know through the bond there is no refusal in him. There is shock, love, grief, joy, and something bright enough to make

the forest lean closer, but no refusal. Still, human rituals have silences inside them where fear can grow teeth, and mine grows too fast.

Then he drops to his knees in front of me. “Yes,” he says, but the word breaks.

The relief that hits me has no dignity. It goes through every bone, every root-thread, every old hollow place in me. I make a sound that is almost a sob and almost laughter, and Lucas laughs too, crying harder now.

“Yes, Wildheart,” he says again, clearer though still wrecked. “Of course, yes. God, yes.”

I take his left hand, and my fingers shake. He notices, and strokes his thumb across the back of my hand, steadying me in the ritual I learned for him. That is Lucas; that has always been Lucas. Dying, grieving, frightened, newly reborn, half-Cervari under the full moon, and still determined to comfort me if my hands tremble while giving him forever in a human shape.

I slide the ring onto his finger.

It fits because I measured while he slept, which he will call creepy when he can breathe properly. The onyx warms against his skin at once. The opal catches moonlight and throws it back in quiet fire. His mark hums through the bond, and the faint root-lines beneath his wrist answer. The sun marks across his face seem to darken for one soft pulse, ember-bright under his tears.

I bend and press my mouth to the ring on his hand, and he makes a sound that almost brings me apart.

Then he grabs my face and kisses me.

I catch him carefully, though nothing about the way he comes to me is fragile. We sink fully onto the moss, knees pressed together, hands tangled, mouths clumsy with tears. The kiss tastes of salt and moonlight and Lucas’s living breath. The bond opens warm and bright between us, gold and green-white and ember-orange, no cold places, no false lights, no silence.

I hold the back of his neck with one hand and his ringed hand with the other because I cannot choose which proof matters more. When we part, his forehead rests against mine.

“Crying means yes, too?” I ask, because some anxious piece of me still needs the words.

Lucas laughs wetly, wiping his cheek against my shoulder instead of his sleeve, overwhelmed and perhaps also because he knows I will like it.

“Cryin’ very much means yes.”

“Good.”

“You were so nervous.”

“Yes.”

“That’s ridiculous, you know,” he says, voice wet and so full of joy. “You’re my mate, Onyx. You’re the forest. You’re home. You really thought I’d say no to a ring made out of our emotionally significant rocks?”

“Humans are mysterious.”

“You proposed to a man who argues with trail signs and still gets defensive when you insult his fridge.”

“The cold box deserves insult.”

“We’re not bringin’ the fridge into our engagement.”

Our engagement.

He says the words like they are ridiculous and holy at once.

I close my hand over his, pressing the ring between our palms, over my heart. “Our engagement,” I repeat, and the words completely soften something in me.

Then the trees rustle, and Lucas goes still. I realize, a breath too late, that human families do not wait as patiently as ancient trees.

Jonah steps into the clearing first, as I knew he would. He is nearly twenty years old now, taller than when I first watched him shake beneath the weight of the forest’s wrong stories, stronger in ways that have nothing to do with muscle. He grins so hard his whole face looks split, eyes wet and bright in the moonlight.

Behind him comes Mel, one hand pressed over her mouth, the other gripping Aaron’s sleeve hard enough that he looks both emotional and mildly worried for the fabric. Lucas’s mother steps into the clearing last, quiet and tearful, with that fierce look she gets when love has made her proud and furious at the same time.

Lucas turns toward them slowly. His face goes through many expressions. Shock. Horror. Realization. Betrayal. More shock. Then a bright, mortified flush that spreads all the way up to his ears.

Jonah throws both arms up. “He said yes!”

“Oh my God,” Lucas says, staring at me. “You invited my family?”

I straighten slightly. “A proposal is human ritual. Human pack should witness.”

“My human pack has been hiding in the trees?”

Mel laughs through tears. “Only for ten minutes.”

“Twenty-three,” Jonah says proudly.

Lucas points at him with his ringed hand, then seems to remember the ring is there and immediately starts crying again, which makes his pointing less threatening. “You knew?”

Jonah’s grin turns impossibly smug. “I helped with the distraction text about the raccoons earlier.”

Lucas looks toward his mother as though she may be the reasonable one, which is brave and foolish because she is the one who taught his stubbornness to walk upright. She comes forward with tears on her cheeks and takes his face in both hands, touching him the way she did after Sweet Rivers gave him back to her, changed but living.

“Don’t you fuss at that boy,” she says. “He asked permission.”

Lucas blinks. “He what?”

I lower my head slightly, though I do not know why embarrassment comes now when I have already knelt before him with my heart open in both hands. “I asked your mother. Then Mel. Then Jonah. Then Aaron because he was in the room and looked frightened to be excluded.”

Aaron nods solemnly. “I appreciated the inclusion.”

Lucas’s mouth opens, but nothing comes out. This is rare and wonderful.

Mel reaches us and pulls Lucas into a hug so tight he wheezes. She is crying fully now, speaking into his hair while he clings to her with one arm and keeps his ringed hand lifted, as if he’s afraid it might disappear if he presses it between them.

“I’m so happy for you,” she says, voice breaking. “You impossible, terrifyingly stubborn idiot. I’m so happy.”

“I’m the idiot?” Lucas mutters, but his voice breaks too, and he holds her harder.

Jonah comes to me while Lucas is trapped between Mel and his mother. He looks up at me with damp eyes and a grin he is trying to make casual. He fails.

“You did good,” he says.

The words strike strangely. Humans say small things that carry large roots.

“I did?” I ask.

Jonah nods. “Yeah. The ring’s sick, by the way. Like, emotionally devastating, but also sick.”

“I accept both meanings.”

He laughs and throws his arms around me.

For one moment, I stand frozen because Jonah hugs like Lucas, sudden and sincere and trusting enough to hurt. Then I bend around him carefully and place one hand against his back.

This boy once looked at the forest and saw only the shape of what took Ava. Now he stands in the clearing where his uncle first chose me and hugs a creature from the same stories, because Lucas lived, because grief did not get the final word, because the world is sometimes kinder than it has any right to be.

“Welcome to the family officially,” Jonah says, muffled against my chest.

I look over his head at Lucas.

He is watching us, crying and smiling at once, his mother’s arm around his waist and Mel wiping under her eyes. The ring gleams on his finger. The mark at his throat glows softly. The split rock stands behind him, moss-filled and moonlit, holding the memory of the first bridge and now this one.

Family.

Human pack.

Mate.

Home.

I have had many names in old stories, most of them warnings.

Tonight, under the full moon, Lucas’s family makes room for one more.

His mother comes to me next, and Jonah steps aside quickly, scrubbing his face as if no one has noticed he was crying, too. She is smaller than Lucas, though her spirit is not, and she looks at me with the kind of seriousness that once made me understand where my mate learned to stand his ground. I bow my head before she can ask. It feels right.

“You take care of him,” she says.

Lucas groans. “Momma.”

She ignores him completely.

“I will,” I say.

Her eyes narrow. “And let him take care of you.”

That stops me.

I glance at Lucas, and his expression is soft enough to bruise. He knows what she has touched without knowing all of it. The old instinct in me wants to promise protection only, to be guardian, teeth, shelter, wall. But

love that only guards becomes lonely in another shape. I learned that. Lucas taught it loudly. His mother sees more than I expected.

I look back at her and answer carefully. “I will try.”

She studies me for one breath longer, then nods as if that is better than any perfect vow. “Good.”

Then she hugs me. I hold very still at first, then slowly place my arms around her with all the care I have. She smells like flour, lavender soap, grief survived, and Lucas’s childhood. Over her shoulder, Lucas presses both hands to his face, entirely overcome.

Mel laughs. “Oh, he’s gone.”

“I am not gone,” Lucas says thickly.

“You are absolutely gone.”

Aaron claps Lucas on the shoulder. “Congratulations, man.”

Lucas drops one hand and looks at him. “Thank you. Also, did every single one of you know except me?”

“Yes,” Aaron says.

“Betrayal.”

“Community,” Jonah corrects.

“Don’t start using therapy words at me.”

Jonah grins. “That’s not therapy. That’s vocabulary.”

“I hate everyone here.”

I feel his joy through the bond, bright enough to turn every false complaint transparent. He does not hate anyone. His happiness is huge, nearly frightened by its own size. I step back to him because the bond pulls, and because he reaches for me at the same time. His hand finds mine. Ring against my palm. His family closes around us without crowding, standing in the clearing beneath moon and pine and the old split rock.

Lucas leans into my side and whispers, “You really did this here where we first met.”

“Yes.”

“Because you’re a romantic menace.”

“Yes.”

His laugh breaks softly. “I love you.”

“And I love you,” I say aloud, in front of his family, in front of the forest, in the place where once I could not speak with my mouth and thought wanting might always remain hidden behind silence.

His fingers tighten around mine.

The forest breathes around us. The split rock holds its moss. The moon shines over Lucas's ring, over his tear-wet face, over the people who came when I asked because they love him enough to trust the creature who loves him too. For the first time in all my long life, I understand why humans want more.

The bond is sacred. The mark is sacred. The Mother's witness is sacred. But this, too, is sacred. Lucas laughing through tears while Jonah cheers too loudly. Mel crying into Aaron's shoulder. His mother wiping her cheeks and pretending she is not doing exactly that. My mate's ringed hand warm inside mine.

Not alone.

Never again alone.

Lucas looks up at me, eyes bright with moonlight and rootfire. "Humans are mysterious, huh?"

I bend and kiss the ring on his hand once more before lifting my gaze to his. "Yes," I say. "But I am learning."

His smile trembles, then steadies, and the bond between us glows so warm that the night itself seems to lean closer. I look at him and understand that this is the shape of my happily ever after: not an ending, not a quiet place beyond danger, not a perfect life without grief or teeth or storms.

It is Lucas alive beneath the full moon, loved by his family, claimed by no one but himself, choosing me again with a ring made from our first clumsy attempts at trust.

It is the forest no longer asking me to endure alone. It is his hand in mine, warm and sun-marked and trembling with joy, while the old clearing holds us like a promise the earth kept after all.

For centuries, I guarded the dark.

Then Lucas walked into it and called me beautiful.

Now, he wears my promise on his hand, and I stand inside his family's laughter with the forest breathing around us, knowing at last that a guardian can be guarded too.

The End.

Dear Reader, please read the acknowledgements for a surprise...

OceanofPDF.com

Acknowledgements

TO MY READERS,

First and foremost, thank you to every single reader who picked up this book, especially because I know this one was a little different from what I usually write.

Onyx and Lucas were not my usual brand of chaos. Okay, fine, there was still chaos. There was still yearning and trauma, but this book asked me to step into something a little stranger, a little wilder, and a lot more moss-covered than usual. The fact that you came with me means more than I can say.

Thank you for trusting me with a forest, a lantern, a monster with a soft heart, and a ranger who really should have known better than to follow the pretty blue light.

To Bree Wiley and Lee McCormick, thank you so much for inviting me to be part of this collaboration. Truly, it was a dream come true to be asked to join authors I look up to so much. I'm still not fully convinced someone didn't accidentally send that message to the wrong person, but I'm so grateful you let me sneak into this world and bring my weird little cryptid boyfriend with me.

To my beta readers, thank you for everything. For the notes, the screaming, the emotional support, the honesty, and for surviving whatever feral little spiral this book became. I am also deeply sorry for what I put you through during those chapter-forties. You deserved snacks, financial compensation, and possibly a wellness retreat. Instead, I gave you trauma, trees, and a skull-faced forest man having emotions. Thank you for sticking with me anyway.

Jenn, my editor, I genuinely don't even know how to thank you properly. You saved this manuscript, and somehow you did it from a hospital bed, which is both incredible and very rude because now I can't even make a joke without getting emotional. I am so incredibly thankful for you, for your time, your eye, your patience, and the way you helped me untangle this book when my brain was just screaming "forest monster feelings" at full volume. I honestly can't put into words how much it means to me. "Thank you" doesn't feel big enough, but it's what I have, so thank you. So, so much.

And to my readers again, thank you for returning. Thank you for loving my boys, whether they're hockey players, mafia men, broken disasters, soft doms, bratty little menaces, or ancient forest guardians who have personal beef with refrigerators. Thank you for letting me try something different and for meeting Onyx and Lucas exactly where they were.

I hope this story made you feel something. I hope it hurt in the right places. I hope it reminded you that sometimes the monster in the woods is not the thing you should fear.

And if you're wondering who saved Jonah…

Well.

The forest still has secrets.

Chaos and Kisses

—Avery x

OceanofPDF.com

Mayhem Manuscripts
Season Two:

CRYPTIDS

Pareidolia by Lee McCormick
Feral by Emmy LaRoux
Hollow by MN Bennet
Palingenesis by Rae Stone
Tenebrous by Bree Wiley
Golden by B. Ripley
Hush by Avery Collins
Leech by Rikki Leighton
Mortis by Lily James
Noctis by H.L. Day
Solivagant by Ronan Marlow
Solais by C.S. Autumn
Marked by N. Boeyer

OceanofPDF.com

Also by Avery Collins

Sinners of Blackthorne U
Pretty When He Bleeds
Bitter When He Begs
Cruel When He Smiles
Wicked When He Cries
Beautiful When He Breaks
Heathens of Lakehaven U
Dirty Hit
Of Ruin and Royalty
Conquest
Empire *(novella)*
Reign
Others
Hush

OceanofPDF.com