

Mated in the Shadow of My Sister - Chapter 5

Chapter 5: Without His Luna

(James POV)

Tomorrow will mark six years since Stephanie died. Everything and nothing has changed.

I still think of Stephanie every single day. Her beautiful smile. Her laugh. The kindness that she showed to pack members. The passion that she showed for her luna training.

Stephanie would have been an amazing and strong luna. Had Stephanie lived, we would have been happily married by now. We would probably have already had at least two adorable pups, who would have been doted on by two loving sets of grandparents. Together, Stephanie and I would have been leading the West Mountain Pack to new heights.

Of course, Stephanie is no longer here. And without Stephanie... Well, without Stephanie, I am only a fraction of the man that I used to be, and only a fraction of the wolf.

Without Stephanie, I am not even Alpha yet.

In our world, most alpha heirs take over from their fathers between 25 and 30 years old. That timing ensures that most alphas will have already found their mates before they take over the running of a pack. Running a pack is not easy to do by yourself. Even with a strong beta and a strong gamma, a luna's importance to a pack cannot be underestimated.

A luna brings heart and balance to a pack and to the alpha himself. She is the alpha's equal, and she is one of the few werewolves in the pack who can get away with challenging and questioning an alpha's decisions. If she exercises her role properly and judiciously, a luna's presence can lead to better overall outcomes, decisions, and governing. This is especially true if the luna is the alpha's fated mate, because it means she takes on her role with the blessing of the Moon Goddess.

Alpha heirs who take over their packs prior to turning 25 typically do so either out of necessity, or because they have been fortunate to have been mated very early to a strong luna.

Six years ago, when Stephanie was still alive, my father thought we were going to be part of the lucky latter category. He had been very eager to take an early retirement. He and my mother had fantasized about all the European trips and Caribbean cruises that they would take after I was sworn in as alpha, and they had already had tentative plans for at least one of those trips. Of course, all of those plans were ultimately scrapped.

Today, I am old enough to take over as alpha, even without a luna by my side... but my father is concerned that I am not mentally strong enough to do so yet. He sees me as broken.

My father is probably right.

It is a little hard not to feel broken. The reminders of Stephanie are everywhere. Even after six long years, I feel like I cannot escape from the reminders or from my grief, and it is suffocating. The packhouse has practically turned into a mini museum to her, and almost all of the local businesses have some sort of small dedication, whether it be a dedicated drink, food item, picture, or shelf of Stephanie-inspired items.

Worse, twice a year, we hold a series of ceremonies and remembrances for Stephanie. As Stephanie's mate and as the future alpha heir, I am expected to attend every one of them.

I want to be there. I know that I should be there. But...

It is complete and utter torture. Every day without Stephanie is difficult, but Stephanie's birthdays and death anniversaries always hit me the hardest. What I want to do more than anything on those two days is be by myself so that I can process my grief.

There is a waterfall that I like to go to. If I could, I would spend all day there on both days. The waterfall isn't exactly hidden, but to find it, you have to go pretty far within the woods and know where to go. As far as I know, I am the only one in our pack who ever goes there. Being at the waterfall brings me comfort; it always has. That is where I want to be when I am grieving or upset.

Unfortunately, instead of spending time in the comfort of my waterfall, I have to spend the two hardest days each year out in public with almost 20,000 eyes watching my every move and every reaction. Instead of just... grieving... I have to be conscientious of how every display of emotion can impact and be perceived by the pack members. As I listen to pack members, Stephanie's parents, and my own parents take turns telling stories about Stephanie and her good deeds, I am expected to somehow strike an impossible balance between sadness and strength.

At each of the events, year after year, the remembrances are largely the same. At this point, I practically have the speeches memorized. The speeches usually include stories about how Stephanie would bake cookies and send her sister to deliver them to the guards working the late-night shift on the borders. And stories about how any time anyone was injured in training or at battle, she would not only have her sister deliver care baskets to patients at the hospital, but she would also put one together for any family members separated from them while they were recovering. My parents talk about how eager Stephanie was to take on her position as luna, and how dedicated she was to her training, even working on lessons for hours at home multiple times per week. Stephanie's parents talk about their prior dreams for their daughter and the hole they continue to feel in their hearts. Nick talks about how family celebrations do not feel the same without Stephanie there, and Jenny talks about wishing that she still had a sister-in-law to bond with and engage in girl talk.

The only blessing is that—as the grieving mate—no one expects me to say anything at these events. But that does not spare me from the staring and judgment.

If I show too much sadness, pack members worry that I am weak and will not be able to be the leader of the pack in the future. If I seem too stoic or show too much “strength,” pack members could perceive me being disrespectful towards Stephanie’s memory. They will also worry that my reign as alpha will lack balance and compassion.... which I already hear whispers about from time to time.

Sometimes, I feel angry about the whole thing. I would never, ever expect anyone who has lost their mate to put themselves on a stage multiple times a year and be judged on whether their external grief is appropriate enough. And yet my parents have no problem doing it to me.

I tried to push back once, but only once. As you can imagine, it did not go well. I started the conversation by telling my parents that I did not think it was healthy for me to be surrounded by constant reminders of Stephanie, and I told them that I thought the constant remembrances were counterproductive to my mental health. I suggested that we scale back the events, or make them more private affairs.

My father got angry and accused me of being selfish. He told me that being uncomfortable and dealing with the pressure of judgmental pack members is part of being an alpha. Meanwhile, my mother reminded me that the ceremonies had been Stephanie’s parents’ idea, and she asked me if I wanted to be the one to tell them it was no longer important to celebrate Stephanie’s life.

No, of course I did not want to tell Stephanie's parents that. No, I did not want to be selfish. I just wanted --and still want-- to not feel so sad all the time.

Six years in, and the only reprieve I ever get from my grief is when the Little Brat is around. She has made herself scarce the last few years, but when she is around, my wolf and I can sense her from a mile away. My wolf and I fight about her all the time --for some reason, Luke seems to have a soft spot for the Little Brat-- but we can agree that it is nice having her around. For me, it's because I have a worthy target for my anger and rage.