



# Redeeming His Omega Mate

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**Category:** Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

**Description:** The naïve Omega who once hid behind her mate to dodge debt?

She died the night he rejected her.

Seven years was enough to bring someone far more dangerous back.

Tala

Now I wear power like a second skin—sent to broker peace between Alphas who only understand blood.

But I wasn't prepared for him.

Damian Stone.

My fated mate. The Alpha who let me bleed, then walked away like I never mattered.

His gaze isn't just on me—it's locked on the Alpha who saved me, like he's two seconds from tearing him apart.

But he doesn't smell it yet.

The secret sleeping in the east wing – six years old, with his moon-gilded eyes.

And when he sees her?

Peace won't survive the hour.

Damian

I let her go before my father could kill her for the blood in her veins.

The girl with wildfire in her veins. The mate my wolf still howls for.

Now she's back—colder, sharper, untouchable.

But I see it. The way she trembles when I get too close.

And I'd bet my fangs she doesn't flinch like that for anyone else.

She wants peace?

I'll hand her the whole damn treaty—

after I find out who that Alpha is...

and why her scent carries two heartbeats.

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## Chapter 1

Tala

The sound of glass shattering brought the entire bar to a standstill. I froze, barely a few centimeters away from the shards as they scattered across the floor. Ruby, my co-worker, stood beside me, her face pale as a sheet. Her hands trembled at her sides, and when our eyes met, I saw it—the raw fear and the tears welling up. Everyone knew what this meant for her. This wasn't just a mistake. This was a final strike.

If Mr. Titan found out Ruby had dropped the glass, she'd lose her job. As if summoned by the noise, Mr. Titan stormed out of his office, his shoes striking the floor like warning shots.

“You have got to be kidding me!” His voice sliced through the tense silence, sharp and cold. His piercing gaze snapped to us. “Who did this?”

Ruby's tears spilled over, her lips trembling as she turned to speak, ready to take the blame. But I couldn't let her.

“It was me, Mr. Titan,” I said quickly, my voice quiet and apologetic. I stepped forward slightly, shielding Ruby from his wrath. “My hands were wet, and the glass slipped. I'm very sorry, sir. I'll—”

“You'll what? Apologize? Clean it up?” he snapped, taking a step closer, his looming frame casting a shadow over me. “Do you have any idea how much that glass costs? How many more are you going to break before you learn how to be careful?”

I bit my tongue, swallowing a retort. Technically, this was the first glass I'd ever broken, but saying so would only make it worse. Instead, I nodded. "It won't happen again."

"It better not." He jabbed a finger in my direction. "And rest assured, I'm taking this from your paycheck. You're lucky I'm even letting someone like you work here. You are good for nothing."

My stomach tightened at his words, but I kept my face neutral. This is just how it is, I reminded myself.

Mr. Titan's gaze snapped to Ruby, who hastily wiped at her wet cheeks. "And why are you crying?" he barked.

"I—I..." Ruby stammered, unable to find her words.

"The glass cut her a little," I said, stepping in again before she could fumble further.

"That's why you're crying?" he scoffed, his expression twisting into disgust. "Pull yourself together and get back to work. Both of you!" He pointed toward the floor. "And clean this up. Now!"

With that, he turned and stormed off, muttering something under his breath about "useless Omegas." The silence that followed was suffocating, broken only by the quiet shuffle of feet as the bar's staff resumed their work.

"Thank you," Ruby whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "You didn't have to do that. You just saved my job."

I shrugged one shoulder, brushing it off. "Don't worry about it. Just be careful next time, okay? You know how impatient he is."

She nodded vigorously, still dabbing at her cheeks.

“You should go to the bathroom and get yourself together. I’ll handle things here.”

Ruby muttered a quick “thank you” before running off into the staff bathroom.

I crouched down, grabbing the broom from under the counter. As I swept up the shattered pieces, a sharp sting shot through my hand. I glanced down to see a shard of glass lodged in my palm. Biting back a wince, I plucked it out, watching a bead of blood rise to the surface.

This was the life of an Omega—thankless, undervalued, and predetermined. It sucked, but I’d come to accept it. Nineteen years of this existence, made worse by losing my parents and brother at a young age, had hardened me to it. I wasn’t asking for recognition or sympathy. I’d learned long ago that those things didn’t come easily to someone like me. So, I simply lived to survive. I swallowed the ache in my chest and continued my shift because no matter how heavy the weight, I refused to let it break me. As I worked, I counted down the time to the end of my shift.

There was supposed to be a bonfire in the slums where I lived tonight. And I had promised Gina, my friend, that I would go with her as a third wheel to keep things from getting awkward with Rowan—the boy she was convinced was her fated mate. To me, her description of a fated mate sounded ridiculous. As an omega, I wasn’t even qualified to dream of such things.

As I wiped down the empty wooden table, ready to end my evening shift, Mr. Titan approached me with his signature frown etched deep into his face. “You think you’re leaving already,” he said, his tone sharp and disdainful.

I glanced at the patrons who had just walked into the bar before meeting his gaze. “My shift is over in a few minutes, sir. And I’ve made plans for the night.”

“Well, cancel them,” he snapped. “Nothing is more important than satisfying my customers.”

Without waiting for a response, he whirled around and walked away.

Sighing, I returned to the counter to get my notepad and gather the new patron’s orders. I did the routine of scribbling down requests, setting up the drinks on the counter, and ferrying them to the tables. Each step felt heavier, knowing my night wasn’t ending anytime soon.

“Refill. Now,” one of the patrons barked, cutting through the noisy chatter in the bar. Grabbing the jug of beer, I hurried over to his table, refilling his cup for what must have been the fifth time.

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As I leaned in to pour, I felt a finger creep up my thigh, sliding towards my waist. My body reacted instantly, flinching away from the unwelcome touch. In my haste to move, I stumbled backward into the girl behind me, and the jug tipped forward, sending beer splashing all over her.

Shit.

I didn't need a crystal ball to know what was coming next. I knew exactly what would happen and how it would happen. She would rain hell on me, loudly berating my incompetence, cursing my entire existence, and threatening to involve her undoubtedly powerful Beta father because I ruined her pretty dress. The whole scene would attract the attention of Mr. Titan, who would come barreling out of his office to join the chaos, berate me in front of everyone, and remind me of how unworthy I was of the scraps he was paying me as wages. He always made sure to make it seem like he was paying me an arm and a leg.

Bracing myself for the inevitable, I closed my eyes, took a steadying breath, and prepared for the storm.

"How dare you, you tramp?! Don't you know how to do your job?" Raina, a regular at the bar, shrieked, leaping to her feet. Her finger jabbed at me repeatedly, her words sharp and venomous as she hurled insults and threats my way. Of course, she ended with the ultimate promise to tell her Beta father, who no doubt had the money and influence to make my life miserable.

I tried to slip in a few apologies, but they were drowned out by her tirade. And just as expected, Mr. Titan stormed out of his office, his face red with anger.

“What is this commotion?!” he bellowed, his fury quickly zeroing in on me. “Tala, can’t you go a single shift without causing a disaster? You’re lucky I even pay you for this nonsense!”

I stood there, absorbing his words, each one stinging like a fresh wound.

Oh, I forgot to mention. Humiliation? Yeah, we were old friends.

After making it very clear that I was going to get a deduction from my wage today, he ordered me to work behind the counter for the rest of the night and leave the table service to “more competent” workers.

I kept my eyes lowered to the ground, as I returned to prepare another round of drinks for the late-night patrons, the doorbell chimed, signaling the arrival of another customer. I sighed—more work. But when I looked up, something stopped me cold. My breath caught in my throat, and suddenly, everything Gina ever told me about the day she laid eyes on Rowan started to make sense.

Every thought faded into a blur when I laid eyes on him. He walked in like he owned the room, his movement smooth and deliberate, carrying a quiet confidence with each step. His scent hit me next, earthy and warm, wrapping around my senses like a slow-burning ember on a cold night.

As he approached the counter, I straightened, drawn to him in a way that felt too strange. I couldn’t look away, even as my pulse quickened in my ears. There was a strange sensation, like I had known him forever, yet this was the first time I was seeing him. My breath hitched when his eyes met mine, and in that moment, it was as though something deep inside me had snapped into place. My wolf, quiet and dormant for so long, woke with an urgency that felt foreign to me. A magnetic pull tugged at me, strong enough to stop time, steal the air from my lungs, and root me in place.

He flashed me a smile as he settled onto one of the barstools behind the counter. It wasn't the cocky grin of a Beta looking for trouble. It was softer, quieter, and almost...curious. Only now did I have the sense to tear my eyes away from him and hope silently that he didn't think I was checking him out or something. At the thought of that, I cringed internally.

When I glanced up at him again, he was still smiling, but as per my job description, I had to smile back and ask this gorgeous customer what he wanted.

"A glass of beer, please." His voice was calm, far more soothing than I was prepared for.

I filled a glass, and as I was handing it over to him, my fingers brushed his. For some reason, my entire body shivered. The bar was hot and thick with the stench of sweat and alcohol. So, why on earth was I shivering?

"Would you like anything else?" I asked, trying to keep my composure.

He shook his head in refutation. "Nothing for now. I am waiting for someone. Mind if I wait here?"

"Wait...here?"

He looked down at the counter, and then he looked back up at me. "Is that a problem?"

I mentally slapped myself. "Oh no, you can sit wherever you want to. It's a free world, not for people like me, but yeah, anywhere you like."

Having already embarrassed myself enough, I turned to head over to the other side of the counter, but he spoke again. "Damian."



I stopped and turned back toward him, a brow arched.

“My name is Damian,” he repeated, offering his hand with that same easy smile on his face.

Before accepting his handshake, I discreetly wiped my surely sweaty palm on my apron. “Tala.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Tala.”

For a moment, everything seemed to pause.

Something about the way he held my hand sent a strange shiver through me, a fleeting sensation I couldn’t place. That was ridiculous, wasn’t it? No one believed in fated mates anymore—except Gina.

The silence between us was only broken when the doorbell chimed again, signaling another arrival. Damian glanced over his shoulder and turned back to me, still holding my hand.

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“My company has arrived.”

I followed his gaze to a man entering the bar. Something about him felt off. There was something unsettling in his presence. Though, I couldn't put my finger on it.

Damian withdrew his hand from mine, his smile still in place. He lingered for a few moments, his gaze holding mine, before he finally picked up his drink and made his way to one of the tables where the man he was supposed to meet was already settled, waiting for him.

Over the next few minutes, the man spoke in a low, hushed tone. I couldn't eavesdrop even if I wanted to, though I found myself trying to catch fragments of their conversation. At first, Damian wasn't fully focused on what the man was saying as he kept stealing glances in my direction. The way I could tell he was stealing glances was because I was doing the exact same thing. There was something about him that I couldn't put my finger on, but I'd never felt this drawn to anyone, especially not someone I'd just met.

I tried to ignore the way my skin tingled under his gaze. The curiosity and intensity in his dark eyes made me feel very self-conscious and intrigued. Despite my best efforts to focus on the tasks in front of me, my thoughts kept drifting back to him. It wasn't long before I realized he had stopped looking my way, his full attention now on the man. From behind the counter, I could see the shift in their expressions. The conversation had turned serious and tense. The man's face was contorted with anger and bitterness. Damian looked angry, too, but there was something deeper there. Disappointment.

Their conversation went on for what felt like an eternity. When it was finally over, the man was the first to leave. Damian remained seated, his face buried in his drink, lost in thought. I found myself itching to go over to him and...what? Comfort him? I wasn't even sure. But the man sitting there now looked like a shadow of the one who had walked in earlier. After a long moment, Damian drained the last of his drink, stood up, and walked out of the bar, leaving the emptiness of his presence behind.

I felt a pang of disappointment. I had convinced myself that we'd shared some kind of instant connection, but maybe I was wrong. I had to remind myself that he was a customer I had spoken to for all of five minutes. That should be it. Nothing more. Pushing him to the back of my thoughts, I continued my work for the rest of the night, eventually closing the bar. By the time I finished, it was very late, and I was certain the bonfire would have ended. I hated to disappoint Gina, but I hoped she would understand when I explained the circumstances that kept me from showing up.

As I walked down the dimly lit alley that led home, I had this prickly sensation settle over me—like I was being followed. Occasionally, I would glance over my shoulders, half expecting to see someone there, but every time, it was just the empty path behind me. The sensation didn't fade. It grew stronger, twisting into a gut-wrenching unease that I couldn't ignore any longer. I'd always trusted my instincts, and this time, they were screaming at me. I quickened my steps, my heart pounding against my chest, until I spotted a shadow lurking in the dark—a confirmation that I wasn't alone.

I was about to run when I was halted by a man in a black hoodie blocking the path in front of me. My first instinct was to turn and run the other way, but as I did, I found another hooded figure casually leaning against the alley wall.

I let out a sigh, calculating the possibility of taking down one of the men and making a break for it. But before I could even make a move, a voice cut through the silence, sending a chill down my spine.

“Tala Vale,” the voice called as a figure stepped out of the shadows. “You’re a hard woman to find.”

## Chapter 2

### Tala

The last thing I wanted tonight was more drama. After a long shift at the bar, I was exhausted and wanted to head home, put my feet up, and call it a night. But as I watched the three men edge closer, their eyes glinting with mischief, I knew my quiet evening had just slipped out of reach.

As they moved closer to me, I backed against the cold wall of the alley. The other two men paused, and the one that had spoken continued toward me, a filthy smirk across his scarred face. When my back hit the wall, I swallowed hard. My throat was dry despite the lump that had formed. I knew exactly who they were. After all, I had walked right into their loan shark stall, desperate for a loan. I had honestly thought I could pay back within the given time, but I hadn’t anticipated how difficult things would get. I’d given Gina all my savings when her father fell ill. Then, I had to take out a loan to cover rent and other expenses while I worked to make it all back. But with Mr. Titan always finding reasons to deduct my wages, and with the less-to-nothing tips I received at the bar, paying back the loan has proved to be a tough feat. Now Garrick and his goons were after me.

“Garrick...” I managed to speak, averting my gaze from his wandering eyes, which were making my skin crawl. “I just need some more time—two more weeks, I swear. I’ll have your money and even some extra by then. You have my word.”

“I don’t care about your word,” he sneered, stepping closer. “If you can’t pay me my money right now, I can think of other ways you can settle your debt for the time being.” His eyes dropped lower, and I could feel the weight of his unwanted attention

on the neckline of my shirt. A sick feeling twisted in my stomach as I understood exactly what he meant.

“Garrick, I—”

“Shhh,” he cut me off, placing his finger against my lips. I watched as he licked his lower lip and allowed his gaze to sweep across my bosom before moving to my face. “Why don’t you come with us? Or would you rather we do it right here?”

I froze, absolutely disgusted. But knowing the reputation of the infamous Garrick, I had to hold my reservations. “Garrick, please—”

Once again, he cut me off. But this time, he leaned forward in an attempt to kiss me. Dear goodness! He reeked of cigarettes, sweat, and alcohol combined, a stench that made me retch. I recoiled instinctively, but his lips brushed against my cheeks. Garrick grabbed my jaw, forcing me back towards him as he tried again. With all the force I could muster, I shoved him away, not realizing that my claws were out, and I had scratched him in the process.

“You’ve got some audacity, you little bitch!” He lunged at me, but I reacted quickly, raising my hand, ready to slash with my claws and run. But before I could, he caught my hand mid-air, his grip like iron.

“What do you think you’re trying to do, little wolf?” Garrick sneered, pressing me against the wall. He leaned in, his lips just inches from mine, when a voice, cold and seething with anger, cut through the air.

“Get away from her!” A voice rang out, familiar and commanding.

My breath caught, and my body went rigid, as if something deep inside me recognized it before my mind could catch up. Then, warmth spread through me,

strange and completely out of place, given the danger I was in. But hearing his voice made me feel safe and protected—like nothing could touch me as long as he was here.

I couldn't make out his face in the shadows, but I knew it was him. Damian.

Garrick pulled back in anger, his gaze shifting to Damian, irritation apparent on his face. "And you are...?"

One of Garrick's goons leaned in and whispered in his ear. "That's Damian Stone. The Alpha heir. He just returned to town from his Alpha heir training."

My stomach dropped. Alpha heir? My gaze flickered to the stranger who had made my body react in ways I still didn't understand. Of all the people to feel this pull toward, it had to be him? It didn't make sense. It couldn't make sense. The mate bond, if that's even what this was, shouldn't tie an Omega to an Alpha heir. That just didn't happen.

Garrick's expression faltered for a brief moment. Then, he started towards Damian with confident steps. "You're on the wrong side of town, Prince Charming. I suggest you go back to that mansion of yours and leave us to handle our business." He halted in front of Damian, his voice dropping to a malicious whisper. "Plus, take a look around you, pretty boy. It's three against one. You really think you can—"

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Garrick didn't get to complete that sentence. What followed was the sharp, sickening crack of bone breaking, followed by Garrick's pained yell. His goons immediately rushed to attack Damian, but he was faster. With a fluid motion, Damian deflected the first shifter's attack and knocked him hard into the wall. Then he turned his attention to the second shifter, delivering a brutal kick to his groin and a blow that sent him crashing after his comrade.

Garrick, visibly enraged whilst nursing a broken arm, charged towards Damian, but Damian grabbed his injured arm and twisted it, making Garrick drop to his knees as he cried out in agony.

"If I ever see you or your men harassing her or any other person," his voice was a low growl, carrying a promise with the threat, "your arm won't be the only thing I break."

He released Garrick's arm, letting him crumple to the ground. His eyes shifted toward me, who had been watching the scene unfold in front of me with a mixture of satisfaction from hearing their screams and awe at the swift power Damian displayed. He stretched his hand to me. "Let's go."

Instead of taking his hand or even showing any gratitude for his sudden appearance, I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "You're the Alpha's son?"

What kind of twisted game was the Moon Goddess playing by making the Alpha's son my mate?

In the weeks that followed, I never heard from Garrick and his goons. Although I saw him once on the street, he surprisingly made no attempt to approach me. I managed to

scrape together the money I owed him, plus a little extra as interest, and paid him back. But Garrick was the least of my problems during that time.

After learning that Damian was the Alpha's son and the heir, no less, I tried to keep my distance and ignore everything that I felt at our first meeting. It should have been easy. It should have been possible to forget about him. But Damian made sure it wasn't.

Every single day, he showed up at the bar. And he wasn't just there to get drinks. Sure, he ordered a glass or two and always left a ridiculously generous tip, but that wasn't why he came. He would sit in the back of the bar, watching me as I worked. I couldn't figure out if he was just bored or determined, but it drove me crazy. He would always be the last person to leave the bar, and he would sometimes offer to walk me to my home. Every time, I would refuse. But no matter how many times I turned him down or how hard I tried to act like his presence didn't affect me, I couldn't stop the flutter of nerves—or something more—whenever I felt his eyes on me.

The worst part was how my wolf reacted to him. Every time he stepped into the bar, her restlessness flared up, pacing inside me like a wild thing trapped in a cage, desperate to be free. She wanted me to close the distance, to go to him, to accept the bond between us. Her urges were maddening, a constant pull that I fought with every bit of control I had.

One day, I decided it was time to tell Damian Stone off. Yes, he was attractive in more ways than I cared to admit. And yes, I might enjoy knowing that he came by the bar every day just to watch me. Maybe I enjoyed it a little too much. But unfortunately, the truth was simple: we lived in two completely different worlds, and it simply wouldn't work.

The day I resolved to set Damian straight, he didn't show up at the bar at his usual



time. At first, I was relieved. Then, slowly, a wave of disappointment crept in—a feeling so ridiculous it almost made me laugh. How ironic to miss someone you were planning to chase away. Every time the bell over the door jingled, I found myself glancing up, my heart jumping in anticipation, only to deflate when it wasn't him. By mid-afternoon, frustration mingled with something I refused to name, and by the end of the day, I'd all but resigned myself to the fact that I wouldn't be seeing Damian today.

The bar emptied out as closing time approached, leaving me with my thoughts and a bitter sense of annoyance I couldn't shake. The last customer left without leaving a tip, and I began cleaning up, dragging chairs, and wiping tables, trying to convince myself I didn't care if he showed up or not.

As I wiped down the tables and flipped the chairs onto them, the jingle of the doorbell startled me. I straightened, ready to tell whoever it was that the bar was closed, but the words caught in my throat when I saw him.

Damian stood in the doorway, rainwater streaming down his face, his clothes clinging to his body. He looked like he'd walked straight through a storm to get here, and from the state of him, he probably had. His dark brown eyes locked onto mine, and I froze, unable to look away. He was soaked to the bone, his wet hair framing his face and his gray T-shirt clinging to every inch of his lean, muscular frame.

"Damian..." I whispered, his name barely audible over the storm raging outside. Slowly, Damian began walking toward me. His expression was complicated, a mix of sadness, anger, and relief. When he stopped just a few inches away, his eyes softened, and the tension in his face melted away.

Then, gently, he raised his hand and cupped my chin.

I felt my breath hitch as his cold, damp touch met my skin. I hadn't realized how

much I craved his touch until now. Without thinking, I nuzzled into his palm.

“I had a bad day,” he spoke softly, though there was a raw edge to his voice, like recalling the reason his day went badly reignited by the anger he had been feeling.

Damian’s finger brushed lightly against my chin, his cold touch sending a shiver down my spine. “I thought I understood the world I lived in, but I was wrong,” he continued, this time, his tone dripping with frustration. “Furious as I was, all I could think about was you.”

“You,” he continued. “Being near you...it calms me. Watching you go about your day is the highlight of mine. Since the moment I met you, I haven’t been able to get you out of my head. I don’t know what it is, but I’m drawn to you in ways I can’t explain.”

My heart raced at his confession, and heat rose in my cheeks. I felt the same, too. I made no solid attempt to stop him when he moved closer, covering the only space between us.

My mouth opened, and the words that came out were, “Damian...we shouldn’t...”

I averted my gaze, trying to find my resolve amid the turmoil, but he gently cupped my cheek, tilting my face back to meet his eyes

“Tell me to stop,” he murmured, his voice barely audible over the pounding of my heart. “If you want me to leave, I’ll go. But if you feel it, too, Tala...if you feel even a fraction of what I feel, then don’t push me away.”

Once again, I opened my mouth to speak, but this time, no words came out. The words caught in my throat, words that even if I said, I knew would have zero conviction. Damian’s hand slid to the back of my neck, his fingers threading through

my hair. Tilting my head up slightly, his eyes searched mine for permission. And I knew my gaze gave him all the answers he needed.

His lips found mine, and the world around me disappeared. I melted into his arms, my fingers instinctively gripping the damp fabric of his shirt. Damian growled into my mouth as the kiss deepened, his grip shifting to my waist, pulling me impossibly close. His tongue teased mine, slow yet demanding, and he sighed, as if a long hunger was finally satisfied.

I didn't care about the consequences. I didn't care about the voice screaming in my head to stop. All I cared about was the way he made me feel—alive, seen, and wanted.

Damian stayed with me at the bar until the rain stopped. This time, when he offered to walk me home, I said yes without a second thought. When we reached my house, I couldn't just let him head back across town soaked to the bone, so I invited him in to dry off.

“Here,” I murmured, handing him a clean folded towel.

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“Thank you, Tala.”

Our fingers brushed as he took it from me, and a shiver shot down my spine. His gaze caught mine, and the air between us grew thick with tension.

Was this the mate bond? Was that why resisting him felt impossible? It wasn't just attraction, it was something deeper, something I couldn't fight, no matter how much I wanted to.

His midnight black hair clung damply to his face, the rain having flattened its usual soft waves. Droplets clung to his jawline, rolling down to disappear into the neckline of his equally damp shirt.

Realizing I'd been staring, I pulled my hand back abruptly. I cleared my throat awkwardly, rubbing my temples as I looked anywhere but at him. “I, uh...you can take your time,” I said, my voice uneven. “My place is cramped, but I can look away while you dry off.”

“I don't want you to look away.”

I let out a nervous chuckle. “I think it's best if I do.”

Without glancing at his face, I turned my back to him. A small chuckle came from him, and then the sound of fabric rustling filled the silence as he pulled his shirt off. My thoughts raced. What would he look like with his shirt off? I shouldn't be thinking of him this way, yet I found myself doing so.

Out of the corner of my eye, in the mirror's reflection, I caught sight of him. He was rubbing the towel through his hair, his damp muscles shifting with the motion. His chest was broad and scarred, glistening faintly in the low light that emphasized every sharp, defined line.

I stared longer than I meant to. Too long. When I finally tore my eyes away, I realized he was staring back at me through the mirror, catching me in the act.

Heat rushed to my face as I looked away quickly, mortified.

Damian didn't seem to mind, though. If anything, he was amused, judging from the laugh that followed.

Shaking off thoughts of him from my head, I shut my eyes tight, determined to keep them closed until he was finished. But then I felt a warm, firm hand on my shoulder. My eyes fluttered open, and I found him standing right behind me. I could feel the heat of his body. An inch closer, and our bodies would be touching.

No, no. I couldn't afford to be this close to this man. Not here.

I attempted to back away from him, but his hand slid down to my arm, holding me gently in place.

"Why do you resist me?" His voice was soft as his eyes searched mine.

"Damian," I started, my voice trembling, "you know it's an unwritten rule for an Omega to speak to an Alpha without permission."

"You have my permission now," he said, his tone firm. "Tell me, Tala, why do you resist me?"

I hesitated, letting out a shaky sigh. “Because...if I let myself fall for you, if I accept this bond completely, I feel like I’d only get hurt in the end.”

His expression softened, his hand still on my arm as he considered my words. Silence lingered between us before he finally spoke.

“Do you want to know what I feel?”

I shook my head, unsure if I wanted to hear the answer.

“I feel this pull towards you,” he said softly, his gaze pinning me in place. “It’s not just the bond, it’s you, Tala. The way you carry yourself, the fire in your eyes, even when you’re trying so hard to hide it. I...I’ve never wanted anyone this much.”

When Damian cupped my cheeks and tilted my face up, I didn’t stop him. I couldn’t. Instead, I leaned into him, letting him kiss me. No, I didn’t just let him kiss me. I kissed him back.

What started as a slow, tender kiss quickly transformed into a dance of passion that transcended coordination. His hands moved from my cheeks to my waist, pulling me closer until there was no space left between us. The raw sexual chemistry between us was electric, burning any doubts I’d held on to. He moved from my lips to trail soft, deliberate kisses along my temple, down to my neck. My breath hitched as he found the zipper of my dress, and without hesitation, he eased it down slowly, letting the dress pool at my feet.

Damian took a couple of steps, his dark eyes roaming over my body as he devoured my nudity. His gaze lingered on the skin just beneath my left breast, tracing the crescent-shaped mark I’d had since birth, before flicking back to my eyes.

“What’s that?” he asked, his voice rough and thick with desire.

“A birthmark,” I said, a little sheepishly.

I felt shy and vulnerable under his gaze, but the shyness faded when he began undressing, removing his pants in one fluid motion.

He closed the distance between us again, capturing my lips in a deep, urgent kiss. His arms wrapped around me as he lifted me effortlessly, carrying me to the bed. Gently, he laid me down, careful not to press the weight of his body against mine.

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“Have you done this before?” he asked softly.

I shook my head.

Despite his eyes burning with unrestrained desire, he asked. “Do you want to?”

Did I want to? All I could think about at this very moment was what it would feel like to have him inside of me. Slowly, I nodded.

I pushed up to kiss him, and he growled against my mouth, his restraint slipping as the kiss grew deeper.

He shifted, spreading my legs and settling between them.

“It might hurt,” he said, his voice gentler. “Are you absolutely certain you want to do this?”

“Yes,” I whispered, my voice soft but certain.

Locking his eyes on mine, he placed his crown at my opening and moved slowly and gently, circling around my wetness. The anticipation was almost too much to bear, and when he finally pushed in, just slightly, a sharp pain followed. But I didn’t care. I wanted him. All of him.

“Please tell me if I’m hurting you,” Damian murmured, his voice barely a whisper. His gaze was full of concern and tenderness.



Spreading my knees wider, I relaxed as best as I could. He moved slowly, inch by inch, until he was fully inside me.

He started to move, slowly and deliberately, his hips rocking into mine. The pain began to lessen with each movement as he stretched me. My legs wrapped around him instinctively, pulling him closer. His low grunts and soft moans filled the room, and I clung to the sound.

“Damian...” I breathed, his name escaping me in a moan.

His pace quickened slightly, his movements more sure and intense. My body responded to him in ways I couldn’t control, and the heat building in my core finally broke free. My nails dug into his back as I cried out his name, trembling as the wave of pleasure crashed over me. Within moments, Damian followed, shuddering with a low grunt as he filled me with his release.

Breathless, he collapsed against me, planting soft kisses along my jawline and neck. “Fuck,” he muttered softly, a smile tugging at his lips. “That felt incredible.”

I smiled, heat creeping up my cheeks as he pulled me into a cuddle, tracing invisible lines along my bare back.

Little did I know that this would mark the beginning of something far more complicated and painful than I could ever imagine. I hadn’t just lost myself in Damian that night. I had set myself up for the worst heartbreak of my life.

## Chapter 3

Tala

Over the last weeks, Damian had taken to me all the beautiful places in the pack I had

only ever dreamed of visiting. What amazed me most was how unashamed and unbothered he was to be seen with me. It wasn't just that he walked beside me. He held my hand as we strolled, wrapped an arm around my waist to keep me close, and stole sweet kisses in plain view, which I absolutely loved.

But what he didn't seem to notice were the stares. People around would glance at me with disgust, their expressions screaming in disapproval. Still, I would force the thoughts of what they might think of us to the back of my mind, determined to savor every moment with him.

I was the subject of every gossip in the pack, from the slums to Beta territory. Gina, bless her, never failed to butt into the cruel conversations she overheard about me. Once, she even got into trouble with her co-worker who accused me of manipulating Damian into falling for me.

These things never seemed to bother Damian. He always urged me to ignore the gossip and rise above it, but it was easier for him to say. One day, he would be Alpha, untouchable, and revered. I, on the other hand, would always be an Omega, cast out, overlooked, and invisible. Yet, despite it all, I couldn't help but love him. We shared everything that lovers did, and last night, we had sex again.

I used to dread mornings, but that changed when Damian came into my life. Now, waking up next to him felt like the best part of my day. Streaks of sunlight streamed through the window, casting a soft glow on his face. His expression was calm, almost boyish in sleep—a stark contrast to the strong, commanding presence he carried when awake. I smiled, my chest tightening at the thought of how fleeting these moments felt as if the world might come knocking any second to take them away. The smile on my face turned wistful as I let the thoughts linger. Unable to resist, I reached out and brushed a strand of his dark hair away from his forehead. His lips twitched into the faintest of smiles, and his eyes slowly fluttered open.

“Good morning,” he murmured, his voice husky from sleep.

“Good morning,” I whispered back, my voice soft but steady.

He immediately noticed the unease on my face, even though I hadn’t meant it to show. Wrapping his arm around my waist, he pulled me closer. “What’s wrong, Tala?” His thumb brushed over my cheek as he studied me, his eyes filled with concern.

I hesitated, the words caught in my throat. How could I share the nagging fear that this was too good to last? So, I did what I always did—I smiled and covered the truth with another lesser truth.

“Just thinking about the hundred insults Mr. Titan is going to hurl at me when I show up to the bar late,” I said, forcing a small smile.

Damian smirked, his expression softening. “I could talk to Mr. Titan and ask him to make your work easier.”

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I chuckled, throwing the sheets aside as I climbed out of bed. “I already receive enough backlash just from being seen with you. I think I’ll pass on adding fuel to that fire.”

I began searching for my jeans and shirt, slipping them on one by one. Damian sat up in bed, watching as I dressed.

“So, what’s your day going to be like?” he asked.

I paused, glancing over my shoulder. “There’s this thing. It’s the anniversary of the Beta-Omega battle, where I lost my parents and brother, Ryker. It’s the one time of the year when everyone here, including Garrick and the likes, sets aside their bad attitudes to honor the memory of the ones we lost.”

An uncomfortable silence settled over us, but I ignored it, passing him a small smile.

“And tomorrow night?” Damian asked.

“Isn’t that the pack’s centenary celebration?”

“It is. And I want you to come with me.”

I froze, staring at him like he’d just sprouted a second head. “No way,” I said. “That sort of thing is for the rich, powerful, and classy. Omegas don’t go to events like that.”

“Then, it’s time we changed that.”

The day of the pack's centenary celebration arrived. My nerves were on edge all day, knowing I was walking straight into the lion's den, the judgmental, critical stares of those who ruled the pack's social circles. I was leaving the slums I knew so well to step into a world where I didn't belong, a place where appearances mattered more than anything else.

But alongside the nerves was a flicker of excitement I couldn't ignore. Damian would be by my side the entire night, his presence a silent yet powerful affirmation of everything the pack had been whispering about us. It was, in a way, my quiet rebellion, a "shove it up your ass" moment for everyone who thought I didn't deserve to stand beside him. Damian was with me, and no amount of gossip or disapproval could change that.

The day went by quickly, especially as there were not many customers. Mr. Titan decided to close early so everyone could prepare for the celebration that night. After my shift ended, I went over to Gina's house, where she helped me get ready. I intended to look different because, for once, I felt different, like maybe I could matter. The dress Damian had given me was stunning, something far from anything I'd ever owned, and I knew it would draw attention. I wanted to make sure my entire look lived up to the dress.

Gina carefully worked through my hair, her fingers moving with practiced ease. As a hairstylist, she worked her magic, transforming my usual loose hair or low bun into something polished and elegant.

"You know, this is the first time I've seen you with your hair done up like this. You look stunning."

I glanced at her through the mirror. "I look like I'm some Beta girl from the bar, right?"

Gina laughed softly, pinning a pearl clip into my hair. “No, you look like you—beautiful and kind.”

I sighed, watching my reflection as she added the final touches. “I don’t know if I belong there.”

Her voice softened. “It’s not about belonging. It’s about being yourself, no matter where you are.”

I stood and turned to face the full-length mirror, inspecting the ivory satin dress that fell gracefully over my curves. It clung just enough to make me feel elegant.

“You look gorgeous,” Gina said again, stepping back.

“Thanks,” I muttered, tugging at the hem of the dress. “I guess.”

She caught my eye, a grin tugging at her lips. “Just breathe. You’re gonna rock it. Now go. The celebration’s already in full swing.”

I grabbed my purse, giving her a quick hug. “See you later, Gina.”

“Take care of yourself.”

With a final nod, I headed out the door, my heart pounding in my chest.

The moment I arrived at the pack headquarters with the invitation card Damian gave me, I was greeted by a sea of unfamiliar faces. The place buzzed with chatter and laughter. I scanned the crowd for Damian, but he was nowhere in sight. I could feel the weight of stares on me, some paired with whispers exchanged in hushed tones, which only heightened my self-consciousness. A few glances carried outright disdain, but then there were others, smiles offered by a different group who, to my surprise,

even invited me to join them at their table.

Clearly, they didn't know who I was.

Forcing a polite smile, I accepted their invitation and took a seat while I waited for Damian to notice me. They introduced themselves one by one, sons and daughters of a well-known Beta family whose name carried weight in the pack. My stomach tightened as the introductions circled closer to me, and I debated lying about who I was. But just as the moment arrived, I was spared. The crowd fell silent as Alpha Thorne stepped onto the stone pedestal. His presence exuded authority, but to those of us in the slums, it invoked only fear and resentment.

Alpha Thorne was a ruthless leader infamous for the brutality that kept his pack in line. Stories of his reign circulated like bedtime horror tales meant to frighten children. He was a complete contrast to Damian, and watching him now, I wondered how the apple could fall so far from the tree.

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“Tonight, we honor the strength and unity of the Stonehart Pack,” Alpha Thorne’s deep voice echoed through the silence, commanding attention. “For a hundred years, our ancestors have bled, sacrificed, and fought to protect the legacy of this great pack. They have conquered rivals, crushed enemies, and ensured that our name would be whispered in fear and awe across these lands. It is their sacrifices that we stand upon, and it is my leadership that guarantees we will never fall.

“We are not a pack of equals. We are a pack of purpose,” he continued, his tone growing arrogant with each word. “My duty is to ensure that every choice and every sacrifice is made for the future of our pack. The weak serve the strong, and the strong ensure our survival.”

His voice boomed, filling the setting as he declared, “So tonight, we don’t simply toast to the past. We toast to me, the Alpha who carries this legacy forward. To strength. To dominance. To Stonehart!”

The crowd erupted in cheers, but the weight of his words settled over me like a dark cloud. To him, we weren’t equals. We were mere tools, expendable pieces in his quest for power. And yet, despite the harsh truth of his words, no one dared challenge him.

The chatter resumed, and while everyone at my table was engrossed in bragging about the accomplishments of their fathers, I slipped away to go in search of Damian. My instincts led me to the pack house, right across from the pack headquarters. I figured if he wasn’t in the quarters, he’d be at the house. I don’t know what I was doing, trying to sneak into the Alpha’s domain, but there was no better opportunity to do so since everyone was engrossed in the celebration. I needed to see Damian. I felt



suffocated in the crowd, like I couldn't breathe, surrounded by all those eyes.

As I passed through the courtyard, I caught sight of Alpha Thorne barking orders at a few servants. Panicked, I ducked behind a pillar, hoping he hadn't noticed me. But I had a sinking feeling that he did. My heart raced in my chest, and I braced myself, expecting him to walk over and expose me. What was the punishment for sneaking into the Alpha's house? I didn't know much about the pack laws, but I imagined it could not be good.

But to my greatest surprise, Alpha Thorne turned and walked away. Confusion settled over me, but I dismissed it, convincing myself that he hadn't seen me and I was just being paranoid. I ventured further into the house, not sure where I was going, until I stumbled upon the garden. There, I saw him. Damian stood with his back to me, gazing up at the fountain.

Instantly, I felt relief wash over me, like sinking into a soft bed after a long day. I couldn't help but smile. With a newfound sense of confidence, I stepped forward into the garden, no longer afraid of being caught in the pack house with him.

I had only taken a few steps forward when Damian turned. And the moment I saw his face, I knew something was wrong.

"Tala," he said, his voice filled with surprise. "H-how...you shouldn't be here."

The smile on my face faltered, an unsettling feeling creeping through me. I had grown accustomed to the way Damian reacted when he saw me. First, his face would break into a smile, and he'd come toward me, wrapping me in a hug, burying his face in my neck to breathe in my scent. When he pulled back, he'd kiss my cheek, his touch warm and affectionate. But none of that happened now. Instead, Damian stood there, hands shoved in his pockets, staring at me with a mixture of surprise and something else I couldn't quite place.

“I—I...” I stuttered, not sure of the right words to say at this moment. But I eventually managed, “I searched for you at the party.”

When he didn’t say anything, I continued. “I just...I thought you might be here. That’s why I came.”

Damian’s head dropped briefly before his eyes lifted, and when they met mine again, everything in him had changed. His expression was blank, empty even, as if he were a stranger standing in front of me.

He spoke quietly, his voice devoid of warmth. “It’s good you’re here, Tala. I need to tell you something.”

“Okay...” I nodded slowly. “What is it?”

Damian took a deep breath before he spoke again. “The last few weeks have been wonderful, but we both knew it couldn’t last.”

My heart broke. No, that was an understatement. My heart shattered into a pile of dust. That very statement knocked the air out of my lungs.

“Today has reminded me of my responsibility,” he continued. “I have a legacy to uphold, and I would be doing you, as well as my ancestors, a disservice if I kept...whatever this was between us.”

His words hit me like a physical blow. Whatever this was between us. I blinked back the tears threatening to fall from my eyes. The knot in my throat tightened, and I fought to keep my composure. The past few weeks had been the happiest of my life, yet he dismissed it all as if it meant nothing.

“When I become Alpha,” he said, his tone hardening. “I’ll need a Luna. Someone

worthy of the title.”

He didn’t need to say the next words. I knew it. I was an Omega, and there was no way I could ever be worthy enough to wield the title of Luna.

“The best thing is to let you go, Tala,” Damian continued, his voice like ice. “You deserve someone special, someone like you. So, I reject the mate bond. You’re free to be with whoever you want now.”

I couldn’t speak. His words numbed me, leaving me speechless. And when he was done, without waiting for a single response from me, he turned away. As he walked past me, he muttered, “You should leave before someone sees you.”

The moment Damian left my presence, my wolf howled in agony. Her pain mirrored my own, but it was deeper and more primal. It was as if his rejection didn’t just break my heart, it shattered her very spirit. I stumbled backward, clutching my chest as though I could physically hold the pieces of myself together. It felt like a part of me had been torn away, the part that was supposed to complete me and make me whole.

I gathered my dress in my hand and turned on my heel, sprinting out of the pack house and away from the celebration. I didn’t care who saw me or what they thought. I didn’t care about anything other than escaping the way my heart was trembling in an agony foreign to me. My wolf wailed in despair, clawing at the edges of my mind. Her anguish mirrored mine and amplified it until I could barely breathe. She stirred restlessly, furious and hurt. She wanted to burst free, to let out a mournful howl that would shatter the trees. But I held her back, barely.

The cold wind bit my skin as I ran blindly into the woods. Hot, relentless tears streamed down my face, blurring my vision. Damian’s words echoed in my mind, louder with each step I took, slicing me open over and over again. Soon, my legs gave out, and I stumbled to a stop near a small clearing and sank to the damp ground,

sobbing.

How could I have been so stupid? I should have known better than to believe in something as fragile as hope. Damian had made me feel seen and like I was more. But the same man had, tonight, reminded me of the truth, the harsh reality of what I was—what I am.

My chest ached with a pain so deep it felt like it might tear me apart. I was wheezing furiously, trying to catch a breath amidst the downpour of tears. Pressing a hand to my chest, I tried to hold myself together. But as I sat there, gasping for air, I realized the ache wasn't just in my chest. It was lower, an odd sensation deep in my stomach. Not painful, but different.

I frowned and leaned back against a tree, trying to steady my racing thoughts. My body had felt strange for weeks now. I'd thought it was the stress of trying to prove myself or living under the constant weight of judgment—circumstances of life I was unfamiliar with. I hadn't even noticed how tired I'd been or how my sense of smell had sharpened even more than usual.

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And there were the dizzy spells. I'd brushed them off as nothing and convinced myself I didn't have time to worry about feeling faint when I had so much else to deal with. And then it hit me. My period was late.

My breathing accelerated, and I pressed my trembling fingers to my abdomen. A new kind of warmth spread through me, unfamiliar but unmistakable.

"No," I whispered, shaking my head. "It can't be."

But deep down, I knew. All the signs were there, too glaring to ignore.

I was pregnant.

### Chapter 4

#### Tala

The next few days went by in a blur. Each one dragged into the next. Depression wrapped itself around me like an unwelcome friend. I'd spent all the time holed up in my apartment, which had become a prison—safe from the judgmental eyes of the pack—but a cage all the same. Both Betas and Omegas had plenty to say, and none of it was kind. I'd been talked about before, but never like this.

I don't know how it happened, but somehow, news of Damian's rejection spread through the pack like wildfire. By the time it reached every corner of the pack, there was no stopping it. My name was on everyone's lips. Tala: The foolish Omega who dared to think she could ever be loved by an Alpha.

Being the subject of mockery sliced deeper than I wanted to admit. But Damian's rejection was a wound that carved out a part of me I wasn't sure I'd ever get back. Each morning, I woke up empty, lost, and unsure of how to go through the day. And at some point, I wondered if I had any will left to keep living. No matter how hard I tried to stay strong, I kept falling apart.

Even my wolf, the fierce part of me that had always been my strength, felt broken. Since Damian's rejection, she had gone silent, curled up in the back of my mind like a wounded animal. I could feel her pain, raw and heavy, resonating through me.

When I tried to reach for her and to offer comfort, she pulled away. Her grief ran deep, blending with mine until I couldn't tell where hers stopped and mine started. I couldn't distinguish between my wolf's sorrow and my own anguish.

We were both lost and broken by the same wound.

I barely ate. Sleep became a distant memory. Even when exhaustion dragged me under, my dreams were merciless and filled with vivid images of a war, blood, and bodies scattered around a battlefield. And then there was this strange woman in white. Whenever our eyes connected, I was yanked out of the dream and pulled back into reality. It felt far too confusing and depressing to think about. And when I wasn't dreaming about that, I was dreaming about Damian's cold, piercing eyes and the sharp sting of his words slicing me apart.

One evening, as streaks of sundown filtered into my room, I sat on the edge of my bed, staring at my reflection in my cracked mirror. My cheeks were hollow, and my eyes were dull and swollen. My hair looked like a tangled mess that hadn't been washed in days—because, well, it hadn't. I barely recognized the person looking back at me.

This isn't you, I thought to myself. You can't let this destroy you.

But even as I said it, I didn't know where to begin. How could I fight back when it felt like my own heart had betrayed me? My chest constricted, and my fingers squeezed the fabric of my clothes, desperate to numb the ache. Then, my eyes fell to my stomach.

From the moment I'd learned I was pregnant, I'd tried my best not to think about the fact that a baby was growing inside of me and definitely not about who the father was—the man who had ripped my heart out from my chest with his bare hands. I didn't let myself think about it because the baby had become a cruel reminder of how foolish I'd been and the price of dreaming of a life I could never have. Every flutter in my belly and every beat of its tiny heart mocked me.

As I sat in front of the mirror, staring at my hollow reflection, something shifted. My hands moved lower, my fingers pressing against my stomach. Tears stung my eyes again, but not of despair this time. For so long, I had let my pain and shame define the child inside me. But then, I felt it, the steady, rhythmic thump of the baby's heartbeat, clear and strong. It was as if the world stood still for a moment. And then, my wolf, who had been silent for so long, stirred within me, her senses awakening as she, too, heard the heartbeat.

That sound, the beat of new life, filled me with something I hadn't felt in a long time. Hope.

The baby shouldn't be a reminder of my mistakes. It should be my redemption, my second chance.

I didn't just owe the child survival. I owed them a life worth living—a life where they would never feel less than or unwanted. And in that moment, I made a promise: I would give them that life no matter what it took.

For the first time in days, a small spark flickered inside me, a spark of purpose. So

that night, while the pack slept, I packed a duffel bag with clothes and a few essentials. Then, I slipped away from Stonehart. Staying there wasn't an option. As long as I remained, I would always be Tala, the foolish Omega rejected by the Alpha. And my child? She would live under that same shadow, judged and cast aside for something that wasn't her fault.

The plan was simple: find a town far from the pack, somewhere no one knew me, and start fresh. So, as I made my way through the eerie quiet of the forest, that goal pushed me forward despite the sharp ache I was feeling all over my body.

I walked for hours, stopping only briefly to rest. During one of my short breaks, I sank to the ground, leaning my back and head against a tree. I closed my eyes for a moment, hoping to catch a little sleep, but then I heard it. The unmistakable snap of a branch. My eyes flew open instantly, my senses on high alert. Pregnancy had sharpened them—my sense of smell, my vision. So, when an unfamiliar scent drifted toward me, I knew immediately I wasn't alone. Whoever was out there had done a good job of staying hidden, blending with the trees and bushes, because I could barely make out a figure.

I rose slowly to my feet. My first thought was to run, but I knew better. Running would make too much noise, mark me as prey, and give whoever—or whatever—was out there an advantage. They'd track my every movement. The smarter choice was to remain calm and assess the situation. I crouched low, blending with the under bushes, forcing myself to steady my breathing, despite the thud of my heart within my chest, to focus on every movement around me. My ears picked up the faintest rustle of leaves to my right, and my nose caught a new, unfamiliar scent in the air.

Another rustle to my right. Another scent.

There wasn't one, there were two.



The snap of another branch, this time closer, sent a chill down my spine. I strained my eyes, scanning the shadows between the trees. Then I caught it—the flash of a figure slipping between trees barely visible but there. The air was charged with danger, and the loud rustle of leaves made my heart race. They didn't try to hide their presence anymore. They wanted me to know they were here. A branch snapped and fell from a tree, drawing my eyes upward. That's when I saw it, a feral figure, massive, cloaked in wild fur as black as midnight. Its eyes gleamed red, glowing with an eerie intensity as it stared down at me, menacing.

Okay, maybe it was time to run.

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I might have fancied my chances against one, but three? That was nearly impossible, especially in my state. I couldn't fully shift. I could only manage a partial shift, my claws and fangs, and that was all. But even that small transformation was enough to remind me of the danger it posed to the baby. Shifting too much could hurt her, and that thought kept me grounded. My wolf, despite her fierce and protective instincts, understood that we had to hold back for the child's sake.

Immediately, I turned on my heel and bolted as fast as my legs would carry me. The heavy thud of paws pounding behind me told me they were hot on my trail. I didn't bother with turning to see how far or how close they were. I simply continued running, focused on evading the imminent danger by getting out of this forest.

But as I ran, a figure out of nowhere slammed into me from the side, knocking me to the ground. My vision blurred from the impact, and pain shot through my back, but I couldn't stop. I struggled to get on my feet, ready to keep running.

But when I stood, I realized I wasn't being chased anymore. I was surrounded.

Four feral shifters surrounded me, their eyes glowing red, wild furs bristling, ready to pounce.

Rogues. I sneered, noticing the jagged scars that marred their necks—marks only rogues carried.

My heart hammered in my chest. Rogues were known for their brutality, and facing four of them alone? Moon Goddess, help me.

Before I could even react, the first rogue struck.

A blur of movement erupted from my left, and I barely had time to dodge as claws slashed through the air, grazing my arm. Another rogue lunged at me, its growl low and menacing as it sent a blow to my face, shoving me hard into a tree. A bitter, metallic taste filled my mouth, and I knew I was bleeding.

The largest rogue lunged, its teeth bared, but with a sharp movement, I dove to the side, rolling through the dirt as its claws gouged into the tree behind me. I grabbed a broken branch and, with all my strength, I drove it through the side of the rogue as it struggled to free its claws from the trees.

The rogue let out a pained yelp, but its agony barely registered before the others came at me all at once, their fury and speed overwhelming. I managed to dodge the first strike, but I wasn't fast enough to avoid the second or the third.

They kicked me at all angles, knocking me to the ground as they threw their paws at me. My entire being trembled with fear. When I felt a sharp sting of pain in my side, I knew one of them had slashed me with its razor-sharp claws. I cried in agonizing pain, feeling a gush of blood flowing from the deep wound. Despite being badly injured, I tried to fight back and shove them off me. But there were just too many to fight off all at once. So, I focused on keeping my hands pressed against my abdomen, trying to shield my stomach from their strikes.

Blood poured from my wounds, staining the ground beneath me, and I could feel my strength draining fast. I was becoming too weak to keep my eyes open. Just as the darkness began to envelop me, I heard a menacing growl cut through the haze. A group of werewolf shifters burst through the trees, and the largest wolf lunged, sinking its teeth into the rogue directly on top of me. The others fanned out, joining the fight. I was too weak to keep my eyes open, but I heard it all—the slash of claws against flesh, bodies hitting the ground, the cries and whimpers of pain—until the

sound faded into nothing but eerie silence.

With what little strength I had left, I forced my eyes open in time to see the wolf who'd jumped in to attack my attacker shift back into his human form. He had a fresh wound over his eye, which added to the dangerous aura the man exuded. I instinctively tried to curl away, but his hand reached out to me.

"Hey, it's okay," he said softly, crouching in front of me. His piercing blue eyes softened with concern. "We're here to help you." He turned to the shifters behind him and gave a sharp command. "Give her some space."

One by one, they shifted into their human forms and stepped back.

"I'm Kael, Alpha of Silver Fang Pack," he said, his tone calm and commanding. "Can you tell me your name?"

"I'm Tala, from—" The name of my pack hung on the edge of my tongue, but I stopped myself. Stonehart wasn't my identity anymore. It was the cage I'd escaped from, a place that had cast me aside and stolen my sense of belonging. Bitterness surged in my chest as memories of betrayal and rejection rose to the surface. My hands instinctively rested on my belly, and I thought, No. Not anymore.

I glanced back at Kael, who seemed to be studying me carefully. After a moment, I added, "That's all I can remember. My name is Tala."

His expression was unreadable for a beat, and then he nodded. "Rest, Tala. You're with my pack now. No one will hurt you here."

He reached out and gently lifted me into his arms. As my eyes closed, I didn't just feel at ease. I felt my wolf settle into comfort, too.

This was going to be my fresh start.

## Chapter 5

Tala's

Seven years later.

An impromptu council meeting had been called. As a member of the council, I had to drop everything and attend.

Glancing at the mirror, I took in my appearance. I ran a palm over my blunt, shoulder-length hair, ironed straight and precise, to smooth any stray strands. Satisfied, I grabbed my bag and headed for the town hall.

The council was a half circle of Elders, Betas, Mediators, and then me. Settling into a chair, I waited for the meeting to begin.

I already knew the reason for the impromptu meeting: the escalating rogue attacks that had ravaged the outskirts of town. Supply routes were ambushed, buildings were left in ruins, and tensions ran high. For months, the pack had been on edge, whispering about the rogues, a group of savage, lawless werewolves who looted without mercy, taking whatever they wanted and killing anyone who dared to stand in their way. Lately, their presence near Silver Fang territory had intensified, pushing Kael to call the meeting. We couldn't afford to ignore them any longer.

"This is becoming a menace!" Beta Charles bellowed, his voice laced with both frustration and desperation. He'd been ranting for the past fifteen minutes. After all, his farmhouse had been the most recent casualty of the rogue attacks. "Are we just going to sit back and watch until everything is taken away from us? Something needs to be done. And fast!"

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Kael sat at the head of the council table, one ankle crossed over the other, his fingers steepled beneath his jaw. His dark blonde hair hung forward, brushing his brows, partially veiling the piercing blue eyes that flicked between the council members as they aired their grievances. For the most part, he remained silent, listening with patience. But when Beta Charles indirectly questioned his competence, I caught the brief twitch of Kael's mouth—a subtle but unmistakable sign of displeasure. After half an hour filled with nothing but complaints and finger-pointing, the council members still seemed content to rehash their grievances instead of tackling the issue. Kael seemed to have had enough of the back and forth as he made a throat-clearing sound that cut through the noise. A pin-drop silence followed afterward, and everyone turned their attention to him.

To my surprise, he shifted his gaze to me and asked, “Tala, what do you think?”

A murmur rippled through the room as all eyes swung in my direction.

What did I think?

Leaning forward, I rested my palm on the polished wood of the table, meeting each gaze without flinching before settling back on Kael's. It still felt strange, sitting at this table among Elders and Betas, being heard rather than dismissed. In Stonehart, an Omega would have never had this seat or been given a voice. But Silver Fang was different. Here, my rank, even as an outsider, wasn't a leash.

“I understand this may not be easy to hear, but we've lost control of the outskirts,” I said, my tone steady and unapologetic. “The rogues move in and out as they please, unchallenged. It's a losing battle trying to maintain a stronghold there with our

current resources.”

A few council members shifted in their seats, frowns deepening, but I pressed on. “I’m not suggesting we abandon security efforts altogether. But it’s time we face reality. We’re stretched too thin. If we want any chance at survival, we need to redirect our resources to fortifying the main town, strengthen its defenses, and make it impenetrable. Because if the rogues break through here, nothing else will matter.”

“This would be a temporary measure, with patrols still deployed to the outskirts to keep the rogues in check,” I continued. “However, their boldness is a clear sign that their leader—whoever he is—is not just intelligent but dangerously daring. He has unified them, giving them the confidence to strike again and again. Unfortunately, we cannot sustain this fight alone without losing all or most of our resources. We lack the manpower to match their aggression, and any prolonged conflict will weaken us further. The most viable solution is to form an alliance with a neighboring pack. By combining our strengths, we can bolster security, share resources, and prepare a more coordinated response to eliminate the rogue threat once and for all. Collaboration is our best path forward.”

Kael’s expression remained impassive. He’d always respected hard truths, but right now, I couldn’t tell if he agreed or disagreed. The other council members, however, mulled over my words, some nodding their heads in agreement.

After a couple of minutes, Kael’s hand finally dropped from his jawline, and he planted both feet firmly on the ground. He straightened in his chair, ready to speak.

“Tala is right,” he said, his deep baritone voice cutting through the room. “I spoke with the security forces earlier, and in the last three days, every patrol sent to the outskirts failed to return. We’re losing men, and we’re losing resources.”

The weight of his words hung heavy in the air. Kael dragged in a breath before

standing to his full height. “We need to act fast. And I believe our best bet is an alliance with a pack strong enough to protect our mutual interests.”

The council was quiet as his words settled over us. But that quiet vanished the moment the door swung open, and the sharp click of heels echoed against the floor.

I glanced over my shoulder to see the tall blonde woman striding towards the council table with a half-hearted smile on her face.

“Sorry I’m late, brother,” Serena Fang said, her voice dripping with false sweetness as she drew out a chair and made herself comfortable.

Serena was Kael’s sister, the self-proclaimed princess of the pack, and undeniably the cruelest person I’d ever had the displeasure of meeting.

No. Scratch that. She was the second cruelest person I’d ever met.

I tore my gaze away from Serena’s slim figure and turned back to Kael, who still hadn’t shifted his eyes from his sister. I could feel the storm raging behind his gaze, his jaw tight, his muscles coiled. Serena, however, seemed utterly unfazed, as if her brother’s menacing stare didn’t even register with her.

“You’re late,” Kael said, his voice deliberately steady, like he was forcing himself to remain calm. “For the—what—the tenth time? If you can’t take this seriously, I’ll have no choice but to kick you off the council.”

That seemed to ignite something in Serena. Her gaze snapped to Kael, sharp and furious. “You’re going to kick me off the council while she remains?” Her finger jutted forward, and I didn’t need to guess where it was aimed—directly at me.

Less than a year ago, Kael had invited me to sit in on some council meetings, and



Serena had exploded, demanding that it was her right to be included. It didn't make sense at the time. Serena had never cared about the pack's issues—or anyone else's, for that matter—other than herself. So, her sudden desire for a seat at the table had been as surprising as it was unwarranted.

Kael's jaw clenched, his expression turning colder. "She's here because I require her insight," he said, his voice quiet but razor-sharp. "If you contributed as much as you complain, Serena, perhaps you'd earn your place instead of just occupying it."

Serena's lips pressed into a thin line, and her hand slammed into the table, her fingers curling into a fist. "Insight?" she sneered. "She's an outsider. She doesn't belong here, and she sure as hell doesn't belong on this council. You think her opinions matter more than the rest of us because you clearly fancy her."

"Enough!" Kael's voice boomed, silencing the room. His command resonated through the walls, and for a moment, everything froze.

The Beta and the other council members exchanged uneasy glances, caught between the urge to intervene and the fear of provoking Kael further. Kael's wrath was a storm none of us wanted to weather.

He turned his piercing blue gaze on Serena, his patience clearly fraying. "This isn't a discussion about personal grudges or what you think of Tala. It's about the survival of this pack. If you can't contribute to that discussion, I suggest you leave."

Serena's face flushed with anger, but she remained seated, her defiance simmering just below the surface. Her disdain for me wasn't new, but her hostility seemed to intensify every time I was in the same room as her. I suspected it was less about my presence and more about Kael's favoritism—or at least what she perceived as favoritism. Still, her words stung, and I had to remind myself that my role here wasn't to prove anything to her. It was to do my job, to protect this pack. And more than

anything, I just wanted a place where my baby girl, Aria, could grow up in peace.

Kael straightened. “Tala’s proposal makes sense, and it’s what we’re moving forward with. As of today, I want plans drawn up to fortify the town. Patrols will continue at the outskirts but on a strictly observational basis. We’re not sending anyone else to their deaths unless we have a strategic advantage. And as for the alliance—” He paused, his gaze sweeping over the council members. “I’ll handle the negotiations personally.”

The council murmured in agreement, and Kael’s decision seemed to settle the matter. As the meeting ended, the members filed out, some giving me quiet nods of approval. I grabbed my things and stood. From the corner of my eye, I saw Serena watching me with cold disdain. Kael called her name, and she finally looked away.

With that, I left the room without another word.

## Page 12

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As I walked through the town square on my way home, I stopped at the stall selling caramel-dipped apples, Aria's favorite. It had become a tradition ever since I learned how much she loved them. Every time I visited the square, I made sure to grab one for her.

Thinking of Aria, a smile spread across my face. She was growing into such a confident and beautiful girl, thriving in an environment where she could truly be herself. It was all I'd ever wanted for her, and watching her blossom made me proud every day.

She was the reason I'd visited the outskirts in the first place. Protecting her has become my top priority. Silver Fang Pack had been our home for seven years, and now it was at risk of rogue invasion. I was grateful to be in a position to help and glad that Kael had resonated with my ideas.

Still, sometimes, my mind drifted back to him. Even after seven years, I could still picture Damian as clear as day. I wondered if he even thought about me or if he ever regretted how he'd treated me. I tried to keep my mind off such thoughts. I had more important things to worry about, like serving on the council and being a mother.

Leaving Stonehart had been necessary, though painful. I hadn't even told Gina because I knew she would have tried to stop me. I couldn't risk that.

When I first arrived in the pack and took a job at the school as a mediator for Omegas, Kael had always said I had a natural gift for diplomacy. I didn't doubt it. I'd dealt with enough conflicts as an Omega in Stonehart to understand the delicate balance between power and peace. One night, Kael came to me with a crucial matter

that had been keeping him up at night. It threatened to disrupt the pack's peace. I gave him my perspective, drawing from the countless situations I'd faced and resolved myself. A few days later, the conflict subsided. Whether my advice made the difference or not, I didn't know. But since then, Kael began seeking me out for delicate matters. Less than a year ago, he invited me to sit on the council, and I'd been a member ever since.

Life in Silver Fang was peaceful and simple, and I loved it. Every morning, I dropped Aria off at the pack school and spent the rest of the day carrying out the duties Kael assigned to me. I didn't always have the luxury of picking her up, so Maeve, my closest friend and neighbor, would help with that.

When I heard the distant chatter of kids, I knew they were on their way back. Aria and Maeve's son, Tobias, were always the loudest, and they never failed to argue about the silliest things. I once overheard them having a heated debate over whose shadow was faster.

A smile touched my lips as I turned off the stove and walked to the front door to greet them. The moment Aria saw me, she ran toward me, and I crouched to catch her as she jumped into my arms. I smoothed her wavy brown hair, inhaling her warm, sweet scent of honey and wildflowers. She had gotten most of her features from me: her hair, the small, straight shape of her nose, the crescent-shaped birthmark just below her waist, and her warm olive skin. But her eyes, that was all Damian. Kissing her head, I pulled back to look into her large, dark brown eyes, already shining with excitement to tell me about her day—and the latest argument she'd had with Tobias. But before she could speak, I raised a hand.

"No, uh, young lady," I said, a playful tone in my voice. "First, go freshen up. We'll talk over dinner. Now, say your goodbyes to Aunt Maeve and Tobias."

She pouted. "I'm not talking to Tobias. He says I cheated at hide and seek."

“Yes, you did! How else could you find me in under twenty seconds?”

“I told you. I followed your scent!”

“Lies!”

Maeve chuckled, squeezing Tobias lightly on the shoulder. “Okay, buddy. That’s enough.”

Maeve was around my age, maybe a little older. With her pale skin and pixie cut, she always had this effortless charm about her. She was a single mom, just like me, and we had bonded easily when I was house hunting. The wind caught her hair as she looked up at me and smiled, muttering, “Kids, right?” She had a way of making even the most chaotic moments feel lighter.

I laughed. “Thank you for getting Aria, Maeve.”

She shrugged. “My pleasure. I quite enjoy listening to them bicker. It’s fast becoming the highlight of my day.”

I laughed again, giving Maeve a quick hug. I nudged Aria to do the same to Tobias, and after a moment of hesitation, she muttered a quick goodbye, which Tobias returned just as hesitantly.

With that, we headed back into the house.

While Aria showered, I set the table for dinner and waited for her to come down. When she finally did, she practically bounced into her seat, already eager to tell me everything that had happened at school.

“Mummy,” she called in her soft, little voice, and I looked up with a smile, prepared

for another of her enthusiastic recounts.

“The Alpha Educator announced at the closing assembly that there will be a father-daughter dance at the end of the term.”

The moment she said it, my heart sank.

A father-daughter dance. The words echoed in my mind, each time stirring a fresh pang of guilt. The thought of Aria standing alone while every other girl had their fathers beside them, or worse, not being able to attend at all because her father wasn't in the picture, made my chest tighten. I'd always given Aria vague answers when she asked about him, telling her he couldn't be here. But she was getting older and more curious. Soon, my excuses wouldn't be enough. She would want real answers, and I didn't know how to tell her the truth about what had happened.

Before I could respond to Aria, there was a knock on the door. I raised an eyebrow. I wasn't expecting anyone at this hour. I looked at Aria, and she shrugged. “Maybe it's Tobias, ready to apologize.”

I laughed and shook my head before walking to the door. To my surprise, Kael was standing on the other side.

“Kael,” I said, trying to hide the surprise in my voice. “Did I forget to—” I stopped myself. I didn't think I'd missed anything.

As if reading my mind, he cut me off. “You didn't forget anything, Tala.”

“Is that Alpha Kael?” I heard Aria's voice as she sprinted toward the door. I stepped aside, letting her see Kael. He immediately picked her up, lifting her off the ground.

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“How’s my pumpkin?” he asked, pinching her nose lightly.

“I’m fine,” Aria grinned. “My friends still don’t believe the Alpha’s my friend.”

“Maybe they’ll believe it when I show up at your school for the father-daughter dance at the end of the term.”

Aria’s eyes lit up. “What? Really?”

I interrupted before the excitement took over completely. “Okay, sweetie. I think it’s time for you to head inside. The Alpha and I need to talk for a bit.”

Kael put Aria down gently, and she skipped inside. As soon as she was out of sight, I turned to Kael with a serious expression.

“You can’t just say things like that to her.”

Kael shrugged. “Why not? She needs someone to take her, doesn’t she?” His tone was casual, but his gaze was anything but. “Unless you’d rather disappoint her.”

My jaw clenched. “That’s not the point. This isn’t your decision.

He took a step closer, his presence pressing in on me like a silent challenge. “You and I both know she doesn’t have anyone else. And you wouldn’t deny her, would you?”

A wave of guilt washed over me, but I pushed it away. Aria would be heartbroken if she couldn’t go. And Kael knew it. He was getting too close, becoming a presence in

our lives, and I didn't want Aria to get used to it. I also didn't want anyone to think I was being favored by the Alpha. I needed to keep some distance, not just for me but for Aria, too.

I sighed, forcing my voice to stay even. "Let me think about it."

Kael's gaze lingered on me a moment too long before he took a step back. "Sure," he said with a crooked smile.

A sense of awkwardness hung in the air, but I quickly dismissed it.

"Did you want to talk about something else?" I asked.

A small, triumphant smile curved his lips. "Actually, yes. I wanted to share some good news with you in person."

I waited, curiosity gnawing at me.

"It's about the alliance," he continued, his smile growing. "I'm pleased to inform you that a pack has accepted our offer. They're not a neighboring pack, but they have resources that will be invaluable to us. They've even invited us for a dinner celebration to mark the occasion, and I'd like you to join me."

Relief flooded through me, knowing Aria's safety was no longer in question. But that sense of calm quickly evaporated as Kael added one last line.

"So, get ready, Tala. We leave for the Stonehart pack in two days."

## Chapter 6

Damian



The council room was tense, charged by grim discussions about the recurring issue: Rogues. They were no longer a nuisance but a relentless threat, testing the borders of our territory with increasing boldness. My father had been battling the same problem a few months before his death, but I hadn't understood the full extent of it until the mantle of Alpha rested on my shoulders. I'd sworn to protect them the day I took the oath, and I intended to keep that promise. But every day, I was reminded how fragile that vow was.

My father had ruled with an iron fist, wielding fear as a weapon to control both our pack and those outside our borders. It had worked—until it didn't. His legacy left Stonehart isolated, with fractured relationships and enemies lurking on every front. Building alliances now was like patching up a sinking ship. Few packs trusted us enough to stand by our side—until two days ago.

Silver Fang had reached out, offering an alliance. On the surface, it sounded promising. They had resources that we desperately needed. But there was a catch. There always was.

“They're only willing to forge an alliance if there's a mating bond to solidify the agreement,” Elder Maren said, his voice edged with stubborn authority. He leaned forward as though the sheer force of his will could make me agree. “They've proposed that you mate with the Alpha's sister. Both packs value the sanctity of marriage, and this would bind us in a way that cannot be easily broken.”

He wasn't wrong. Stonehart did value marriage as a sacred, unbreakable contract. And in truth, the offer was practical. A marriage bound by duty would solidify trust between both packs. But every instinct in me recoiled at the idea of having to marry another woman.

“There has to be another way,” I said, my voice low but firm. I didn't care if tradition dictated otherwise. I wasn't giving in that easily. Still, the question hung in the back

of my mind: How long before the rogues struck again and before we ran out of options?

As usual, the meeting ended with me dismissing them until the next day. Council meetings were fast becoming a daily occurrence. All hands had to be on deck to solve the rising issue, and for the first time in a while, there seemed to be a light at the end of the tunnel. But this time, it was at a cost I did not want.

The truth was, Stonehart was unraveling. The Betas and Omegas were locked in a seething conflict that threatened to tear the pack apart before the rogues could even lift a claw. I'd inherited a pack on the edge of ruin, and it was my job to pull it back from the brink.

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Elder Maren was the last to leave, his gaze lingering just long enough to convey the unspoken thoughts that had been creeping into my own mind. This was the only solution.

I remained in the council room for an hour, pondering the impending decision. But even after all that time, I still couldn't bring myself to decide. I needed space to think and clear my mind. A run in the forest always helped. In my wolf form, racing through the trees burned off the tension and cleared my mind. The smells of the wild, the rustling leaves, the earth beneath me—it always grounded me. It was exactly what I needed right now.

I walked toward the path that led into the forest, my eyes drifting over the busy town square. It was mostly Betas, the ones who owned the big businesses around here. Any Omega seen in the area was either working or handing out deliveries. The divide between the two sides of town couldn't have been more obvious. The North End, where the Betas lived with their businesses and the pack quarter, was the complete opposite of the South End, the slums where the Omegas had no choice but to take up residence.

I watched as people moved about, children laughing and playing in the square and pack members haggling over prices. A heavy weight settled on my chest. Their lives, their safety, it was all my responsibility. As their Alpha, it was my duty to protect them, to protect this pack that had stood for over a hundred years, to protect the town they'd called home since birth. I couldn't let rogues tear it all down.

When I reached the clearing that marked the edge of the forest and the town's border, I spotted Grayson, the head of the pack protectors and my closest friend, giving

orders to his subordinates. Grayson was the closest person to a family I had left since my father's death. We'd grown up together, with his father once serving as the head of the pack protectors. When we were younger, while our parents were deep in intense meetings about border patrols and security details, we would sneak away to the forest to race through the trees or head to the sparring grounds to hone our combat skills. If it weren't for his vibrant ash-blond hair, a stark contrast to my midnight black, strangers might have easily mistaken us for brothers.

When he saw me, Grayson finished giving his final set of instructions before tapping his men lightly on the shoulders. They began to file out, acknowledging me with brief nods as they moved into their positions.

I walked up to him. "What's the latest on your security unit?"

"No new details. The rogues hit Unit Five's border hard, but my men fought tooth and nail and didn't give an inch," Grayson replied. "We lost a few along the way, though. And the rogues vandalized resources in the area. Our hold is weakening, especially with how bold they've become. News is spreading that the rogues have a new leader. They say he always has a mask on, and no one has seen his real face because it's menacing. Bold, dangerous, and mysterious. Wouldn't be surprised if he decides to storm the town square one morning."

"They wouldn't dare," I muttered, my teeth grinding. "That's a suicide mission."

Grayson exhaled deeply. "Right now, I don't think it is. Between us, we both know the pack's not what it used to be. The Omegas aren't willing to fight for the cause to protect this pack, which leaves us short on manpower. Our resources were hit hard when the Omegas vandalized the palliatives in celebration of your father's death. Our pack being the strongest out there? It's just a facade. Which is why, more than ever, we need that alliance to fortify us."

Grayson's words hung in the air, a prickling reminder of the decision I still had to make. I ran a finger through my hair, biting down on my lower lip as I stared past him, my gaze unfocused. Every day, I was reminded of the tyrant my father had been, and every day, I was reminded that it would take more than just willpower to carve a path that was different from his. And it had to start with saving the pack from this growing menace.

"So, where are you heading to?" Grayson's voice cut through my thoughts, pulling me back to the present.

I shifted my attention back to him and answered, "Going for a run. I need to clear my head."

He regarded me for a moment. "I take it the council updated you on the little due diligence I did on the Silver Fang Pack?"

I didn't respond.

Grayson continued, "And I assume they mentioned the marriage proposal to solidify the alliance?"

I clicked my tongue in disapproval. Grayson was taunting me, and we both knew it. "What are you driving at? Spill it or keep it to yourself. I'd prefer the latter."

He sighed, stepping forward and resting an arm on my shoulder. "You can't still be holding out for her, Damian. It's been seven years."

Seven years. Seven long, torturous years without her. Seven years of longing, of this hollow emptiness that gnawed at me—seven years of feeling like a part of me was missing.

I exhaled a shaky breath as though I could expel thoughts of her from my mind. The mention of her cut deeper than I wanted to admit. Years had passed since I made the decision to reject her, yet her presence lingered in my thoughts like a shadow that refused to fade. I had told myself it was the right thing to do, that it was the only way to protect her.

But the truth was far uglier.

My father had built his empire on blood and fear. His reign wasn't just one of dominance. It was a calculated massacre of any threat to the Alpha's dominance. When I returned to the pack after years of training to become an Alpha, my first course of action was to uncover just how far he would go to exert his control. It was the same day I met her, the same day I learned my father's slaughter wasn't random but a deliberate effort to erase the Lunar is Custodes, a rare bloodline of peacekeepers. He had hunted them down, slaughtered them, and wiped them from history because he feared what they represented. He saw their wisdom and foresight as a threat to his power. His obsession with control led him to believe that if the Lunar is Custodes were allowed to thrive, they would unite the pack and disrupt the foundation of his authority that had kept him in control for so long.

But he had missed one.

If I had known that Tala was the last living member of the bloodline my father thought he had eradicated, I would never have allowed myself to get close to her. But when I eventually learned the truth, that she was the last remnant of that lineage, I made a choice I would regret for the rest of my life. I rejected her. Not because I didn't want her. I wanted her more than anything else in the world. But more than wanting her, there was a far greater desire to protect her. I couldn't bear the thought of my family's darkness touching her more than it already had. When I rejected her, I never thought she would actually leave the pack. I figured I could still watch over her from a distance and keep her safe without being too close. But I was wrong.

“She’s never coming back, Damian,” Grayson continued. “You have to move on.”

“I have moved on!” I snapped, shrugging off his hand from my shoulder as though I was trying to convince myself of the very words I had just spoken. Then, softly this time, I repeated, “I have moved on.”

“Then, why can’t you accept the alliance?”

I fell silent.

Grayson touched my shoulders again, this time his voice quieter. “You swore an oath to protect this pack, Damian. I’m afraid this is the only way forward.”

With one light squeeze of my shoulder, he walked past me, leaving me alone with my thoughts. My chest tightened at the very thought of finally letting Tala go and moving on to marry another woman. Everything today had pointed to the decision I had to make. And now, standing alone in the wake of Grayson’s presence, I knew what I had to do.

### Chapter 7

#### Tala

The moment Kael announced Stonehart's acceptance of the alliance with Silver Fang, my thoughts spiraled into chaos. I'd worked hard to build a peaceful, stable life here, and the idea of it unraveling was unbearable. For some reason, Kael had insisted that I come along with him, but I couldn't go to Stonehart—I simply couldn't.

I had two choices: attend the meeting or come up with a convincing excuse. Since attending wasn't an option in my mind, I was left with the latter option. After hours of restless deliberation, I finally landed on a reason Kael might accept.

The next morning, after dropping Aria off at the pack school, I decided to take a detour to the Alpha's residence to present my excuse. As I made my way inside, Serena greeted me with her usual scowl, only this time, there was a flicker of excitement in her eyes. Her attention was elsewhere, focused on two seamstresses surrounded by a chaotic sea of fabrics.

I knew the house well. I'd lived there for months after Kael saved me, but once Aria was born, Serena's hostility became impossible to ignore. Her disdain hung in the air like a toxic fog, pushing me to find a place of my own where I could raise my child in peace.

When I reached the Alpha's chambers, I steeled myself, sucked in a deep breath, and was about to knock when a servant's voice brought me to a halt.



“The Alpha is in the basement,” she said, a hint of disapproval lacing her tone.

I gave a small nod as she walked away. Kael only went down there for two reasons: punishment or persuasion. Those who stole from him, defied his orders, or simply failed to give him what he wanted all ended up in the same place. He didn’t enforce discipline through laws or council decisions; he handled things his own way, cold, calculated, and unquestioned.

I was about to turn back toward the living room when his voice stopped me.

“Tala,” he called. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

I turned to see him wiping his hands with a towel, the sharp scent of bleach clinging to his skin. Swallowing down my unease, I cleared my throat and squared my shoulders.

“I wanted to talk to you about the trip to Stonehart.”

He studied me, his sharp gaze flickering across my face. “And what about it?”

“I don’t think I can make the journey with you and the selected council members.”

His expression hardened slightly. “It wasn’t a request,” he reminded me. “But why not?”

“Aria...” I pursed my lips. “She hasn’t been sleeping well lately. I think something’s wrong.” It wasn’t a complete lie. She’d had restless nights after accidentally eating nuts, which she was allergic to.

Kael’s eyes darkened with suspicion. “She seemed perfectly fine when I saw her the other day.”

“Until night falls,” I countered. “I don’t think it’s right to leave her now. I can’t leave my daughter behind.”

His gaze remained steady, unwavering. “If she’s unwell, Stonehart’s healers will see to her. They have some of the best in the region.”

I opened my mouth to protest. “But I don’t think—”

“On the contrary,” he interrupted, “this trip might be exactly what she needs. Fresh air and a change of scenery. I know Aria, Tala, she loves a good adventure.”

“Kael—”

“No, Tala. I’m giving you a direct order as your Alpha,” his voice was commanding and resolute. “Your presence is important on this trip,” he added, his eyes locking with mine. “This is your chance to prove your loyalty to Silver Fang despite not being born into the pack. You’re coming with me to Stonehart, and that’s final.”

I sighed in defeat as I left Kael’s quarters. If I was returning to the lion’s den, I needed to take precautions.

My next stop was the pack’s mystic. I requested a scent masking potion, not just for Aria but for myself as well. Werewolves could identify familial bonds through scent, and I couldn’t risk Damian discovering the truth about Aria’s parentage.

But masking my scent wasn’t just about protecting Aria. There were truths I hadn’t admitted, even to myself. Werewolf scent betrayed emotions and lingering bonds, and the last thing I wanted was for Damian to catch a whiff of anything that might make him think I wasn’t over him.

Restlessness gnawed at me as the hours blurred toward the day of the journey. Kael,

much to his sister's displeasure, insisted that Aria and I ride with him. It made my nerves fray. Being confined in such close quarters, where he could easily sense my unease, was a risk I didn't want to take. The six-hour journey stretched endlessly before me, and though my gaze remained fixed on the winding roads, my thoughts were far away.

I'd replayed the day Damian rejected me more times than I wanted. The sharp sting of betrayal had dulled into an ache, like an old wound that hadn't healed right. On long, sleepless nights, his presence lingered in my mind, uninvited and relentless. Worse than the memory of his rejection was reminiscing the nights we shared, every touch, every kiss, and every whispered promise of love and forever.

As much as I fought it, my body and my wolf had a will of their own. They still craved his touch and remembered the warmth of his scent, even when my mind rebelled against it. The bond between us clung stubbornly, refusing to wither no matter how fiercely I wished it gone.

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But fate be damned. I wouldn't let this return to Stonehart derail the life I'd built for Aria and me. This was just a brief visit, a day or two at most until the alliance negotiations were finalized. Then, I'd return to the life I'd fought to reclaim, far from the shadows of the past.

As we neared Stonehart, the familiar scent hit me like a punch to the gut: a heavy blend of pine, damp earth, and the musky undertone of wolves. It felt like the land itself was greeting me with all its past memories. I tore my gaze away from the winding roads and looked at Aria, who was bubbling with excitement, her bright eyes taking in every sight along the way.

My eyes flicked over to Kael, only to find his gaze already on me. His eyes were lowered. Suspicion, perhaps? Had I been too obvious? I quickly averted my eyes to stare out the front window, watching as the driver steered the car toward the town square. A short time later, we pulled into the pack quarters.

I drew in a shaky breath as the guards approached to open the doors. The familiar heaviness of the place weighed on me, but I was determined not to let it show. Aria, as if sensing my nervousness, reached over and squeezed my hand with her tiny fingers, offering comfort without even knowing it. I chuckled softly. If only she knew...

Once we were out of the car and away from the curious gaze of Kael, I crouched in front of Aria.

"Listen to me, Aria," I smoothed the crease on the tunic of her natural-colored dress, adjusting the fabric to ensure it sat comfortably against her small frame. "I want you

to stay close to me at all times. Don't let your curiosity wander. This is unfamiliar territory, and I'd hate it if something happened to you."

She looked up at me with a confused expression, her wide eyes searching mine as if trying to make sense of my tone. But I wasn't done yet.

"Also, do not speak to anybody except me," I added, my voice soft but firm.

She nodded slowly, still unsure but sensing the seriousness in my words. I gave her a reassuring smile, brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear before standing up.

Aria was taken by the servants to the quarters, where she'd be safe and comfortable, while Kael and the rest of the council members proceeded inside. The discussions ahead would focus on politics, packs, and alliances, topics that Kael felt were best kept away from a child. He suggested she remain with the servants, ensuring she was well taken care of while the adults dealt with matters that required their full attention.

I followed the guards that led us into the pack quarters.

"Kael of Silver Fang pack, it's a pleasure to have you in my pack. Welcome to Stonehart." I heard his voice before I saw his face. That calm, soothing cadence was unmistakable. But now, it had deepened, taking on a richer, more authoritative timbre.

"It's a pleasure to be here, Alpha Damian. Thank you for your invite. If I may introduce my envoy here with me," Kael's gaze shifted toward us, his tone shifting to a more formal register. "This is Beta Charles..."

One by one, he introduced his envoy, each one stepping forward to pay their respects to Damian. I stood quietly, waiting for my turn.

When it finally came, I stepped forward, my steps measured and deliberate, knowing the eyes of both Alphas were on me. The air was thick with tension, but I kept my composure as best I could. I tried to take comfort in the fact that no one recognized me except Damian. Sure, they must have heard about the Omega he rejected all those years ago, but Omegas were rarely important enough for anyone to bother putting a face to the name. At least my secret was safe. If Damian doesn't say anything, that is.

My heart stopped for a brief moment when Damian's eyes locked onto mine. Oxygen seemed to flee my lungs as I took him in. He was seven years older now, and every inch of him showed the passage of time. His jaw was more pronounced, and the skin under his eyes was slightly darker. I couldn't tell if he had put on more muscle or if I had simply forgotten how imposing he was. His hair, dark as ever, was now slicked back, a stark contrast to the waves I used to run my fingersthrough. And then, his scent hit me, earthy and warm. Except now, there was something else woven into it, something richer and sharper. Something undeniably him. It wrapped around me, pulling at something deep inside me I had spent years trying to bury.

But despite all the changes, despite the man before me now, I still saw the one who had brutally rejected me. Anger surged within me, raw and unrestrained, but I was careful to mask it.

Yet, my wolf whimpered. It was a low, quiet sound that shook me to the core. Separate from the protectiveness coursing through me, separate from the adrenaline that flooded my veins, she saw something else entirely. Not the man who had broken us, not the one who had hurt me so deeply. No. She only saw one thing. Mate.

I noticed a shift in his expression, just a slight widening of his eyes that told me he recognized me. But it faded as quickly as it came, replaced by the stoic demeanor.

"And this is Tala, one of my finest diplomats," Kael introduced me, offering a soft smile in my direction. I returned it, keeping things professional as I extended my arm.

Damian took it, and the moment his hand brushed against mine, a spark shot through me. It was hot and searing, igniting every nerve in my body. His familiar touch made my entire being feel alive. His grip was firm, and his fingers were calloused. His expression remained composed, but his eyes—those deep, stormy brown eyes—flickered with something raw, something unspoken.

I couldn't help the hitch in my breath, and my wolf, unsettled and yearning, let out a low whine in my mind.

No, no, no. This wasn't happening.

I clenched my jaw and quickly withdrew my hand from Damian's, forcing myself to mask my turmoil with a polite smile. "Alpha Damian," I said, my voice steady despite the chaos raging within me. "Thank you for welcoming us."

His lips pressed into a thin line, and for a brief moment, I thought he might say something that would hint at recognizing me. But instead, he simply nodded and replied, "The pleasure is all mine."

Damian led us toward the dining quarters, where we all sat to celebrate the new alliance. As we walked, I couldn't help but reflect on the irony of it all. The last time I had been here, I had been the wolf in sheep's clothing, desperately trying to fit into a world where I didn't belong, only to be humiliated in the process. But now, I was seated at the same table, sharing a meal in the very quarters.

Kael's hand brushed the small of my back, a quiet reminder of his presence, and I quickly refocused on the reason we were here. The past had to remain in the past. "Tala, sit by me," he said.

I passed him a small smile and obliged. As I settled into my seat, I noticed Damian's lingering gaze on us. Heat crawled up my skin, but I kept my focus on everything

else—anything but him—willing myself not to meet his eyes.

Throughout the meal, I kept my attention on polite conversation with Damian's new court, determined not to give Damian any more of my focus. Wine flowed freely, voices grew louder, and laughter filled the hall, but I remained guarded.

By the end of the night, Kael rose to his feet, commanding the attention of the room.



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“I appreciate the hospitality Stonehart has shown,” he began. “This alliance is vital to both packs, and to ensure its sanctity, we have decided that my sister, Serena of Silver Fang, will mate with Alpha Damian.”

The wine in my glass went down the wrong pipe. I choked, the liquid burning my throat. A few concerned glances were thrown my way, but I managed to apologize with my eyes, hoping no one noticed the panic surging inside me. No wonder Serena had seemed so chipper the day before yesterday. She must have been informed that she was to mate with Damian.

I had been present in plenty of council meetings lately, but I had never heard any mention of this. Kael must have discussed his terms with Damian in private. I recalled him saying that marriage was a sanctity that preserves alliances, but I never really thought about what he meant by that until now.

I turned my gaze toward Damian, only to find his eyes already on me. His expression was unreadable, neutral, his lips pressed into a thin line. A shiver of discomfort ran down my spine as I quickly looked away, my heart racing. My thoughts scrambled, fighting for control.

Damian was moving on. The words echoed in my mind, each one like a hammer striking at my chest. Damian was going to mate with someone else, and that someone was Serena fucking Fang.

I glanced at Serena, sitting across the table, her expression smug and self-assured. A sharp pang of jealousy pricked my chest, but I shoved it aside. This wasn't about my past with Damian. This was about the alliance and about securing Silver Fang's

future and Aria's well-being. I had to remind myself of that.

But Kael wasn't finished with his announcements. "While I return to Silver Fang," he continued, his tone unwavering, "I'll need someone here to oversee the terms of our agreement and protect Silver Fang's interests." The room fell silent, everyone waiting for his next words.

In a million years, I would have never anticipated what came next.

"Therefore, I've decided that Tala will remain here for the next three weeks as a delegate from our pack to ensure the smooth execution of our alliance terms."

My heart stopped. The words hit me like a blow to the chest, and I froze, stunned.

No way. No fucking way.

## Chapter 8

Tala

My brain was moving at fifty miles per minute.

Three weeks? Three whole weeks in Stonehart, working closely with Damian every single day?

No, no, no. This cannot happen.

I needed to speak with Kael and reason with him.

There were so many things that could go wrong. First, Aria. She wasn't accustomed to being away from home, and I wasn't sure how she'd handle being in Stonehart for

so long. Second, I'd have to confront the past I'd tried so hard to leave behind. And third, being so close to Damian every single day? That was a nightmare waiting to happen.

I hadn't planned on staying this long. I hadn't even packed enough for three weeks. But that, in the grand scheme of things, was the least of my problems. The real issue? The pack mystic's potion to cloak my scent. It wasn't supposed to last this long. It wasn't supposed to last for three weeks. Five days—maybe a week at best. But now I was staring down the reality of spending weeks in this place with the scent magic eventually wearing off.

And when it did?

I couldn't even begin to imagine how I would confront things when that happened. What would Damian do when he finally realized the truth about Aria? How would he react to the scent of his daughter, so unmistakably his? The very thought made my heart race and my palms sweat.

As flattering as Kael's decision was, and as much as it showed how much faith and trust he had in me, there were far greater things at stake, things he didn't know, things he shouldn't know. There were things I had carried with me for years, locked deep inside because pushing them aside was the only way I could keep my peace of mind. For seven years, I'd managed to live with that peace. I wasn't about to lose it now. Not with everything I'd worked so hard to build, not with the fragile stability I had fought for. Not now. Not ever.

Since Kael announced his decision, I've been unable to settle down. He casually mentioned that Serena would also remain in the pack with me to get to know Damian better while preparing for their mating ceremony that was scheduled for two weeks from now. That was yet another reason why I didn't want to be in Stonehart. How was I supposed to watch as the man who nearly destroyed me got his happily ever

after by marrying another woman? And to my nemesis, no less. The more I thought about it, the more everything about this situation seemed terribly wrong, and the more I realized just how badly everything could go.

I really, really needed to reason with Kael.

I downed the remnant of the wine in my cup, hoping the alcohol would dull the unease and tension gnawing at me. My gaze drifted to Damian, and I caught him staring back at me. Maybe I was just paranoid, but I could swear there was a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

I tightened my lips, making it very apparent that I was not okay with this decision. Then, I tore my eyes away from him. I sat and waited as Kael engaged in conversation throughout dinner, biding my time until I could catch him alone to table my request to reject his decision, politely, of course. Normally, an Alpha's decision was never questioned. No one dared to. But I liked to believe that Kael and I had built a relationship over the years that allowed me to speak freely with him. The weight of his position was never lost on me, and I always treated him with the politeness and respect he deserved.

The night went by in a blur of chatter, and I had to wait until the very end to speak with Kael. After he and Damian shook hands and exchanged their goodbyes at the gates, I fell into step behind him, gathering my thoughts.

I cleared my throat softly and called out to him before he reached the cars. "Kael," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "Can I speak freely?"

He turned to me, a hint of confusion in his expression. "Since when haven't you?"

I paused for a beat before answering, and he gave a nod. "Go ahead."

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“I don’t think staying in Stonehart for three weeks is a good idea,” I said quietly.

Kael raised a brow. “Are you questioning my decision, Tala?”

“No, I’m—”

“A lot of people would kill for the position I just gave you. I expect a little more gratitude.” His tone was calm, but there was an edge to it.

“And I am grateful, Alpha Kael, but...what if I’m needed in Silver Fang? There’s work to be done, and I can’t afford to be away for that long.”

He studied me for a moment before saying, “Are you worried that I left you in charge?”

“No, but—”

Kael’s hand brushed my arm as he stepped closer, effectively cutting me off. The scent of wood and the faint tang of wine clung to him from the celebration. Before I could react, his fingers tilted my chin up, drawing my gaze to his.

“I trust you, Tala. And my trust is all that matters,” he said, his thumb brushing a stray lock of hair from my face.

My first instinct was to pull back and put some distance between us, but I hesitated. Kael had always been respectful, but I’d made a point of keeping a wall between us.

For a moment, he didn't say anything. Then, his voice dropped, softer now, carrying a weight that made me uneasy. "Tala, there's something I need to talk to you about. But now isn't the time or place. When I come back in two weeks, we'll have that conversation. For now...goodbye, and good luck."

He held my gaze a moment longer, and I wasn't sure what he was about to do. But then he smiled and stepped back. Without another word, he turned and climbed into the car.

Just before Beta Charles got into the car, he paused in front of me, his voice barely above a whisper. "The Alpha is clearly smitten with you, Tala." There was no disdain in his tone, but it wasn't exactly warm either. "Let's just hope he made the right decision by leaving you in charge."

With that, he climbed into the car. I stood there, watching as the convoy sped away, leaving nothing but a heavy, unsettling silence in its wake.

I exhaled a long breath. This was going to be the longest three weeks of my life.

As I turned around, I caught Damian standing by the gates, his eyes fixed intently on me. His face was etched with a deep frown, and his hands were clasped behind his back. He held my gaze for a brief moment before spinning around and disappearing into the house.

I waited a while before heading inside. The last thing I wanted was to bump into Damian. A servant was waiting for me near the entrance. "I hope you enjoyed dinner, Ms. Tala?" she asked politely.

I forced a weak smile, my eyes scanning the hall. Aria was nowhere in sight. "Where's my daughter?" I asked, my voice tense.

“She’s upstairs in the room the Alpha asked us to prepare for you.”

Turning to the servant, I asked her to lead the way.

As we climbed three flights of stairs, she spoke casually. “The Alpha insisted on giving you the finest welcome. He mentioned you’re allergic to nuts and warned us not to serve them.”

I blinked in surprise. Damian remembered that?

I shook my head, trying to push him from my thoughts. Staying here didn’t mean I had to talk to him. Any conversation we had would be strictly about the alliance and nothing more, nothing less.

“And,” she continued, “he personally requested that your room be on the executive floor.”

“The executive floor?” I repeated, frowning. “Isn’t that where the Alpha stays?”

“Yes,” she confirmed with a smile as we reached a set of towering double doors. She opened them, revealing a lavish room adorned with polished wood furniture, thick velvet drapes, and a king-sized bed. Gold-accented sconces cast a warm glow across the room, and the scent of fresh linen hung in the air. It was grand and luxurious, but my thoughts were elsewhere.

Across the room, another set of double doors caught my attention. On the wall above the door, there was an Alpha’s head hilt. I didn’t need anyone to tell me whose room that was.

The servant began explaining the room’s amenities, but I cut her off. “No.”

She blinked, confused. “No? You don’t know how to use the water pitcher—?”

“No, I don’t want to stay here. I’m not staying in this room.”



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“But it’s the Alpha’s order,” she said hesitantly.

“Then tell your Alpha I’m not staying here. I’d rather stay in a room that’s not across from his.”

“It’s the best room in the quarters,” she insisted as though trying to convince me.

I held her gaze, my voice firm. “No. Any other room will do.”

A flicker of confusion crossed her face, but she nodded reluctantly. “I’ll inform the Alpha.”

As she turned to leave, a sudden realization struck me. Aria wasn’t here. My chest tightened. “Wait,” I called after her. “You said my daughter was here. Where is she?”

The servant frowned, glancing around. “She was here a moment ago.”

Panic flared through me. Without a second thought, I bolted down the corridor in search of Aria.

## Chapter 9

Damian

That entire dinner was pure torment.

And the worst part was the endless questions swirling in my mind. I sat through it,

my thoughts consumed by nothing more than the burning desire to be alone with her. I wanted to tell her everything, how much I've missed her, how every day for the last seven years was spent thinking about her. I wanted to breathe her in to inhale her familiar, comforting scent, which I, surprisingly, hadn't been able to grasp since her arrival.

Tala. My Tala.

The last person I expected to see again was her. Least of all in another pack, and as a delegate, no less. I had always known she was capable of so much more than the life she had at Stonehart under my father's tyrannical rule, where Omegas were banned from corporate roles. It didn't surprise me that she rose to prominence in another pack, especially with the way its Alpha constantly hovered around her.

Kael.

The thought of him had my body tensing and my jaws grinding. I'd seen how he looked at her as though she was everything. The warmth in his smile, the way his touch lingered as if he wanted more. It sparked a rage in me.

I moved through the quiet garden, where the only sound was the rustling of leaves in the breeze. My mind was a mess of conflicting emotions. My wolf stirred, pacing within me. His growls were low and constant. For the first time in years, I suddenly felt alive. It was like a part of me that had been dormant for years was awakened.

For years, her face lingered in my mind like an indelible mark, small and striking, framed by wild brown hair. I could never forget those hazel-green eyes, full lips, and the delicate slope of her nose. I'd memorized every inch of her body: her petite frame, soft curves, and flawless olive skin. They were vivid as a photograph I couldn't let go of.

But the woman I saw today was different. Her eyes were the same, but there was something new in them, something fierce and guarded. Her face, once round and gentle, now carried chiseled angles, and a more defined jawline. The one thing she didn't lose was her curves. If anything, she'd grown fuller over the years. Her breasts were fuller, her hips more pronounced, and her ass rounder, commanding attention with every movement.

The thought of running my hands along the curves of her body had my cock twitching in my pants. It was seven years later, and she still had this effect on me. Maybe even worse. My wolf craved her and was desperate for her touch, for the bond that still pulsed between us, undeniable and unbroken despite the years and the rejection.

A burst of light, carefree laughter snapped me out of it. I followed the sound to see a little girl seated by a sea of wildflowers. She had long, dark brown hair that matched her wide, bright eyes, which sparkled with unfiltered enthusiasm. Her small hands were stained with dirt as she carefully rearranged a cluster of petals. Her soft laughter filled the garden as butterflies flitted around the petals she had carefully rearranged.

I couldn't explain it, but there was an instant pull toward her, a strange, inexplicable connection. My wolf, who had been seething moments ago, stilled, curiosity taking over him as it did me. My firstand only thought was that she must be one of the servants' kids who probably wandered off while her parent was busy working.

I approached slowly, careful not to startle her. She noticed me when I was just a few steps away and gave me a bright, heartwarming smile.

"Hi," she said cheerfully, brushing dirt from her hands.

"Hello," I replied, crouching to her level. "What are you doing out here all by yourself?"

She shrugged. “I like flowers. And it’s quiet here. Mummy told me to stay where she could see me, but I got bored.”

I chuckled, remembering all the times I’d snuck away from the pack house to escape my parents’ constant watch. “What’s your name?” I asked.

“Aria,” she answered.

“Aria,” I repeated softly. It suited her. “Nice to meet you, Aria. I’m Damian.”

“Nice to meet you too, Damian,” she chirped with a wide grin.

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There was something about her that felt familiar, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Maybe it was her eyes. I watched as her fingers gently brushed over the petals as if she were handling something sacred.

"You seem to know your way around flowers," I said.

She nodded enthusiastically. "I help in the garden at the pack school! Mrs. Willow says I have a green thumb. I don't really know what that means, but I think it's good 'cause she sometimes lets me take care of her favorite flowerpot."

I couldn't help but smile at her innocent misunderstanding. "It means you're really good with plants. I'm sure you're amazing at it," I said, genuinely charmed.

Her face lit up, and a strange warmth spread through me. It was rare for me to connect with anyone this quickly, let alone a child. But with Aria, it felt effortless.

"In school, we have a big garden where we plant flowers," she said, stretching her hands to show just how big. "I spend most of my break time there with my best friend, Tobias, talking with the flowers."

I raised an eyebrow. "Talking?"

She nodded, smiling. "Not like people," she clarified. "But they have meanings. Like daisies mean happiness, and marigolds mean courage. Roses mean love," she made a face, "but that's boring. Everyone knows that."

I chuckled. "You're right. Roses are overrated. What's your favorite flower, then?"

She paused, furrowing her brows in thought. “Hmm...I think lavender. It smells really nice, and it makes people calm. Mrs. Willow says it helps when you’re sad or stressed.”

For some reason, I made a mental note to tell the servants to replace the carnations in the living room with lavender.

Something about her innocence, her pure joy, hit me right in the chest. I hadn’t felt this kind of lightness in years.

“You know a lot about flowers for someone your age,” I said. “That’s impressive.”

She shrugged modestly. “Mummy says it’s good to know things. And I like learning.”

Just as I was about to say something else, she tilted her head up and asked, “What’s your favorite flower, Damian?”

I blinked, caught off guard by the question. “Hmm.” I stroked my jaw. “You know, I’ve never really thought about it. Not that I don’t like flowers. I just never gave it much thought.”

“You should,” she said seriously. “It should be something that suits you. Mrs. Willow says everyone has a flower that suits them.” She paused, her big eyes studying me as she considered it. “I think you’re a sunflower.”

I chuckled. “A sunflower? Why’s that?”

“Because they’re big and tall and strong,” she said, her eyes sparkling. “Just like you. Sunflowers always stand out in the field because of their height.”

Her words surprised me. A sunflower? I liked the idea. Tall, strong, and always

standing out. It wasn't exactly inaccurate. I smirked, not sure if I should be flattered or amused, but it was a bit of both.

A sudden rustling and the sound of hurried footsteps interrupted the conversation. I turned just as Tala burst into the garden, her expression frantic. Her eyes locked on Aria, and relief flooded her face.

"Aria!" she called, rushing over.

"Mummy!" The little girl called back, and I froze on the spot.

Mummy? My stomach dropped. Since when does Tala have a child?

I straightened up as Tala reached us, pulling Aria into a tight hug. "I told you not to wander off," she murmured, her voice soft but laced with concern as she kissed the top of Aria's head.

"I'm sorry, Mummy," Aria said, her voice full of innocence.

"It's alright," Tala replied, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "Just don't do it again."

I stood there the entire time, frozen in shock. My mind was racing. How? When? Had she moved on? Had she really forgotten about everything that happened between us? But there was a bigger question clouding my thoughts.

Tala didn't acknowledge me as she held Aria's hand, ready to leave. But just before she turned, Aria pulled her hand away and ran toward me. "Good night, Damian," she said with a bright smile.

I managed a smile, though it was more out of surprise than anything else. "Good

night, Aria.”



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Tala's gaze met mine for a split second, her eyes heavy with something unreadable, before she quickly looked away as though the contact burned her. Her grip on Aria tightened, and without a second glance, they turned away.

As I watched them walk away, the thought gnawed at me, clouding my thoughts. Could it be? Could Aria be mine?

### Chapter 10

Tala

After tossing and turning, I finally dozed off just before sunrise and managed a few hours of sleep. It didn't help that I was sleeping in the room across from Damian, who may or may not have suspected that Aria was his daughter.

I hadn't even been here for a full day, and things were starting to unravel. Before going to bed, I reminded myself of why it was important to keep a huge wall between Damian and me. As long as I kept my head down, three weeks would go by in a breeze, and when I returned to Silver Fang, my life would go back to being as it was—simple and peaceful.

The next morning, I rebuffed the idea of going down for breakfast when the servant informed me that the Alpha insisted on us having breakfast together. But then I thought, wouldn't it be more suspicious if I didn't show up after how last night ended?

From the moment I walked into the dining hall, I felt the tension. Damian was seated

at the head of the table, one leg crossed over the other and a hand brushing over the scruff on his jaw. He looked to be in deep thought.

I ignored the way his eyes followed my every movement as I walked toward a chair, deliberately choosing one very far away from him. Even after sitting, I felt his gaze pinned on me. He wasn't even trying to hide the fact that he was staring at me. His presence was suffocating, his scent wrapping me like chains I couldn't break free from. My wolf wouldn't stop whimpering and stirring inside of me. But I had to keep her at bay. Damian wasn't good for her, for us, no matter what the mate bond meant. Fool me once, and I'd carried the shame. But fool me twice? I wasn't about to let that happen.

I grabbed a plate and began loading it with scrambled eggs and flatbreads. I needed my energy if I was going to get through a full day back in this pack. Just as I was about to take a bite, his voice sliced through the air, freezing me in place.

"Tala," Damian called, his voice low but firm. "We need to talk."

I slowly set the fork back on the plate, turning to meet his gaze. His brown eyes were swirling with emotions I couldn't quite read, though I could see the curiosity flickering within them.

Sucking in a breath, I pressed my lips together in a thin line, an indication that if this wasn't a conversation about the alliance, I wasn't interested.

He didn't seem to pick up on the hint because his next question caught me off guard, even though I had been bracing for it.

"Is Aria mine?" Damian demanded without preamble.

My throat tightened, but I fought to keep my composure. I wasn't sure how to

respond. Should I pretend to be shocked and act like I didn't know what he was referring to? Feigning ignorance would only drag this conversation out longer than I wanted it to. Finally, I decided to give him a straightforward answer.

"No," I answered evenly.

His eyes narrowed. "Don't lie to me, Tala."

"I'm not," I lifted my chin, praying my voice wouldn't betray me.

"She has my eyes."

I scoffed, shaking my head. "Get over yourself, Damian. You're not the only man in the world with brown eyes."

"She looks the right age," he countered with another claim.

"What are you? An expert in childhood development?"

Damian fell silent, his piercing gaze trained on mine as though he could see the depths of my soul, searching for any cracks in my composure.

"Look," I said, finally breaking eye contact and shifting my gaze away from him. "I had a fling with a guy when I got to Silver Fang. It wasn't serious, and he left before I found out I was pregnant. I figured it was for the best. But I know for a fact that Aria isn't yours, Damian."

I turned my gaze back to him just in time to see his eyes flare. "You've been with someone else?" he asked, and I recoiled, stunned by the sheer audacity of the question.

Anger flared inside me, hot and raw. “What did you expect? That I would sit around pining for you after you shattered my life?”

He leaned forward sharply, a condescending retort surely at the tip of his tongue. But before he could speak, Serena’s voice cut through the tension. “Oh, Damian, there you are!”

I glanced over my shoulder, and there she was, sauntering toward us in a yellow dress that clung to her body like a second skin. A smug smile played on her lips, but as soon as she looked at me, it turned cold. “Tala.” She took me in with a slow, deliberate gaze. “I would have expected a more... appropriate outfit, considering you’re working here as a delegate.”

My blood boiled. What right did she have to question my choice of clothing? And what was so wrong with a T-shirt and jeans?

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I bit back a sharp retort, unwilling to give her the satisfaction of knowing her words had any effect on me. Instead, I took a bite of my breakfast, but it had lost its appeal. My appetite had vanished completely.

Serena took a seat right beside Damian, her smile sweet and irritating. “We need to get to know each other better and also plan for the engagement ceremony. So, I figured we could do that while you give me a tour of the town.”

Damian’s expression darkened as his gaze shifted to her. “I have servants for that.”

She leaned in slightly, undeterred. “Yeah, but we still need to spend some time together. That’s the main reason I’m here, after all. We’re going to be mates, and as much as an alliance brought us together, I see no reason why we can’t get to know each other better.”

Ugh. My stomach twisted. If I sat here any longer, I was going to throw up the little food I had managed to eat. Pushing back in my chair, I got up. And without a glance at either of them, I left the dining hall.

The air outside was crisp and fresh, a welcome relief from the suffocating tension I’d just left behind. I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath to expel the anger and frustration that had been building inside. My day was already set, and even though breakfast with him hadn’t been part of it, I wasn’t going to let it derail my plans.

My feet carried me down the familiar path as I made my way toward the slum. The moment I set foot in the territory, I was greeted by the mingling scents of smoke, sweat, and freshly baked bread. Years had passed since I last walked these roads, but

nothing had truly changed. Makeshift stalls lined the dirt roads, their owners shouting out prices for everything from wild herbs to handwoven cloth. Children darted between clusters of people, their laughter and chatter filling the air. Vendors waved skewers of charred meat over open flames. Young pups wheeled barrels across the streets, selling freshly baked bread. If there was one thing the slum did better than the Beta territory, it was in making bread. I remembered how Gina and I used to wheel those loaves when we were younger. There were rarely any leftovers, but whenever there were, the baker always let Gina and I have them. We'd look forward to those days when we'd go home with plenty of bread.

I had taken up residence with Gina's family after mine had died. Beta soldiers stormed the slums one night, killing mercilessly and without reason. Of course, the Omegas put up a fight, but we were no match for trained, armed soldiers. Many lives were lost that night, my family included.

The memories flooded my mind as I made my way down the uneven, cracked roads. Mud clung to the edges of my boots, but I didn't mind. I passed through the market square, heading toward the residential part of the area where faded wooden houses leaned against each other like drunks at the end of a long night. Their walls were patched with whatever materials could be found: planks, scraps of cloth, and rusted sheets of metal.

People turned as I passed, their conversations faltering. Curious eyes followed me, some filled with disbelief, others with barely veiled hostility. I ignored the way their stares drilled into me, some bold and unashamed. Of course, everyone knew me. I'd made a fool of myself years ago, and my actions had become the talk of the town.

Pushing their stares to the back of my mind, I held my head high and continued. I had left this place in shame, and now, my return was a spectacle.

I felt a sense of relief here in the slums, where I didn't have to carry the burden of

pretending not to remember a past I could very much recall. Alpha Kael, and most certainly Serena, would never be caught dead in a place like this.

As I neared the path that led to Gina's home, the sounds of the market faded, and the road grew quieter, offering a reprieve from the stares and whispers. When I reached her front door, I paused, feeling a tight knot in my chest. I wasn't sure what kind of welcome I would receive. It had been so long—far too long. And given the way I left, I had no idea what to expect now.

Swallowing hard, I lifted my hand to knock, but before I could, the door swung open, and a boy with wild black curls rushed out, nearly knocking me off balance. I stumbled back as he came to a stop, his wide eyes staring up at me.

“Aiden, be careful out there!” a familiar voice scolded from inside the cottage. Almost immediately, Gina appeared in the doorway.

Her eyes grew wide in shock when they landed on me standing by her doorstep. “Tala?” she asked, disbelief heavy in her voice.

I managed a small smile, replying, “Hey, Gina.”

The young boy stared up at me with curiosity before glancing back at his mother as if waiting for some explanation. Gina's hand instinctively rested on his shoulder. For a long moment, neither of us said anything; we just stood there, staring at each other.

The awkward silence between us was finally broken when the boy tugged at Gina's hand. “Mama, I'm gonna go find Papa at the workshop!”

Gina tore her gaze away from mine, ruffling the boy's hair as she said, “Stay out of trouble, okay?”

The boy gave me a quick glance, and if I didn't know any better, I would have sworn it was a warning. Then he turned and hurried off.

I looked back at Gina. "You wanna come in?" she asked.

I followed her inside, where the warmth and scent of freshly brewed tea filled the cozy room. The living room was simple yet inviting, with mismatched furniture that gave it a lived-in feel. A soft, faded rug covered the wooden floor, and the walls were adorned with hand-painted pictures and little trinkets, each one telling a story. There were a few potted plants on the windowsills, adding a touch of green to the warm and cozy room.

Gina disappeared to what I presumed was the kitchen and reemerged with a small sizzling kettle. I took a seat at the worn wooden table as Gina poured two cups of tea.

She set one in front of me but didn't sit. Her gaze flickered over me, assessing me. "You look... different."

"Yeah." I nodded with a small smile. "You look good," I said dryly, cradling the warm cup between my palms.

"Oh please," she chuckled. "Between having to keep an eye on Aiden every single minute of the day and running the tea shop, I barely have time to care about my looks. I'm definitely a shadow of the girl you knew before you left town."

I shook my head. "No, I'm serious, Gina. You look good." That wasn't a lie. Yes, she looked a lot different from how she had been seven years ago. But she looked healthier in general. She had added a bit of weight in contrast to how thin she used to be. Her brown skin seemed to glow more, a stark contrast to how dull it had been. Her auburn hair, which used to be wild and untamed, was pulled back neatly in a braid, bringing out the softness of her features.



She regarded me for a moment as though trying to see if I was saying the truth before she smiled and muttered a quiet, “Thank you.”

After a beat, she asked, “So, are you just passing through?”

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“I, um, I’m staying for a while. Stonehart entered into an alliance with another pack, Silver Fang, and I am overseeing the progress.”

“So, what are you now? A council member for Silver Fang?”

“Yes,” I responded.

The awkward silence resumed, and neither Gina nor I said anything. I had plenty to say and ask, but I didn’t know if I had the right to ask about her life after I left. I didn’t feel guilty for leaving; I only felt guilty for not at least informing her. But it was a decision I made in the spur of the moment, and I just did it.

I breathed out, attempting to curb the awkwardness, and said, “He looks exactly like you. Aiden, I mean.”

“Really?” Gina’s smile spread the moment I spoke. “Some people say he’s a spitting image of Rowan.”

“Rowan, huh?”

“Yeah,” she chuckled. “I told you he was my fated mate.”

A pang shot through me, and I sipped from my tea. It scalded my tongue, but it didn’t burn nearly as much as the memory of Damian’s rejection. I thought he was my fated mate. I was sorely mistaken.

Gina seemed to notice the slight change in my mood as she came to sit beside me, her

voice soft and tender. “I’m sorry about what happened to you, Tala. You didn’t deserve any of that.”

Tears stung my eyes. “No, Gina. It is me that should be sorry. I was selfish. I should never have left you like that.”

She touched my arm gently. “I understand. I was mad when I found out. I thought you’d just wanted to get away for a while, but when it became apparent that you weren’t coming back, I was mad. But trust me, I understand why you left.”

I exhaled, some of the tension leaving my shoulders. She took a sip of tea, and the conversation finally seemed to relax. Though it wasn’t the same as it used to be, it felt like a step in the right direction.

“So, anyone in your life?” Gina asked, her tone lighter than it had been earlier.

I smiled as I responded. “My daughter.”

Gina blinked, clearly surprised. “You have a daughter?”

“Yeah. She’s about the same age as your boy.”

“What about her father?”

I kept my expression neutral and simply said, “Not in the picture.”

Her lips parted as though she wanted to press further, but she stopped herself. I hated lying to her, but something about the truth felt like it would unravel everything. Avoiding her gaze, I traced the rim of my cup.

Gina broke the silence after what felt like an eternity. “So, what is it like working

with Damian?”

I scrunched my face, trying to mask the rush of emotion. “I’d rather not talk about him, Gina.”

She paused, her eyes softening with understanding. “I get it,” she said quietly, but there was an edge to her voice. She hesitated for a moment before continuing. “You know, I wasn’t the only one who searched for you.”

Her statement caught me off guard. I looked up at her as she continued.

“I was furious with him, Tala, after what he did to you. But he didn’t stop. He waited. Almost every day, he came to your house. He patrolled the forests and stood by the pack borders, hoping you’d return. Even when I gave up, he didn’t. He kept looking for you.”

I felt my chest tighten. An ache started to form beneath my ribs.

“I asked him why he was doing it,” she continued, her voice quieter now, almost reverent. “If he knew he loved you this much, why then did he reject you? But he never answered me. All I saw was how broken he was. He was shattered, Tala, and all he clung to was the hope that you’d come back. Or that he would find you. That’s what kept him going, day after day. Right up until his father died, that’s when he stopped searching.”

Her words settled over me like a storm, and for a moment, I imagined Damian feeling just a fragment of the hurt I had felt, that he still cared, which was why he searched for me. But that thought faded as quickly as it came, and the familiar feelings engulfed me. Anger twisted inside, like a clenched fist in my chest. Yet there was something else, something I couldn’t deny, something that clawed at the edges of my resolve no matter how hard I tried to ignore it.

I let out a pained wince. “Why are you telling me this, Gina?”

She hesitated, her gaze flickering to the floor. “I don’t know. Just thought you deserved to know.”

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I looked away, my jaw tightening. Whatever Damian had done after I left, it didn't matter. He had made his choices long before then.

And I would never forgive him for that.

### Chapter 11

#### Damian

The council room buzzed with heated discussions and reports, but I wasn't really there. Try as I might, I couldn't get Tala and her daughter out of my head.

Our conversation this morning had gone nowhere, frustratingly so. But I'd gotten more than enough conviction by just speaking with Aria. It was light. Easy. Good. The connection was real. And then there were her eyes. Dark brown. Just like mine.

It wasn't lost on me that this thought could be irrational. Brown eyes weren't proof of anything, but that gnawing suspicion refused to let go. Aria looked no more than six. The math lined up perfectly, and my gut had never failed me before.

It was this, or I had to come to terms with the fact that Tala had been with another man.

A sharp, hot pang flared in my chest. The nights we'd spent together flashed through my head. I hated that somebody else had felt her soft skin, tasted her lips, and heard the sweet sound of her pleasure. The thought of someone else knowing that part of her made my blood boil. She was supposed to be mine.

Whatever the truth was, I couldn't rest until I knew it. And something told me Tala wouldn't be the one to give it to me.

"Damian?" Elder Maren's voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

I blinked, forcing myself back into the present. The elders and Grayson sat around the table, their faces taut with concern. My gaze landed on Grayson, and I could practically smell the displeasure radiating off him.

Leaning forward, I locked my knuckles together and spoke with the confidence of someone who'd been listening all along. "We'll need a patrol unit to escort the healers to Silver Fang. Mixing our scouts with their warriors will give us better coverage along the borders and help secure the forest that separates our towns."

Grayson was the first to speak, his tone cutting. "That won't solve the real problem."

All eyes shifted to him, waiting for the more he had to say.

"We don't have enough fighters," he said bluntly. "Yes, we have the numbers, but most of them won't join the pack protectors. They think they're fighting for the Alpha and the Betas, not for themselves."

"If we send our warriors for joint patrols and they fail to control the forest, we're basically giving the rogues a free pass into our town. We'll have no defense." Grayson paused, letting the weight of his words sink in. "I don't think it's wise to send patrols. We should only send escorts for the healers while we retrieve the promised moonstone barriers. Once we have that, we can fortify our borders."

I clicked my tongue in disapproval, cutting him off before he could sway the room. "The terms of the alliance were clear: joint patrol units, joint intelligence councils, healer deployments, and border fortifications. The delegate in charge won't accept

anything less.”

“You mean Tala?” Grayson’s voice was sharp.

Silence fell over the room. My gaze locked on his. The scowl on my face was enough to warn him, but Grayson wasn’t one to back down easily.

I turned back to the elders and caught the surprise etched on their faces.

As expected, Elder Maren was the first to speak. “Are you telling me the Omega who Damian rejected all those years ago is the delegate from Silver Fang?”

Grayson remained silent, but his reaction earlier had pretty much revealed that.

I ignored Maren’s question and forced myself to take a steadying breath. As much as I didn’t like his confrontational tone, I couldn’t refute that he wasn’t wrong. The Omegas wouldn’t fight with us. Sending the bulk of our pack protectors was an invitation for the rogues to invade.

But breaking the alliance terms? That wasn’t an option. Not if we wanted to maintain trust with Silver Fang.

“I hear your concerns,” I spoke again. “But abandoning the patrols entirely isn’t an option. The terms of the alliance were clear, and I won’t dishonor this pack by breaking them.” I paused, letting that sink in. “That said, you’re right about the risk. We’ll adjust the strategy; send a smaller, elite patrol unit, handpicked scouts and warriors. They’ll be supported by Silver Fang’s best trackers and warriors as they work on gaining control of the forest. In the meantime, we’ll focus on fortifying the borders and preserving our fighters.”

Elder Maren nodded thoughtfully, but Grayson wasn’t convinced.



“You really think Tala will agree to that?” he asked.

I pinned him with a hard stare. “I’ll talk to her about the recent developments. I’m sure she’ll understand.”

Grayson’s expression was still grim, but he gave a grudging nod. Everybody seemed to have come to terms with adjustment. Now, it was time to work.

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“Good,” I said, leaning back in my chair, which signaled the end of the discussion. “Then we’re done here.”

The elders rose from their seats, chairs scraping across the floor as their murmurs filled the room. One by one, they began to file out. Grayson started to follow, but I called him back before he took a step.

“Grayson, stay.”

His brow furrowed, but he gave a curt nod and sank back into his seat. I waited patiently, listening as the elders’ footsteps faded into the distance. When the last echo died, silence wrapped around us. Grayson looked at me expectantly, waiting to hear the reason I told him to stay back.

I straightened and met his gaze. “I have an assignment for you.”

His expression hardened with suspicion. “What kind of assignment?”

“I want you to lead the escorts accompanying the healers to Silver Fang.”

“That’s it?”

“No.” My voice dropped, firm and deliberate. “While you’re there, I need you to gather information about Tala’s stay in Silver Fang—who she’s been with and who she’s close to.” My jaw clenched. “Especially if she’s been with anyone else.”

Grayson’s eyes widened slightly before narrowing. “You’re sending me to spy on

her?”

“It’s not spying,” I countered. “It’s intelligence gathering.”

He let out a dry laugh. “Call it what you want, but you know how the pack will see it when they find out their Beta is doing a spy’s work.”

“They won’t find out.” I leaned closer, my tone low and commanding. “This stays between us.”

Grayson’s lips pressed into a thin line, but he nodded grudgingly. “Fine. But I have to ask. Why does this matter so much to you? What are you hoping to find out?”

I hesitated, considering whether to tell him my theory. But Grayson had always been loyal, and if anyone deserved an explanation, it was him.

“Seeing her again...” I exhaled slowly. “It brought back everything I thought I’d buried. I realize now that I never stopped caring for her, Grayson.” My voice softened, but there was a sharp edge to it. “But now it’s not just about her.”

Grayson’s brows furrowed in confusion.

“It’s about the little girl she came back with,” My throat tightened. “There’s a chance she might be my daughter.”

Grayson’s expression flickered with surprise, his brows furrowing as my words sunk in.

“You really think Tala would keep your daughter from you?” he asked quietly after a long pause.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But I need to find out.”

## Chapter 12

Tala

Being in Stonehart’s council room, surrounded by the very people who had fueled Omega’s oppression in the pack for so long, made my blood boil. I’d rather be anywhere but here, forced to strategize with these hypocrites. But it was my duty, so I had to swallow my anger and make this alliance work in Silver Fang’s favor.

The room was silent, but the tight expressions and cold glares on their faces spoke louder than any words. I could feel the hatred in the air, but it wasn’t until one of the elders, a man with gray hair, whispered that I knew for sure. He leaned in close to the person next to him and muttered, “She must have warmed the Alpha of Silver Fang’s bed. That’s the only reason she’s sitting at his council table. She sleeps with Alphas to climb her way up.”

Then the Elder he whispered to replied, “Thank the Moon Goddess, it didn’t work on our Alpha.”

I kept my face neutral despite the disgust his words stirred in me. I couldn’t stop my jaws from clenching. One of the reasons I had kept my distance from Kael was to shut down any rumors like this. But it didn’t matter what I did or didn’t do. Gossip would spread as long as people didn’t like you. I had learned this long ago and trained myself not to be affected by what others thought of me.

The scornful silence in the room was broken by Damian’s heavy footsteps as he entered. Great, I thought. The man we’d all been waiting for. Now, we could finally get this meeting over with, and I could get the hell out of the space with these hypocrites.

Damian walked into the room with his usual confidence and took his seat at the head of the table. I remembered our dinner with Serena yesterday, where he had casually mentioned the issue of sending fewer patrols than required to join Silver Fang's warriors. Of course, I hadn't taken the news lightly. Silver Fang had entered this alliance under the belief that Stonehart had enough warriors to deal with the rogue threats. Now, it all felt like it had been built on empty promises. But there was no use dwelling on it. We'd made the alliance, and now the only option was to make it work.

I'd left the dinner with a storm of thoughts in my mind. I wasn't about to fail Kael and Silver Fang by bringing back this news. My priority was securing my daughter's future in Silver Fang, and that drove me. I spent most of the night turning over options in my head, knowing today's meeting was coming. By the time I walked into the council room, I had a solution ready. Though I doubted any of them would like it. But honestly, I didn't care.

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Damian gave a quick glance around the room before addressing everyone. “As we all know, the head of the pack protectors reported yesterday that we’re short on manpower. Unfortunately, this has impacted our ability to fulfill the terms of our alliance with Silver Fang. We are an honorable pack, and we intend to keep our word. That’s why we have Silver Fang’s delegate here today. She has a solution that not only benefits the alliance but could also help our pack,” Damian said, turning to me. “Tala, the room is yours.”

I gave him a brief nod to acknowledge his words, then turned my attention to the scorned looks on the elders’ faces, likely already prepared to dispute everything I was about to say.

I kept my expression calm, letting the sheer hatred rolling off them slide right off me. “To defeat the rogues and come out on top, we need manpower,” I began. “The rogue army has likely grown, and with rumors of a new leader, their attacks have become bolder. Silver Fang doesn’t have the manpower, and unfortunately, neither does Stonehart. But the difference here is that this pack has the numbers. What it lacks is the will.

“As a former member of this pack and as an Omega who spent most of her life in Stonehart’s slums, I can tell you with certainty that the reason the Omegas won’t stick out a claw for the pack is because the people in charge have done nothing but perpetuate the divide. The Omegas’ loyalty to their Alpha is broken. But that can be fixed. The Alpha needs to show that he cares for all his people, not just the Betas. He needs to ensure they have the same resources as the Betas. He has to be willing to root out the duality that has been ingrained in this pack for so long.”

I turned to Damian, meeting his gaze. “The Alpha needs to connect with the people. Like it or not, they’re the backbone of this pack, yet they’ve been neglected for too long. I believe if he reaches out and earns their trust, they will fight for him without hesitation.”

A stunned silence filled the room as I spoke. I could almost feel the disbelief rippling through the air, passing from one person to the next. Well, I didn’t expect this to be easy.

Finally, a voice broke the silence, and when I turned, I saw it was the same man who had practically called me a whore. “You’re suggesting the Alpha does what? Coddle the Omegas?” he sneered. “That’s weakness! We’ve ruled with strength and ruthlessness for generations. That’s why this pack survives.”

“No. That’s why it’s divided,” I countered, keeping my tone calm and controlled. “Ruthlessness has only bred resentment. And if you can’t see that, then you’re part of the problem.”

The man’s nostrils flared as he shot to his feet, glaring at me. “You little wench! Do you think you can just walk in here and start giving orders?”

“I will not tolerate being called names,” I said, my voice steady. “If you cannot address me with the respect I deserve, then I suggest you sit back and observe for the rest of the meeting, using a more professional approach.”

If anger had a physical form, it would have been him. His eyes looked like they might pop out of his head. Smoke seemed to be rising from his ears as he jabbed a warning finger in my direction.

“You are nothing,” he spat. “Just because you sit at a council table as a delegate from another pack doesn’t make you any different from the girl who threw herself at the

Alpha only to be rejected in the most shameful way.”

“Enough!” Damian’s voice was razor sharp as he slammed his fist on the wooden table, the sound reverberating through the room and bringing it to a standstill. “We do not tolerate disrespect in this room, especially not toward our guests. You will sit down and remain silent, Elder Maren.”

Slowly, he sank back into his seat, his mouth set in a tight line, glaring at me like a storm cloud about to burst. My attention turned to Damian, his fiery expression softening as his eyes met mine. “Continue, Tala,” he said.

I took a slow breath. The room was still, the air thick with unresolved animosity.

“I don’t expect a complete overhaul overnight,” I went on. “But the Alpha can’t just sit on his throne while the rest of the pack suffers. He needs to show up and make his presence felt in places an Alpha would normally never set foot in. That’s the first step toward rebuilding loyalty and trust.”

I thought they might try to interrupt again. But they didn’t.

Damian’s gaze never left mine as I spoke, his eyes flickering with something I couldn’t read. Approval? Skepticism? Maybe a little of both.

“I understand that this might seem... unorthodox. But the divide between the Betas and Omegas runs deep. The Alpha has to be the one to bridge it. Silver Fang is counting on your warriors. Our lives depend on whether they’ll fight for this pack.”

I finished and rested my back in my seat. I held my breath, waiting for the inevitable rebuttal. But none came.

“I think it’s a brilliant suggestion,” Damian said, his voice steady and commanding.



“Without wasting time, we’ll start an outreach on the south side of town. I’ll meet with the Omega communities and listen to their concerns. If we’re going to defeat the rogues, we need them. The unity of this pack depends on it.”

His agreement left the elders in stunned silence.

“If this is what it takes to honor our alliance with Silver Fang and rebuild this pack for the better, then we will,” he declared, his gaze sweeping over the council members. “Anyone who has an issue with that is welcome to leave. But this is my decision, for the pack and for the future.”

The room was tense, but there was no more arguing. Elder Maren, still fuming, shot me a venomous look but remained silent.

Damian’s eyes met mine again, and for the briefest of moments, I saw something in them, something that made my heart stutter. For the first time, it felt like we were on the same side, united in a goal. But that didn’t mean that everything was suddenly healed. There was still the past between us. There was still the hurt.

I gave him a small nod. “Thank you, Alpha Damian.”

His gaze softened for just a second before he turned his attention back to the rest of the room. “Now, let’s move on to the next order of business.”

The meeting continued, and after about half an hour, it came to an end.

As the elders filed out, their contemptuous murmurs trailing behind them, I forced myself to push their words aside. I stood, gathering my things, ready to leave.

“Tala, please wait,” Damian said, bringing me to a halt.

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I paused against my better judgment. He waited for the last of the elders to disappear before standing. His steps were measured as he moved toward me, each one making my heart race in my chest. My fingers curled around the hem of my shirt as he drew closer. But then he stopped, just inches away, and I couldn't explain the strange pang of disappointment that settled in my gut.

"I'm sorry for Elder Maren's words earlier," he said softly, his eyes burning into mine. "You should know I don't see you that way."

Swallowing a chunk of nothing, I averted my gaze from him. "Thank you, Damian, but I don't really care what you think."

His eyes stayed locked on me, searching my face like he was trying to read my expression. "Do you really mean that?" he asked, his voice low.

"Yes."

He nodded slowly. Then, with quiet hesitation, he asked again, "Do you hate me, Tala?"

I froze, whipping my gaze back to him. "What?" The question threw me off guard.

"After everything that happened between us...do you hate me?"

The truth knotted in my chest. Hate would've been simpler. Easier. It would've given me a better reason to hold onto the anger. But what I felt for Damian was far more complicated, an ache tangled with frustration and a longing I couldn't ignore.

I exhaled sharply, my voice quieter than I intended. “I don’t have the energy to hate you, Damian.”

It was the truth. I’d tried to hate him, really tried. I had every reason to, but somehow, I couldn’t.

The weight of my words lingered between us. My gaze didn’t waver from his, and in that moment, I saw him, not just the man who’d hurt me, but the mate I’d once loved. My wolf stirred, restless inside me, pulling me closer to him, urging me to let go of the distance and let myself fall back into him.

I could smell his desire. Damian’s gaze on me darkened, a storm of emotions swirling in his eyes. And when he stepped closer, covering the distance between us, I didn’t stop him.

He leaned in, just close enough that I felt the warmth of his breath against my neck, but our bodies never quite touched. Still, the heat between us was enough to set every nerve in my body alight. I hadn’t realized it until now, but the raw need had been building inside me. Need for him. Just him.

He inhaled deeply and groaned low in frustration. “Why can’t I seem to catch your scent?” he muttered, taking another breath.

Damian pulled back slightly, eyes meeting mine as if trying to find the answer to that question in my gaze. I said nothing.

His hand lifted, reaching for my face. But then he hesitated mid-air, as if contemplating whether to touch me or not. But that hesitation lasted for all of one second before his second hand slid around my waist and pulled me into him.

I let out a small gasp, and when his other hand rested on my face, I leaned into it. His

touch was warm and gentle. I closed my eyes, unable to stop myself from nuzzling into his palm. I couldn't bring myself to admit how good it was and how his touch ignited me. But it was undeniable. It felt too damn good.

Mate.

The possessive whisper of my wolf sent a shudder through me. She pressed against my consciousness, stirring, restless. A deep longing resonated in my chest, a craving that had nothing to do with logic and everything to do with instinct.

In that moment, I forgot everything. The past, the hurt, they disappeared. It was just me and him, and it felt right.

But then, someone's voice broke through the moment.

"Damian?"

My eyes snapped open at the sound of the voice, and I turned quickly to see an unfamiliar man standing in the doorway. His gaze flicked between us, his face a mix of surprise and something else.

Without a word, I stepped back from Damian, pulling away from his touch. I gathered the last of my things, my hands trembling slightly, and practically fled from the room.

Dear goodness, what was I thinking?

Chapter 13

Damian

I bit back the urge to snap at Grayson as a flustered Tala gathered her belongings and scurried out of the room. Inhaling sharply, I dragged one hand through my hair until the frantic rhythm of her heartbeat faded down the hall. Ever since I saw her a few days ago, I'd been restless. I wanted nothing more than to touch her, to feel the smooth warmth of her olive skin under my fingers. And now that I had, it wasn't enough. Not even close. I wanted more. So much more. And maybe I could have had that if Grayson hadn't barged in.

My wolf let out a low, impatient growl, mirroring the frustration coiling in my chest. I scraped my boot against the floor, dragging it slowly before sinking back into my seat. My gaze locked on Grayson, daring him to explain why he'd barged in.

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“The patrol unit and healers are ready to move,” Grayson said quietly, the tension from what he’d walked in on still thick in the room.

“How many?” I asked.

“Twenty men, seven healers.”

I nodded. “Be careful out there, Grayson.” I paused, meeting his eyes. “And don’t forget your personal assignment.”

Grayson nodded, and for a second, I thought he was going to leave. But instead, he took a couple of steps toward me, his expression tense. “I have no right to say this,” he started, his lips pressing into a thin line when he noticed the way mine curled in displeasure. I knew exactly where this was going.

“And I don’t want to overstep,” he continued, his tone firm. “But more than my friend, Damian, you’re the Alpha. And I’m saying this not as your friend but as your subject. A lot is riding on this alliance. We’ve already slacked by sending fewer men than agreed. You can’t jeopardize everything by letting...whatever this is with Tala distract you. I get that you care about her. You’re allowed to. But right now, the pack’s survival depends on this alliance, and your promised marriage to Serena is the only thing holding it together.”

He paused, his gaze hard and unyielding. “If you let your feelings for Tala compromise this, it could mean the death of all of us.”

Silence clung to the room as he stepped back and lowered his head in deference.

“May I be excused, Alpha?”

After dismissing Grayson, I made my way back to the pack quarters. His words clung to me, an incessant buzz I couldn't shake no matter how hard I tried. He was right. I had a duty to the pack, one that should come before everything else, including whatever I felt for Tala. But it didn't feel right. What felt right, what would feel right, was being with my mate.

When I stepped into the pack house living room, I found Aria kneeling by a shattered vase, wilted flowers scattered across the floor. Her brows were furrowed over reddened eyes that had lost their usual spark. Something foreign twisted inside of me. Her small hand hovered above the jagged shards, unsure whether to gather the broken pieces or let them be.

“Aria,” I called softly, moving toward her to pull her away from the shards.

She turned to me, strands of hair sticking to her damp cheeks.

“What's wrong? Why are you kneeling by broken glass?” I asked. And where the hell were all the servants? They should've been here, keeping Aria away from anything dangerous. Almost immediately, one of the servants appeared with a broom and an apologetic look on her face.

I crouched in front of Aria, gently checking her arms, legs, and knees. “Are you hurt?” I asked. “Is that why you're crying?”

She shook her head, her lips trembling. “I'm sorry I broke your vase,” she whispered, fresh tears slipping down her cheeks. “I was trying to water it, but I knocked it over by mistake, and it...” She sniffled. “It broke. Are you mad at me?”

“Oh, Aria,” I sighed, following my instinct as I pulled her into my arms and stroked

her hair. "I'm not mad at you," I assured her. "But next time, don't go near broken glass, okay? You could get hurt."

She nodded as I wiped her flushed cheeks, though guilt still clouded her small face. The urge to make her feel better tugged at me.

"How about we get out of here for a bit?" I asked, pulling back to look at her.

Her brow furrowed in surprise, and she bit her lip. "But...Mummy doesn't like it when I go out without telling her."

"It's okay. I'll let someone know." Turning to the servant tidying up the broken shards, I said, "Please inform Tala that I've taken Aria out. Tell her she's safe with me."

The servant nodded, and I turned back to Aria with a reassuring smile. "See? All taken care of. You're in safe hands, I promise."

Her hesitation wavered, and a small smile tugged at her lips. "Okay."

We reached Stonehart's Crystal Spring after a leisurely walk through the winding paths of the town. Clear water shimmered under the soft sunlight. The gentle sound of flowing water filled the air, blending with the rustle of leaves from the surrounding trees. Rocks lined the edges of the spring, and wildflowers in different colors swayed in the light breeze.

Aria's eyes lit up as she took in the vibrant scene before her. A wide grin spread across her face the moment she spotted the flowers, all traces of gloom vanishing. This place had that effect, its gentle embrace could wash away even the heaviest memories. Since Tala left town, it had become my refuge. After countless fruitless searches, I found myself returning here each day, seeking a fragment of its warmth.



Aria was practically bouncing with excitement, her small hand tugging eagerly at mine. “Can I pick some flowers?” she asked, her eyes gleaming with pure joy.

I chuckled. “Sure, but stay near the rocks, okay? Don’t wander too close to the water.”

“Got it!” she beamed, releasing my arm and dashing toward the bed of wildflowers. I watched as she cradled each bloom with delicate care.

Not taking my eyes off her, I strolled toward one of the nearby stalls and selected a simple flowerpot. After paying the vendor, I returned to find her still lost in her floral world.

“Hey, Aria,” I called gently, holding out the pot, “I got you something to keep your flowers safe.”

Her eyes widened with delight. “Really?”

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“Really,” I said with a smile, handing it to her. “Now you have your own flowerpot.”

“Thank you!” Aria beamed as she took the pot from my hands and set it carefully beside her.

I settled on a nearby rock, watching as she inspected the pot with a thoughtful expression, ensuring it was perfect for what she had in mind. She went ahead to fill it with soil, using her tiny fingers to poke small holes across the surface. Watching her gentle hands move over the pot was soothing.

“Have you ever planted a flower?” she asked, not looking up as she selected a vibrant bloom and gently nestled it into one of the holes.

“No,” I admitted.

“Would you like to try?”

“Sure.”

“Give me your hand,” she instructed with a smile.

I extended my hand, and she placed a flower in my palm. “Just put it in this hole,” she said, pointing, “then pat the soil around it.”

She spoke with the confidence and precision of a little teacher, which I found adorable.

I followed her guidance, carefully tucking the flower into place. “You’re really good at this,” I remarked, smiling as we continued planting together.

“I do this a lot back home with my best friend, Tobias,” she shared.

“You have a best friend, huh? What’s he like?”

She paused, her lips forming a pout. “He’s soooo annoying,” she emphasized, her eyes crinkling as she shook her head. “But he can be nice sometimes.”

I chuckled as she returned to arranging the flowers. “Aunt Maeve always makes him apologize whenever he annoys me,” she added, then glanced up to explain. “Aunt Maeve is Mummy’s best friend and Tobias’ mom.”

I nodded, piecing together the names. Tobias, her best friend; Aunt Maeve, Tala’s best friend; and Mrs. Willow, her teacher. But there was no mention of her father.

“And your father?” I asked gently.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Mummy never talks about him.” A trace of sadness flickered across her face.

“Hmm,” I hummed softly, her words lingering in the back of my mind. But I reached over and brushed a bit of dirt from her cheek, hoping to lighten the mood. “Hey, looks like you’re growing more dirt than flowers,” I teased.

Aria cackled, wiping her chin as we went back to planting the flowers.

By the time we returned to the pack quarters, it was already sundown. Aria skipped ahead of me, her flowerpot clenched tightly in her hands. Her light, joyful giggles echoed through the yard, filling me with a warmth that felt foreign, but I welcomed it.

Seeing her happy made me happy, and I was glad I'd managed to bring back that spark in her.

When we reached the front door, I pushed it open, letting Aria dart inside.

"Mummy!" she squealed, her voice ringing through the room.

Tala stood by the sofas, her posture rigid. Our eyes met, and I saw the anger blazing in them.

"Mummy, look!" she beamed. "I've got my own personal flowerpot! I picked out all the flowers and planted them myself!"

Tala pressed her lips into a thin line, clearly trying to muster a smile, but displeasure still clung to her expression. "That's great," she said tightly, crouching in front of Aria and smoothing down her wild hair. "You must have gotten dirt all over your body in the process. Why don't you go upstairs and freshen up? I'll join you in a moment, okay?"

Aria's grin stretched from ear to ear as she nodded. But instead of going upstairs, she darted toward me and hugged my waist. "Thank you, Uncle Damian. I promise to take very good care of the flowerpot."

I smiled at her. "I trust you will."

She hugged me again, then skidded up the stairs, leaving me and Tala alone with the elephant in the room.

Silence stretched between us. Tala's stare was sharp enough to draw blood, but I met it head-on. "I don't appreciate you taking my daughter out without my permission," she finally said, her tone firm and biting.

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I sighed, raking a hand through my hair. She must have been worried when she returned and didn't find Aria at home. "I'm sorry for taking her out without asking, Tala. I apologize for making you worry," My voice was low and sincere. "She was upset after breaking the flower vase, and I just wanted to cheer her up."

"It's not your job to make her happy, Damian," she shot back coldly.

Her words hit harder than I expected. I stilled, searching her face for any faint trace of softness. But there was nothing.

Her expression was a fortress and just as cold as her words. "She said her father had never been in the picture."

Tala's expression hardened. "You took her out just to question her about her father?"

I held her gaze, unflinching. "No, I took her out because she was upset. But it was hard to miss the way she talked about it, like it was normal—like she's used to not having a father around." My voice dropped lower, edged with frustration I couldn't quite suppress. "Why is that, Tala?"

Her jaw clenched, and she folded her arms across her chest. "Because that's how it is. End of story."

I stepped closer. "It doesn't make sense. You don't just leave a child without answers unless there's something you're hiding." I searched her eyes, looking for a crack in her composure. "Who is Aria's father?"

Her eyes flickered with something. Guilt? Fear? I couldn't tell. But it was gone as quickly as it appeared.

"You don't get to ask that, Damian," she said tightly. "Not after everything."

I frowned. "Everything?"

"You don't get to show up and pretend you care about my life, about Aria's life when you never cared before." Her voice wavered slightly, but her resolve remained firm. "You're not entitled to those answers."

I swallowed the sharp retort that rose in my throat. She was right about one thing. I didn't have the right to demand anything from her. But that didn't stop the growing suspicion from festering in my mind.

"I don't get it, Tala," I said after a moment.

She arched her brow. "You don't get what?"

"One minute you're hot, the next you're cold."

Her lips curled into a faint, humorless smile. "I'm pretty sure I'm warm right now."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

She said nothing, and frustration gnawed at me. My gaze flickered across her face like I was trying to solve a puzzle. Maybe I was. We'd shared a moment earlier. It was something real. I thought I was finally chipping away at the wall she'd built between us. But now, it was as if she'd used the hours apart to rebuild it, higher and stronger.

“Earlier this morning—” I began, but she cut me off.

“No. I don’t want to talk about this morning.” Her voice wavered, just barely. “It was a momentary lapse of... confusion. It shouldn’t happen again.”

A momentary lapse of confusion? Right.

”And that’s not what we should be talking about right now,” she continued. “I don’t want you taking my daughter anywhere, Damian.Or asking her any questions. I just want you to leave us alone and mind your own damn business.”

“Are you mad about this morning or about me taking Aria out?” I asked.

Her eyes narrowed. “Why would I be mad about this morning?”

“Because...” I took a step toward her, and she instinctively stepped back. “You don’t want me to know the truth.”

She scoffed. “And what truth might that be?”

“That you still want me as much as I want you.”

She laughed, sharp and forced. “You’re delusional, Damian.”

“Am I?” I started to take quick and purposeful strides towards her. Her eyes widened for a moment, and she started to back away just as fast.

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“Damian, what are you doing? Damian? Da—.” The words stopped at the tip of her tongue when her back hit the wall, trapping her between me and the hard surface. It still frustrated me that I couldn’t catch her scent, even with the small distance between us.

Her breaths came in fast, her chest rising and falling with each one. Her eyes flickered with a mix of apprehension and something deeper. Desire.

“You say one thing, Tala,” I murmured, my gaze dropping to the rise and fall of her chest before returning to her eyes, “but your body says something else entirely.”

I lifted my hand to brush my fingers against her arm, and her breath hitched. A shudder rippled through her immediately, a confirmation that I was very much not delusional.

“Unlike you, Tala,” I leaned in, brushing my lips against her ear as I spoke. “I don’t have the energy to deny myself what I want.”

“Stop it, Damian,” she hissed. “Whatever this is, you need to stop.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Yes, I do!” Her voice cracked slightly, but she pressed on. “You forget yourself. Or maybe I need to remind you that you’re mating with Serena soon. Do you even remember that? Or does your ego block out inconvenient truths?”

I stiffened, her words striking a nerve, but it wasn’t enough to douse the heat between



us.

“Tala—”

“No.” Her voice was firmer this time, steeling herself. “Whatever this is, it needs to die here. Because I will not be a fool for you again.”

Serena’s voice cut through the charged moment like a blade, and Tala immediately shoved me away in time before Serena entered the living room.

She looked between us for a few seconds. “Is everything okay, Damian?”

“Yeah,” I answered smoothly, forcing my voice to remain steady. “Tala and I were just talking.”

Tala looked at me briefly, and without acknowledging Serena, she turned and headed up the stairs.

## Chapter 14

Tala

Over the next couple of days, I had to learn how to separate my feelings from the task at hand. Damian and I ended up working together more than I’d expected, hashing out outreach plans and tackling the finer details of the alliance. I’d spoken to Gina about the outreach plans, and she’d been incredibly helpful, suggesting key infrastructure improvements and other resources that the people would genuinely benefit from.

The barrier equipment from Silver Fang, crafted with moonstone to fortify boundaries and strengthen the territory, had finally arrived. Damian sought me out for advice on

setting it up since it was unfamiliar to them. In the course of doing this, he'd also come up with suggestions to strengthen the boundaries using Silver Stakes. We'd further discussed the allocation of resources for the joint patrol unit, negotiating how much each pack was going to provide to sustain them and their activities in the forest.

Despite everything between us, we'd managed to set aside our past and differences and make real progress—especially considering our previous interactions, which, thankfully, had been interrupted. Twice. Though things had been amicable and formal, I made sure to make some groundwork that ensured that.

I made sure to keep our interactions strictly within workspaces like the council room and the Alpha's quarters. Anything beyond that—breakfast, dinner, or even being in the same space without a clear purpose—I avoided completely. After almost getting caught by Serena in the middle of...whatever that was going to be, I knew I couldn't afford to jeopardize this alliance by letting my feelings get in the way. Luckily for me, pack celebrations like the Rite of Passage ceremony—where young shifters were welcomed as full-fledged members—and the Full Moon ceremony kept Damian occupied, leaving him out of the house for longer periods and away from me.

I even made a trip to Stonehart's pack mystic to renew the cloaking potion that masked Aria and my scent. I'd been foolish enough to let Damian see that he still affected me. I wasn't ready for what might happen when his wolf caught the scent of my desire whenever we were close.

Things had remained cordial and professional. Exactly how it needed to be. Before I knew it, one week had passed. Now, I just needed to get through two more.

I let out a deep sigh as I penned the last words of the letter I planned to send Kael, updating him on the alliance's progress and recent developments. The first report from the joint patrol unit had just come in, and the rogue threat seemed to be waning. Although attacks on neighboring villages had been reported, the forest separating

Silver Fang and Stonehart remained clear, which meant both packs were safe—for now.

Our plans were working. Either the joint alliance had driven the rogues away out of fear, or they were biding their time for a more calculated attack. Either way, we had to be ready to fight. That's why outreach strategies had dominated our discussions lately, discussions that often stretched late into the night. Just like tonight.

After folding the letter, I sat back in the chair across from Damian's mahogany desk. He'd excused himself a few minutes ago, presumably to use the bathroom. My muscles relaxed for the first time in hours, and I let my eyes drift shut.

"I made you tea," Damian's voice broke through the quiet, snapping my eyes open. I immediately straightened in the chair, my gaze drifting from the steaming cup he held out to his face.

Just as it had one too many times, my thoughts drifted to places I wished they wouldn't. Gazing up at him, I noticed how his hair was a tousled mess from the countless times he'd raked his fingers through it. I'd always preferred it that way—messy, rather than the slicked-back look he usually wore. When we first met, those unruly waves had given him a boyish charm. But now, with his defined jawline and the shadow of stubble, that same mess made him look... breathtaking.

I mentally scolded myself, dragging my thoughts back to what mattered. As I reached for the cup, our fingers brushed for the briefest moment, a fleeting touch that sent a spark through me. "Thank you," I muttered, taking a small sip to steady myself.

I expected him to round the desk and return to his seat where he'd been all night. Instead, he perched right in front of me, so close that the faint scent of cedar clinging to his skin wrapped around me. I willed my heart to remain steady, but it was already a lost cause.

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I kept my gaze fixed on the mahogany desk as I sipped from the cup, pretending to be absorbed by the clutter spread across its surface. There was the stack of papers, the custom seal stamped with the pack's sigil, the maps stretched across one side, a worn ledger, and an old lantern. Anything was better than acknowledging Damian's eyes drilling into me. The ticking of the brass clock on his desk filled the silence, each beat growing louder until it pressed against my nerves. But I kept drinking the tea, forcing myself to endure it.

"You're avoiding me," Damian said, not a question, but a statement.

Without looking up, I kept the rim of the cup at my lips and murmured, "I'm not."

"You are, Tala," he insisted.

"I'm not, Damian," I repeated, glancing at him briefly. "If I was, I wouldn't be here... in your quarters."

"Then why have you stopped having breakfast and dinner with me?"

"I prefer to eat alone," I said evenly.

"And the Rite of Passage ceremony? You didn't honor my invitation."

"I was exhausted that day. Besides, my presence wasn't necessary."

"What about the Full Moon ceremony?"

“Well, I...” My voice faltered, but I quickly recovered. “I had other responsibilities to attend to.”

A beat passed after my last word, and then Damian’s low rumble broke the silence. I snapped my head toward him, only to find him trying and failing to laugh quietly.

I scowled. “What’s so funny?”

“You, Tala,” he said between chuckles. “You’re obviously avoiding me. And you just confirmed it three different ways.”

Rolling my eyes, I took a final sip of tea and set the cup down gently on his desk. “Thanks for the tea, Damian. I think it’s time to call it a night. We can go over the outreach details tomorrow.”

I stood, brushing down my dress as I moved. “Goodnight,” I said briskly, already turning away. But I hadn’t made it two steps when a firm hand caught my wrist.

“Tala, wait.” Damian’s grip was gentle as he turned me back toward him.

I almost collided with his chest, stopping just inches away. Heat rushed through me, spreading like wildfire. My heart rate spiked, pounding against my ribs, and my breaths came shallow and uneven. This was what his proximity did to me, undermining every ounce of resolve I had. I hated how my body betrayed me. And worse, I hated that Damian knew exactly how to get this reaction.

“Damian,” I breathed, barely finding my voice. My thoughts scattered, caught between nervous tension and self-awareness as his gaze swept over my face. The pull to lean into him was overwhelming, but I fought against it.

“We can’t keep doing this,” I said, closing my eyes briefly as his scent wrapped

around me. “You can’t keep doing this.”

He tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear, his finger brushing along my cheekbone. “Unlike you, Tala, I don’t know how to hide wanting what I want.”

He leaned in, burying his face in the crook of my neck. A low growl rumbled from his chest, vibrating against my skin.

“Why can’t I still get your scent?” he whispered, his voice raw with confusion. The words were muffled, but I heard them clear as day.

I pressed my hand against his chest and gently pushed him back. “You really need to stop coming close to me, Damian.”

“Why?” he challenged, stepping forward again, closing the space between us. “Because you don’t want to face how you feel? How I make you feel?”

“Because it’s wrong,” I whispered. “You’re going to mate with Serena in less than a week.”

“It’s not Serena I want.” His eyes never left mine. “It’s you, Tala. It’s always been you.”

My eyes fluttered closed as my heart clenched in my chest. There was a time I would have given anything to hear Damian say those words. But he was seven years too late. Now, they didn’t mean a thing. They shouldn’t mean a thing.

I shoved him again, this time harder than I intended to. “My job here is to protect the alliance, not destroy it,” I snapped, turning to leave.

“Why, Tala? Why do you resist me so much?” Damian called after me, his voice

rising above a whisper, mixed with anger and frustration.

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I stopped in my tracks, memories of the first time he had asked me this very question flooding my mind. It was the first time we'd slept together. I had been in love, even if I was too scared to admit it. After all, I'd found my fated mate. Foolish as I'd been. I thought he felt the same way. Now, that memory has turned sour.

Slowly, I turned to face him, my emotions hardening into anger.

“You’re not even going to bother changing your tactics, huh?” My voice was sharp, laced with a simmering rage that threatened to explode. “Do you think I’m that stupid?”

Damian drew back, visibly startled. “What are you talking about, Tala?”

“You think I’m going to fall for the same bullshit that got me into your bed in the first place?” I spat.

“Tala—”

“Just stop, Damian!” My voice wavered, raw with frustration. “You got what you wanted from me years ago. Why can’t you just leave me the hell alone?”

“Tala, what the hell are you talking about?” he barked.

“I’m talking about how you pretended to love me,” I said, my breath shuddering as the words finally broke free. “How you lied just so you could get me into bed.”

The admission cut deeper than I wanted it to. I hated thinking about it, let alone



saying it out loud because it made me feel used. And heartbreak was one thing, but being used? That left a wound time couldn't touch. Being valued only for what someone could take from you was a pain that lingered long after love had died.

Damian staggered back as though my words had struck him physically. His expression twisted with pain. "Is this what you've thought all these years?" His voice was strained and wounded. "Tala, please tell me that's not what you believed."

"What else was I supposed to think, Damian?" I threw my hands in the air, frustration bubbling over. "We spent so many nights together, and then one night, when you decided you'd had enough of me, you rejected me. You invited me to that party just to humiliate me."

"No, no, Tala," he said, shaking his head as though trying to erase my words from existence. "That's not what happened. I swear it."

"Then why?" I snapped, the pain of years ago ripping open like an old wound that refused to heal. "Why did you reject me?"

Silence fell between us. His eyes were dark and turbulent, but he didn't look away. For a long moment, I thought he wouldn't answer.

"I didn't want any of this," he said quietly. "Believe me, Tala. I only ever wanted to protect you."

"You've got a pretty sick definition of protection," I scoffed. "I'm done with this conversation."

I turned to leave, but Damian caught my arm and spun me back around.

"Let go of me," I warned, trying to yank my arm free, but he didn't budge.

“It was never about getting you to sleep with me,” he ground out, his jaws clenched. His eyes darkened with frustration. “Fuck, I hate that you think that. I loved you, Tala. More than anything. Not a single day went by in the last seven years where I didn’t think about you.” He blew out a sharp breath, his expression softening. “You have to believe me.”

My erratic breathing began to slow. I wanted to believe him. But how could I when he’d fucked me, knocked me up, rejected me, and left me humiliated in the pack?

“How do you expect me to believe that?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

“Because I’ve been miserable since the day you left.”

Silence stretched between us as we stood there, staring at each other. His words settled over me, daring me to embrace and accept them. But the weight of the past clung to me, stubborn and unyielding, refusing to let go.

I opened my mouth to speak, but another voice beat me to it.

“What the hell are you doing with my fiancé?”

I jumped back, spinning towards the doorway where Serena stood, eyes wide with a mix of confusion and anger. And without a word, I dashed out of his chambers as fast as my legs could carry me.

## Chapter 15

Tala

The morning of the outreach came, and my nerves were all over the place. I stood by the gate of the pack house, watching the guards load crates of supplies into the

wagons. A cold breeze seeped in through my coat, but it wasn't the morning air that made me shiver. It was my racing thoughts.

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I knew this wouldn't be easy, undoing years of damage rooted so deep it had grown into hatred. Omegas weren't known for forgetting betrayals, much less forgiving them. Nearly all of them had lost someone or something to neglect and mistreatment. I understood how seeing an Alpha suddenly show up to care could feel like a slap in the face. His efforts wouldn't bring back their loved ones, but I could only hope they'd see he was different and was trying to make a change.

The day was packed with activities. It wasn't going to be a simple in-and-out visit. We were spending the entire day in the slums, showing the people that we were here to care and be present. Different groups had already gone ahead to set up stations for food distribution, medical care, and job placement consultants where Omegas could meet one-on-one to discuss their skills and find roles within the pack. A children's corner had been set up with games and storytelling sessions to keep the little ones engaged. Workshops were planned throughout the day, everything from basic literacy classes to skill-building sessions focused on crafting, trade work, and entrepreneurship. The goal was to equip them with knowledge and tools that could empower them long after the outreach ended. Security had been carefully arranged as well. Patrol guards discreetly stationed themselves around the area to ensure things stayed peaceful. It was essential to create an atmosphere where people felt safe and not policed.

Before noon, the outreach was already in full swing. Omegas lined up at the stations, waiting for consultations or basic medical checkups. Damian hadn't arrived yet because an impromptu meeting had come up with the patrol unit at the security border, something about a disturbance, but he was still expected to show up before the community meal. He'd declared it a work-free day across the entire pack so everyone could come out to socialize. Betas were encouraged to participate, though

I'd only spotted a handful since I arrived, aside from the volunteers.

As I stood in the corner watching the event unfold, the nervousness that had gnawed at me all morning began to ease. A lot was riding on this plan working. Not only was it crucial to solving our rogue problems, but I also didn't want it to come off as a colossal failure to the council members who had frowned at the idea from the start. More importantly, I believed the Omegas deserved better—far better than what they had endured. Change wouldn't happen overnight, but today was about showing that we were willing to put in the work.

My gaze drifted to Gina, who was fussing over Aiden's loose collar, her lips pressed tight as she issued what was probably a stern warning. The boy, clearly too excited to care, darted off the second she let go, skidding toward a group of kids near the Ferris wheel. Gina stood there, shaking her head before turning. When our eyes met, she smiled and began making her way over to me.

When Gina reached me, she turned to take in the view I'd been watching. "You did this, Tala," she said proudly, shaking her head as her eyes swept across the buzzing activities. "I could only ever dream this up."

I shrugged. "So, what are people saying about all of this? You know you're my eyes and ears."

She chuckled. "Well, most people are happy with the attention. Some are a bit wary, trying to figure out the Alpha's angle and why there is the sudden care and interest. Others are just going with the flow. But honestly, what everyone's really looking forward to are the supplies. Those are going to make a big difference."

I nodded, knowing exactly what she meant. I'd lived their struggles for most of my life, which was why I'd personally curated the inventory for the supplies. Herbal medicines and rare healing ingredients that were often too expensive to afford. Warm,

appropriate clothing for the children, especially since the slums were exposed to harsh weather. Nutrient-packed food supplies for both children and adults. Household essentials, including water purification stones, sturdy utensils, and so much more. The list was extensive because it had to be. They deserved better, and I was determined to give them that.

“The supplies will be distributed by the end of the day,” I told Gina. “Damian should be here any minute now.”

She nodded, a sly smile tugging at her lips. “You and Damian seem to be working well together.”

I narrowed my eyes. “That’s what my job requires.”

“Does your job also require you to wanting to kiss him?”

“Gina!” I hissed, glancing around to see if anyone had heard. “Keep your voice down.”

“Oh, please,” she waved dismissively. “It’s not exactly a state secret that you and the Alpha have history.”

“Yeah, seven long years ago,” I clarified, heat rising to my face. “And I never said I wanted to kiss Damian. I said we just had a...little moment.”

“A little moment,” she repeated with a knowing smirk. “Funny how you’ve been having a lot of those lately.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but she pressed on.

“You practically ran to me after that council meeting like a woman in heat, lamenting

about how you would have nearly made a mistake if that man hadn't interrupted." She grinned. "Honestly, if he hadn't, we wouldn't be talking about you wanting to kiss Damian. It'd be a whole different conversation."

"It would not!" I shot back defensively.

"Yeah, keep telling yourself that."

Gina was right. Damian and I had been having one too many little moments lately. It shouldn't be happening. He was set to be mated in less than a week, and I had no business entertaining lingering feelings for the man who had shattered my heart. Yet, whenever we were near each other, the air seemed charged with a tension I couldn't shake.

"Talk of the wolf, and he appears," Gina said, jutting her chin forward.

I followed her gaze and felt my breath hitch. Damian was striding toward us, clad in a dark coat that flared slightly with each step, black pants that fit him just right, and boots that added an edge to his commanding presence. His slicked-back hair only emphasized the hard lines of his face. He looked every inch the Alpha he'd become: serious, confident, and utterly captivating.

For some reason, my cheeks grew hot, and I quickly averted my gaze, only to find Gina watching me with a knowing smile. "I guess this is my cue to exit," she said. "I'll come find you later."

With a mischievous grin, she disappeared back into the crowd just as Damian closed the distance between us.

"Hey," he said softly, standing beside me. "How's it going?"

“Um...” I cleared my throat, trying to keep my voice steady. “Good. It’s, um, going great. Did you prepare a speech?”

He shook his head. “Not really, but I’ll know what to say when the time comes.”

I nodded. “You’re just in time for the community lunch. Come on, I’ll show you to the hall.”



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As I turned to leave, Damian's hand gently caught my arm. I froze, glancing back to find him watching me intently, his eyes searching mine.

"Tala, are you okay? You look...flustered."

"Yeah, of course." I quickly shrugged my arm free, hyper-aware that people might be watching. "I'm fine. Let's go."

I led Damian to the town hall, where Omegas were already pouring in and settling down at long communal tables. I'd planned for him to sit with the community leader, but that plan was quickly derailed when a group of excited children tugged at his coat, insisting he join them and tell stories about past Alphas. Ironic, I thought.

Shaking my head, I made my way to the community leader's table instead. Brad, a man in his late sixties with silver-streaked hair, greeted me warmly. I'd known of him for some time, though we'd never had a personal conversation. His reputation as a voice of wisdom and calm in the slums preceded him.

"You've done something remarkable today," Brad said, his deep voice cutting through the hum of conversation. "It's been a long time since we've seen this kind of attention from the pack leadership."

I offered a polite smile. "It's long overdue."

The town hall buzzed with conversation as the community lunch carried on, warm bowls of stew being passed from hand to hand along the long wooden tables. Laughter rose and fell, mixing with the clatter of spoons and the rustle of shifting

chairs. Each time someone laughed, a little warmth settled in my chest. Everyone sat shoulder to shoulder, sharing food, stories, and the comfort of familiar company. Children ran between the tables, their giggles spilling into the air as they ducked and weaved around the legs of smiling adults.

My eyes flickered to Damian, who was laughing at something one of the kids beside him had said. A small smile tugged at my lips. He was good with children—patient, easygoing, and attentive. Watching him, I had no doubt he’d make a great father. The thought stirred an ache in me, followed by guilt. But I pushed it down, turning my attention back to my food.

The first sign of trouble came in the form of hushed murmurs rippling through the crowd, harsh whispers, tight-lipped expressions, and glances edged with disdain. At first, it barely registered with me. But then, Damian stood, and the murmurs faded. All eyes turned to him as he stepped forward, commanding the room without a single word.

His gaze swept across the hall, and I saw genuine joy light up his face as he took in the sight before him. This was more than just a gathering. It was history in the making, something no leader before him had dared to do.

After a moment, he spoke, his voice steady and deep. “First, I want to thank each of you for being here today,” he began. “I know you have no reason to give us your time, not after everything. For too many years, we have failed to do what is right.”

A hush settled over the crowd as his words took hold. He let the silence stretch. Then he continued, his tone solemn.

“Words alone can’t make up for the pain this pack has caused you. I know that trust isn’t freely given, and I don’t expect it. But what I do want, what I will prove, is that things can be different. That we can be better.”

Some heads nodded in quiet agreement. Others remained still, arms crossed, eyes wary.

“What about the supplies you promised us?” A sharp voice laced with suspicion cut through the crowd, drawing everyone’s attention to the back of the hall.

“The supplies will be distributed by the end of the day,” Damian assured. “No one will leave empty-handed.”

A few shoulders seemed loosened at that, and some of the tension in the room ebbed. Damian continued his speech, speaking of unity, change, and a future where no one in the pack would have to suffer as they had.

Then, an Omega rose. He was old, his face lined with years of hardship. His fists clenched at his sides.

“You think we’re fools, Alpha?” His voice was cold, heavy with anger and bitterness. “My father died in the Omega-Beta war. My mother suffocated because we couldn’t afford to leave the polluted sectors. My younger sister—” his voice cracked slightly, but he pushed on. “She died because the medicine that could have saved her was too expensive. And where were the Alphas then? Where were you?”

A wave of unease swept through the crowd. The room felt tighter, the air thick with the weight of the building tension. Expressions shifted to grief, anger, and pain, all stirred by memories of their past.

Another Omega stood. “He’s right! Where were you, Alpha, when I lost my home in the storm last year?”

Then another. And another.

One after the other, they rose, voices raised in grief and anger, demanding answers that no apology could ever truly give.

My gaze darted between each Omega who stood, struggling to grasp how we had shifted from a light, carefree lunch to this. I barely had time to process the change before one of the volunteers appeared at my side, her face pale.

“Tala,” she whispered urgently. “The supplies. They’re gone.”

A sharp chill ran through me.

“What?” I breathed, my pulse quickening.

“The storage crates... they’re empty. Someone must have taken everything.”

Brad turned to me, his expression tightening. “The supplies are gone?” His voice was barely above a whisper, laced with fear. “If the Omegas find out that there are no supplies...”

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He didn't need to finish. I already knew.

Panic flared hot in my chest. My breath came quicker and shallower. This couldn't be happening.

Another Omega's voice rang out, louder this time.

"You're only here because you want us to fight for you against the rogues, isn't that right?"

A shocked murmur rippled through the hall. Whispers of uncertainty turned into open distrust. My stomach twisted into knots. How had they found out?

"You lied to us!" the same Omega shouted, his voice thick with fury. "There are no supplies. You'd never truly invest in anything that could make our lives better, would you?"

Then his gaze landed on me. "You both lied to us! You came in here, selling us lies about trying to better our lives. Meanwhile, you were just tricking us!" If looks could kill, the intensity of his glare would have knocked me straight to the ground.

He turned to the crowd, his anger fueling theirs. "There are no supplies!" he declared. "My friends checked the wagons. The crates are empty. They're deceiving us!"

That was all it took for the tension to finally shatter.

Shouts erupted from all sides. Anger surged through the hall like wildfire, fast and

uncontrollable. Chairs scraped against the floor as people leaped to their feet. Some tried to calm things down, but years of buried frustration had finally erupted.

Brad moved from the table, hands raised in an attempt to ease the tension, but he was just one man against a room full of fury.

Then, the guards marched in, moving swiftly to shield Damian. That was the breaking point.

The act of peace was shattered.

Chaos exploded. People hurled whatever they could grab, cups, spoons, plates, and even their own shoes at the guards. Some rushed forward, fists swinging. The guards fought back, only escalating the violence.

“You’ve got to get out of here, Tala,” Brad’s voice was urgent as he grabbed my arm, practically hauling me from my chair. “It won’t be long before they turn on you. They already see you as a traitor for having a seat on the council.”

“Wh—what about Damian?” I asked, my heart pounding.

“He’ll be fine. Your guards will get him out, and I’ll make sure he’s safe. But you need to leave. Now.”

I hesitated, my gaze darting to Damian. He was tense but composed, his voice raised as he tried to regain control. But it was too late. The room had unraveled into complete mayhem.

A firm grip closed around my arm. I turned to see one of the guards.

“We have to go, ma’am. They’re trying to block the exits.”

With one last look at the hall, at the overturned tables, the shouting, and the guards struggling to contain the angry mass, I let myself be pulled toward the exit.

As I stepped outside, the cold air bit into my skin, but it did nothing to cool the dread pooling in my stomach.

The outreach had failed.

I had failed.

## Chapter 16

Tala

“Your little charity event was a disaster,” Elder Maren spat, his glare pinning me in place. “Not only did it accomplish nothing, it nearly got our Alpha killed.”

A murmur of agreement spread through the room. I felt the weight of their stares, cold, disapproving, and unforgiving. I told myself I didn’t care what they thought. That their judgment didn’t matter.

But right now? It did.

Another Elder rose to his feet. His expression was twisted with the same scorn that laced his voice. “We should have known better than to take orders from a sheep in wolf’s clothing.”

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His gaze dragged over me, slow and deliberate, before shifting to the head of the table, where Damian sat in silence. He hadn't said a word since the meeting started, his back resting against the chair, eyes fixed on the oak table in front of him.

Since yesterday, since barely making it out of the slums after the fight broke out, we hadn't spoken.

When the guards brought me back to the house, I had been restless, unable to think about anything except the fact that Damian was still out there, stuck in a place where years of buried resentment had finally boiled over, and all of it had been directed at him.

Brad had tried to reassure me, but his words had done nothing to ease the knot in my stomach. I knew he was a good man and that he would do everything in his power to make sure Damian got out alive.

But there was only so much one man could do.

A few hours later, Damian had returned. The moment I saw him, my chest tightened. There was a thin cut just above his eyebrow, fresh and unbandaged. His expression was hard, his frown deep, and he barely slowed his steps as he stomped into the house and disappeared into his room.

Relief washed over me—he was safe. But right behind it came the crushing weight of guilt. He was angry. And it was because of me.

Maybe my plan had been ridiculous from the start. Maybe trying to change something



that had existed for nearly a century was nothing more than a fool's dream. Maybe I had let myself believe in something impossible.

And now, that dream had nearly gotten Damian killed.

The next time I saw him was now, in the council room. But he hadn't looked at me once since he walked in. His gaze stayed locked on the table. His expression was unreadable.

I guess he was just as furious as the rest of them.

Elder Maren let out a scoff, his gaze swinging back to me like a whip. "See what your little plan did? Your stupid outreach event didn't bring peace. It didn't bridge any gaps. All it did was undermine our Alpha's authority. You made him look weak, pandering to those hooligans, hooligans who now think they matter just because they know we need them to win this fight."

"They're not hooligans," I snapped, my jaw tight.

"Of course, you would say that. You're one of them. No matter how you dress yourself up in luxury, no matter how high you sit at this table, it won't change what you are."

The words struck harder than I expected. I curled my fingers into fists, nails digging into my palms as I swallowed the sharp retort burning on my tongue.

He shifted his attention back to Damian. "We've got to show them that we're strong. We've got to send a strong message to those Omegas for trying to ruin the outreach. Everyone who was involved, everyone who threw a cup or spoon, whether woman or child, must be brought in to serve the consequences of their actions."

“That’s an act of war!” I said. “If we do that, we’re declaring an all-out war that will kill us all even before the rogues do.”

“Girl, you declared war the moment you suggested that stupid idea,” Elder Maren lashed out. “In fact, I suggest you keep your mouth shut and let us handle things the way we’ve always done. You’ve done more than enough already.”

“That’s enough, Elder Maren,” Damian’s voice cut through the backlash, cold and commanding. All heads swiveled in his direction.

Elder Maren reluctantly returned to his chair, but not without passing me a death glare.

The silence stretched as we waited for Damian to speak. It was both uncomfortable and nerve-wracking. But his next words left me in shock.

Damian’s eyes swept over the room, sharp and assessing, before settling on Elder Maren with a cold, unwavering stare.

“The next time you disrespect Tala in this council room,” he said, his voice low but deadly, “you’ll be ripped from your seat. Permanently.”

Silence fell over the room. Stares of shock flickered between the council members, but no one dared to challenge him.

“I’ve listened to you all yell and blame Tala for everything that went wrong yesterday,” Damian continued, his tone steady and commanding, “as if she’s responsible for my father’s failures. For the mistakes of the Alphas before him.” His eyes darkened with something unreadable. “She is not the reason the Omegas resent us. And she certainly isn’t the reason they tried to lynch me.”

He let that sink in, his words settling over the room. “Undoing years of bad leadership won’t happen overnight. Tala’s suggestion was a step forward, but the divide we’re trying to bridge is deep. It will take time. And if you think pointing fingers at her will fix what’s broken, then you are part of the problem.”

A muscle in his jaw tensed as he exhaled slowly, his expression hard. “I won’t hear another insult thrown at Tala. If you have nothing useful to contribute, either keep your mouth shut or leave this council. And if you do walk away, don’t bother coming back. You’ll have lost your seat.”

A tense, heavy silence followed. The council members shifted in their seats, stiff and glaring, but none of them spoke.

I swallowed hard, the tension heavy in the air. Damian had just silenced an entire council in my defense.

As the meeting dragged on, the hostility lingered in the air, but no one dared to speak against me again.

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And when it finally ended, Damian didn't spare a glance at anyone. He simply stood and walked out.

That night, I lay in bed, tossing and turning as the elders' words echoed in my head. No matter how hard I tried, sleep wouldn't come.

With a frustrated sigh, I threw off the covers, grabbed my robe, and stepped out onto the terrace just outside my room. The cool night air wrapped around me, carrying the faint scent of damp earth and blooming flowers from the garden below.

I leaned against the railing, staring into the quiet darkness. Maybe, with enough time, the crisp air and the stillness of the night would calm my racing thoughts. Maybe then, I'd finally be able to sleep.

I watched as moths flitted around the flowers, their delicate wings catching the moonlight. I was never much of a flower person, but Aria loved them so much that I found myself paying more attention. I could only confidently name a rose, lavender, and sunflower. For everything else, I was still learning, one step at a time.

The soft sound of footsteps pulled me from my thoughts. I turned to see Damian stepping onto the terrace. He wore black shorts and a white shirt with a thick black robe draped over his shoulders. His hair was a wavy mess like he had just rolled out of bed.

"Can't sleep?" he asked, his voice low as he joined me at the railing, taking in the same view.

I nodded. “You?”

“Me either.”

We sighed at the same time, then glanced at each other and laughed. Our gazes shifted back to the garden, watching as the moths flitted from flower to flower. The silence between us wasn’t uncomfortable or awkward. If anything, it was soothing. The distant chirping of birds, the rustling leaves, and the cool breeze running through our hair all felt peaceful.

It was exactly what I needed.

After a long silence, I finally spoke. “Thank you for sticking up for me today at the council, Damian.” My eyes stayed on the garden below as I spoke.

I felt him shift, and when I glanced his way, he was leaning against the railing, watching me. “I didn’t do it because I wanted to.”

I turned to him, brow arching. Well, that stung.

But Damian chuckled, shaking his head. “Not that I don’t want to stick up for you, Tala. I always will. But this time, it wasn’t just about you. It was about doing what’s right. So, we hit a few bumps on our first day. No one expected this to be easy.”

“No one except Elder Maren and the rest of the council,” I muttered under my breath.

Damian laughed. “Maren’s never been a patient man. He’s conservative, set in his ways, and he’ll fight anyone who threatens the status quo.” He said it casually—like he had long accepted it and like nothing Maren did could bother him anymore.

I scoffed. “Yeah, I noticed.”

Damian smirked. "I guess he'll just have to be patient enough to watch us prove him wrong."

I hesitated for a moment before turning to Damian. He was still watching me, his brown eyes brighter than I expected, almost... joyful. Considering everything that had happened, I couldn't make sense of it.

"You're not mad?" I asked.

His brows pulled together. "Mad? Why would I be?"

"Well... yesterday, when you got back to the pack house, you were seething. You looked furious."

He let out a quiet chuckle. "Well, that's what happens when someone throws a cup at your face."

I laughed, my gaze drifting to the small scar just above his eyebrow. It had healed fast, though a faint mark remained. By tomorrow, it would be gone completely.

Without thinking, I reached up, standing on my toes as my fingers brushed lightly over the scar. "I'm sorry it was a disaster," I murmured, still tracing the spot.

Damian's expression shifted, his eyes darkening as he watched me. "Not all of it was a disaster," he whispered. "I actually enjoyed parts of it... especially talking to the kids. Being around them was a different kind of joy. It made me realize how much I want to be better for them. A better Alpha. One they deserve."

I met Damian's gaze, and beneath the desire simmering in his eyes, I saw something deeper, something genuine. And it made my heart flutter.

Silence stretched between us as we stood there, neither of us looking away. Every day, I was seeing a different side of him, and with each moment, the image of the man I had resented for so long was shifting into someone new. Someone I wasn't sure how to feel about.

His fingers brushed against my cheek as he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, his touch lingering.

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“I want to kiss you, Tala,” he said, his voice steady, unshaken.

He wasn’t asking. He was simply telling me the truth.

My breath caught at the raw honesty in his words, but that flicker of logic I had nearly lost came rushing back. I blinked rapidly and stepped back onto my heels.

“Damian—” I started, but he cut me off.

“Do you want to?”

I hesitated before shaking my head. “I shouldn’t.”

“That’s not what I asked.” He closed the space between us, his presence overwhelming. “Do you want to, Tala? Because I’ve been dying to kiss you since the moment you walked through the gates of the pack house.”

The rawness in his voice and the unfiltered desire burning in his gaze knocked the air right out of my lungs.

I opened my mouth to speak and tell him that he shouldn’t want to kiss me, that whatever this was between us wasn’t right, that in less than four days, he would be mated to another woman. But no words came out.

The cool air wrapped around us, but all I felt was heat. My heart pounded in my ears as I watched his eyes trace the path from my eyes to my nose and down to my lips. I watched the way his own lips parted slightly and his chest rose and fell with barely



restrained control. His gaze was locked on me like I was the only thing in the world that mattered.

How could I say no?

“Tala,” Damian murmured, his voice rough, thick with need. “Tell me to stop, and I will.”

But I didn’t. I couldn’t.

Deep down, beneath the walls I had built, beneath the resentment and the pain, I wanted this. I wanted him.

I swallowed hard, my throat dry as I whispered, “I want you to kiss me, Damian.”

His breath hitched. And then, in one swift motion, he closed the last bit of space between us. His hand slid to my jaw, tilting my face up to his. His thumb brushed over my lower lip, a touch so reverent that my lips parted on instinct, a silent invitation.

For a heartbeat, he hesitated, his lips a mere breath away from mine as if giving me one last chance to pull away. But I didn’t.

And then he kissed me.

The world around me seemed to come to a standstill. And for the first time in years, I felt the flutter of butterflies in my stomach and the thrill of being alive. From the moment his lips touched mine, the kiss was rough and urgent, a fiery dance of passion that transcended any coordination. Damian kissed me like a man starved, claiming my mouth with desperate hunger, sucking at my lower lip, his tongue delving deep, leaving no space for hesitation and no room to breathe.

I didn't even want to breathe.

In that moment, wrapped in his touch, lost in his kiss, I had never felt more alive.

My entire body vibrated with need.

Damian shrugged off my robe, his fingers trailing over my bare skin, leaving a path of fire in their wake. A shiver rippled through me, the sensation electrifying. His hands found my waist, gripping me firmly, pulling me impossibly close until there was nothing between us, nothing but heat, nothing but him as he devoured my lips, his kiss searing and consuming.

A small, desperate sound escaped my throat, and that was all it took to ignite him. He lifted my nightwear, his hand palming my bare ass with a firm, possessive grip. I gasped, but he swallowed the sound as his lips crashed back onto mine. I could feel him, every inch of his arousal pressing into me. He was hard. Rock hard.

His hands moved to slip the strap of my nightdress off my shoulder, but before he could, a cry shattered the air, sharp and insistent.

We froze. The haze between us dissipated in an instant, replaced by a chilling realization.

It was Aria.

I tore myself away from Damian and sprinted down the hall, my heart hammering as he followed close behind. Bursting into her room, I found her tangled in the sheets, her small hands gripping the fabric in a white-knuckled hold. Sweat drenched her forehead, her chest rising and falling in frantic gasps.

Something was wrong.

Chapter 17

Tala

The sight of Aria trembling and visibly terrified made my heart sink. I rushed to her side, kneeling beside the bed and cupping her tear-streaked face. “Aria, baby, what’s wrong? What happened?”

She threw her arms around me, her small hand gripping the thin fabric of my nightdress. Her breaths were uneven, her body shaking as if she’d been pulled from the depths of terror itself. Damian crouched beside us, his eyes sharp with concern.

Aria hiccupped between sobs, pressing her face into my shoulder. “It was horrible, Mummy,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. “There was so much blood. So many people were dying. I tried to look away, but I couldn’t.”

A chill swept over me. I pulled back just enough to see her face, wiping away the tears on her cheeks. “What are you talking about, sweetheart? What did you see?”

She swallowed hard, her little fingers still clutching me as if letting go would pull her back into whatever nightmare had shaken her so badly. “There was a war,” she whispered. “Wolves fighting each other. They were ripping each other apart, and there was fire everywhere. The sky was red, and the ground was covered in bodies.” Her voice hitched. “I could hear them screaming.”

Damian and I exchanged a glance. His brows were furrowed and his jaw tight, but his eyes were soft with concern as he looked at Aria.

“It was just a nightmare, Aria,” he said gently.

She shook her head, her grip on my shirt tightening. “It wasn’t just a dream,” she insisted. “I could feel it. Like I was there.”

A chill ran down my spine. Her words stirred something deep in me, something I hadn’t thought about in years. A memory, distant but familiar, surfaced in my mind. The same dream, or at least something eerily close to it.

I forced my voice to stay calm. “Did you see anything else?”

Aria hesitated and gave a small nod. “There was a woman in white. Her clothes were covered in blood, and she was standing in the middle of it all. She wasn’t fighting. She was just...watching. Crying.”

She sniffled, her eyes filled with fear. “She looked at me, Mummy,” Aria whispered. “Like she knew me.”

A heavy weight settled in my chest, squeezing the air from my lungs because I knew this dream.

A war. Wolves fighting. Fire and blood. The cries of the dying echo in the air. And the woman, always watching, always crying.

I had seen it all before.

My hands stilled against Aria’s hair. Why were we having the same dreams?

Damian must have noticed the shift in my expression. His touch was light and questioning, his eyes searching mine. He didn’t speak, but the concern on his face said everything. Are you okay?

I forced a small smile and nodded. I turned my attention back to Aria. “I’ll get you

some water, sweetheart,” I said, my voice steady despite the unease curling in my stomach.

Standing, I crossed the room to the table where a jug of water and a cup sat, grateful for the moment to collect myself.

Damian turned to Aria, reaching for her. His strong arms wrapped around her small frame, pulling her close, and Aria clung to him just as she had to me, burying her face in his chest.

“You’re safe, Aria,” he murmured, his voice softer than I’d ever heard it. “No one is going to hurt you, I promise.”

I felt an ache in my chest as I watched them. Aria fit so perfectly in his arms as if she belonged there. And the way Damian held her was natural and protective—like a father holding his daughter.

The thought sent a wave of guilt crashing over me. I had taken this from them. I had told myself I was protecting Aria from rejection and shielding her from the pain I had endured, but had I really been protecting her? Or had I just been protecting myself?

Pushing the thought aside, I returned to Aria and handed her the glass of water. She gulped down half before I pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. “Try to sleep, sweetheart. I promise that it’s over now.”

She nodded hesitantly as Damian tucked her in, smoothing the blankets over her small frame. But even as she settled back into the pillows, her breathing evening out, my mind was racing.

Why was she seeing the same thing I had seen all those years ago?

The next afternoon, I took a trip to the slums to see Gina. I had a lot on my mind, and she was the only person I could unravel to.

As I stepped onto the familiar muddy ground, my eyes swept over the chaos—crates of supplies scattered across the open space, tables broken and overturned, and food stomped into the dirt. The place was wrecked, a reminder of what happened two days ago.

Damian was determined to push forward with the outreach, no matter what. I wasn't sure how it would go, but I admired his optimism and his need to make a difference. Maybe if people saw how persistent he was, they'd start to accept him. Or maybe they'd turn on him and ambush him.

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I didn't know why that last thought lingered in the back of my mind, but after seeing the way people looked at him, I couldn't ignore it. There was so much anger here, so much resentment, and Damian was putting himself right in the line of their fire.

I'd lived in these slums for nineteen years. I knew how brutal they could be. But I wasn't going to tell him to stop. He wouldn't listen, anyway. I just hoped there would come a time when he could walk these streets without someone trying to throw a plate at his head.

I noticed a few stares as I walked down the path that led to Gina's tea shop. Then came the hushed whispers and murmurs. I didn't expect anything less. It seemed I had made enemies out of not just the Betas but the Omegas, too.

The scent of dried herbs and freshly brewed tea wrapped around me when I stepped into the small space. The hut-like shop was built from wood and bamboo, with a straw roof that let in slivers of light through the gaps.

It was mostly empty, except for a young man sitting in the corner, staring into nothingness. He didn't even seem to notice me.

Behind the counter, Gina was rolling up her sleeves as she poured hot water over a blend of chamomile and mint in a small clay teapot. Steam curled into the air, carrying its rich, soft floral scent with a hint of apple. She glanced up at the sound of the door, her eyes scanning my face.

"Well, you look a mess," she said, setting the strainer aside. "Good thing I was just making chamomile tea. You need it more than anyone."



I let out a slow breath as I reached the counter and sank into a chair behind it.

Gina ducked down to grab a cup, then poured the chamomile tea and stirred in some honey. “Here,” she said, passing it to me.

I wrapped my fingers around the ceramic, letting its warmth seep into my skin. The steam curled up, carrying its soothing scent, and I took a slow inhale before bringing it to my lips for a sip.

“You first,” I said. “How are you? And Aiden and Rowan?”

Gina let out a smile. “I’m trying to think of a time when Aiden wasn’t fine. He’s so full of life and energy, and I guess that just rubs off on Rowan and me.”

I smiled. “I’m happy you’re happy, Gina. Really.”

“Thanks,” she said, but her expression turned into a frown. “But I’m not happy that you’re not. You look downright exhausted. You even have bags under your eyes.”

I exhaled, taking another sip of my tea. “I haven’t really slept well in the past couple of days,” I admitted, rubbing my temples as exhaustion gnawed at me.

She leaned on the counter and crossed her arms. “Is it because of the outreach?”

“Well, that’s one thing.”

She tilted her head. “What else is there?”

I hesitated, staring into my tea. The words felt heavy like saying them out loud would make them more real, which was ridiculous because they already were. I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about it—how wrong it was, but also how right it felt. I sighed.

“Damian and I kissed.”

Gina’s eyes flew open for a fraction of a second before her expression melted into something far too knowing. “I don’t even know why I’m surprised,” she said, shaking her head. “I saw this coming from a thousand miles away.”

I frowned. “You don’t understand, Gina. I shouldn’t be kissing him. And I sure as hell shouldn’t be thinking about wanting to do it again.”

Gina’s gaze softened slightly, like she understood my plight. “Is it because you’re going to be leaving town after this whole alliance thing is done?”

“No.” I shook my head, the words catching in my throat. “It’s because, in about three days, he’s going to be mating with Serena.”

The air between us stilled as Gina drew back, confusion etched on her face. “Serena?”

“Yeah. Kael’s sister.” My voice was flat. “Those were the terms of the alliance.”

Gina stared at me for a long moment, then clicked her tongue, rubbing her fingers over her chin. “So, do you and this Serena happen to be sworn enemies?”

I let out a humorless chuckle. “I guess you can say that.”

She nodded to herself, then tilted her head. “Hmm. Does she look like she was sculpted by the Moon Goddess herself?”

I nearly choked on my tea as I scoffed. “With that attitude of hers? No way.”

“Well...is she blonde? Tall? Slim?” she probed.

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I raised a brow, slowly setting my cup back on the counter. “Yeah. Have you seen her before?”

Gina shook her head. “Not exactly, but I’ve heard some things,” she hesitated, her fingers drumming against the counter as if debating whether to say what was on her mind. “People in the slums have been talking about her, saying they’ve seen her around lately. And not just by herself. One said they saw her with a group of Garrick’s men.”

Garrick’s men were known terrors of the slums, so Serena hanging around with them could not be good.

“Word on the street is that she’s paying them off.”

I frowned, confused. “Paying them off for what?”

She nodded. “I mean, the more I think about it, the more it makes sense. She hates you. You and Damian clearly have something going on, and she’s supposed to mate with that same man. Everything gives her motive.”

My frown deepened. “Motive for what? What are you talking about, Gina?”

She exhaled and leaned forward on the counter, lowering her voice. “You said the crates of supplies were stolen, right? Well, I think I know who took them. On my way to the lake the other day, I saw a tall, blonde woman with a group of men—men known for terrorizing the slums. At first, I thought they were harassing her. She looked like someone who had never worked a day in her life. But the longer I

watched, the more I realized they were negotiating. After they talked, she handed them some money and left.”

She paused, watching my face closely before dropping the final piece. “But that’s not even the crazy part. The men she paid off? They were the same ones who fiercely opposed Damian’s speech and ignited the protest. I thought everyone just wanted to find something bad to say about her when rumors started flying around that she paid Garrick’s men to steal the supplies, but after seeing it for myself, it makes sense.”

I blinked as my thoughts spun in every direction. “Wait, wait, wait. Hold up, Gina,” I said, trying to piece everything together. “Are you saying Serena is responsible for what happened at the outreach?”

“I’m not sure,” she said. “But why else would she be in the slums? And with those kinds of people? I thought it was shady at the time, but now it all makes sense. She probably wants to make you look bad.”

A storm of emotions swirled inside me. Anger and frustration but also a bitter sense of inevitability. Of course, Serena would pull something like this. It wasn’t just my position that threatened her. It was my connection to Damian, which had become far too obvious these days. But more than that, she was threatened by the very fact that I existed.

My fingers tightened around the cup as I swallowed back the heat rising in my chest. But beneath all that anger, another realization settled in. If she hadn’t sabotaged the outreach, we’d be telling a different story right now. Damian would be one step closer to winning the Omegas.

“You know, despite everything, Damian is insistent on continuing the outreach. The odds against him succeeding just keep rising,” I muttered.

Gina sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “Damian is a good man, and I’m sure with time, the people will see it too.” She pursed her lips, then added, “Just tell him to give it some time. A couple more days, at least, for this to blow over. And this time, make sure whatever plans you have stay within a trusted circle.”

I nodded absently, my mind circling back to that vile, vicious woman named Serena and just how far she was willing to go to ruin me. At least with the mating ceremony just around the corner, she’d be too focused on that to worry about me. No matter how much she despised me, she wouldn’t jeopardize her own big day just to make my life miserable.

## Chapter 18

### Damian

Tala was back to avoiding me. Ever since we kissed on the terrace, she had gone out of her way to keep her distance, leaving the room whenever I entered, speaking in careful, measured tones that set my teeth on edge. It wasn’t just annoying. It infuriated me.

The only chance I’d had to speak with her alone was the morning of the second outreach day. She had suggested holding it on Labor Day, a tradition in the slums where everyone set aside their work to clean and improve the community. When she spoke about it, there was something wistful in her voice, like those were some of the only good memories she had from her time there. But the second she caught me watching her, she straightened, her face going blank again—just as it had been for two whole days.

“Are you sure about this, Damian?”

Her voice caught me off guard. The guards were loading the trunks with supplies, and

I had been standing beside her, hands shoved in my pockets, watching them work. I arched a brow at her.

“Oh? So, we’re speaking again? Must have missed the memo.”

Tala glanced up at me, but the moment our eyes met, she quickly looked away. “I’m serious, Damian,” she said, her voice slipping into that measured tone that always got under my skin. “We don’t know what kind of adversity we’ll face next.”

“I never expected this to be easy,” I said. “I know there’ll be obstacles. But I’m hopeful that today will be different.”

She looked up at me again, just for a second, but in that brief moment, I could have sworn I saw something close to a smile. A flicker of pride in her eyes. But with Tala, I could never be too sure. She was becoming an impossible puzzle to solve.

She turned away. “I just want you to be prepared for whatever we may face today.”

I shifted to face her fully. “I can handle whatever they throw at me. Literally. What I can’t handle is you avoiding me.”

She didn’t even flinch. Didn’t even look at me when she said, “Damian, this is not the time or place for this conversation. I’ll go cross-check the supplies.”

And just like that, she walked away.

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I fought the urge to grab her wrist, to pull her back and demand answers. But she was right, this wasn't the time.

By the time we arrived at the slums, the streets were already alive with activity. Omegas were out with brooms and buckets, scrubbing and sweeping, while children darted between them, handing out water to the elders. Women cleared debris from the roads, and men balanced on ladders, patching up buildings.

I arrived with the wiremen and woodcrafters, Betas skilled in their trades, tasked with improving the electricity and repairing homes. I had learned that most houses here relied on lanterns at night, and that needed to change. More than anything, I hoped that working together, Betas and Omegas, wouldn't just teach them new skills but also force them to interact and see each other beyond their ranks.

This wasn't just about fixing buildings. It was about building something more.

Wary glances followed me as I stepped onto the road, whispers passing between them in hushed tones. I doubted any of it was good, but I wasn't fazed. Instead, I flashed them a smile and kept walking, moving deeper into the street.

One by one, they paused what they were doing, their eyes tracking my every step. By the time I reached the center of the clearing and stopped, all work had come to a halt.

They were waiting. Watching.

Anticipating what I would do next.

And then, from somewhere in the crowd, a single voice spoke up.

“We don’t want you here, Alpha Damian. Go back to your mansion!”

A few voices murmured in agreement, but thankfully, the protest didn’t last long.

Once it quieted, I cleared my throat to speak. “I know what you’re all thinking,” I spoke in a voice that carried across the street, making sure everyone heard me. “You probably didn’t expect the guy who was hauled out of here to show up again two days later.”

A few chuckles rippled through the crowd, some hesitant, some genuine. The resistance was still there, but at least I had their attention.

“But I’m here,” I continued, glancing around, meeting as many wary gazes as I could. “And I’m here because I meant what I said before. I want change. Not just words, not just promises. Actual, real change. And I won’t stop until we achieve it.”

A few murmurs passed through the crowd, but no one spoke up. I took that as a sign to continue.

“I heard Labor Day is fun here,” I said, flashing a small smile. “So, I figured, why not join in?”

I gestured to the workers behind me. “I brought wiremen and woodcrafters to help. We know a lot of the houses here don’t have proper electricity, and some of the buildings need repairs.”

A long moment of silence followed. There was apparent hesitation in their eyes, doubt, and reluctance to trust. I understood perfectly.



I clapped my hands together. “Now, I also owe you an apology about the supplies. Things didn’t go as planned, and I acknowledge that as a failure on our part. But we’re here now with double the supplies, and I promise, this time, everyone will get something.”

That seemed to break some of the tension. The wariness was still there, but at least they weren’t outright rejecting me.

“So,” I said, rolling up the sleeves of my shirt. “Let’s get to work.”

People slowly started moving again. It wasn’t instant, and there were still some skeptical looks, but at least they weren’t telling me to leave. The wiremen got to work setting up the electricity, and the woodcrafters started assessing the houses that needed repairs. Some Omegas hesitated before approaching them, but soon, small groups started forming, working together.

I spotted Tala crouched among a group of children, her hands covered in dirt as she helped them shape mud bricks. The kids were chattering excitedly around her as she laughed at something one of them said.

I made my way over, shoving my hands into my pockets as I stopped beside her. “Need an extra pair of hands?”

Tala glanced up, and the smile on her face slowly waned. For a second, her lips parted as if she were about to say no, but then she sighed and scooted over slightly. “Only if you’re actually going to help.”

I smirked. “I’m offended. I’ll have you know I’m great with my hands.”

One of the kids, a boy who looked about seven, wrinkled his nose. “You don’t look like you’ve ever touched mud before.”

I chuckled. “Guess there’s a first time for everything.” Without another word, I crouched down and plunged my hands into the damp earth. It was cold and thick between my fingers, and the kids all giggled at the way I hesitated for a moment before I started shaping a brick.

I glanced up to see Tala watching me with an amused expression, but as is the norm now, when our eyes connected, she looked away, focusing on molding a brick. Her hands moved with practiced ease, and I found myself watching her more than the work. She was completely in her element here, calm, steady, and patient as she guided the kids. But then a voice cut through the air.

“You stole my brick!”

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I looked up to see two boys standing toe-to-toe, their faces scrunched in anger. One of them, the same kid who had called me out earlier, was gripping a half-formed mud brick while the other clenched his fists at his sides.

“I didn’t steal it! Yours fell apart, so I made a new one,” the second boy argued.

I was a little lost. When did they turn forming bricks for the garden bed into a competition? Weren’t we all just laughing a moment ago?

I turned to see Tala wiping her hands on her clothes and standing on her feet. She stepped over to them, placed a hand on each of their shoulders, and said, “Now remind me, boys, what did I say about working peacefully?”

“But I didn’t do anything! He stole my brick.” The first boy insisted.

“No, I didn’t! Just admit I’m better at molding than you are.”

Both boys started talking at once, their words overlapping over each other as they argued. Tala didn’t interrupt. She just listened, nodding here and there until they finally ran out of things to say. Then she crouched down to their level.

“I get it,” she said.

She did? Because I had been listening the entire time and still had no clue what just happened. The whole thing seemed too ridiculous to grasp.

“You both wanted to prove a point to one another. But look around.” She gestured to

the half-built garden beds. “These bricks aren’t yours or mine. We’re building something together, something for the whole pack.”

The boys shifted on their feet, glancing at the unfinished rows.

Tala smiled softly. “Okay, how about this? You make a new one together. That way, it’s stronger, and we don’t waste time arguing. Sounds fair?”

The first boy looked at the second and then huffed. “I guess.”

“Fine,” the other muttered.

“Good.” Tala gave their shoulders a small squeeze before stepping back, watching as they reluctantly started working together.

I leaned back on my heels, watching the scene unfold in front of me. She handled them calmly and patiently and yet commandingly. It was beautiful to watch how she managed to get the situation under control easily. She didn’t force them to listen. She made them want to.

As she returned to building the bricks, she caught me staring.

She didn’t look away this time. Instead, she smiled, just a small thing, barely there, but it stirred something inside of me.

My wolf stirred, restless, mirroring the frustration tightening in my chest. Lately, regret had been creeping in, reminding me that I had her once, and I let her go. I still told myself it was the right choice at the time, but that didn’t make it any easier. The way she kept her distance felt like a quiet reminder of what I’d lost and like I had no right to want her. And damn it, as much as it infuriated me, that only made me want her more. More than ever.

The work carried on until evening. I spent the entire day with the kids working on the garden. By the time we were done, it was full of life, vibrant with colors, and utterly beautiful. I used what Aria had taught me to plant some flowers, and for a moment, I wished she was here to see it. She would have loved the sight of it.

As the last of the supplies were handed out, the crowd slowly began to disperse. The outreach was coming to an end. The artisans returned with updates about how they had restored electricity to several homes, patched up buildings, and even had Omegas watching them work, eager to learn. A deep sense of fulfillment settled over me.

We weren't where I wanted us to be. Not yet. But today proved that maybe we were finally moving in the right direction.

After the successful outreach, I found new ways to immerse myself and the Omegas in pack life, to prove my dedication to the cause I had begun, and to show that I was not all talk. The Harvest Moon Festival, an annual event to honor the hard work of the farmers and hunters, was just around the corner, and this time, I decided the celebration would be held in the slum.

For as long as I could remember, the festival had always taken place in the pack's headquarters, territory that, unsurprisingly, belonged to the Betas. By bringing the festival to the slums, I could bring the pack with it, Omegas would finally be able to take part in a celebration that had long excluded them, and Betas would have no choice but to step into a world they rarely acknowledged.

I had sat with the members of the Omega community to arrange this. While most of the Elders were open to the idea, some still had their doubts. I wanted them to see that this festival belonged to everyone, including them, and that they, their farmers, and their labor mattered to the pack and deserved recognition just as much as anyone else.

On the day I arrived in the slums, I was taken aback by what they had managed to

create. Of course, I had sent down resources—food, supplies, whatever they needed to bring the Harvest Moon Festival to life—but seeing it all come together was something else entirely. Lanterns lined the streets, ready to glow as the night stretched on, casting a warmth over the carefully decorated space.

I turned to find Tala, a satisfied smile tugging at her lips as she took it all in. Beside her, Aria practically buzzed with excitement. She looked much better than she had two nights ago when she'd woken up from that terrible nightmare. I was relieved to see that whatever had haunted her then hadn't dimmed her brightness.

The day unfolded in great style. And, most importantly, peace. There was another communal feast, and once again, I found myself sitting with the children. The girl had gathered her friends, just as I had asked, and we shared the meal together. Aria even joined us, her presence adding to the warmth of the moment.

There were no interruptions, just the hum of happy conversations that filled the air. At one point, an Omega stood up and began singing. Soon, others joined in, drumming on tables with cups and spoons. The rhythm grew into a beautiful melody that enveloped the crowd. Before long, the children were pulling me out of my seat, urging me to join them. I found myself dancing, caught up in the joy of the moment.

By nightfall, the festival was buzzing with even more energy. It felt like everyone had found new strength. I saw a few Betas join in, though it was still just a handful. The crowd had definitely grown, and I figured some of those who'd said they wouldn't come had changed their minds.

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As I played around with the kids, eating more than I thought possible, my eyes would occasionally drift to Tala. Whether she was playing with the children or speaking with Omegas who seemed distant from the celebration, she had a way of drawing them in. She made them come alive, coaxing them to join in on the joy of the evening. What struck me the most was how Tala managed to balance having fun with reaching out to others. She wasn't just enjoying herself. She was making sure others did too. Even the most hardened Omegas, the ones with tight scowls etched on their faces, softened when she spoke to them. Her energy was magnetic, and everywhere she went, people seemed to bubble to life, their frowns turning into smiles.

I watched in admiration as she moved gracefully throughout the festival. But more than that, I admired her heart. Tala wasn't just doing this for the alliance. I could see it in her eyes. She truly cared about this unity more than anyone else.

Later that night, the celebrations paused, and everyone gathered around as I prepared to make an announcement.

I stood in front of the crowd, a genuine smile on my face as I spoke. "I can't express how happy I am today. This is probably the happiest I've been in a long time, and it's all because of you. First, I want to say thank you. Thank you for making this happen, thank you for allowing me to try to make things right, and thank you for giving me one of the most unforgettable days of my life."

I paused and looked around. Everyone was listening closely, their expressions warm and kind. The coldness I used to see seemed like a distant memory now.

"Now, in the spirit of change, I have an announcement. Starting today, there will be a

change in the rules.” A murmur spread through the crowd, and their curiosity piqued. “There will be no more Omega Tax.”

Gasps filled the air, followed by surprised looks.

“You won’t be forced to pay taxes to the Betas or to me as your Alpha. No one will owe anything to anyone. If anyone tries to collect unlawful taxes, report them to me, and they will be dealt with.”

Relief washed over their faces. The tension that had been there started to melt away. The whispers grew louder, but I wasn’t finished.

“And finally,” I continued, “this town belongs to all of us. Every inch of it. No one should be confined to one area. From now on, you are free to move throughout the pack’s lands as you please. You can shop at the markets, join in the Full Moon ceremonies, and take part in other celebrations. This is not your designated zone anymore.”

The crowd’s reaction spoke volumes. Relief, happiness, and the beginning of something new.

And that’s how the night ended—on a high note. Tala had left early with Aria while I remained to thank the elders and extend an invitation to Brad to sit in on the next official council meeting, where he would represent the Omegas and their interests.

But even as the night came to a close, a lingering weight settled in my chest. The festival was a success. The Omegas were receptive. They no longer looked at me with resentment—at least a good number of them. It was progress. But was it truly enough to erase generations of discrimination?

That question stayed with me as I finally made my way back to the pack house,



exhaustion pressing down on me. The celebration had ended. But we had really made a difference? Because the rogues were still out there, a lingering threat. I didn't hope for an attack, but I couldn't afford to be unprepared. If war came to our doorstep, we would need every fighter we had. And that meant the Omegas.

But were they ready to stand with us?

I made my way to my room, but I paused in front of Tala's door. I considered knocking, wanting to check if she was still awake, but decided against it, thinking she was probably just as tired as I was.

The smile that had lingered on my face quickly vanished when I opened the door to my room. Serena was sprawled out on my bed, dressed in a sheer, clingy dress that left little to the imagination.

"What the hell are you doing in my room?"

She stretched leisurely, her voice dripping with faux sweetness. "I was wondering when you'd return. You've been so busy lately."

I didn't have the patience for this. I was too tired for a conversation of any sort, especially one that involved her dressed like this. "Get out."

Her smile faltered, slipping into a frown before smoothing out into something unreadable. Then, she started climbing out of my bed.

"You must be exhausted," she said as she stepped toward me, her voice light, almost teasing. "It's affecting your mood."

She stopped in front of me, smirking. "Let me help you relax."

She reached for my face, but I caught her wrist mid-air.

“Damian,” she murmured, her voice laced with desperation. “We don’t have to wait for the mating ceremony. I can help you take the edge off right here, right now.”

She reached for me again, but I tightened my grip, my eyes locked on hers, cold and unyielding. Disgust curled in my chest as I wondered what gave her the audacity to walk into my room and do this.

“I won’t say it again.” My voice was low and dangerous. “Get out.” I shoved her back hard. She stumbled, lost her footing, and hit the floor.

Anger twisted her face. “Is it because of her?” she snapped, her voice sharp now. “We’ll be mated in a few days, and you—” She scoffed. “Don’t tell me you have feelings for her, Damian.”

I stepped forward, looking down at her. My voice was calm. Empty. Except for one thing laced in every word I spoke. Disgust.

“Let’s get something straight, Serena. This marriage is nothing more than an arrangement. I have no interest in knowing you or anything beyond securing this alliance.” I let my gaze drag over her once before meeting her eyes again. “And I sure as hell am not attracted to you. Now get out.”

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For a moment, she didn't move. Then, silently, she pushed herself up, gripping the sheer fabric of her dress as she turned and walked out of my room unabashedly.

### Chapter 19

Tala

Things were getting out of hand. It wasn't just one dream anymore. Or rather, one nightmare. There were several. Night after night. Even in the afternoons. Every time Aria closed her eyes, something crept into her dreams, haunting her until she woke up drenched in sweat, terror written all over her face.

I was worried. More than that, I was confused. She barely ate. She barely smiled. The joy that once lit up her face was gone, replaced by exhaustion and fear. She was too scared to sleep now.

I had no choice but to give her an herbal remedy just to help her rest. And even then, she only slept for two hours before waking up again.

But that time, she wasn't afraid. Her face was calm, almost serene.

And when she spoke, I didn't understand a single word.

"The woman in white," she had said. "She spoke to me."

Well, that was new.

I'd had this same dream more times than I could count, but the woman and I had never moved closer than seven feet apart. She always just stood there, watching me, tears streaming silently down her face.

Aria looked at me with a small smile on her face as she continued. "She said she was my guardian. The first of our kind."

Our kind? I was utterly confused.

"She promised to protect me and guide me in my journey. And...she touched me," Aria continued. "She wasn't crying this time, Mummy. There was something in her eyes. And she called it 'hope'. She said there was hope again."

That was it. Aria didn't say anything more.

Right after that, she went to bed, leaving me wide awake, replaying her words over and over in my head, trying to make sense of them. But no matter how many times I turned them over, they refused to fit into something I could understand.

And so, by the time the first light of dawn crept through her curtains, I had made up my mind.

I needed answers.

The seer's abode was nestled deep in the woods, still within the pack's territory but far enough that she lived in complete solitude. I'd heard plenty about her when I lived in the slums. People sought her out for dream interpretations, readings, and whatever else they believed she could offer. But she kept her distance, withdrawing so much from civilization that many had taken to calling her a creep.

Right now, she was the only one who might have the answers I needed.

After a long walk, I finally spotted the small, thatched building. The roof was slightly uneven, and the walls were weathered by time and nature. A gust of smoke curled into the sky, likely from a fire she had just put out.

I followed the narrow path leading to the entrance and stopped when I reached the door. It was wide open.

Peering inside, I took in the dimly lit room. Sparse, worn-out furniture filled the space. Everything looked as old as the house itself. Herbs hung from the ceiling in bundles, their scent thick in the air.

The silence was unsettling.

Just as I lifted my hand to knock on the door, a voice stopped me.

“Your energy is heavy, tangled in too many threads.”

The words came from behind me: low, cryptic, and more than a little eerie.

I froze, my pulse quickening, and then I slowly turned around.

The seer stood there, watching me with sharp, knowing eyes as if she could see straight through me. Her face was weathered with age, lines etched deep into her dark skin. Strands of silver wove through her long, unkempt hair, and a faint smear of ash marked her forehead.

“Um,” I took a step forward, intending to introduce myself. “My name is—”

“Tala Vale,” she finished for me.

I stilled.

She studied me for a long moment, her gaze flickering like she was seeing something beyond what was in front of her. “You’re carrying a heavy emotional burden, with unexpressed feelings and unresolved issues, leaving you uncertain about your way forward. No wonder it weighs you down.”

I swallowed.

Despite the cryptic way she spoke, I understood every word. She knew me. Many people did. After my brutal rejection, my reputation had spread far beyond what I ever wanted. But this was different. The way she spoke wasn’t just knowing my name or my past. It was as if she had unraveled me in an instant.

I straightened, clearing my throat. Since there was no need for pleasantries anymore, I got straight to the point.

“I didn’t come here for myself,” I said. “I came here for my daughter.”

“Nymera.”

“Huh?” I blinked, caught off guard.

“My name,” she said. “It’s Nymera.”

I nodded slowly.

“I need your help, Nymera,” I said. “My daughter is troubled by gory nightmares, and it’s starting to distort her reality.”

Nymera held my gaze as I spoke, silent and unreadable. Then, just as I finished, her eyes shifted, drifting past me, focusing on something unseen.

I glanced over my shoulder, following her line of sight. Nothing. Just an empty space.

When I turned back, she was already moving toward me.

“Come in, child,” she murmured. “The answers you seek are already waiting.”

I settled into one of the sparse chairs while Nymera disappeared into another section of the house. She returned two minutes later, carrying a sizzling teapot and a single cup.

“Oh, no, thank you,” I said quickly before she could set it down. “I’m not really in the mood for tea.”

Ignoring my refusal, she placed the pot and cup on the table and then poured the steaming liquid, anyway. Pushing the cup toward me, she lowered herself onto the floor, settling in front of a small table cluttered with cards, beads, and other objects I couldn’t identify.

“The tea will open your mind to me,” she said simply. “Drink. Then come sit in front of me.”

I hesitated but eventually reached for the cup, taking a few sips. The taste was earthy and slightly bitter but not unpleasant.

Setting the cup down, I moved to sit across from her on the cold floor.

“Give me your hand,” she instructed.

“I told you. I’m not here for myself. I’m here for my daughter.”

Nymera tilted her head slightly. “Then why didn’t you bring her with you?”

When I didn’t respond, she continued. “It’s because you seek the same answers for yourself as you do for her.” She extended her hand again. “So, give me your hand, and let’s get on with it.”

Hesitation tugged at me, a small part of me urging me to walk away from this. But the larger part, the part desperate for answers, kept me rooted in place.

She was right. I didn’t just want the truth for Aria. I wanted it for myself, too. Why were we having the same dream? And what did it mean?

Slowly, I placed my hand in hers.

Nymera’s long fingers traced the lines of my palm. Her eyes drifted shut, and she began to murmur in a language I couldn’t understand.



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I watched her intently, assuming it was some kind of chant when suddenly, her grip tightened.

Her eyes snapped open, now completely white.

Tension crackled through the room, the air shifting as if something unseen had awoken.

Panic flared in my chest as I tried to yank my hand away, but her grip was unrelenting, far stronger than it should have been.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, my voice rising as I struggled against her hold. “Nymera, what the hell are you doing to me? Stop it!”

She didn’t.

Her grip was firm, her body rigid. I thrashed harder, my heart pounding. And then, just as suddenly as it began, it ended.

With one final desperate yank, I tore my arm free. The moment our connection broke, Nymera’s eyes flickered back to normal, and the pressure in the room vanished.

She exhaled sharply, blinking as though coming out of a trance. When she finally lifted her head to look at me, her expression was one of awe. She stared, unblinking, as if seeing me for the first time.

“It can’t be...” she murmured, but I heard it.

My chest tightened. “What? What can’t be? What did you do to me?” The questions tumbled out all at once, my voice filled with panic.

Nymera took a step back, the shock still etched on her face. “You’re supposed to be dead,” she whispered like the weight of those words had stolen the air from her lungs. “He was supposed to kill you.”

A chill ran through me. My confusion must have been plain on my face, but she just kept staring at me like she was looking at a ghost.

I swallowed hard. “Who? Who tried to kill me?”

Nymera rose to her feet, pressing her fingers against her chin as she paced back and forth. “How did I not find you?” she muttered, almost to herself. “My powers have never failed me. I have never been wrong before.”

I watched her, my confusion deepening with every word. She spoke so clearly, yet none of it made any sense.

“Look,” I said, my patience was wearing thin. “I came here for answers, not for you to complicate and add to the things I didn’t understand. Just tell me what’s going on.”

She stopped pacing and looked me dead in the eye like she couldn’t believe I was really sitting here in front of her and as though my very existence defied everything she thought she knew. After a long pause, she lowered herself back to the ground, her expression grim.

“Twenty years ago, I did something terrible,” she started, her voice quiet and hollow. “Alpha Thorne paid me a visit. He wanted answers about an old prophecy, one that had been passed down for generations. It foretold the return of the Lunar Custodes, the ones who would rise again and restore balance to the pack. But Thorne didn’t

want balance. He wanted control.” She exhaled sharply, her gaze darkening. “He asked me to find them, to see if their bloodline still existed. And I did. I saw them, a group of children no older than three to six. I knew one of them carried the bloodline of the Lunaris Custodes, but there were too many to be certain. I couldn’t pinpoint who exactly. But I knew what would happen if I told him. I knew what he would do.” Her voice cracked, and she met my gaze, raw with guilt. “But I told him, anyway. I gave him the only answer I had, knowing he wouldn’t stop until they were all dead.”

A lump formed in my throat.

“Alpha Thorne didn’t hesitate. That very night, he stormed the slums, slaughtering any child who could be the one I had seen. Anyone who stood in their way was cut down. The Omegas fought back, but they were no match for the Beta soldiers.”

“The Beta-Omega war,” I murmured to myself.

I lost my parents and my brother in that war. The night the Betas stormed the slums, they cut down anyone who stood in their way: men, women, and even children. There was no mercy, no hesitation. Some hid, some ran, and some were saved.

I was one of the lucky ones.

My brother, Ryker, had saved me. I remember waking up to the sound of screaming and the acrid smell of smoke in the air. Then, he stormed into my room, took my hands, and carried me away. I didn’t understand what was happening. I only knew that the world outside was chaos.

He took me to the edge of the woods, and he hid me beneath the roots of an old oak. “Stay quiet. Don’t move until it’s safe.” Those were his last words to me. He’d gone back to help out our parents, and I never saw him again. Gina’s mother had found me crying behind the tree and tried to carry me away, but the soldiers caught us. She put

up a fierce fight, managing to kill one of them while shielding me from their wrath. Despite her injuries, she got me to safety, where she'd hidden Gina, but she didn't last long. The wounds she sustained were too severe.

"After his rampage," Nymera continued, "he came back. And he asked me to search for you again."

She paused, her sharp eyes sweeping over me as if trying to unravel a puzzle that had been left unsolved for decades.

"But I didn't find you," she admitted. "It was like you didn't exist. No trace, no sign, nothing." She exhaled, shaking her head. "So, I concluded that you were dead, that he had done what he set out to do. But seeing you here, now..." Her voice trailed off, a flicker of something, wonder, maybe even fear, crossing her face.

"I was wrong," she murmured, almost to herself. Then her gaze met mine again, piercing. "Something protected you."

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Or someone, I thought. I remembered Aria's words. The woman in white told her that she would protect her and guide her.

Nymera took my hands in hers, her grip careful. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice solemn, heavy with something that almost sounded like regret. "But it was either your life or mine."

I swallowed hard and gently pulled my hands away. "I get it," I said, though my voice was tight. "You did what you had to do. But none of this explains why my daughter is having the same dreams as me."

"There's only one explanation for that." Nymera's voice returned to normal, her expression neutral. "The Lunaris Custodes spirit is awakening in her."

I frowned. "But she's just a child."

"It's rare," she admitted, nodding. "But the spirits know best."

I let out a breath, my mind spinning again. "I thought I was the Lunaris Custodes."

"You were." She hesitated, then shook her head. "No, you are a Lunaris Custodes. But the spirit chooses one from the bloodline to awaken in. The moment you left the pack, you abandoned that destiny. And it only makes sense that it would pass to your child."

I sat there, staring at the cluttered table as her words settled over me like a thick fog. The last thing I wanted was to uncover something from my past that would tether me

here or, worse, put my daughter in danger.

As if reading my thoughts, Nymera spoke again. “Your child is powerful, Tala Vale. Not only is she a Lunaris Custodes, but she also has Alpha blood coursing through her veins.”

I flinched, startled that she knew that. She chuckled softly, a knowing glint in her eyes.

“I knew everything about you the moment I touched you. Your secrets, your lies, your pain, everything.” Her voice was gentle, almost reassuring. “But don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.”

I was on my feet in an instant. “Thank you for the information,” I muttered, turning sharply on my heel and heading for the door.

Trust a woman who had once given me up to die? Never.

She knew my secret, which meant it was no longer a secret. Too much was unraveling: my past, my long-buried feelings for Damian, everything I had worked so hard to leave behind.

More than ever, I needed to get out of this pack and return to my life. Not just for myself but for my daughter.

This would not be her life.

I wouldn’t let it be.

Chapter 20

Damian

It's been two days since the Harvest Moon Festival. Exhaustion weighed on me, not just from the pack, the alliance, or everything else demanding my attention. It was her. She was the reason for my sleepless nights, my daydreams, and the moments I caught myself staring into nothing. I wanted more than stolen glimpses in the hallway, the dining room, or anywhere else she let herself be seen.

Tala was driving me insane. The memory of that night had my cock twitching in my pants, and every time I thought about the wall she'd built between us, I felt like I was losing my mind.

I stopped in front of her door before I could think better of it. It was late, too late. The pack was already asleep by the time I'd finished going over patrol details and reports with the security unit.

I was exhausted, but still, I wanted to see her and talk to her.

I stood there for minutes, torn between reason and impulse. Just as I convinced myself to leave, I heard it.

The soft hum of her voice, sweet and effortless, was enough to undo my resolve. And without even considering if it was appropriate or not, I wrapped my knuckles on her door.

There was a pause. Then, after a brief moment, the door creaked open.

Tala stood in the doorway, wearing a simple nightdress with a neckline just low enough to tease a glimpse of her cleavage. Her hair was pulled up, exposing the curve of her neck, an invitation I immediately imagined tracing with my tongue.

My gaze drifted lower, to where the dress skimmed her thighs, revealing smooth, bare skin. The fabric was so thin that I could see her nipples poking out of it.

The sleepiness in her features vanished the moment she saw me, replaced by uncertainty and vulnerability. She swallowed hard, gripping the edge of the door like she couldn't decide whether to let me in or shut me out.



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I had a feeling she was leaning toward the latter.

“D-Damian,” she breathed. “What are you doing here?”

I didn’t answer immediately. I kept my gaze on her face, taking in the flush of her cheeks and the way her lips parted as if she were already preparing to argue with me. She shifted uncomfortably on the spot.

“I came to talk to you,” I finally said.

“About what?”

I stepped inside as she spoke, brushing past her without waiting for permission.

“Damian,” Tala hissed, shutting the door quickly behind me. “You shouldn’t be here. It’s very late. What will the servants think?”

I turned to face her, the rage and frustration palpable on my face. “I don’t care what the servants think.” I snapped, my voice sharp with frustration.

Tala froze, her eyes widening in surprise as she stared at me.

“Why do you keep doing this, Tala? Do you enjoy watching me suffer? Is that it, huh?”

She folded her arms, her expression guarded. “What are you talking about, Damian?”

“Just when I think I’m tearing down the walls you’ve built between us and when I think I’m making progress, you build an even bigger one.”

Her nostrils flared, and her body went rigid. “Okay, first of all, I’m not doing anything. We’ve been busy with the outreach. Reports from the patrol units are coming in soon. And you—” her voice faltered for half a second, then steadied. “You’ve been busy planning your mating ceremony.”

I let out a sharp breath, moving closer. “That’s your excuse this time?”

She lifted her chin, defiant. “Plus, Damian, the relationship between us should not extend beyond council room discussions and negotiations.”

“But it does,” I said with a frustrated growl as I kept closing the distance between us. “And it did.”

Tala tried to step back, but her back met the wall instead. She let out a sigh, muttering a quiet curse under her breath.

“Tell me,” I said, my voice rough with a need I could no longer suppress. “Tell me that you haven’t thought about the kiss. That it meant absolutely nothing to you.”

Her lips parted, but she hesitated, her pulse jumping at her throat.

“Damian, it was just a—”

“A momentary lapse of confusion?” I cut in, tilting my head.

She sucked in a sharp breath, her eyes flashing.

“I don’t think you’re confused, Tala,” I continued, my voice low. “I think you’re in

denial. And fuck, is it both infuriating and frustrating?”

By now, I was only inches away. Tala’s chest rose and fell with each breath, her eyes darting everywhere except mine. She pressed her hands against my chest, but she didn’t push me away. Instead, she let out an exasperated sigh, her voice edged with frustration. “What the hell do you want me to do, Damian?”

“Stop building walls between us,” I said. “And allow yourself to feel.”

She looked up at me, frustration and vulnerability clashing in her eyes. “How can you ask me to do that?” Her voice wavered, and I saw the glossiness creeping into her gaze.

“You’re going to mate with another woman in less than twenty-four hours.”

“Don’t you see it, Tala?” I raked a hand through my hair, stepping back as frustration burned through me. “I don’t want her. I want you. It’s always been you. And I’ll prove it to you. I’ll put an end to this mating ceremony.”

Tala let out a small nervous laugh. “Don’t be ridiculous, Damian. Your marriage to Serena is the only thing holding this alliance together.”

“I don’t care what the cost is as long as it means I get to be with you.”

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My voice came rough, edged with desperation. “Every fucking minute of the day, I think about you. I think about what it would feel like to touch you, to have your lips on mine, to claim you in ways no one else ever should. I crave you, Tala. And if your plan is to drive me insane with wanting you, then congratulations, it’s working.”

Her expression softened. “You shouldn’t feel this way, Damian. You...” she trailed, as though my confession had left her speechless.

“I told you,” I brought a hand to her chin, trailing the line on her jaw. “I don’t have the energy to deny myself what I want. And it’s you, not Serena, not any other woman. It’s only ever going to be you.”

She shuddered beneath my touch, her lashes lowering for half a second. Her lips, those lips that had nearly driven me to madness, parted, but no words came.

She was fighting it. I could see it in every tense line of her body, in the way she bit her lip, in the way her fingers curled into my shirt like she was trying to ground herself.

But then she did the one thing that unraveled me completely.

“Damian...” She exhaled my name, so soft, so fragile like it had slipped from her lips before she could stop it.

And that was all it took.

I crushed my mouth to hers.

She responded by throwing her arms around my neck and crashing her mouth against mine. The kiss was rough and raw like I was pouring every ounce of frustration and need into it. I slammed her against the wall, and Tala met me just as fiercely, her tongue tangling with mine.

A surge of excitement shot through me as my hands roamed her body, gripping her breasts, her ass, feeling her through the thin fabric of her nightdress.

I was two seconds away from tearing it off.

Without breaking the kiss, I lifted her, pressing her back against the wall as her legs wrapped tightly around my waist. Her hands slipped under my shirt, fingers dragging over my bare skin before her nails dug in, sending a sharp jolt of heat through me.

She deepened the kiss, trying to take control, but I didn't let her. My hand tangled in her hair, tugging her head back to expose the smooth column of her neck. I took my time, trailing my lips down, tasting her, moving lower until I reached the neckline of her dress.

Her moan was soft but insistent, a sound that only spurred me on, feeding the fire already consuming me and pushing me closer to the edge of control.

Pure lust curled down my spine, searing through every inch of me. My cock twitched, aching, and I pressed the hard bulge against her pussy. She responded instantly, grinding her hips against me, and that was it. Every last shred of control snapped.

"Fuck, Tala," I groaned, lifting her off the wall and setting her on the table. I devoured her mouth, kissing her like she was mine to take and mine to own.

"Damian...Damian...Damian," she gasped, pulling back. Her breath came fast, her chest rising and falling, her eyes scanning my face. I saw it, the unmistakable desire,

the same hunger that was driving me insane. It made me want to grab her neck and claim her lips again.

“What?” I asked, breathless. “Do you want to stop?”

She sighed like she was battling herself, torn between reason and desire. “We shouldn’t be doing this, Damian. You’re going to—”

“Do you want to stop, Tala?” I cut her off, my voice sharp, unwavering. “Because I don’t.”

I held her gaze, my tone raw and stripped bare. “Ever since you walked through those gates two weeks ago, I’ve wanted you like this. You have no idea how badly I’ve needed to be inside you, to remember what you taste like.” I exhaled, my restraint hanging by a thread. “But if you want me to stop, Tala, I will. I’ll walk out of here right now and spend the rest of the night in torment, stuck in the memory of what it’s like to make love to you.”

“Oh, Damian,” she whispered, her eyes fluttering closed as she leaned into my touch.

I cupped her other cheek, tilting her face up. “Look at me, Tala.” My voice was softer this time, a plea. She opened her eyes, meeting mine, and I held her there. “I need you to say it. I need to hear you say you want this as much as I do.”

She searched my eyes for a long moment before leaning in and brushing her lips against mine.

“I want you, Damian,” she murmured against my mouth. “More than you can imagine.”

That was all it took. I crashed my mouth back onto hers, kissing her with the raw

hunger clawing through me. My hands found her breasts, gripping them just as roughly, frustration growing at the thin fabric between us.

With a low grunt, I slid the straps of her nightdress over her shoulders, watching as the soft material slipped down, pooling at her waist. And without a second thought, I took her breast into my mouth.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” I murmured against her skin, my tongue teasing her nipple before I sucked, no—ravished it. Lust clouded every inch of my mind.

Tala was bare in front of me, surrendering herself completely. And all I could think about was how badly I wanted to claim every inch of her.

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Her hands slid to the back of my neck, pulling me closer, pressing me against her. I moved to her other breast, giving it the same attention, maybe even more, savoring the way she moaned, the sound filling the room like a siren's call.

When I finally pulled back, just for a moment, Tala's hands were already at the hem of my shirt, tugging impatiently. I didn't make her wait. I yanked it off, tossing it aside, watching as her fingers traced my chest, her touch sending fire through my veins.

I found her lips again, claiming them as I lifted her from the table. Her night dress slipped from her body, pooling on the floor. With effortless ease, I carried her to the bed, laying her down with a tenderness that contrasted the raw hunger between us.

My hands went to my pants, unfastening them and pushing them down. Then, my briefs.

Tala's eyes widened slightly when I freed myself.

I climbed on top of her, careful not to press the weight of my body against her. Then I spread her legs, watching her quiver with need as I traced her folds with my fingers. I enjoyed seeing the look of frustration and need as I used my fingers to tease her slick entrance. When I finally touched her clit, she moaned louder than she had been, writhing beneath my touch.

Tala's breath hitched as she watched me, her chest rising and falling in rapid anticipation. Her eyes darkened as I slipped my fingers into my mouth, tasting her arousal, and a shudder ran through her body.



“Damian...” she breathed, her voice laced with desperation. “Please.”

I wasn’t going to make her wait any longer. It was torture for both of us. I settled between her legs, gripping her thighs as I slid my cock against her folds, teasing and coaxing. A moan escaped her lips, a mixture of pleasure and frustration. But just as I was about to push inside, I paused.

Her brows furrowed. “Why are you stopping?”

My gaze locked onto hers, serious now. “When was the last time, Tala?”

Her breath was still uneven. “Last time?”

“When was the last time you were with anyone?”

She blinked, then exhaled sharply. “Many years ago,” she admitted. Then, as if reading my thoughts, she leaned up, her fingers threading into my hair. “But don’t treat me like a virgin, Damian.” Her voice dropped, sultry and commanding. “Fuck me like you’ve imagined it every night.”

A guttural sound tore from my throat as I plunged into her in one powerful thrust. Tala gasped, her body tensing for a brief second before she melted into me, wrapping her legs around my waist, pulling me deeper, as if she wanted to take all of me—to drown in me.

I started slow and controlled despite the wildfire burning through my veins. I wanted to savor this and make sure she felt every inch of me. But then she dug her nails into my back, her breath ragged against my ear.

“Harder,” she demanded, her voice rough and desperate.

Something inside me snapped.

I gripped her waist and obeyed, driving into her with a force that made the bed creak beneath us. Each thrust sent fire through my body, raw and primal, my need for her obliterating any last shred of restraint. She moaned, her body moving with mine, meeting me stroke for stroke.

I was lost in her. In this. In the way she felt wrapped around me, in the way she begged for more. And I was going to give it to her, every last bit.

Tala threw her head back, surrendering to the pleasure as her cries filled the room. I felt it the moment she unraveled. Her pussy walls clenched around me, pulsing, gripping me like a vice.

“Damian,” she murmured, her voice breathless, wrecked, as she clung to me, her body trembling through the waves of her orgasm.

I guided her through it, keeping my thrusts deep and steady, prolonging her pleasure until it became too much, and I couldn’t hold back anymore.

With one final, powerful snap of my hips, I groaned against her neck, my body shuddering as I spilled inside her. A raw, consuming bliss crashed over me. She held me through it, her fingers tracing the tension from my back as I buried my face in the crook of her neck.

I collapsed against her, breathing heavily. After a moment, I pulled out and settled beside her, wrapping an arm around her waist. Tala curled into me, her body warm against mine, her breathing slow and steady as her eyes fluttered shut.

I didn’t have the words for what I felt. Maybe there weren’t any. But I knew one thing. I didn’t want this to end. I didn’t want to stop feeling this way. And she was

the only woman in the world who could make me feel like this.

My mate.

She fell asleep first. I stayed awake, listening to the quiet rhythm of her heartbeat. Soon, I fell asleep. It was the most peaceful I'd slept in seven years.

Morning came too soon.

The first thing I heard was the sound of tiny footsteps rushing down the hall, followed by an excited little voice.

“Mummy! Uncle Kael has arrived!”

A rapid knock followed. Aria’s excitement was barely contained as the nanny gently reminded her to knock softly. She had been staying in the nanny’s room most nights since Tala often worked late.

I sat up, blinking away sleep.

And just like that, reality came crashing back in.

### Chapter 21

Tala

Kael’s arrival caught me off guard, mostly because I was still in bed with the man his sister was supposed to marry in just a few hours. My body still ached from the night before, my skin tingling with the memory of every kiss and every touch. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t shake the feeling of the way he consumed me. Everything about last night lingered in my mind, refusing to let go.

I’d been on edge the entire day, and I knew spending most of it with Kael wasn’t the best idea. But Serena was too caught up in last-minute wedding preparations to notice, and Kael had asked for a full report on everything that had happened over the past two weeks. We moved through the crowded streets of the town square, and I was doing a terrible job as a tour guide. Kael wanted to see Stonehart, and he’d asked me to show him around while I filled him in on everything.

Since Damian's new laws took effect, more Omegas had started appearing in the town square. The integration was slow, but it was happening. I'd already heard about two fights between Betas and Omegas. Apparently tensions were still high. Many Betas resented Damian's decision, but some were starting to accept it. Not many, but a few.

As we walked across the markets of the streets, stares and glances followed me. I was used to them by now, but Kael clearly wasn't.

"Looks like you've gotten popular around here real fast," he said, breaking the silence as he took in the way people watched me.

I let out a nervous chuckle. "Looks like it."

Kael wouldn't be here for long, just a few days, maybe three, and then he'd be gone. I just had to hope that in that time, no one would slip up and reveal the truth about my past. Seven years of lies could come crashing down in an instant. I'd never been more grateful for Serena's self-absorption. She only cared about herself, which meant she wasn't the type to go digging where she shouldn't. And since she hadn't confronted me about anything in the past two weeks, it was safe to assume she didn't know.

Which was perfect.

Now, I just had to keep it that way for one more week until I left Stonehart for good.

"So, how are things back at Silver Fang?" I asked, steering the conversation away from the fact that I was apparently popular and not for the right reasons.

Kael's expression darkened instantly. He had that stormy look he got when he was angry, the kind that made it seem like he could tear through anything in his way. "A group of thieves got caught trying to steal pack supplies."

My eyes widened slightly. “How did that happen?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care,” he said flatly. “But after the way I handled it, I doubt anyone will be stupid enough to try it again.”

“What did you do to them?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know, but curiosity got the better of me.

Kael turned to me with a smile, slow, sharp, and purely sinister, like he was savoring the memory—like it thrilled him.

“Let’s just say I skewered them,” he said smoothly. “Details aren’t necessary.”

Skewered. That sounded brutal.

I forced a smile in his direction but didn’t press for more details as we continued toward the Crystal Spring, a quieter path, away from the prying eyes of the pack. Hardly anyone was around, which was exactly what I wanted.

Kael and I walked in silence until he suddenly stopped.

I took a few more steps before realizing he was no longer beside me.

Turning back, I found him standing still, watching me.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, retracing my steps to where he stood.

“Yes, everything is fine,” he nodded. “I want to talk to you about something, and now that we have the luxury of quiet...” he gestured to our empty surroundings. “There’s no better time.”

“Okay...” I said slowly and uncertainly. “What is it?”

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There was a brief moment of silence between us before Kael said, “Marry me.”

The words were spoken with such certainty, such confidence, that for a moment, I thought I had misheard him. His expression was calm and relaxed, watching me as though my answer was nothing but a mere formality. As though I would, of course, say yes.

I swallowed. “What did you say?”

“You heard me, Tala,” he said. “You’ve proven yourself more capable than any woman I’ve met, and when you return to the pack after your delegation, the whole pack will see what I’ve always seen: how worthy you are to be their Luna. You’re strong, smart, and more importantly, you understand me.” He took a step toward me, then another, and another, until the space between us disappeared.

I exhaled sharply. “Alpha Kael—”

“Don’t tell me you’re considering it,” disdain was evident in his voice. “I am the Alpha. My Luna will be respected. Protected. Worshipped.” He lifted a hand, his knuckles brushing against my jaw in a fleeting, possessive touch. “And I want my Luna to be you.”

My stomach twisted. It didn’t seem like he was asking. I’d always known Kael was not the kind of man to entertain refusal because, in his mind, it didn’t exist.

I hesitated. Kael had given me a lot. A home, a position of authority, a chance to rebuild my life. And maybe being with him would finally sever whatever lingering



threat still connected me to Damian.

Damian.

The thought of him sent a sharp pang through my chest. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake the feeling that something inside me was cracking, breaking a little more with each passing second, each moment bringing me closer to the evening and his mating ceremony.

Kael's gaze darkened at my silence. His hand, which had been light against my skin, curled under my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. "Tala."

"After the delegation," I forced myself to say, searching for a way to slow this down, to allow me more time to think things through. "Please, let's wait until my delegation is over. When I return to the pack, we can properly discuss this."

Something flickered in his eyes, something unreadable.

"Fine," he said, stepping back. "When your delegation is over."

Later that evening, I stood in front of the full-length mirror, fastening the clasps of the third necklace I'd tried on. It was easier to pour my emotions into critiquing jewelry, convincing myself that none of them suited the dress, a long emerald gown that I barely took the time to appreciate.

The necklace slipped from my fingers, landing on the floor with a soft clink. I didn't bother picking it up.

My hands fell limply to my sides as I stared at my reflection. Despite my best effort to look put together, the sorrow in my face was undeniable. My eyes were hollow and distant, and my chest felt unbearably heavy. A crushing weight settled over me,

something close to despair, pressing down until it stole even the faintest trace of a smile, real or forced.

Abandoning the necklace, I picked up a brush and dragged it through my already-brushed hair. I was stalling. I knew it. It was as if lingering here just a little longer could delay the inevitable.

I had spent the entire day suppressing my thoughts, forcing myself to focus on the alliance, the pack, and Kael's proposal. But now, in the quiet of my room, there was nothing left to distract me.

Damian was getting married.

A sharp ache tightened in my throat. I reached for the table, for the glass of water sitting on it, hoping to drown the feeling, but all I could think about was him, how he'd lifted me onto this very table just last night, kissing me with a hunger so raw it left me breathless. My gaze drifted to the bed, and the memory followed, how he'd carried me there, how he had consumed me completely, body and soul.

And now, I was supposed to go downstairs, smile, and watch him marry someone else.

I winced, pressing a hand to my chest. For a moment, I didn't know what to feel. Regret? Heartbreak? Both?

I had spent so much time convincing myself that I could stay away from Damian. That three weeks would pass, and I'd return to my life as if nothing had happened. That whatever I felt for him was just remnants of the past, old wounds reopening.

I had pushed him away more times than I could count. And now? Now, I regretted it.

What if I had told him the truth, that I did love him? That I never stopped?

Would that have changed anything?

Would he have...called off the marriage?

I exhaled a shaky breath.

The alliance was too important. It was bigger than me and whatever history still lingered between Damian and me. I would be a fool to think he would throw it all away and stop his marriage to Serena, the very thing securing this alliance for me.

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A single tear slipped down my cheek. I let out a quiet, bitter chuckle.

For two weeks, I had preached about protecting the alliance, about honoring its terms. And now, here I was, foolishly hoping, that Damian would do the exact opposite of everything I'd told him to do.

I dabbed at the dampness on my chin, inhaled deeply, and forced my shoulders back. Then, without another thought, I left the room.

Lanterns bathed the pack headquarters in soft golden light, their glow flickering against the dark sky. White silver petals were scattered across the ground, forming a delicate path leading to the center aisle, the place where it would all happen, where Damian would mark Serena and make her his mate.

Everyone was here. Even the patrols had been called in for the night. Kael had decided that one evening of celebration wouldn't hurt, especially since there hadn't been any rogue sightings in weeks. Wolves from every rank filled the space, their hushed whispers weaving into the cool evening breeze. Damian had extended invitations to the Omegas, and many had accepted, a clear sign of progress after the last outreach and festival. But I couldn't bring myself to care about any of it. Not now. Not when this was happening.

All my attention was on Damian and the moment unfolding before me. He stood at the aisle clad in ceremonial attire, an intricately woven black tunic embroidered with silver thread, the crest of his pack displayed over his chest. A thick leather belt wrapped around his waist, securing a cloak of midnight blue lined with fur. He looked every bit the Alpha he had become. I couldn't tear my gaze away from him.

Yet, watching him felt like a knife twisting deeper into my gut.

Serena stood before him, dressed in a flowing white gown that shimmered under the lantern lights. The fabric draped effortlessly over her figure and was cinched at the waist with delicate silver embroidery. Her blonde hair cascaded in soft curls, adorned with tiny pearls and silver petals woven carefully throughout. I disliked everything about her. But I couldn't deny it, she looked beautiful.

In front of them, the oldest elder of the pack stood solemnly, ready to begin the ceremony.

I sat beside Kael, my hands clenched in my lap, forcing myself to remain still. Forcing myself not to let the agony consume me as I watched my once-fated mate vow himself to another woman.

"We've gathered today, under the gaze of the moon, to witness our Alpha choose his mate," the elder began, his voice steady as he recited the ancient rites of the pack.

As he spoke, Damian's gaze shifted.

And then, for the briefest moment, his eyes found mine.

It lasted no more than a heartbeat, a fleeting second where everything around us faded into nothing. Then, just as quickly, he looked away.

My chest tightened with a sharp, unbearable squeeze that threatened to shatter my composure. I forced myself to remain still and keep my expression blank. Kael was perceptive, too perceptive. I couldn't let him suspect anything.

The ceremony pressed on, each word pulling me deeper into a nightmare I had no power to wake from. Then came the moment of vows.

The elder turned expectantly to Damian. “Speak your vows,” he prompted.

What followed was silence.

The air thickened with anticipation, the crowd shifting restlessly. All eyes were on Damian, waiting. Expecting.

But he said nothing.

Serena’s smile faltered, though she quickly masked it with a laugh. “He must be nervous,” she said, her voice light but strained. “I’ll go first.”

She reached for Damian’s hands and began to say her vows. Her voice was steady and practiced, as if she’d rehearsed these words a hundred times. She promised loyalty, love, and strength. She vowed to stand beside him as his Luna, to lead with him, and to bear his heir.

I swallowed hard, my gaze drifting to Aria. She sat among the crowd, her innocent smile glowing in the candlelight, completely unaware of the storm raging inside me.

I couldn’t do this.

I couldn’t sit here and pretend I was fine. I was breaking apart, barely holding myself together.

Serena finished her vows, her voice full of conviction. The elder turned to Damian once more.

“Alpha,” he said, the weight of the moment pressing down on the silence. “You may now say your vows.”

Just like the first time, there was silence. Only this time, it stretched longer.

Damian's gaze swept over the crowd, waiting in anticipation, until they landed on me.

I held my breath.

The flickering lanterns cast shadows across his face, highlighting the tension in his clenched jaw and the way his throat worked as if he were swallowing down words he couldn't say.

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Then, slowly, he pulled his hand away from Serena's.

He lifted his head to look at her.

"I cannot take you as my mate, Serena," he said, his voice steady but firm.

Gasps echoed through the quarters. Shock rippled through the pack, with members exchanging bewildered glances and murmurs breaking out like wildfire.

Serena's expression faltered, her eyes flickering with disbelief. "What?" she whispered.

But Damian wasn't looking at her anymore.

He was looking at me.

## Chapter 22

Tala

At first, there was silence, complete, utter pin-drop silence. It lasted for a few seconds, then the murmurs followed. If I strained my ears enough, I'd hear what most, if not all, of the guests were saying. Did Alpha Damian just stop his own wedding because of her?

Damian wasn't even trying to hide the fact that he was staring at me. Heads swiveled in my direction, following his gaze. The air around us became thick, and tension was



palpable in the atmosphere. A moment ago, I'd been hoping Damian wasn't mating Serena, that maybe we'd get a shot to be together again with our daughter. But now that it actually happened, at least the first part of that, I suddenly couldn't breathe.

Everyone knew he had practically said "I don't" at the altar, and now, everybody knew that it had something to do with me.

"What the hell is going on, Tala?"

Kael's voice cut through the haze. I turned to see the raw anger dripping from his face. He looked visibly pissed, but there was also a strain of confusion in his expression.

I turned away from him. My throat was tight, the air too thick to breathe. And everybody was staring at me. It felt like I was suffocating, drowning in the weight of their stares. I needed to get out of here.

I pushed back my chair, stood, and barreled through the crowd as Kael's voice calling me back faded into the distance.

The garden was a few steps away, just beyond the towering doors leading to the courtyard. I rushed outside, the cool night air hitting my face, but it didn't help. My chest still felt tight, each breath coming out too fast and shallow.

I stumbled forward, gripping the stone railing of the fountain at the center of the garden. My fingers curled over the cold surface as I squeezed my eyes shut. Breathe, Tala. Just breathe.

But I couldn't. My thoughts were spiraling.

Damian had actually stopped his wedding. Because of me.

A part of me had wanted this and hoped for it in some small, buried way. But not like this. Not in front of everyone. Not with the entire pack staring at me, knowing exactly why.

The weight of their gazes, the whispers, the judgment, it was suffocating. My name would be on everyone's lips by morning. The rejected mate who ruined the Alpha's wedding.

And Kael—

My stomach twisted. What will he think? Would he see this as a betrayal? Everything was unraveling too fast. Too sudden. Too much.

I pressed a hand against my chest as if that could steady the frantic beat of my heart. My vision blurred. My entire body felt too hot and too cold at the same time. I didn't know how long I stood there, gripping the fountain like it was the only thing keeping me upright. I didn't even notice when the footsteps approached.

"Tala."

Damian's voice cut through my panic, and I turned to see him coming towards me. I started to back away.

"Damian, don't," I said, holding out an arm between us as if that could keep him away, even when all that stood between us was air. "You shouldn't have done that to Serena. And we...we shouldn't have—" My voice broke. "We shouldn't have slept together last night."

His jaw tightened. "All I ever hear from you is 'we shouldn't.'" His voice rose, raw with frustration. "We shouldn't do this. We shouldn't do that. But I think we should, Tala."

“I’m never going to be happy with anyone else. And I sure as hell won’t sit back and watch you walk away next week.” His voice dropped. “So, no. I’m done listening to you tell me we shouldn’t.

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I sucked in a sharp breath, my hands pressing against my chest. “We had our time, Damian,” I whispered. “Seven years ago. It’s over now.”

“Then we’ll start over,” he said, stepping closer. His voice was steady, determined. “I refuse to believe our time has passed, Tala. I...I can’t accept that.”

A single tear slipped down my cheek. “But you made that choice for us.”

“And it was the worst decision of my life.” He let out a breath, raking a hand through his hair. “For seven years, I’ve tried to convince myself that letting you go was the right thing to do, the only thing. But no matter how hard, all I feel is regret, knowing I could have done better.” His gaze locked onto mine. “I wish I could change everything.”

Damian’s words took my mind back to that awful night. I hadn’t thought about that night in a long while.

“Tala—” He started toward me again, but I kept my arm up to maintain the distance between us.

“Why?” I asked, my voice strained. “How can I trust anything you say after you’d suddenly cast me away like I meant nothing to you?”

“I had to let you go to protect you, Tala.”

A humorless laugh escaped my lips, “Protect me?” My voice was barely above a whisper. “You call ripping my heart out protection?”

“My father would have killed you if he knew who you really were, who you are,” Damian said.

My brows knitted in confusion.

Noticing this, he exhaled sharply as if the memory itself was a weight he despised carrying, then continued. “When I returned from my Alpha training, Grayson told me about the atrocities my father had committed. I didn’t want to believe that my father was capable of not just murder but mass murder. So, I started digging.”

I said nothing, listening as he spoke.

“The day we met, the night at the bar, I was there to meet a former Beta guard. A man who barely survived the war. He told me my father ordered his men to kill any child they saw between the ages of three and six.” He scoffed, shaking his head. “At first, I thought it was oddly specific. So, I kept investigating, trying to understand why.”

“That’s when I learned he was targeting the Lunariss Custodes bloodline.” Damian’s voice hardened. “I overheard him talking to his advisor about it. I didn’t understand why my father was so determined to erase them. So, I kept searching for answers.”

“I found out the Lunariss Custodes bore a mark. And the moment I read that, I knew.” He pursed his lips. “I had seen that mark before. On you. The first time we slept together. But I didn’t realize what it meant until the day of the Centenary Celebration.”

Everything inside me went still. My lips parted, but no words came out. There was a mark near my left breast. I had always thought it was just a birthmark and nothing more. Aria had the same one, too, just below her waist.

Damian dragged a hand through his hair, his expression tight. “The moment I realized

my father hadn't succeeded in wiping out your bloodline completely, that you were still alive..." He hesitated, shaking his head. "I knew if he ever found out, he'd try again."

"I had to take his attention off you, Tala." Damian's voice was raw and heavy with regret. "I thought if I let you go, he'd never find out the truth. I thought I was keeping you safe." He sucked in a sharp breath. "But I was wrong. I should have fought for you. I should have..." His voice faltered. "I should have protected you the right way."

I let out a trembling exhale as my fingers tightened around the stone railing of the fountain, grounding me.

For years, I had believed Damian never truly loved me, that everything he'd done was nothing more than a calculated move to sway me before he discarded me. But now, the truth stared me in the face. And it didn't make the pain any less suffocating.

"You let me believe I wasn't enough," I whispered, my throat tight. "You let me suffer, Damian. You let me hate myself."

His face twisted in anguish. "Tala—"

"Seven years!" My voice rose, shaking with emotion. "Seven years, Damian. Do you have any idea what that did to me? To think I was worthless to you?" My vision blurred with unshed tears. "To believe that I wasn't good enough for you."

Damian stiffened, like my words had struck him, but I didn't stop. I was expelling the rage that had built up over the years, spilling the thoughts that had kept me awake almost every night for the past seven years.

"The words you said to me that night played over and over again in my head like a

goddamn horror song, unraveling every bit of the life I was trying to build for myself.” I pressed my trembling lips together, my chest tightening.

“I don’t feel better, Damian,” I choked out. “Knowing you rejected me to protect me doesn’t make it hurt any less. You didn’t save me. You destroyed me.”

The silence between us was heavy. His shoulders sagged, his hands loosening at his sides. I could see the regret in his eyes, the guilt carved into every tense line of his body.

But it didn’t erase the past. It didn’t take away the years of pain.

A sharp cry cut through the air, and I turned just as Serena stumbled into the garden, clutching her dress in her hands. Her face was streaked with tears. She looked at Damian first, her eyes wide and raw with hurt. Then her gaze found me.

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“You—” Her voice wavered, but the fury in it was unmistakable. “You ruined everything.”

“Serena, look—”

“Shut up!” she exploded. “I don’t want to hear your voice. I don’t want to see you.”

She turned to Damian, her chest rising and falling with ragged breaths. “You humiliated me,” she choked out, tears streaming down her face. “And for what? Her?”

“I know how you must feel, Serena,” Damian said solemnly. “And I truly am sorry—”

“Are you?” she cut him off with a scoff. “Because you didn’t look sorry up there.”

Damian’s expression tightened. “Would you rather I commit you to a life of misery? Of lovelessness? Or longing for another woman?”

Serena stumbled back as if the words had struck her. “What is it about her?” Her voice cracked, thick with hurt. “How is she any better than me?”

Although I had never liked her, I felt a pang of sympathy for her because I knew what it was like to be publicly rejected.

“Serena—” Damian attempted to pacify her, but once again, she cut him off. I could see his lips twitch in anger.



“Do you know she’s been lying to you?” she asked, tilting her head toward me but not taking her gaze off Damian.

Damian’s brows pulled together.

My breath caught. What was she talking about?

Serena let out a sharp, brittle laugh. “I thought if I kept my findings to myself, I wouldn’t give you a reason to go back to her. But I was sorely mistaken, wasn’t I?”

Damian’s voice flared with irritation. “What are you talking about?”

“When I first arrived at the pack, I noticed the lingering stares, the tense conversations. For two people who were supposed to be strangers, it sure didn’t look like it.”

I stiffened.

“Then, there were the murmurs,” she continued. “It didn’t take long for me to figure out that Tala was no stranger in Stonehart. And she had quite the reputation. The Alpha’s rejected mate,” she scoffed. “I wanted to understand why she lied. So, I had her followed. You’d be shocked what money can make people do.”

My stomach lurched.

Serena turned to me, her lips in a cruel smile. “Why don’t you tell Damian why you took that little trip to the pack’s mystic?”

Damian’s gaze flickered to me. “You visited the pack’s mystic?”

“Go on, Tala,” Serena drawled. “Tell him why.”

I swallowed, my mind racing. “Damian—”

“I’ll answer for her,” she cut in, her voice brimming with satisfaction. “She visited the pack’s mystic for a special potion to mask her and her daughter’s scent. Now, I don’t care why she masked her scent, but why would she want to mask her daughter’s scent?”

Damian turned to Serena, his patience waning. “If you have something to say, Serena, say it or get out of my face.”

“No, you don’t get to raise your voice at me, Damian,” Serena snapped. “You don’t get to be the one angry here. You left me in the aisle, remember? And all for what? For a woman who has been lying about having your daughter?”

I froze, my breath catching. I had sorely underestimated Serena, and that was my mistake. Guess she wasn’t as self-absorbed as I thought.

I watched as Damian’s gaze slowly shifted to me, his expression questioning.

I wanted to speak, to deny it, to say something, anything, but the words lodged in my throat.

Because what could I say?

The truth hung between us, clear as day. He knew.

### Chapter 23

Damian

I'd always had the unshakable suspicion that Aria was my daughter, but now, hearing it from Serena and seeing how Tala's face turned pale, guilt written all over it as if the truth had finally backed her into a corner, my suspicions were confirmed.

A mix of emotions slammed into me. Relief that I'd been right all along. Joy, because I had a daughter, a beautiful, caring girl who had unknowingly stolen my heart. And then there was the rage, white-hot and searing, burning through me like wildfire. Seven years. For seven long years, I'd had a daughter, and Tala had kept her from me. She had buried the truth, letting me believe I had no claim to Aria. No right to hold her. No right to protect her.

My pulse roared in my ears, drowning out the stillness of the garden. Tala stood before me, rigid but defiant, her chin lifted as if daring me to lash out.

"I just want to know one thing, Tala." My voice came out rough, strained, and barely recognizable. "Were you really going to leave next week without telling me Aria was mine? Were you going to let your daughter—no, our daughter—grow up for the rest of her life without a father?"

She flinched just slightly, her expression darkening with something that looked like regret.

“Is this your way of exacting revenge on me?” My voice cracked.

“Wh—what? No, Damian.” She shook her head vehemently. “I promise you I didn’t—”

Before she could finish, a distant scream tore through the night, sharp and chilling. A second later, a thunderous explosion rocked the earth beneath our feet. The ground trembled violently. The stones of the fountain shook, and before I could fully register what was happening, a massive chunk of stone came crashing down toward Tala.

With instinctive speed, I grabbed her arm and yanked her away just as the heavy debris crashed down, shattering into jagged pieces. Dust and rubble clouded the air.

“Are you okay?” I asked, my eyes sweeping over her, searching for even the smallest scratch.

Tala stared at the rubble, her chest heaving, her lips parted in shock. Her hands clutched her stomach like she was struggling to breathe. “What was that, Damian?” she whispered.

Another boom echoed in the distance, followed by a rising sound of screams, growls, and panicked voices. The sharp stench of smoke filled the air, thick and suffocating.

As if on cue, Grayson burst into the garden. His clothes were torn, blood streaked down his arm, and his face was dark with urgency.

“Rogues!” he shouted. “They breached the west gate. It’s bad!”

Tala let out a strangled gasp, pure terror flashing across her face. And without a word, she turned on her heel, bolting for the entrance.

“Tala!” I grabbed her wrist before she could take another step.

“Let me go, Damian!” Her voice cracked with fear as she struggled against my grip.

“A—Aria...my daughter is out there.”

“Our daughter,” I corrected, my voice low and firm. The screams and sounds of chaos hammered against my skull. My wolf was clawing to break free, desperate to find and protect her.

“I’ll find her,” I said, my voice hard. “I’ll protect her. I promise.”

“Then, I’m coming with you.” Tala’s voice shook, but there was no hesitation. Her eyes were wild and frantic. “There’s no way I’m staying here while my daughter is out there.”

“Tala, please.” I cupped her face, forcing her to look at me. “I cannot be out there worrying about you, Aria, and the rest of the pack. Please, stay in the quarters, lock yourself in your room, and do not come out until this is over.”

She started shaking her head before I even finished speaking. “No, Damian. I won’t. Please do not ask me to—”

“Tala.” I softened my voice, trying to ease her panic. “Look at me.”

She stilled, her chest rising and falling rapidly. Tears brimmed her eyes. “I can’t lose her,” she choked out. “I can’t—”

“You won’t.” I pressed my forehead to hers. “I swear to you. I’ll bring her back.”

Tala’s body trembled against mine. “Please, Damian,” she whispered. “Don’t let anything happen to her.”

“I won’t,” I vowed. “Now, go.”

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I didn't look away until she was safely inside the pack house. Only then did I turn to Grayson, my expression hard and determined. "How many?"

"Too many." His jaw clenched. "Double the patrol units of both packs combined. They're slaughtering our people, Damian."

I dragged a hand through my hair, forcing down the rage as I tried to think, to strategize, to stay in control. Our people were counting on their Alpha to protect them. I had to set fear aside and take command.

"Is there a leader? Can you identify one?"

Grayson paused, then nodded. "Yeah. There's a man in a black mask. He's leading the charge."

Good. If we cut the head off the snake, the body would crumble.

"We take him down," I said without hesitation. "Without their leader, the rogues will fall back."

Grayson gave a firm nod, but his eyes held the weight of everything we were up against.

"Gather fifteen men at the council room. I'll be there soon. I need to get Aria first," I ordered, already shrugging off my coat. My muscles tensed, my wolf stirring inside me, urging me to release him.

“And Grayson?”

He paused.

“Wipe that look off your face.” I met his gaze, my own filled with nothing but steel and resolve. “We’re not losing our pack tonight.”

Then I took off.

The once beautiful pack headquarters was now a bloodstained battleground. Rogues, wild and relentless, tore through my pack mercilessly, attacking with unquestionable brutality. The sight made my chest tighten. They were everywhere, at every corner, at every turn. The pack protectors fought back, but their efforts were disorganized and frantic. It wasn’t just the sheer number of rogues that made this battle feel hopeless. It was the chaos. They were scattered around, so there was no chance to regroup and charge forward. Nobody had expected it. We’d let our guard down for a day, and they seized the opportunity.

I pushed forward, cutting down any rogue that came at me, while my eyes scanned the area sharply for Aria. While searching, my gaze landed on the masked man Grayson suspected was their leader. He was a towering force of destruction, fighting with a fury that made me question his purpose. Was this just another raid, or was there something more?

I forced my way through the chaos until I finally spotted Aria. She was curled up beneath a table, her small frame trembling violently. Her wide, tear-filled eyes darted around in terror, her lips quivering as she hugged her knees to her chest. She looked utterly shaken.

I rushed toward her, scooping her up into my arms. She clung to me instantly, burying her face in my chest as she sobbed. A few pack protectors saw me and



moved in, shielding us as I carried Aria through the madness and back to the pack house. Once inside, I handed her to the nanny to take her up to Tala.

Then I turned and headed for the council room.

When I got to the council room, Grayson was already there with about thirteen men.

“These were the only ones I could gather,” he said. “The others are...” he faltered.

I nodded. Thirteen wasn’t much, but it had to be enough. I laid out the plan. Simple but risky. We had to go straight for the rogue leader. Taking him down was the only way we stood a chance, even if he had an entire army backing him.

Once everyone understood the plan, we moved out, diving back into the pack headquarters. The rogue leader was up ahead, shouting commands, his presence alone fueling his warriors. I pushed toward him, Grayson and the others close behind, fighting to clear a path. But the rogues came at us from every direction, relentless and vicious, their claws flashing as they tried to tear us apart.

“Grayson, cover me!” I shouted after cutting down a rogue in my path.

Grayson moved to follow my command, but before he could react, a rogue in full wolf form lunged at him, knocking him to the ground.

I barely had time to register it before I realized we were being overwhelmed. The thirteen men had already dropped to seven, and the rogues kept coming.

I turned toward Grayson. He was struggling beneath the wolf pinning him down, its jaws snapping dangerously close to his throat. Without thinking, I lunged forward, sinking my claws into its abdomen. The wolf let out a sharp cry before collapsing.

I grabbed Grayson's arm, hauling him up. "You good?"

"Barely—behind you, Damian!"

I spun just in time to see a wolf launching itself at me, fangs bared. Instinct took over as I sidestepped, barely dodging the attack, but another rogue tackled me from the side, knocking me off balance.

Through the chaos, I saw Grayson trying to stand, only to be tackled by two more wolves. More rogues surrounded me, closing in fast. Our numbers had dropped again. Seven had become four, excluding Grayson and me. That left us badly outnumbered.

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“We can’t hold them off much longer!” Grayson shouted, his voice tight with exhaustion and fear. Not fear for himself but for the pack and what would be left of us by morning.

Another sharp cry rang through the battlefield as yet another one of our men fell. My wolf snarled, rage surging through me. We were losing.

Then, just when all hope seemed to slip away, I heard them.

A chorus of howls rose from behind us.

I turned sharply, my eyes widening at the sight of figures charging toward the fight.

Omegas.

They moved fast, some shifting mid-run, others gripping weapons, their faces set with fierce determination. They hit the rogues hard, tackling them to the ground and tearing into them with claws and fangs. What they lacked in skill, they made up for in speed, brute strength, and sheer ferocity.

Just like that, the battle had turned.

I saw an Omega shielding a wounded pack protector and another tearing out a rogue’s throat with ruthless precision.

Grayson stumbled up beside me, panting as he took it all in. “Didn’t see that coming.”

Neither had I.

But I welcomed it.

“Cover me,” I said, my eyes locking on the rogue leader. “I’m going for him.”

I surged forward to face their masked leader. He didn’t hesitate. In a flash, his body shifted—but only partially. Though his human form remained, his hands twisted and stretched into razor-sharp claws. I dodged his attack. But I was not fast enough. His claws connected with my shoulders, ripping through the clothing I had on.

I sucked in a sharp breath as the pain tore through me. He came at me again, relentlessly. I blocked his blows with my arms, bracing against the impact. When he swiped with his claws, I sidestepped, barely slipping out of reach. But not always. More than once, his claws found their mark, cutting into my flesh. Still, I held my ground. My plan was to wear him down and wait for the right moment to strike.

But he wasn’t slowing. Every move, every strike was filled with something more than just violence. He fought with aggression. Anger. Resentment. As if every blow carried the weight of something he had been holding on to for too long.

“You fight like a coward,” he snarled. “Just like your father.”

I stiffened. He knew my father? Did that have anything to do with why he was attacking the pack?

He wasted no time in coming at me again, but this time, I met his attack head-on. Our fists clashed with a brutal collision that sent a jolt of pain through my body. But I ignored it. I drove my knee into his stomach, knocking the breath out of him. And as he lost his balance, I seized the opportunity to attack.

With a burst of strength, I drove my elbow into his face. He stumbled back, wiping his nose, and when he saw blood smeared across his fingers, something in him snapped. He launched at me again, fangs bared, ready to strike.

But I was faster. I caught his arm mid-swing and twisted hard. A sickening crack filled the air, and he dropped to his knees with a sharp cry.

“Who’s the coward now?” I leaned in to whisper in his ear before slamming my knee into his jaw. Blood sputtered from his mouth, staining my face as he collapsed to the ground, clutching his broken arm.

I braced myself for him to shift, to unleash his wolf and charge at me again. But he didn’t. Or maybe he couldn’t. Either way, he was down, and I intended to keep him that way.

Using a tactic my father had taught me, I wrapped my arm around his neck, applying just enough pressure to cut off his airflow. He struggled for a few seconds, his body twitching, but it didn’t take long before he went limp.

As soon as he was unconscious, I tore the mask from his face. I didn’t recognize him. His features were sharp and hardened, but it was the brutal scar running up the side of his face that caught my attention. It looked deep like it had been etched on his face for years.

The rest of the strike team, having taken down their opponents, moved in beside me.

The rogues, who had been fighting with fury, began to falter the moment they saw their leader on the ground. Panic flashed in their eyes as they stared at his unmoving form, and just as I expected, one by one, they started to retreat. The flank team managed to catch a few, but most of them scattered, slipping into the woods and disappearing into the night.

Silence slowly settled over the pack headquarters, save for the pained groans and ragged breathing of our wounded protectors.

I let out a sigh as I pressed a hand to my bleeding shoulders. The fight was over. For now.

## Chapter 24

Damian

“How many?” I asked Grayson as we walked through the pack’s headquarters.

Devastation filled me as I took in the sight around me. Parts of the ground were scorched black from last night’s explosions, the stone pathways disfigured with deep claw marks. Tables lay overturned, and chairs were broken into useless pieces. Bloodstained petals were scattered everywhere. And the air, thick with the sharp, metallic scent of blood, made it impossible to forget what had happened here.

Smoke curled in the cold morning air, mixing with the distant sobs and the agonized groans of the wounded. Families clung to their dead ones, weeping over their losses, while the healers worked to keep the injured alive. My heart clenched at the sight before me, and anger rose within me. But I couldn’t let it take over. If I led with rage, more people would suffer. What they needed from me was control and reassurance. They needed to believe this was the last time they would mourn like this. And I was going to make sure of it.

“Twenty dead,” Grayson said quietly. “Fifteen pack protectors and five civilians. Many injured.”

“Get me the names of the families who lost someone today,” I said. “We’ll send them compensation and pay them a condolence visit.”

Grayson nodded. “Kael is already withdrawing his troops. Once their injured warriors are healed, they’ll leave Stonehart.”

I let out a pained smile. “Make sure they get everything they need. It’s the least I can do after all that’s happened.”

Grayson nodded again, but there was something in his eyes, hesitation. It was as if he was debating whether to say what was on his mind.

“What?” I asked, turning to him.

“I don’t know if this is the right time, but I found out something during my assignment in Silver Fang,” he said carefully.

It took me a moment to remember that I had sent him to look into Tala’s time there before he left with the joint patrol unit. “What did you find?” I asked.

“You told me she had a fling when she got to Silver Fang and got pregnant,” Grayson divulged. “But that’s not true. Kael found her in the woods, beaten by rogues...and then she was pregnant. This was just a few days after you rejected her.”

A sharp pang of guilt settled over me. I could only imagine what she had been through.

“But that’s not all I found out,” Grayson said, his tone grim.

I arched my brow. “Go on.”

“I befriended one of the Silver Fang guards,” Grayson said. “We went out for a drink, he got drunk, and...well, he spilled a lot more than he should have. Apparently, Kael had a Luna. He was married. But she died.” He paused, holding my gaze. “But that’s not the truth.”

“Then what did kill her?”



Grayson's expression darkened. "Kael did."

Silence stretched between us. Kael killed his wife?

"They were arguing," Grayson went on. "He put his hands on her and hurt her badly. And it wasn't the first time. The pack believes she died from an illness, but the guards on duty that night heard her screams. He'd sworn them to secrecy, threatening to kill anyone who spoke about that night. His guards and warriors fear him. His brutality has kept them silent. So, they carry his secret for him."

I stared at him, trying to process what I'd just heard. But Grayson wasn't finished.

"Kael doesn't play by the rules, Damian. And after what happened last night...I think we've just made an enemy of Silver Fang."

I exhaled, dragging a hand through my hair. "One thing at a time, Grayson," I muttered. "I'll deal with Kael later. Right now, we have bigger problems. The Rogues."

I'd already communicated my plan for the rogue leader with him last night, so he was well in the loop.

"Get a healer down to the cells," I instructed. "The captured rogues and their leader need treatment. And tell the servants to prepare something decent for dinner. I'll be speaking with their leader when I get back."

Grayson gave a sharp nod before turning on his heel to set things in motion. And with one final glance at the heart-wrenching sight around me, I proceeded to the council room.

"This has gone too far!"

As expected, my words were met with resistance. Elder Maren's voice, sharp with disapproval, rang through the council room.

I barely flinched. Out of the eight elders, only a few saw reason in my decisions. The rest, loud as they were, held no real power beyond their words. Still, they came at me from all sides, angry over my decision to end my marriage to Serena, which dissolved our alliance with Silver Fang, and even more furious about my choice to negotiate with the rogue leader in our custody.

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“All you had to do was marry the Silver Fang girl and secure our alliance,” Elder Vance spat, his glare dripping with disdain. “And you couldn’t even do that. Now you want to reason with a psychopath?”

I met his glare with cold resolve. Murmurs of discontent spread through the chamber, but I ignored them. They were thinking of the immediate consequences and how vulnerable the pack was now. But I was looking beyond that.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” Elder Maren scoffed.

He went ahead to answer his own question. “You’ve put us in a dangerous position. We lost too many protectors last night, which means we’re low on fighters. Without the Silver Fang alliance, we stand alone. And now that you’ve imprisoned the rogue leader, his people will come for him, and we don’t have the numbers to fight them off.”

“We have the Omegas,” I said.

Maren let out a dry laugh. “You mean untrained fighters who may not even fight for us?”

“They’re not fighting for us,” I corrected. “They’re fighting with us.”

“No, you put us in this mess,” he snapped. “Since taking the mantle of Alpha, all you’ve done is make reckless decisions. You don’t listen to the council—”

“Because this is the same council that stood by while fathers slaughtered innocents in

the Beta-Omega war!" I snarled.

The room fell into a heavy silence. The elders flinched at the sharp edge in my voice, but not one of them spoke. No denials. No justifications. Just uneasy glances and tense shoulders as they shrank into their seats, hiding behind their silence.

I let out a cold scoff. "That's what I thought. I didn't come here seeking your approval. I came to inform you of my decision. If any of you have a problem with it, you're welcome to step down from the council."

I scanned the room, waiting for someone to challenge me. But no one did.

"Then it's settled," I pushed back my chair and rose to my feet. "I'll let you know when it's done."

After the council meeting, I visited a few families who had lost loved ones in the attack, offering my condolences. It was a small gesture, but one I hoped would bring them even the slightest comfort.

By the time evening fell, I returned to the pack house, ready for my meeting with the rogue leader.

Grayson was waiting inside when I arrived. "I've stationed guards outside your chambers," he said. "Just in case...you know, he tries anything."

I gave him a pointed look. "We're trying to broker peace, Grayson. The last thing we need is to make him feel like a prisoner."

Grayson sighed. "Fine. But don't say I didn't warn you."

"Where is he?" I asked.

“The cells. We were waiting for you before bringing him up.”

“Okay,” I said, shrugging off my coat. “Have the servants send for Tala and bring some food and wine to my chambers. Then bring him up.”

Grayson gave a nod and left to carry out the orders.

I made my way to my chambers to settle in. A few moments later, the door creaked open, and Grayson stepped inside with the rogue leader at his side.

Grayson gave me a brief nod before turning and exiting the room.

I gestured toward the table where food and wine had been laid out. “Please, sit.”

His eyes skimmed across the table and then back at me. He didn’t move. Instead, he leveled me with a hard stare. “I don’t eat with enemies.”

I exhaled slowly, keeping my composure. I didn’t expect this to be easy. “We don’t have to be enemies.”

A humorless laugh escaped him. “That’s rich, coming from someone like you.”

“I assure you,” I met his stare evenly. “You do not know someone like me.”

He sneered and stalked toward me, his movements controlled but brimming with barely restrained aggression. He stopped just short of where I sat, lowering himself to my eye level. “You Alphas are all the same, power-hungry tyrants who thrive on oppression and bloodshed. You rule through fear, pretending it’s order. You are no different from your father, Damian. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

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I leaned back in my chair, unfazed. “Tell me, would my father have invited you to his chambers to share a meal and discuss peace?”

His lips curled in disdain. “That’s why you called me here? To talk peace? You must be out of your goddamn mind if you think I’d ever agree to that.”

“So what then?” I asked, voice steady. “You’d rather we slaughter each other until there’s nothing left?”

His sneer deepened. “It won’t come to that,” he said darkly. “Because I’m going to kill you first and take this pack for myself.”

His threat hung in the air between us. We stared each other down, neither of us breaking gaze first. Then, a knock at the door shattered the tension.

Tala. I thought. Perfect timing.

I pushed back my chair and stood. “Help yourself to some pork,” I said, glancing at the table. “Everyone loves pork.”

He didn’t respond, his cold stare tracking my every move as I crossed the room. I opened the door, and sure enough, Tala stood there, her expression guarded.

“You sent for me,” she said, her tone even as she avoided my gaze.

There was still an unresolved conversation hanging between us about the fact that she had kept my daughter a secret for seven years, and I’d found out through Serena, of

all people. But now wasn't the time to address it. Right now, we had bigger things to deal with.

"I'm here with the rogue leader," I said quietly. "I could use your diplomatic skills."

Her brows lifted slightly. "The rogue leader?"

I sighed. "I'm trying to make peace."

Stepping aside, I let her look inside. But as soon as her eyes landed on the man by the table, her entire body went rigid. Shock flickered across her face.

The rogue leader stiffened as well, his own expression mirroring hers.

"Tala?" I asked, frowning at the palpable tension between them. "What's going on?"

She barely seemed to hear me. Her voice came out in a whisper as if the words had been stolen by disbelief.

"Damian..." she breathed. "That's my brother."

## Chapter 25

Tala

The air around me went still as I met the rogue leader's gaze. My heart slammed against my ribs, my vision blurring at the edges as recognition tore through me.

No. I thought at first. It wasn't possible. My brother had died that night. He went back to save our parents, and I never saw him again.

But unless my mind was playing tricks on me, unless this was some cruel hallucination, he was right there. Alive.

“Ryker?” His name slipped from my lips, barely a whisper, as tears burned in my eyes.

I saw the way his body tensed, the way his gaze swept over me, confusion flickering in his dark eyes.

“Tala?”

The room tilted, and my knees threatened to give out. Shock crashed into me like a tidal wave, shaking me to my core.

My brother was alive.

He was right in front of me in flesh and blood, shattering the belief I had for years that he was nothing more than a ghost lost to war.

Memories crashed into me all at once. The way he used to ruffle my hair. The way he stood between me and the bullies at school. The last time I saw him, he made a promise to come back for me. But he never did.



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I had mourned him year after year for twenty-five years.

And yet, here he was.

“I thought...” My voice broke as a tear slipped down my cheek. “I thought you were dead.”

His jaw tightened. “I thought the same about you.”

“How?” I whispered, stepping closer, almost afraid to reach for him, afraid that if I did, he’d vanish like nothing more than a cruel illusion.

But then Ryker stood, towering at six feet. His face was shadowed by a deep frown. He looked hardened and shaped by years of pain. But beneath it, I saw him, my brother. The boy who had loved me, who had protected me with his life.

Ryker lifted a hand, hesitating mid-air as if caught between reaching for me and pulling away. Just as he started to withdraw, I caught his hand and pressed it to my face.

His expression shifted. And just like that, the hardness disappeared.

I rushed into his arms, sobbing uncontrollably as I held him tight.

Ryker’s body stiffened at first like he wasn’t used to being touched. But after a moment, he exhaled, his muscles loosening as he wrapped an arm around me and hugged me back.

“How?” I choked out between sobs. “How are you here? Where have you been?” And more importantly, how are you the rogue leader?

Ryker let out a sharp breath as I pulled back to look at him. The anger was back in his eyes, but I still saw that familiar softness when he looked at me. His gaze drifted past me as though lost in a memory, and from the way his face darkened, I knew it wasn’t a good one.

Running a hand through his short brown hair, he sighed. “I barely made it out,” he said, his voice tight. “After I left you behind that tree, I went back for Mama and Papa. But by the time I got to the house...it was on fire. They were inside.” His jaw clenched. “The flames started at the doors, trapping them. There was no way out.”

My heart clenched as I tried to picture my parents trapped in the flames, panic setting in as the fire closed around them.

“I couldn’t just stand there and watch our parents burn,” he said, his voice tight with emotion. “So, I tried. I walked straight toward that fire, straight through that door to save them.”

His breath hitched as his fingers brushed over the scar on his face. “That’s how I got this,” he murmured. “But by the time I got inside...Mama was already wheezing, barely holding on. The smoke had gotten to her before the fire did. Papa carried her as I cried, but when we made it outside, we ran into something worse.” His throat worked. “The soldiers were waiting. They came at me, but Papa didn’t let up. He fought with everything he had so that I could run.”

Tears blurred my vision as I listened. I had always known our parents died in the war, but I never knew how. Now I did. My mother, gasping for air as smoke filled her lungs. My father, cut down in battle.

They didn't deserve that. They should have lived long enough to grow old and leave this world in peace, not in fire and blood.

Ryker placed a hand on my shoulder to pacify me. "I ran all night," he continued. "They chased me through the woods, but I didn't stop. And when I finally lost them, I went back to the tree where I left you. But you were gone. The whole area was covered in blood, and I thought they got to you too."

I reached up, cupping his cheek, my fingers gentle against his scar. Ryker met my tear-filled eyes and gave me a small, broken smile. I knew what it felt like to be alone in the world. So, I understood how he must have felt.

"I was so angry, Tala." His voice cracked. "Mad that they took you from me. Mad that they took our parents. The only thing that kept me going was the thought that one day, I'd make them pay, and I'd make them feel the same pain they caused me."

"You became a rogue," I said quietly.

Ryker pulled away from my touch, taking a few steps back as if realizing he had let his guard down and needed to rebuild the walls around him.

"I became a rogue the day they stormed our village and tried to kill us all," he said, his voice cold, distant. "The very people you all fear, the ones you call terrorists, they're the ones who saved me. They found me wandering the forest alone. They took me in. They trained me. They made me who I am today."

"A rogue leader?"

"Yes, Tala!" Ryker snapped, his voice sharp enough to cut. "I am the rogue leader, and I'm damn proud of it."

I flinched at his tone, my stomach twisting.

“Why do you think we raid towns for supplies?” he went on, his eyes burning with conviction. “There are so many of us out there, Omegas, outcasts, people with no home or whose homes were ripped from them. We give them a place to belong. We keep them alive. And if that means stealing from the packs that cast them out, then we damn well will.”

His gaze flicked to Damian. “Do you have any idea how many Omegas from this pack are in our camp?” He scoffed, his voice laced with contempt. “How many of us lost everything while your father, the great Alpha, sat on his throne and called for our heads?” His words turned into a low growl, thick with anger and grief. Then, his sharp eyes landed back on me. “I wasn’t going to spend the rest of my life begging for scraps, Tala. So, I built something of my own, an army strong enough to make your packs feel the same fear they forced on us.”

I shook my head. “I get what you went through, Ryker—”

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“Do you, Tala?” he cut in, his scoff cold and sharp. “Because from where I’m standing, you’ve become one of them.”

His gaze flicked to Damian again, and I instinctively glanced over my shoulder. Damian stood by the door, silent and watchful. He hadn’t said a word through our exchange, letting us process everything that was happening.

“Ryker, I am not your enemy.” I stepped toward him, happy that he didn’t back away. “But in your bid for revenge, you’re killing innocent people.”

“Betas,” he corrected, his tone firm. “I would never go after the Omegas.”

“But there were Omegas at the celebration yesterday,” I pressed. “And you attacked everyone.”

Ryker’s eyes narrowed. A flicker of doubt crossed his face, but he masked it just as quickly. “That’s not possible. They are never invited into Beta territory.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” I said, holding his gaze. “Things have changed. Damian is nothing like his father. He’s trying to fix what was broken and undo the damage.”

He didn’t look convinced. He studied me carefully, suspicion carved into every line of his face, his body tense and rigid. I could see the war raging inside him, the part of him that wanted to believe me, and the part that had spent years drowning in bitterness and rage.

“Why are you defending him, Tala?” Ryker’s voice was quieter now. “His father killed our parents.”

I let out a small smile. “Because he’s the father of my child.”

Ryker’s eyes widened, shock rippling across his face. I could see the moment the words sank in, the weight of them settling into his bones. And for the first time since I walked into this room, Damian spoke.

He stepped forward, stopping just beside me. “I meant what I said before,” he said solemnly. “I want peace. You’re not a prisoner here, Ryker. Like me, you’re a leader. You’d do anything to protect your people, and I respect that. But war doesn’t protect them. It only destroys us all.”

Ryker’s gaze flickered with uncertainty, his features still hardened by years of hatred and distrust.

After a long pause, he exhaled and said, “I can’t make that decision without speaking to my people.”

“I understand,” Damian said, his voice steady. “You’re welcome to stay the night. Tomorrow, you can return to them. I’ll have the servants prepare a room for you.”

Ryker’s expression didn’t shift. “And my people? The ones you locked in your cells?”

Damian hesitated briefly before nodding. “I’ll have them released immediately.”

Ryker barely nodded, the tension in his shoulders still heavy. Hewasn’t ready to trust. Not yet. One conversation, one night, none of it could fix a wound that had festered for decades. He wouldn’t decide today. I knew that much.

But for the first time in years, I had my brother back. And I wasn't going to lose him again—not to war.

## Chapter 26

Tala

Damian left us in his chambers to catch up while he went to oversee the rogues' release and make sure everything was set up properly. As soon as the door closed behind him, I hugged Ryker again. Despite the years that had hardened him into the man he was now, being with him still felt the same as it did when we were younger: safe and familiar, like coming home.

He was still trying to wrap his head around it all. How I, an Omega whose parents were murdered by the Alpha, had ended up having a daughter with the Alpha's son. There was a lot to catch up on. There were twenty-five years of lost conversation between us, but I was more than happy to tell him about all of it.

The awkwardness faded, replaced by something warmer, something that felt like family. When a servant arrived to show Ryker to his room, I walked with him, helping him settle in. I assured him that he could trust Damian's word, that he was safe here, and that his people would be cared for until he decided his next move.

Life had changed us both. We had fought our own battles and endured our own pain. But in that moment, I felt like I was talking to my big brother again.

After leaving Ryker's room, I went to find Damian. I found him on the terrace, the same one where we had kissed, watching the garden as the moths darted between the flowers.

"Ryker is settled into a room," I said, announcing my presence as I stepped onto the

terrace.

Damian glanced over his shoulder, acknowledging me with a brief look before turning back to the garden.

“Do you think he’ll accept the peace deal?” he asked, his voice calm but distant.

“He will,” I said without hesitation. “He has a reason to now.”



Damian only nodded.

I joined him, leaning against the railing as we watched the moths dart from flower to flower, their wings shimmering under the moonlight. They moved so freely, as if nothing in the world could trouble them.

We stood in silence for a long time before Damian finally spoke again.

“I never cared much for gardens or flowers before I met Aria.” A faint smile touched his lips. “But now, I find myself trying to see what she sees in them. It’s not hard, really. Flowers are beautiful, calming...a breath of fresh air. Just like her.”

A dull ache settled in my chest. “You’re angry,” I said softly.

Damian finally turned to face me. “Of course, I’m angry, Tala. I’ve been standing here thinking about everything I missed: her first birthday, her second birthday, all the way to her seventh. Her first steps, her first words. Seven years of my daughter’s life are gone. You should have told me,” he said, his voice tight with frustration. “I had a right to know, despite what happened between us.”

I took a slow, steady breath. “I know. I was...I was trying to protect her.”

His eyes flashed. “Protect her? Or protect yourself?”

“Both,” I admitted exasperatedly. “Damian, you rejected me. You made it clear I meant nothing to you. What was I supposed to do? Stay and let her suffer the same fate? Let her grow up in a pack where she would always be seen as less?” My voice

wavered, but I pressed on. “I did what I thought was best. I left so she could have a chance at a better life.”

Damian exhaled sharply, turning away. When he faced me again, the anger in his eyes had dimmed, replaced by something heavier. Guilt.

“I pushed you into that choice, didn’t I?” he murmured.

I didn’t answer right away. I didn’t need to.

He let out a long sigh. Silence settled between us again, but this time, it wasn’t awkward, heavy, or tense. It felt like relief.

“I want us to tell her tomorrow,” Damian said. “Together. Because beneath the anger, the frustration, the realization...there’s joy in knowing she’s mine. I can’t explain it. It’s like my life suddenly has another purpose, something more than just serving the pack.”

I smiled, thinking how lucky Aria was to have a father like him. I hadn’t always believed that, but in the two weeks I’d been here, I had seen it. She deserved to know. Tomorrow, no later.

The next morning, Aria sat on the couch with her legs tucked beneath her, eyes wide as she looked between us. I had imagined this moment so many times last night that it had kept me awake. I had feared she would feel hurt and betrayed.

But when Damian told her the truth, that he was her father, her entire face lit up.

“Really?” she said, her voice high with excitement.

“Yes, Aria,” Damian said, his voice softer than I had ever heard it. “I’m your father.”

She didn't hesitate. She threw herself into his arms, wrapping her small arms around his neck. Damian smiled, big and genuine, as he held her close, burying his face in her hair.

I pressed a hand to my mouth, my eyes brimming with tears at the sight.

When Aria finally pulled back, she grinned up at him. "So that's why your eyes look like mine!"

Damian chuckled. "Now we know."

As I watched Aria skid across the living room foyer with the nanny, her face lit up with pure joy, and a warmth spread through my chest. Raising Aria without her father, constantly dodging her questions or skirting around the truth, had been one of the hardest things I'd ever done. I used to fear moments like this, afraid that if Damian ever knew the truth, he was going to try to take my daughter away from me. Or worse, reject her.

But seeing how naturally they connected, how they had built a bond in such a short while, and how happy she was to learn he was her father, that fear was gone, replaced by something else, something lighter and warmer. It was as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

Lying had been exhausting. Hiding the truth had drained me in ways I couldn't even put into words. But now, I didn't have to anymore. Aria knew. Hearing her call Damian Dad so easily and naturally, it felt like everything had finally fallen into place.

A single tear slipped down my cheek. But they weren't from sadness, exhaustion, or anything close to it. They were pure, unfiltered joy. The past few weeks had been an emotional whirlwind, and after everything, the sleepless nights, the endless weight of

uncertainty, this moment was the best thing that could have happened.

Damian reached out, his thumb gently catching the tears on my cheek.

“Why are you crying?” His voice came out in a soft whisper.

I turned to him, nuzzling into his palm, letting myself bask in the warmth of his touch. “I’m happy,” I murmured, a small smile forming on my face. “You and Aria together feels like the most natural thing in the world. And I’m so sorry I kept that from you, Damian.”

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He crouched in front of me, his hands cradling my face. “That doesn’t matter anymore, Tala. I understand why you did what you did, and I’m never going to hold it against you. I promise.”

I lifted my hand, pressing it over where his palm rested against my cheek. My gaze locked onto his, and for a long moment, we just stayed like that. Silent, staring into each other’s eyes.

Right here, right now, I felt peace—a rare, quiet kind of peace. And I wanted to stay in it, to bask in it forever. I had found my brother. Damian knew about Aria. Everything was finally falling into place.

Everything except us.

Now that Damian knew the truth, what did that mean for us?

Now that he had ended his engagement to Serena, what did that mean for us?

Now that the rogue threat was gone, what did that mean for us?

“Everything I said that night,” Damian spoke softly, pulling me from my thoughts, “I meant it, Tala. In fact, I’ve meant every word I’ve said since the day you walked back into Stonehart. I don’t think it was a coincidence. I think this is fate giving us another chance to rewrite our story, to right my wrongs, to finally be happy.”

My heart clenched. I had thought the same once. That fate had somehow pulled us back together. But I had also believed that fate was cruel, and I had sworn to fight

against it.

Two weeks ago, I would have refused to believe in second chances.

But now...now, I wanted to embrace it.

“I don’t expect you to forgive me for what I did, Tala,” Damian continued, his voice quieter. “But I need you to know that I’m going to make things right. If you let me.”

Tears brimmed in my eyes. I had been so angry at Damian for so long, but these past two days had made me realize something. No matter how hard I tried, I could never truly erase him from my heart.

When he went out to fight the rogues, I’d been terrified I would never see him again. That thought alone had shaken me more than I wanted to admit. I even said a prayer to the Moon Goddess to protect him.

I opened my mouth to respond, to tell him I forgave him and that I was ready to let go of seven years of pain, to tell him I wanted this, us.

But before I could, the door burst open.

A fuming Kael stormed inside. His gaze landed on Damian and me, taking in the intimate moment between us and the way Damian’s hand still cradled my face. His expression darkened, and raw anger burned in his eyes.

And just like that, the fragile peace I had found was shattered. I was yanked back into reality.

Chapter 27

Tala

“You lied to me!”

Kael’s voice was low and sharp as a blade, each word laced with fury. His eyes were dark and burning as they locked onto mine, and for the first time, I felt something a flicker of fear of him

I had seen Kael angry before. Enraged, even. But never like this.

Damian’s hands fell from my face as he stood, and I followed immediately. He moved to step forward, to say something, but I grabbed his arm, holding him back. This wasn’t his fight. It was mine. And I had to fix it. Or at least try.

Besides, something told me that after everything, Damian wasn’t exactly Kael’s biggest fan at the moment.

“Let me talk to him,” I said quietly, tightening my grip when Damian hesitated. “Leave us to talk, please.”

His jaw clenched. “I can’t leave you with him, Tala. Not when he’s like this.”

“He has every right to be angry,” I said, my gaze flickering back to Kael. “But he would never...hurt me.”

My words wavered at the end, barely above a whisper. Like even I wasn’t sure if I believed them.

“You don’t know him, Tala.” His eyes never left Kael. “You don’t know what he’s capable of.”

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My brows furrowed, confusion settling into my chest as I tried to make sense of what he was saying.

“What is he now?” Kael scoffed. “Your protector? Where was he in the last seven years? Where was he when you were getting battered by rogues that night? Who saved you, Tala?”

Damian’s teeth clenched, his body going rigid beside me. But before he could speak, Kael cut in again.

“How do you go back to your vomit, Tala?” His voice was laced with bitterness. “How do you go back to someone who tossed you aside like you didn’t mean a damn thing?”

Anger flickered behind Damian’s eyes. His breathing was slow and measured like he was trying to hold himself together.

“I never tossed her aside.” The words came out like a growl. His eyes were fierce, locked onto Kael.

Kael didn’t back down. His stare was just as lethal and unyielding. The tension in the room was suffocating enough to choke on.

“You think you know everything,” Damian continued. “But you know nothing.”

Kael scoffed. “I know enough.”



Damian attempted to step forward, but I tightened my grip on his arm. He stopped, but just barely, his body taut beneath my fingers.

Kael, on the other hand, stepped forward instead, meeting him head-on, challenging him, and daring him to make the first move.

But before he could get too close, I moved between them, pressing a hand against Damian's chest, my presence forcing him to stay still.

"Please," I turned to Damian, my voice soft. "Let me talk to him alone."

Hesitation flickered in his gaze. He didn't want to leave. He was ready to stand there and stay until Kael left. But I pleaded with my eyes, telling him to trust me.

After a long, tense beat, Damian exhaled sharply and took a step back. His gaze lingered on Kael for a minute longer, a silent warning in his gaze, before he turned and walked away.

Though something told me that he wouldn't go far.

I turned to Kael, his gaze still seething with anger.

"Kael, I know you're hurt—"

"Damn right, I'm hurt!" he exploded, his voice raw. I flinched. "You had seven fucking years to tell me the truth, Tala. And what did you do? You lied. Over and over again to my face despite everything I did for you."

I swallowed hard, my throat tightening with guilt. "I never thought I'd have to confront my past again," I admitted. "I didn't think there was any need to revisit the worst moment of my life. I wanted to start over. And Kael, I am forever grateful that

you gave me that chance, that you saved me that night.”

“Are you really?” he scoffed.

“Kael—”

“Don’t.” He stepped closer, his entire being trembling with barely restrained rage.

“Don’t feed me more lies, Tala. Serena already told me everything.”

“Serena doesn’t know everything.”

“She knows enough!” he bellowed. “She knows you lied. She knows you pretended not to remember your past. She knows you and Damian had a thing, and that thing gave you a daughter.” His face twisted in pain, like the words themselves physically hurt him.

“So yeah, Tala.” His voice was quieter now but still edged with fury. “She knows enough.”

The anger radiating off him was ferocious, but underneath it, I heard the pain.

“I never meant to deceive you, Kael,” I said. “I was trying to protect Aria. To protect myself.”

“Protect?” He let out a humorless laugh. “You don’t get to act like you were protecting anyone, Tala. Because if you really wanted to stay away, if you really didn’t want to come back here, you would have told me the truth from the start.”

“And then what?” I challenged. “What would you have done, Kael? How would you have reacted to the fact that I’ve been lying to you for years?”

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His mouth opened, but no words came. He held my gaze, his jawtight. When he finally spoke, his voice was quieter and calmer but not softer.

“I would never have let you come back here,” he said, his eyes burning into mine. “I would never have let you return to a man you once loved. Because I never want to compete for you, Tala.”

I let out a shaky breath. “Kael, please—”

“I’m willing to forget everything, Tala,” he cut in sharply, his voice rough and edged with desperation. “Every lie and every betrayal. I’ll let it all go if you come back with me to Silver Fang. Be my Luna. Let me be Aria’s father like I always have.”

“But she has a father, Kael,” I said quietly.

His eyes darkened. “And who was there when she took her first steps? Who was there when you gave birth to her? Me.” His voice hardened. “Your life is in Silver Fang. Her life is in Silver Fang. You’re chasing something that doesn’t exist, thinking you can build a future here in a place that once threw you away.” He took a step closer, his voice lowering. “I’ll allow it. This moment of temporal insanity. But I’m leaving tomorrow, and I want you to come with me.”

It wasn’t a request. It was a command.

I should have wanted to go. Silver Fang was safe and familiar. I had built a peaceful life there with Aria. But I couldn’t leave. Not when I had finally stopped running from my past. Not when I had finally found my happiness.

With Damian.

Kael's jaw tensed, his teeth grinding together as he read my hesitation. And then, his voice dropped even lower, almost coaxing. "Forget Damian. Forget this pack. Come with me, and I'll give you everything. You'll be Luna, Tala, the most powerful woman in Silver Fang."

No matter what he said, I knew what my answer would be. But the pain in his eyes made it so much harder to say the words.

I took a deep breath. "Kael...I can't."

His body went rigid, his fists clenching at his side. "Why?"

"Because Damian is my mate. And even if I wished things were different, which I don't, I could never love anyone else the way I love him."

Kael flinched as if I had struck him.

I continued. "You deserve someone who will love you the way you love them. Someone who won't hesitate. Someone who won't still be looking at their past when they're with you." I breathed. "And that's not me."

His breathing grew heavier.

"You chose him," he muttered, voice dangerously low. "Even after I offered you the world, Tala."

I said nothing.

Kael took a step back, his expression twisting into something bitter and unreadable.

“You’ll regret this, Tala.”

A chill ran down my spine.

“Kael—”

He turned on his heel, his movement sharp with anger. “You think he’s your fate? Fine. But mark my words, you’ll regret this.”

And then he was gone.

I let out a shaky breath, trying to push down the fear riding inside of me. Kael was hurt and betrayed, but I had never seen him like that before. The look in his eyes had been more than just heartbreak.

It had been the promise of something far worse.

## Chapter 28

Damian

I had been in my chambers with Grayson, going over the plans to rebuild the ruined pack headquarters, when Tala burst through the doors, her eyes wide and frantic and her breathing rapid and uneven.

Fear was palpable on her features as she spoke. “Aria is gone.”

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I looked up from the pile of construction papers on my desk, my brows pulling together. “What do you mean, gone?”

“She’s not in the house,” she said, voice sharp with impatience.

“What about the garden?”

“She’s not anywhere, Damian. Not in the garden, not with the nanny, not in the living room. Nowhere.” Tala swallowed hard, struggling to steady herself. “The nanny said she last saw her with Kael just before he left Stonehart with his troops. And after what he said yesterday, I—” Her voice caught as if saying the words would make them real.

But I was already stuck on something else. My jaw tightened as I stood. “What did he say to you?”

She hesitated. “He said I was going to regret my decision.”

“What decision?”

“To stay in Stonehart,” she said. “With you and Aria.”

In any other circumstance, those words would have warmed my heart. After all, it’s all I’ve wanted since she came back here. But it didn’t matter if Aria wasn’t here.

“I think Kael took her with him,” Tala finally said, her voice breaking. “He’s trying to hurt me, Damian. He knows how much she means to me.”

“When did he leave the pack?” I inquired.

“The nanny said she last saw him about an hour ago.”

An hour. They couldn’t have gotten far. My mind was already working through the possibilities as I yanked open a drawer and pulled out a map, spreading it over my desk.

“We can’t let them reach Silver Fang,” Grayson said as his eyes glided through the map, his expression grim. “That’s exactly what he wants. He knows we’ll come for Aria, and he’s trying to drag us into his territory to force a fight we didn’t plan for.”

“Or he just wants to hurt her,” I muttered, my jaw tightening. “He killed his wife and lied to his entire pack. You really think he wouldn’t do this?”

Tala flinched. Through the tears streaking her face, she choked out, “Kael had a wife?”

Something inside me twisted. Seeing her like this, vulnerable, breaking apart, made my wolf restless with rage.

I pulled her into my arms. “We’ll get her back, Tala,” I murmured. “I swear it.”

Grayson cleared his throat, forcing me to focus. “If they left an hour ago, they should be here.” He pointed to a spot on the map. The forest water pond.

“They’re moving with fifty men, so they’ll be slow,” he continued. “If we take this route...” He traced a narrow path through thick woods. Dangerous ground. Rogue territory. “...we can catch up with them in forty minutes. But it’s not car accessible.”

The rogues weren’t an immediate threat, not anymore, but that didn’t mean the route

was safe.

“Then we run,” I said without hesitation. “Get me twenty of our fastest shifters. We leave in ten minutes.”

Grayson nodded and took off to carry out my orders. I turned to Tala, trying to tell her to stay behind, to let Grayson and me handle this, and we would bring Aria back. But I barely got a sentence out before she cut me off, her refusal sharp.

There was nothing but determination in her eyes. She wasn’t staying behind.

So I didn’t fight her on it.

Ten minutes later, Grayson and the pack’s protectors were gathered at the pack gates, ready to move. Without hesitation, we shifted into our wolf forms and took off, racing through the muddy forest paths. The ground was slick from last night’s dew, but we didn’t slow down. I assigned two men to stay by Tala’s side at all times. She could hold her own, but I wasn’t taking any chances.

We ran for over an hour, our paws pounding against the earth. We ran past the forest pond and even farther, but there was no sign of Kael or his men.

Frustrated, I shifted back, my eyes still scanning the area sharply as possibilities raced through my mind. Where the hell were they?

“They must have taken another route,” Grayson said, shifting beside me. His chest rose and fell heavily from the run. “They knew we’d come after them, so they changed course.”

I swore under my breath, my jaw clenched. My gaze flicked to Tala. There was a quiet despair creeping in as Grayson spoke. I held her stare, willing her to see what I



wasn't saying, that we would find Aria. No matter what.

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“There are four other routes leading back to Silver Fang,” Grayson continued. “None of them are car accessible, just like this one. Kael could be on any of them.”

“Then we split up,” I said quickly. “Groups of five or six. Tala, you’re with me. Grayson, take the group heading north.”

He nodded, and without another word, we broke apart, each group vanishing into the dense forest.

Twenty minutes down the west path, the sharp scent of shifters hit me. I slowed, ears perked and nostrils flaring.

I motioned to my group, and we moved forward, silent and precise. And then, through the trees, I saw them.

Kael’s troops.

My gaze darted through the crowd until I found what I was looking for. Aria.

Kael had her in his grip. Her small body was trembling, and her tear-streaked face was twisted in fear. And then, as if sensing us, Kael turned. His eyes darkened the moment they landed on me, and his fingers tightened around Aria’s arm, causing her to whimper.

Tala let out a choked cry. “Kael, please, let her go. You’re hurting her.”

Kael didn’t even spare her a glance. His gaze stayed locked onto mine, burning with

barely restrained anger. “Do you think you can just waltz back after seven years and claim Tala? Claim a child you didn’t even know existed until two weeks ago?” His voice was sharp with arrogance and contempt. “I’ve turned it over in my head, again and again, trying to understand—what is it about you that made her choose you over me?”

Then his gaze dropped to Aria, his eyes darkening.

“It must be her,” he muttered. “She’s the bond tying you two together. So, if she were gone...”

Tala stepped forward, shaking her head. “Kael, it’s Aria,” she pleaded, her voice soft and coaxing. “You watched her grow. You love her. You don’t want to hurt her.”

His jaw clenched. His grip flexed around Aria’s arm.

“I don’t care!” he thundered.

Aria let out a shriek, her small body trembling as she cried. “Mummy?”

“Aria,” Tala choked out, her voice filled with fear and desperation. Kael’s grip only tightened on Aria.

I took a step forward, forcing his attention back to me. “If you’re so angry at me, if you want Tala so badly, then come after me,” I challenged. “Fight me, Kael. Or are you too much of a coward? An Alpha going after a child?”

Kael stiffened, my words cutting through him. His pride. His ego. His twisted sense of dominance. I knew I had him right where I wanted, and he took the bait.

His lips curled into a smirk, but his eyes gleamed with malice. “Fine,” he said.

Then he shoved Aria forward. She stumbled, but Tala was there in an instant to catch her. Aria buried her face in Tala's chest, sobbing.

Kael rolled his neck, stepping toward me. His men shifted uneasily, exchanging wary glances, but none dared to intervene. Not when an Alpha had just been challenged.

He tilted his head, eyes cold and calculating. "When I win," he said, "I'll take Tala. I'll take your child. And I'll take your pack."

I held his stare. "I'd like to see you try."

Without hesitation, I shifted and launched myself at him.

Kael shifted and met my attack head-on. His claws tore through my fur, slicing deep into my flesh, and with a vicious twist, he pulled back, dragging skin and muscle with him. Blood gushed out of the wound, and I caught the flicker of satisfaction in his eyes. Behind me, I heard Tala's sharp gasp.

Pain seared through me, but I refused to falter. I staggered backward, gritting my teeth against the agony, my claws digging into the dirt to keep myself steady. I barely recognized the man before me, the man I'd once called an ally. There was no trace of reason or restraint left in him, only hatred and a savage, all-consuming need to destroy me.

But if it was a fight he wanted, I would give him one. He had gone after my daughter. He had threatened Tala.

And now, he would pay.

Kael's wolf lunged at me again, his massive paw slamming into my side and knocking me to the ground. He pounced, but I rolled away just in time, dodging his

attack. His sharp eyes locked onto me, and in an instant, he charged again, fangs bared, snapping dangerously close to my throat.

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I twisted, barely avoiding his bite, but his claws found their mark. They tore through my wounded side, ripping the flesh open even further. A deep, guttural growl of pain escaped me as fresh blood spilled onto the ground.

“Damian!” Tala cried out.

But she couldn’t do anything. None of them could. Not Kael’s men. Not mine. It was the law. No one interfered when an Alpha was challenged.

Through the haze of pain, I caught sight of her. Tears streamed down her face as she clutched Aria tightly, shielding our daughter’s eyes from the fight.

I had barely a second to recover before Kael lunged at me again. This time, I didn’t dodge. I countered his attack, slamming into him with full force. The impact sent him stumbling, and the moment he hit the ground, I was on him.

He snarled, his claws lashing out, aiming straight for the open wound he had already inflicted on me. But I was ready. I deflected his strike, knocking his paw aside before driving my own into his face. He growled, thrashing beneath me, but I didn’t let up. I sank my jaws around his throat and tore.

A whimper escaped him as his body jerked violently beneath me, his claws still scraping at my sides. I clamped down harder, cutting off his air, his fight, his life.

He started to go limp, and I eased up slightly, but he took advantage of that, shoving me off as he scrambled backward, trying to catch his breath. I didn’t give him the chance. As he retreated, I lunged, driving him back to the ground and clamping my

jaws around his throat. He thrashed wildly, clawing at my sides, desperate to break free. Pain flared through me, but I didn't let go. I held on, forcing him down, refusing to give him even a sliver of control. His struggles grew weaker, his movements sluggish, until finally, he went still.

Pulling away from Kael's bloodied and battered form, I watched him. He barely moved, his breaths slow and shallow. The duel had been to the death, but he was already too weak to fight. Sparing him felt like the right choice. I shifted back to my human form and rose to my feet, my body marked with deep claw wounds and scratches. Every movement sent a sharp jolt of pain through me.

Staggering, I turned to Tala and Aria, the reason I had fought, the reason I had endured. Tala stood, tears streaming down her face as she rushed toward me. But before she could reach me, her eyes widened in terror.

"Damian, behind you!" she screamed.

I spun just in time to see Kael, a blur of black fur and bared fangs, lunging at me, unwilling to accept defeat.

I dodged at the last second, his teeth snapping shut inches from my throat. I shifted in an instant, my wolf taking control. And the moment Kael's body hit the ground, I struck.

This time, I didn't hesitate. I drove my claws into his throat and tore through flesh. A single, broken whimper escaped him before silence fell, and he went still. Dead.

I rolled off him, collapsing onto the ground as I gasped for breath. Blood seeped from my wounds, and I knew they wouldn't heal quickly because they had been inflicted by an Alpha.

Darkness crept at the edges of my vision, my eyelids growing heavy. I felt Tala beside me, wrapping her arms around my battered body.

“I thought I was going to lose you, Damian,” she choked out between tears.

With the little strength I had left, I lifted a hand to her cheek, brushing away the tears as I forced a faint smile.

Before the darkness consumed me, I saw Kael’s troops drop to one knee, their heads bowed in silent recognition, acknowledging me as their new Alpha.

## Chapter 29

### Damian

The next week was hectic. After winning the duel with Kael, I became Silver Fang’s Alpha. But I couldn’t lead two packs at once, so I made the decision to merge Silver Fang and Stonehart. The merger would give us territorial expansion, eliminate segregation, and bring other advantages that would strengthen us as a whole.

The ceremony was a mix of both Silver Fang and Stonehart traditions. I wanted the people to see that my leadership didn’t mean erasing their customs. Nothing had to change except the chain of command. They could continue their lives as they always had. Of course, adjustments were necessary to accommodate new members, especially the rogues. With Silver Fang’s superior weaponry, I made the pack the base for our protectors, which now included Ryker’s massive army after he agreed to the peace deal. His acceptance came with conditions like guaranteeing safety, shelter, and resources for his people because rogues weren’t just warriors. They had families. Women, children. And those were conditions I was more than willing to meet.

I knew not everyone would welcome the change right away. But if I could win over



the Omegas, who had every reason to despise me, then I could win over Silver Fang's people, too. I had to prove that I was a leader capable of handling two powerful packs with long histories. And that was exactly what I intended to do.

At the start of the ceremony, I followed Silver Fang's council's suggestion and took the Alpha's oath on the Stone of Fang, the sacred relic of their first Alpha. It was tradition, a symbol of loyalty and protection, and a way to show the people that I wasn't here as a conqueror but as their leader.

Once the oath was done, I stepped forward, facing the gathered crowd. "It's an honor to learn Silver Fang's traditions," I began. "But while our packs have different terrains, different customs, and different histories, this merge is about forging something new, one pack, one people, under my leadership as Alpha.

"It's important that we create history together and that we honor our past but also embrace a future where we are truly one. And that begins with a name for our pack."

I paused, watching the crowd. Most seemed receptive, nodding along, though some remained wary. That was expected.

"Harmoniq Pack," I announced. "A name that represents unity despite past conflicts. A name that signifies strength not through dominance but through mutual respect. This is my vision: for us to stand together and be stronger than one."

Murmurs spread through the crowd, followed by approving nods. It was more acceptance than I had anticipated, but I wasn't done yet.

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“I know everyone is eager to jump into the fun part of this merger, the feast and celebration, but I have one more announcement.”

I gestured to Tala, who stood at the edge of the gathering with Aria, to bring her forward. Aria grasped my hand, beaming up at me, completely unbothered by all the eyes now fixed on her.

“To facilitate this unity I speak of, the Moon Goddess has blessed us with the awakening of the spirit of the Lunaris Custodes.”

A stunned silence swept through the crowd before gasps followed, heavy with disbelief, as they tried to process the impossible—that the Lunaris Custodes, thought to have been wiped out, still existed.

“The Lunaris Custodes were created by the Moon Goddess herself to preserve balance among us. Their purpose was to ensure that no rank was abused, that power never became tyranny, and that strength was always tempered with wisdom.”

I let my gaze sweep over the crowd, meeting eyes that ranged from wary to astonished to disbelief. I turned to Aria, whose bright eyes stared into the crowd. She looked unshaken, with no fear, as though she had always known this moment would come one day. Thankfully, she’d stopped having those nightmares that kept her up. “Through my daughter, the blood of the Lunaris Custodes lives again. She is a child now, but in time, she will be what the Moon Goddess intends, a beacon of balance, a force to guide us, to ensure that everyone, both Betas and Omegas have a place amongst the pack.”

A ripple of understanding passed through the crowd. Then, a howl, low and deep, filled with reverence, came from an elder in the front. Others followed, first hesitantly, then in growing numbers, until the air vibrated with the voices of my pack, our pack, howling in acknowledgment of a new era.

I met Tala's eyes across the sea of people. There was pride in them. When she first told me about the Lunar Custodes spirit awakening in Aria, she had been afraid, afraid that it would make our daughter a target, just as those before her had been, and that even with Serena exiled, she might one day return for revenge. But I had assured her that Aria was safe. She didn't just have us. She had her uncle. She had Ryker and his army of rogues, who were no longer outcasts but protectors, sworn to defend the pack and its people. And she had more than that, she had the strength of Stonehart and Silver Fang behind her.

The celebration carried on with a feast, bringing everyone together to mark this new milestone. It was a beautiful sight, one that filled my heart with warmth and joy. A part of me wished my father were here to see that power could be wielded differently, that authority didn't have to be built on fear, and that a world of peace and equality could thrive. But then again, if he had been here, none of this would have ever been possible.

As the pack's celebration faded into the night, Tala and I slipped into the pack house to enjoy a quiet moment away from the noise.

"It's incredible what you've done, Damian," she murmured against my chest as we lay in bed together, her fingers tracing the rough scruff along my jaw. "You've built a history no one could have ever dreamed of. You're a good man, Damian. A good Alpha. A good father."

"I want to be a good husband, too," I said.

I felt her body tense as she lifted her head to look at me. I held her gaze and continued. “Fate gave us a second chance to regain what we lost, and I do not intend to waste another moment. None of this would have been possible without you. We made this history together, Tala. And I want to keep making more, with you as my Luna.”

Her expression was unreadable, and for a moment, an unwelcome feeling settled in my chest. Was it too soon? Maybe she wasn’t ready.

But then, she smiled.

“Oh, Damian,” she whispered, cupping my cheek. “I would love nothing more than to be your wife.”

Relief crashed into me. I pulled her in, my arm curling around her waist as I crushed my lips to hers.

She responded by wrapping her arms around my neck, pushing me into the bed as she settled on top of me. Tala broke the kiss, her gaze locking onto mine. I saw the raw emotion, contentment, and the unmistakable flicker of desire in her eyes.

“You are so beautiful, Tala. Did you know that?” I murmured, pushing myself up just enough to cup her face. “And in that dress... you’re absolutely breathtaking.” I rested my forehead against hers, breathing her in. “But I want to take it off right now.”

She giggled as I rolled us over, pulling her beneath me. “Damian,” she laughed, breathless. “We should probably get Aria to bed. It’s way past her bedtime.”

“She’s allowed to stay up late tonight,” I said, pressing a kiss to her temple. “I bet she’s having plenty of fun downstairs.”

Tala laughed again. “Are you saying that just so we don’t have to leave?”

I pulled back, grinning. “Of course not.”

My fingers found the zipper at the side of her dress. As much as I loved that yellow dress on her, the way it hugged every curve, teasing me all day, right now, it was just in my way.

I helped her out of it, letting the fabric slide down her body before I climbed out of bed to strip off my own clothes. Tala chuckled, watching me struggle with my pants, and I shot her a playful glare.

Once I was free of them, I settled on top of her, capturing her lips again. Her hand trailed down between us, wrapping around my cock, and my breath hitched at the first slow stroke. She was teasing me, drawing it out, making me impossibly hard.

When I’d had enough, I caught her wrist and pinned it to the bed, smirking against her lips before moving lower. I kissed my way down her body, from her mouth to her breasts, down her stomach, lingering at her thighs before settling between her legs.

I paused, watching her tremble in anticipation. I hadn’t even touched her yet, and she was already shaking.

The second my tongue met her clit, she gasped, her back arching. I buried my face between her thighs, worshipping her with every flick and stroke of my tongue, savoring the way she writhed beneath me.

Her fingers threaded in my hair, pulling me closer as her moans filled the room. She was close. I could feel it in the way she tensed, barely holding back the scream on the tip of her tongue.

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But then, she tugged me away, her eyes dark with need.

“Please, Damian,” she whimpered.

My lips curled in a smirk as I moved up to reclaim her lips, letting her taste herself on my tongue. I settled between her legs, my cock hard and throbbing as I pushed myself inside her.

“Fuck, Tala,” I growled as I slid into her warmth. She moaned, her fingers digging into my skin as I filled her completely, stretching her.

I set a relentless pace, thrusting into her deep, hard, and fast. She bit down at her lower lip to stifle her moan, but I wasn’t having it. A moment ago, she had been screaming my name, and I wanted to hear it again. I didn’t care who heard us.

My gaze never left her face as I took her, savoring every flicker of pleasure that crossed her features, the way she gasped each time I hit her sensitive spot, the way her eyes rolled to the back and the way she moaned my name. It was the most intoxicating sight.

When her walls clenched tight around me, and her body shuddered, I knew she was close. I drove into her harder and faster until she shattered around me with a cry. The intensity of it pulled me under, my release slamming into me as I groaned her name.

Breathless, I crushed my lips against hers, swallowing her whimpers. “I love you, Tala,” I murmured against her mouth. “Too damn much.”

## Chapter 30

Tala

I'd only ever imagined my wedding day once. Just once. And somehow, in that same fleeting thought, I'd imagined finding my fated mate, too. But that was the night before he rejected me. Since then, the idea had turned into something bitter, something I could barely stomach.

And yet, when Damian asked me to marry him that night, I never stopped thinking, every single day, about what I wanted it to be like.

Perfect. Surrounded by the people I loved.

Now, with the merging of Silver Fang and Stonehart, the rogues finding a place among us, and the lines between Omegas and Betas beginning to fade, I could only imagine how many would be there.

I didn't mind, though. Seeing so many people come together to celebrate Damian and me would only make it more special. Because three months ago, this wouldn't have just been impossible, it would never have even crossed my mind.

But here we were.

Gina pinned yet another hair clip into my pearl-adorned hair, tucking a row of curls behind the elegant bun she was crafting. She had been at it for a while, curling every strand with care, adorning it with the finest pearls she could find.

"Too tight?" she asked, ducking her head to meet my eyes.

I tried to shake my head, but she held it in place, a scowl on her face, warning me not

to ruin her work.

“It’s perfect,” I said, offering both words and a smile.

The door creaked open, and Maeve stepped inside, bringing with her the unmistakable sound of bickering, Aria and Tobias, and now Aiden, all at it again. She shut the door firmly and let out a sigh.

“Those children together are insufferable.”

“Tell me about it.” I laughed.

For the past two weeks, since Maeve moved to the former Stonehart territory to help with preparations, the pack house had been a constant whirlwind of squabbling and chaos. With Gina often joining in on the planning, and coming along with Aiden, he had slipped right into the mix, making the house feel even more like a battlefield.

“You’ve done an incredible job with her hair, Gina,” Maeve said, stepping closer.

“Thank you.” Gina beamed. “How are things outside?”

“The pack headquarters is filling up fast. This might go down as one of the biggest gatherings in history.”

I smiled proudly. This was all Damian. He had forged his own path, creating a new future, one that made history and gave Aria and other children a safe, free world to grow up in.

When Gina finished my hair, I slipped into my dress, an ivory silk gown with delicate embroidery along the bodice that hugged my body before cascading to the floor. They left to find their seats while I remained behind, waiting for my cue. My fingers traced



the embroidered patterns on my gown as I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I never imagined I'd be here, in the most beautiful dress, about to take my wedding vows with my fated mate, the only man I had ever loved. Our story had been filled with twists and heartbreak, as if fate itself was testing us, pushing us to the edge. But in the end, it brought us back to each other.

The door creaked open, and I lifted my gaze from the mirror to see Aria step inside. Her brown curls framed her face, and her eyes sparkled with excitement as she took me in.

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“You look so beautiful, Mummy,” she said, her voice filled with awe.

I knelt in front of her, tucking a stray curl behind her ear. “Do I?” I asked, smiling softly.

She nodded eagerly. “Like the Moon Goddess herself.”

I laughed, shaking my head at her words. There was a time when I had been nothing, a discarded mate, a lowly Omega with no place in the world. But now, I stood as a woman who had carved her own path, a mother who had kept her promise to raise her child with love, and a mate who had found love again.

I reached for her small hands, holding them in mine. “And you, my sweet girl, are the most beautiful of them all.”

She giggled, her cheeks flushing with happiness.

A knock on the door interrupted us, and when it swung open, Ryker stepped inside. He was dressed in a dark tunic embroidered with silver thread, the patterns resembling the markings of our new pack. Harmoniq. A leather belt secured it at his waist, and a thick cloak rested over his shoulders, fastened with a metal clasp. He looked every bit the leader he had become, rising to the authority Damian had placed on him as the leader in the former Silver Fang territory.

“You look...” he faltered as he took me in, a smile etched on his face.. “Beautiful, Tala,” he finally said. “I can only imagine our mother’s reaction if she could see you right now.”

A bittersweet smile formed on my lips. "At least I have you." I met his gaze, warmth filling my chest.

A part of me still couldn't believe he was here and that, after all these years, we had found each other again. His presence was a reminder of everything I had lost, everything I had gained, and how far I had come.

He let out a slow exhale before stepping forward, offering me his arm. "It's time."

I took one last glance at my reflection before slipping my arm through his, holding Aria's hand in my other, as I stepped out of the room, ready to get married to my fated mate.

When I stepped onto the pack quarters, the crowd rose to their feet. Aria led the way, scattering petals with each step, while I followed behind, my arm in Ryker's.

I blinked against the sting of tears, my gaze locking on Damian. He was staring at me, starstruck, his smile soft and awed, as if he couldn't believe I was real. He wore a black ceremonial tunic embroidered with silver along the edges, the fabric hugging his frame. My nerves twisted in my stomach, not just from the weight of so many eyes on me but from the excitement bubbling inside of me.

Damian crouched briefly to kiss Aria on the cheek when she reached the center aisle, then rose to clasp Ryker's hand in a firm handshake before Ryker stepped away to take his seat. I took my place beside Damian, the elder standing before us.

He began reading the marital rites, but I wasn't really listening. My gaze was locked onto Damian's as if we were caught in a moment just for us, and as if the hundred or so eyes watching didn't exist.

After what felt like a long speech, the elder finally lifted his gaze from the book in his

hands. It was time for the vows.

“I’d like to go first,” I said.

The elder nodded, giving me the go-ahead.

I took Damian’s hands in mine and braced myself to speak.

“Damian,” I started and then paused, not because I didn’t know what to say, but because I needed a moment. A moment to soak in the goodness of this day, to take in the man standing before me, the man who, in just minutes, would be my husband.

“If someone had told me we’d be here like this, I wouldn’t have believed them. Actually, I would have laughed. Or maybe cried. Because for so long, I thought our story had ended. And I wanted it to stay that way.”

Silence settled over the crowd as everyone listened.

“But life has a way of bringing us back to what is meant for us. And though the road here wasn’t easy, though it was paved with heartbreak and loss, it also led to something greater, to understanding, to forgiveness, and to a love I never thought I’d be brave enough to hold again.

“You were my greatest wound, but you became my greatest healing. Today, I promise you this: I will stand with you, even on the hardest days. I’ll rule beside you as your Luna, leading our people toward the future you dream of, toward one pack, unified against all odds. I will always fight for us, for our family, for the life we’re building. Because love isn’t just words, it’s choices. And I choose you, Damian. In this life and in every life to come.”

Damian’s fingers tightened around mine, his eyes dark with emotion. He just stared at

me. His usual unshakable stance was still there, commanding and strong, but in his eyes, I saw something else. Something raw. Something fragile.

His throat bobbed as he swallowed, his breath just a little unsteady. And then I saw it. The faint shine of unshed tears. Not from pain. Not from regret. From love.

And when it was his turn to speak, he hesitated. For the first time since I'd known him, Damian Stone was at a loss for words.

I let out a laugh, dabbing at the tear that had slipped down my cheek. "Don't tell me you're going to stay mute during your vows again?" I teased, and the crowd burst out in laughter.

Damian chuckled, but when he spoke, his voice was thick with emotion. "I can't..." he exhaled sharply, shaking his head. "Tala, I love you. More than you can imagine. My life was hollow before you walked back into it. And since then, I've felt alive."

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He brought my hands to his face, nuzzling my palms. “I promise you, Tala, I will never hurt you again. I vow to protect you, to be loyal, to be present, not just physically but emotionally, and always be there for you and our children. And to love you every single day like it’s my last.”

His thumb brushed away a tear I hadn’t even realized was falling.

“The Moon Goddess blessed me the day she made you my mate,” he murmured. “And I’ll spend the rest of my life proving that I deserve the second chance you’ve given me.”

“It’s time for the most sacred part of this ceremony,” the elder’s voice drew me out of my haze. “Alpha Damian, it’s time for you to mark her as your mate.”

Damian didn’t hesitate. He wrapped one hand around my waist and pulled me into him before sinking his teeth into the skin on my neck. A sting shot through me. But almost as quickly, it melted into something else. Euphoria. Warmth. A connection so deep it felt like fire and electricity surging from him into me, sealing us together. Forever. It felt like home. Like belonging in the truest, most undeniable way.

Damian’s tongue brushed over the mark, soothing it, as he pulled away.

“It is done. The bond is sealed,” the elder announced with a smile. “Before the Moon and the pack, you are now bound as mates.”

The crowd erupted, claps, howls, and cheers filling the air.

Damian cupped my face and pressed his lips to mine in a kiss that was nothing short of breathtaking. He pulled back just enough that our foreheads touched and murmured. “I love you, Tala.”

I smiled. “I love you more, Damian.”

In that instant, there was nothing else. No fears, no uncertainty. Just us. And I wasn’t afraid to love him anymore. Because despite everything, I was bound to my mate. To the only man I had ever loved. And I couldn’t wait to build forever with him.