

Accidental Surrogate

Chapter 247 – Kieran Shares Something Unexpected

Ella

Dinner is a tense affair.

I wish I could say it's clear whether or not our efforts with this summit are paying off, but all of these Alphas play their cards so close to their chests – well, all except Kieran. The Storm Forest Alpha spends the evening glaring at everyone around him, even his own men. I'm beginning to think that there isn't any way for us to win him over and that we should focus our attention elsewhere – on the Alpha's we can form alliances with. Still, I understand that excluding him might make his animosity towards our cause even greater.

I ponder my conversation with Sinclair, wondering if Kieran is actively betraying us. Has he told Damon that my mate still lives? Is he planning on helping him attempt another assassination? I don't believe he cares about people beyond his pack or perhaps beyond Vanara, but I didn't believe he was stupid. It's one thing to refuse to join forces with us, and another entirely to make a suicide pact with a madman – for that's surely what joining Damon would mean.

Of course, I've been wrong before. Sinclair believes he's hiding something, and I have to admit the Alpha's behavior is suspect. So my only mission tonight is to persuade Kieran to come clean, and I know exactly how I'm going to do it.

I start with simple observation, knowing just how uncomfortable persistent and unwanted attention can be to one with a guilty conscience. I don't hide the fact that I'm watching him. Every time Kieran looks up and finds my eyes on him, I stare with the same expression I've always used for misbehaving children. It's not threatening or cold, rather deliberate and dismayed. It says: I know what you've done and I'm already disappointed, don't make things worse by lying to me.

I begin sprinkling bait into my conversations as well, which isn't difficult when all the delegates want to debrief about their excursion today. "It was absolutely sickening." The Black Alder is saying next to me. "I've never seen so many people in so much pain." He's looking at me with wide eyed sincerity, eager to hear my perspective. They all are – being a child of the Goddess has its benefits.

"And to think the person inflicting all that horror is the one who is meant to protect them." I sigh, shaking my head sadly. "It's the worst kind of betrayal. What kind of Alpha could possibly stomach harming so many shifters, let alone those in his care?"

"But it wasn't only shifters!" The Silver Dawn Alpha pipes up. "The human settlements were even worse."

I pretend like this is news to me, though my pain and outrage over the details they share are completely genuine. "You see, this is why we have to stop thinking about our peoples as separate. Damon doesn't care who he hurts, and if some of us suffer then we all do. If we only help the shifters and leave the humans behind, then those settlements you saw today will only grow. The people will see that we only care for our own kind – they will see us prosper while they languish, and they will hate us for it." I scan the faces around me, taking my attention off of Kieran only long enough to argue my case.

"When I first learned about shifters, Dominic explained to me that he doesn't lead because he wants to. He does it because his power is a grave responsibility – he has the strength to spare, so he's obligated to lend it to those in need. This is the same principle. Vanara has the power and strength that all those beings fleeing the war, and everyone who remains trapped under Damon's thumb, lack." Sinclair has one arm slung over the back of my chair, and his fingers trace circles on my upper arm, encouraging me to continue.

"It is an incredible privilege to be able to choose whether or not to enter this conflict. And it would be easy to say it's not your problem, but if your life is easy and prosperous while the rest of the world wages war..." I trail off, sounding forlorn. "Well I just can't find any honor in that." I return my full focus to my true target, pleased to see the Storm Forest Alpha listening intently. "And what good is an Alpha without honor? Without loyalty to a higher cause than his own self-interest?"

Kieran, who has been turning increasingly red while I make my speech, surges up from the table. "Fine damn you!" He bursts, throwing down his napkin. His movement is so abrupt that his chair falls back and clatters against the marble floor, adding violent emphasis to his outburst.. A hush falls over the room, and I'm infinitely pleased this is a private dinner rather than a public feast. Sinclair glowers at the other wolf, a deep growl rumbling in his chest.

I rest a steady hand on his leg, keeping my posture relaxed. "It's okay." I soothe, trying to gentle his worth. "I'd like to hear anything Alpha Kieran has to say... or confess."

The man in question narrows his eyes at me, outrage and indignance pouring off of him in waves. "Ohh you're too clever for your own good, you know that?" He grumbles – it does not sound like a compliment.

"I've been told." I tell him, smiling serenely.

Kieran shakes his head, clenching his fists. "I wasn't going to share this," He begins furiously. "But now I see I have no alternative." He's silent for almost half a minute, and the quiet drags on interminably.

Eventually Kieran seems to find the right words, "Yesterday I returned to my rooms to find an anonymous electronic message waiting, including a video link and a note advising me to follow it if I cared about the future of Vanara. When I did so, I discovered that Damon was waiting on the other end."

The other Alphas begin muttering amongst each other, and Kieran huffs in frustration. "I didn't announce this for precisely this reason. You're all already preparing to condemn me!"

I raise my hand, urging the other wolves to quiet. "No one is condemning you. Please tell us what happened."

Kieran scowls, and I'm sure he's cursing my name in his head. "He offered me an alternative alliance." He explains fiercely, not taking his eyes from me. "He said that he needed someone to help ensure Sinclair's bloodline ended once and for all, and that he could use ground support to thwart the humans and the resistance fighters on the royal continent. He was confident that once these challenges were overcome, We would be primed to turn our attention to Sevka and Vanara."

Now the hush in the dining rooms is completely voluntary, as many of the delegates gape in surprise. "Dominic was right. Damon isn't going to be satisfied with controlling one land, his appetite for power is infinite. He spoke of a worldwide empire, and he tried to bribe me by offering your crown, Gabriel." Kieran confesses, looking suddenly ill. "He said he would reward my loyalty to his cause by putting me in charge of Vanara – that this was the only way I would ever sit upon the throne."

We're all waiting with baited breath, beyond curious to hear how Kieran responded to this offer. "I questioned his strategy. You see, I thought he might tell me some of his plans to prove he could fulfill the promises he was making. I wanted to know what his vision of the future was, and how he was going to achieve it. In return he lashed out. He called me a coward and a... little bitch. He said I was as bad as a she-wolf, nagging and questioning his ability when he'd just offered me the world on a platter."

Kieran is growing visibly more irate with every word, his cheeks positively crimson now. "He called me every insulting name he could think of and he ended the meeting when I refused to commit to an alliance."

The Alpha averts his gaze to the ground. "Then today... this afternoon my chief of staff called to inform me that I'd received an express package by special courier. Apparently it was full of dresses, diapers and self help books on how to be a real man." It's a good thing that Kieran can't seem to look us in the eye, because I slap my hand over my mouth to smother the shocked laugh attempting to bubble up inside of me. I glance at Roger, whose lips are visibly twitching as he fights his own humor.

"I know it was from Damon." Kieran announces angrily, and I'm certain only the grace of the Goddess keeps my face straight. "He's trying to bully me into betraying you all. But I will never join such a wolf." He turns his gaze on Sinclair now, looking contrite. "I did not reveal to him that you are still alive, Dominic. I did not share any of the progress we've made here." He sucks in a deep breath. "I should have told you about the offer as soon as I received it. But after seeing those camps today, after learning just how dishonorable our enemy is... I've made my decision. My allegiance is yours."