

## Chapter 0335

"Seriously?! I'm not opening this now!" I say to her, not even bothering with the mindlink.

"Either you open it or I am supposed to." She shrugs. "Orders from the top."

I narrowed my eyes at her. That means Xander is in on this too. Now I know it's some kind of trap.

"What does she mean 'orders from the top?'" Tyler asks me. "Is that code for something? And why do you look like you are terrified about opening a gift?"

"My friends are messing with me and unfortunately we have a hierarchy meaning Mina will cause a scene." I look right at him then take a deep breath and spin the box to face me.

The dark blue velvet is soft and expensive with gold lining the edges of the box and the hinge. I slowly pull it open with Tyler sitting shoulder to shoulder with me and I gasp.

Sitting on a dark blue satin pillow is a gold metal choker necklace. The metal circlet sits open with a gold moon charm hanging from one end, complete with the two little stars sitting on the bottom tip. Hanging from the other end is a delicate gold chain with star charms made of faceted colored glass attached every few links. There is one in each of the guys' colors and I recognize the circle diamond hanging from the bottom as Xander's. Tears fill my eyes as I look up to see Mina with her phone up, most likely taking a video of my reaction.

"This means something to you?" Tyler asks the question, but the way he asks lets me know he doesn't need the answer. I just nod as he pulls it off the cushion and slides it around my neck on top of the necklace from my brother last year with the matching moon pendant that I never take off. The opening sits just above my collarbone so the moon dangles on one side of my neck and the star charms hang on the other. "This is not a gift from just a friend. And that is not a reaction from just a friend." He says looking at me, shoulders slouched. His voice is thick and hurt.

"No, Tyler, stop. It's really not like that. This is not what you think, but it is personal and yes it means something to me. No I'm not going to explain the significance, I can't." I close my eyes and will the tears away. I won't let them fall, this is special and meant to be special. They are thinking of me too.

"I'm just going to go." He gets up to leave, Mike following.

I got to Mike first. "Go sit with Mina, we will be right back."

I follow Tyler outside. "So that's it then, you are just going to get up and walk away?"

"What do you want me to do Sky? You clearly are leading someone else on at the same time you are playing with me. I have been as patient as I can, but waiting for you to figure out what you want is painful and I don't believe for a second that you have no idea what you are doing here. No one sends a gift like that to their girlfriend's best friend." He's getting more and more angry as he talks.



"I told you I knew Sam first, I have known him my whole life. I introduced him to Sierra. There has been and never will be anything between us. This necklace is special to me and I shouldn't have to explain that to a guy who has friend zoned me since he found out I have guys as friends. You don't want to get to know me and you don't want me to know you. You are the one holding back. You are letting your petty jealousy get in the way." I shove him with each accusation. At least I can still feel anger towards him because as fake as this is I do care about him as a person, but I won't take the blame for the distance.

"Sam has a funny way of showing his 'friend' affection. Does he buy you nice underwear too?" That was the last straw. I cocked my fist back and punched him with all of my strength. His head spun around, the rest of his body following with the force so he was facing away from me.

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"For your information you son-of-a-b\*tch." He turns slowly back to me, complete anger contorting his usually handsome features while he holds his cheek. "My mother died giving birth to me, I hate my birthday. My friends, all of them, as in plural or more than one since you seem to be slow on the uptake, get me something with rainbow colors for my birthday." I hold up my cuff with the rainbow colored leather. "Each color represents a different friend, it's to let me know they are thinking of me. So maybe before you go accusing people of deceit, you should get the whole story." I push him again before walking away.

"SKY! WAIT! I'M SORRY!" He shouts at my back, but I just keep walking.

"I'm here Little One, just keep walking. As soon as he's out of sight I'll get you."

"Why can't the brand take pain too? He didn't hurt me really, but I don't like being accused of cheating or leading people on. I would never do that to someone. I can't even feel affection for him and I still didn't go after any other guys even when he stopped giving me information."

"Pain lets us know we're still alive. It lets us know that something is wrong. We cannot take pain away, but we can work through it. You're almost to me. Let's go for a run."

"Okay." I sniffle back my tears and take a deep breath. I will work through this like I work through everything else that

has frustrated me over the years. I will let my wolf out, let her take control and protect me until I can get my head on straight again.

I don't talk to Osiston, Nickolas or even Mina about what happened. Someone wanted a result and they got it. I don't know if Sam and the guys were trying to get under my skin, or if they were trying to push Tyler away or maybe thought he would be jealous and fight for me, but I was used, and I don't appreciate it at all.

I leave my phone on airplane mode most days. I use it only for music when I workout...alone. If anyone needs to talk to me they can mindlink me. I know I'm being followed, I can always feel a presence near me, but I don't ask who it is or acknowledge them. I have switched from sharing a room with Mina to staying in one of the other guest rooms with my door locked if I am home. I still go to classes, I just make sure that I am surrounded by other people so Tyler, Mike and Mina can't sit next to me. <sup>3</sup>

I shift and run almost every night with Osiston hot on my tail. He says nothing just lets me go and keeps me from doing anything to jeopardize our mission.

Three weeks after my disastrous birthday, Mina comes into my room. She picked the lock and tried and failed to make a joke of being proud of herself. I was sitting on my bed doing homework, like the good old days.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't think it would go down like that."

"So you were in on the set-up? It's good to know my friends have my back. What was the end game there? Cause I still

haven't figured it out."

"You weren't getting anywhere with him, so when Xander brought your present we thought we could use it to make him jealous and spark a reaction."

"Well, you were right. His reaction was to call me a two timing wh\*re and all of you ruined the memory of a gift that should be special to me. Do the guys know that their gift and I were used to bait Tyler?"

She looks down at her hands, clasping and unclasping them.

"That's what I thought. And who's 'we' exactly?"

"Alyssa and I." She whispers.

"So you didn't get the idea from Xander or Nickolas or Osiston? Did Xander explain the significance of the necklace?"

"No." She's still whispering.

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## Chapter 0337

"Well, let me enlighten you. What I told Tyler was true. I hate my birthday because my dad hates my birthday. My dad hates me because on the day of my birth I killed his mate. Until last year my birthday was never celebrated, ever. It wasn't allowed. You know about the bullying, what you don't know is that until the beginning of my freshman year my bullies included my father, my brother and rest of the future leaders of my pack. My basic existence was not even recognized by any of my peers. Not even by my brother. Until my freshman year I had no real friends, also something that was not allowed. It was safer for people to steer clear of me. The only people who remotely gave a sh\*t about me were Luna Ava, in secret, my nanny, who was beaten in front of me if my father thought she overindulged me by being too kind, and then our housekeeper who took over after my nanny was fired. The only reason I have friends now is because of Sierra. The minute she stepped foot in my pack Sam was attracted to her and decided being nice to me would get him in her good graces. That's how they figured out I was being harmed by more than just my father and to what extent my father mistreated me. So for the first time in my life my birthday was celebrated last year and it was beautiful. The guys got me these bracelets," I held up my arm, "and clearly kept the theme of the combined color coded gift this year with their necklace and you decided to use it for your own selfish gains." I look from her to my open door. "You can come in, lingering at the door mouth

breathing isn't doing you any favors." 1

Both Osiston and Nickolas walk in, looking not too pleased.

"Is that why Tyler came by asking to see you looking like he was in a cage fight?" Nickolas asked. "And we are not mouth breathers."

I couldn't suppress a small smile at the idea I hit him hard enough to leave a mark. I just nodded.

"I'm actually sad I missed that."

"Well, you might need to make up with him. We have been following his crew for the last few weeks, they are up to something." Osiston says. "And he has been stalking the house, clearly trying to check in on you. He's not very stealthy. This might work for us."

"How soon do I need to be friendly again?" I'm all business now. Tyler means nothing after that. I have no room for people who will turn on me at the first sign of trouble and he didn't even listen to my side of the story. "I'll have to start letting him talk to me in class and slowly go from there, he's got to work for it or he will get suspicious."

"I agree, but sooner rather than later and for sure before the semester ends." I nod again and then look back down at my homework. It's a start that Mina has some history, but I'm still angry and I can't bring myself to wear the necklace yet, which makes me angry all over again. She shouldn't have needed to get my history like that and she shouldn't have gone over the heads of our group leaders. This is just another reason for them to not put on a mission until we



are old enough. It's too easy to be impulsive and emotional. The thought of being iced out of missions keeps the anger simmering too.

The only way to make this look real with Tyler is to make up with Mina. I have to stuff this irritation and save it for another day.

I can feel Osiston and Nickolas leave. Mina hangs for a minute longer, but when she realizes I'm done with her she walks to my door. "Sky, I didn't know, and I really am sorry. I hope you can forgive me."

"I'm working on it." I finally made eye contact with her for the first time in three weeks. "You took something that you can never give back. You may not have had all of the information, but I shouldn't be forced into giving my history to people for any reason. We have a job here and if you want it to go faster or better or whatever, you need to work with the team. Express your concerns or ideas with everyone. We're the green ones here, not the experts, no matter how good we are at a few things. Get your head out of your ass, act like the leader that I know is in there somewhere. We aren't here to be 'the guy' or 'the hero' or whatever you and Alyssa have in your heads. I'm sure the literal years that some of these guys have spent on this mission have been miserable. Our school year can't compare. I don't know how long Alyssa has been here, but she isn't much older than us and she was brought in to track not make decisions and plans. We are better than this, we need to act better."