

Chapter 4

The next morning, I can still feel his lips against my forehead, like traces of a burn. I stay in bed for a while, thinking it over and over. The whole evening felt so unreal. Damian exuded this aura of untouchability, yet he was so close to me. I could also feel his wolf, so noble yet dangerous. As mysterious as his human self... I can't fully understand him, but I sure want to.

I feel something moving on my bed, and notice Bobo's head looking at me at the end of the mattress, his tongue sticking out.

“Good Morning, Bobo.”

It's a bit late for training, so I take a quick shower, and I can't help but remember Damian's scent. Is it so enticing because he is my mate? Or do other female werewolves feel it, too? My wolf growls loudly. Yeah, I don't like the idea either. I choose a pair of dark jeans and an oversized grey t-shirt and pull my hair up in a messy ponytail while exiting my bathroom. Bobo is right there waiting for me.

Tonia, however, is absent from the apartment that day. She just left me a somewhat mysterious note, saying: “Pack Business. Will be back in the afternoon.” I read it and just cook breakfast for Bobo and myself. I wonder what’s going on. A Rogue attack? Or from another Clan? I heard the Purple Clan is quite aggressive...

I can’t help but leave my thoughts to drift to my own Clan during breakfast. Am I still part of the Jade Moon? I wish I knew what happened. It’s been weeks now. December is coming, what could Alec be doing now? Did he manage to pay his debts off?

“Bobo, can we go out? Please.”

The wolf ignores me, his massive head still on his plate. I get up and go back to my bedroom to grab a white hoodie that seems warm enough, get a pair of sneakers, and head for the entrance.

But once I push the handle, it won’t open. What? I’ve seen Tonia go in and out about a dozen times! Did she close it after leaving? Bobo probably knew I wouldn’t be able to go, so he didn’t bother to stop me. Great!

Annoyed, I go back to eating my breakfast, trying to think. Is there a spare key somewhere? If we are locked inside, they must have a plan in case an emergency arises? I try to convince Bobo a bit longer, but he ignores me as usual, even when I threaten to stop cooking. How can he be even more stubborn than Tonia!

I try to keep myself busy, but all I want is to exit the apartment and at least take a walk in the city. I know how crazy it is after what he's done to me, but I can't help but worry about Alec. He is my brother, after all. And there is the matter about Marcus...

I still can't remember clearly what happened that night, and it worries me more than anything. I see bloodstains everywhere each time I try, and I'm scared I've done something terrible. They got rid of my dress when they found me, but every time I picture it, she's not white anymore...

Bobo doesn't care about what I do all day. I guess he's confident I won't be able to find the spare key -if there is one- anyway. As soon as I start innocently reading one of my study books, Bobo resumes his favorite activity: sleeping. It doesn't take five minutes until he starts snoring.

Usually, when he's napping, Tonia takes over in watching me, and she won't leave the room I'm in. This time, however, Tonia's away, and I may have two to three hours of no-surveillance time. After a few minutes, I get up to grab a cup of water in the kitchen, checking if Bobo will wake up and follow me. But he doesn't. I can hear him snoring peacefully, and I don't know if I should be glad he won't wake up or a bit annoyed that he is that confident in me not being able to leave.

Taking my chance, I tiptoe to the entrance and look at the keyhole once again. Can I try and force it with a hairpin, like in movies? I don't feel too confident about the idea... And all the clicketing might wake up my

bodyguard. I try to force the handle a couple of times as quietly as possible, but of course, it won't just open. So frustrating! I was about to turn around and give up when I hear steps from the other side. Is Tonia coming back earlier than planned? Someone abruptly opens the door, and to my surprise, it turns out to be a teenager with a hoodie and a backpack.

"Liam?" I ask, surprised to see the younger brother here.

He puts an index on his lips, mimicking to shut up with a pissed look. It seems like he is a bit... anxious? Is he avoiding someone? He looks at me from head to toe, then whispers softly.

"You alone?"

"No, Bobo is sleeping in the salon, but..."

He makes a grimace. Did he think I'd be alone? He is about to close the door behind him, but I put my feet in between. He frowns.

"What are you doing?" He whispers.

"I was about to go out!"

"What? Alone? Why? My brother knows?"

Why so many questions? I'm pretty sure the "Brother" he's thinking about is Damian, and I can't help but hesitate a second, biting my lip. Will he report me? He understands my reaction and shakes his head.

"You can't! He is going to get really mad!"

This time it's my turn to make a "stay quiet" gesture. We can still hear Bobo snoring, but I'm pretty sure he will wake up if he hears something suspicious, and I'm running out of time.

"What about you?" I ask.

He shrugs and shows his backpack.

"Skipping school. Nath's going to beat the shit out of me if he grabs me."

"Okay. I won't tell if you don't tell." I suggest.

Great, now I am bargaining with a school-skipping teenager.

"No! Damian will kill me!"

It looks like he is much more worried about his older brother's reaction than Nathaniel's. I thought I was lucky that he chose today to try and sneak here, but now turns out he is focused on making me stay! As if dodging Bobo wasn't complicated enough!

"Please!" I insist. "I only need a couple of hours, Tonia is away, and Bobo is sleeping like a baby!"

His eyes light up suddenly, and he makes a sneaky grin.

"Right! The meeting! There was a meeting with the Gold Moon Clan, earlier this morning, so they are all at the Office! I forgot about that stupid thing."

A meeting with the Gold Moon? Why would they meet? Vincent mentioned once that the Blood Moon Clan was looking for more allies, but... Is that happening at their office? The Black Corporation has its headquarters in a building, from what I heard... is that where they are now? My wolf instantly asks if we can go meet our mate, but before I can even think about it, I feel my wrist grabbed, and Liam pulls me out of the apartment.

I'm a bit shocked, but before I can say anything, he carefully closes the door behind us.

"How did you get in, by the way?" I ask.

“It’s an eight digits code: 20071203. I just found it by chance after trying a few times. I’ve seen my brother use that one before.”

How funny, it’s the date of my seventh birthday. I wonder if something happened to Damian that day. I follow Liam to the elevator, as I don’t remember coming to the building. While the elevator gets down, I realize what I just did. I escaped the room! I feel bad for Bobo, but hopefully, I will be back before he even wakes up.

Next to me, Liam seems a lot less nervous now that he knows his brothers are busy. He looks more like Damian than Nathaniel. The youngest of the three has messy dark brown hair, not as black as his brother, but his eyes are almost the same as Damian, a dark grey. He is a bit smaller and thinner, though. We are probably the same age if he is in high school now.

“What?” He asks suddenly, noticing that I was staring.

“Sorry, but it’s kind of the first time we see each other properly, so...”

He rolls his eyes.

“Oh, I got plenty of time to look at you when you were in the hospital. But you look better now, not like a skeleton.”

He is as straight-forward as I remember... I wonder why his brothers made him look after me, too, when I was hospitalized since he doesn't look very responsible. Maybe he was just being watched at the same time.

We finally get downstairs, and I can't help but take a deep breath when we exit the building. Free at last! It may only be a couple of hours before I go back to my golden cage, though.

"Okay, what now, princess? Where do you want to go?"

"You're going to follow me?" I ask, surprised.

"Hell yeah. I don't want my ass kicked when we get back just because you stupidly tripped and hurt yourself or something. I'm sticking with you, so tell me where it is we are going."

"We're going east, then."

I start walking, but he just looks at me as if I was doing something stupid.

"What?" I ask, dumbfounded.

"What, are you waiting for me to shapeshift? Aren't we supposed to get there fast?"

I shake my head. “I can’t... shapeshift. I’ve never done it before.”

He stares at me for a few seconds, shocked. “Wow, you really are as useless as you look. Okay, never mind then, let’s walk like useless humans. But you better walk fast!”

We did walk for quite a while. I hadn’t realized how far we were from the Jade Moon turf. At some point, we even took the subway when Liam realized where we were headed, and he paid the tickets for both of us. Surprisingly enough, he doesn’t ask me anything. He even took his headphones out to listen to some music on the way and asked me if I liked any music in particular. I didn’t, but he kept talking to me about his favorite groups, telling me which songs I should listen to and about the concerts he wanted to go to later that year.

“Liam? Can you tell me about your brothers?”

He looks a bit surprised by my question but put his headphones back into his backpack. We are walking through the last streets of the city now, a few minutes away from our destination. I probably should have asked earlier.

“What do you want to know?”

“I don’t know, things like... What do they do for a living? And where do they live?”

“Just that? Well, I’m not sure about what Damian does... He is a CEO, and busy with Alpha stuff most of the time. But he owns five or six buildings and some establishments in the city. Like the one you live in.”

What? I thought he earned the apartment, not the whole building!

“Nathaniel is mainly at his restaurants and clubs. He likes it, so Damian lets him runs all the resorts we have when he’s not busy with the Clan.”

I shouldn’t be so surprised... The Blood Moon Clan is the wealthiest and largest of Silver City. Even I know a few places they own and about how big their turf is. No wonder they have to split the work.

“My brothers run the Blood Moon Clan since a few years ago... Since they got rid of our Father.”

I’m stunned by how casually Liam can say such things. Is this really a thing to say out loud? And talking about Nathaniel, too, I can’t imagine him killing someone as simple as that; it sounds so... coldhearted.

But then again, they are the Blood Moon Clan.

As we get closer to my Clan's turf -if I'm still part of it somehow-, my thoughts are no longer about the Black brother's bloody history, but about my own dark past. I'm genuinely scared of what might happen. Will they reject me? Am I considered dead? Or as a Rogue?

I decide to head for Robert's bar first, as it's one of the Jade Clan's only establishments in the city, and far enough from the main house. Moreover, if I can talk to anyone first, I would pick Elisabeth. She's the only one I ever considered to be a friend. Liam is walking next to me, and I can see him frowning, unfamiliar with that territory. The streets we are in now are a bit too poor to be of any interest to anyone, so it's hard to say whose turf it is.

I stop a few steps before entering the bar and try to hide my hair a bit as I put my hood on.

"The Jade Moon Clan? Seriously? You're from this Clan of weaklings?"
Scoffs Liam.

"Yes, now please, I don't want them to notice me for now, okay?"

He rolls his eyes as he lets me enter first. Honestly, I have to say, having Liam with me is really reassuring. He is one of the Black brothers, and I'm pretty sure he can warn one of his brothers through their mind-link if anything goes wrong. Which I hope won't happen.

At this early hour, the bar is entirely empty, as usual. And behind the counter, it's only Elisabeth, cleaning glasses while whistling. She probably partied again last night, as I recognize her familiar messy bun, tired eyes, and jean jumpsuit. She notices us entering right away.

"Hello, what can I... Oh, Moon Goddess, Nora? Is that really you?"

She looks so shocked; she stares at me blankly for a few seconds before running to me. She pats and examines me as if to see if I'm real. Liam stays silent, but he's looking at her like she's some annoying fly.

"Hi, Liz..."

"Don't act like this! You crazy girl! I thought we would never see you again after what happened!"

She's almost yelling at me, and I feel awkward. We haven't seen each other for weeks, and I have no idea what to tell her. For now, she just looks like she's still in shock from my returning and sighs while looking at me.

"Oh girl, you have to tell me what happened, okay? Sit down, you can tell me all about it."

She pushes us to one of the nearest tables and brings three bottles of soda from the bar. I don't feel too comfortable being here, but it's better than being at the main house. I'm still afraid one of the pack members might suddenly walk in but having Liam next to me is kind of reassuring. Liz barely looks at him, too busy focusing on me.

“Gosh, girl, you really have to tell me what happened. Things got crazy after you killed Marcus, you know.”

After I... what?

Beside me, Liam raises an eyebrow and gives me an interrogating look, but I couldn't care less. I didn't kill anyone! As far as I know... I shake my head. I have way too many things left unknown until now, I need to start filling in the blanks.

“Liz, please tell me what happened since I... I was gone.”

She sighs a bit too dramatically, and I can tell she's happy to gossip. Even when she mentioned Marcus' death, she didn't seem sorry. She starts talking while playing with some of the sparkles on her nails.

“Well, the Alpha noticed you and your brother were gone for a while, so he sent people looking for you guys. But Alec returned alone in the middle of the night, looking like hell. I was there because I had just come home from work. He had a giant bite mark on his face, and he acted so weirdly!

He said you had gone crazy and killed Marcus! And that you tried to kill him too!”

What? Alec was the one that tried to kill me! How crazy is that story! Even though I can’t exactly remember what happened with Marcus, Alec left me to die, Tonia and Bobo barely got there in time! Is Bobo the one that attacked my brother? To chase him away? I’m so shocked, I can’t speak for a moment, but Liz doesn’t notice. She starts checking her nails. Next to me, Liam is watching my reaction, but I just ignore him.

“And Vincent believed this?”

Elisabeth shakes her head.

“Not really. A lot of people didn’t. To start with, Alec was obviously attacked by a huge wolf, and we all know you can’t shift. You couldn’t possibly be that big, anyway. And Marcus’ body? Nowhere to be found. Dead or alive, he disappeared the same day as you. The guys said his apartment was a bloody mess, though. None of us really knew what to believe. You had disappeared, and your brother kept saying all this weird stuff! Some thought you might have gone crazy for real, but I didn’t, of course. I know my girl. Oh, and Vincent and Peter didn’t believe Alec either, so they told everyone to shut up until we were sure about what was going on.”

Marcus is missing? Is he dead? I know the “bloody mess” part is real, I can remember some of it now, but I’m unclear about what really happened... And it’s scarier than before, with what Elisabeth said. Did I really kill him...? I can’t remember anything but him trying to rape me, and then Alec pursuing me. But what if he is alive? Will he leave me alone? The idea alone is terrifying...

In front of me, Elisabeth’s mind has already jumped somewhere else.

“Hey, tell me what happened to you now! You look all better, girl! And I know the brand of your hoodie! Is it real?”

Elisabeth is in girl’s gossip mode, but I’m miles from it. How can she be smiling right now? It’s like she doesn’t care about all that happened. I know she wasn’t there, and she is not close to Marcus or Alec either, but... Am I the only one who thinks this whole story is crazy?

“What about Alec?” I ask, ignoring her questions. “Is he still there?”

She frowns and scratches her head, looking a bit hesitant.

“Uh... Not anymore. Things kind of got messy the week after your disappearance. Vincent was, like, super angry at him for not properly explaining what happened with Marcus and you, and a lot of people started accusing him of borrowing lots and lots of money. It seems like he even stole stuff from the main house to sell it! Can you believe that? Peter

unleashed on him one day, it was crazy. He beat him really bad, and eventually banished him.”

“He did what?”

My brother got banished from the Clan? And a month ago, to boot? I’m not surprised that Peter beat him—Alec was never strong, to begin with. But where in the world could he be now? No one wants to be a Rogue! All they can do is live like beggars, stealing from other wolves, and sleeping outside all the turfs. Every pack always outcasts Rogues and won’t let them on their territory. It would be hard for him to even be in Silver City now. Did he escape to the wild like others? They say some even go back to completely wildlife and forget they were humans once.

No, wait. Alec was spotted in the hospital days after that. So why was he looking for me? Did Alec know who had rescued me? Or was he pushed to the wall and tried to find me to help him? And there is still the Marcus matter...

“Nora, who’s the kid?”

I turn to Liam, but he is growling already. Guess the “kid” part didn’t please him... Liz immediately avoids his eyes, reacting to his Alpha aura. He may be young and not have a proper pack yet, but no one can deny Liam’s authority. He has the same dominating presence as his brothers,

and Liz is just a regular wolf. He finally stops, and Elisabeth decides to address to me instead of him.

“Why did you bring a stranger to our turf? Do you want Vince to be mad as soon as you come home?”

I raise my head, shocked. To go home? Am I still considered part of the pack? I thought they might have excluded me as soon as they did for my brother! But before I can answer, Liam surprises me by being the one to raise his voice for the first time since we entered the bar.

“To be mad at her? What do you mean? Does this stupid Alpha of yours knows what’s coming to him?” He says with a mean grin.

Now Elisabeth’s smile is completely gone, and she looks petrified. I can tell she’s trying hard not to gaze into Liam’s direction and focuses on me solely.

“Nora, what does he mean? What is coming?”

But I turn to Liam and give him a “hush!” look. “Stop it. You’re not saying anything, we agreed!”

“Whatever. My brother’s going to find them, anyway. Sooner or later, your weak former Clan will be destroyed,” he shrugs

I don't like the sadistic smile he has on now, and I can see Elisabeth has started shaking. And it's not my "former" Clan, I'm still part of the Jade Moon, it seems! But Liam doesn't care; he's having fun right now. He is intentionally scaring her and using his aura. I don't like how he is cruelly making fun of her.

"Liam, stop it!"

He stops but gives me an annoyed look, like a kid who just got his favorite toy confiscated. I don't care. I point my index at the door, ignoring that pissed teen attitude of his.

"If you're going to make things difficult, you can wait for me outside."

"Tsk... Weakling." He growls while exiting the bar.

Elisabeth seems to relax as soon as he's out.

"Nora, who is this guy? And how can you not be scared! I had to fight all I can to keep myself seated; my wolf was going nuts with this guy here."

Now that I think about it, it's true I should have been just as scared as she was. But I've never been really affected by an Alpha's aura. Vincent,

Nathaniel, Liam, none of them intimidated me. Only Damian could scare me, but only when he was furious. And now even his little brother could make a grown wolf shiver so much within seconds?

I, indeed, must have some immunity of some sort because of my mate. I don't know how to explain what happened any other way.

“Don't mind him, he's just a... friend.”

And Liam Black, my mate 's youngest brother, but that I won't tell her. I feel like I'm desperately trying to prevent two worlds from colliding. I run my fingers through my hair, trying to relax a little. This is way too much information for me to take all at once. I sigh and take a sip of my soda, but Elisabeth can barely contain herself.

“Now, will you tell me? I'm dying here, girl! You've been away for weeks!”

“Sorry, Liz. I... Someone attacked me, and I was taken to the hospital. I stayed there a full month, and then a friend took me in.”

She looks at me suspiciously, apparently disappointed by my lousy explanation. So far, I didn't say anything that wasn't true. I just made sure not to mention any names. Even if he's outside, I'm pretty sure Liam can still hear us, and I don't want him to hear anything bad that could reach

Damian's ears. Elisabeth ponders for a while, then points an index at me. I've seen her do that before. She is about to fire all her questions at once.

"Who attacked you?"

"I don't know," I lie.

"How did you escape?"

"My friends intervened just in time. They chased my attacker away and took me to a hospital."

"How long? In the hospital, how long did you stay there?" She asks.

"About a month. I was in a coma for a few days, and they asked me to rest after that."

"And now, where are you staying?"

"I told you... at a friend's place, in the city."

"A friend?"

I know she won't believe me, simply because I never had any friends. Not until I met Tonia and Bobo, and Elisabeth knows that. I sigh, annoyed by this endless examination.

"Listen, Liz, I just happened to meet some good people, okay?"

"People who gave you branded clothes..." She mutters.

I see her thinking, and she looks at me suddenly, with a big, excited smile.

"Oh, Moon Goddess, Nora, you have a Sugar Daddy!?"

"What? No! Are you crazy!"

Moon Goddess, how can she say such things? I'm bright red from the embarrassment, and her stupid idea is really vexing! Elisabeth knows I'm a virgin; she used to make fun of me for it! I'm not even sure about what a Sugar Daddy really is! That is so humiliating, I can't help but growl at her when she starts laughing out loud.

When she hears my growl, she suddenly stops to get up and steps back.

"What the hell, Nora!"

I stop and put my hand on my mouth, realizing I growled out loud for the first time! And with quite some effect, too. Liz is looking totally freaked out.

“Liz, I’m... I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to...”

“So, you really can shape-shift!” She suddenly says, shocked. “I thought you were totally unable to shape-shift, but you really can growl like a big girl!”

She’s right. Growling requires us to use our wolf-form throat, and hence, slightly shape-shift. And it turns out, I can do it now!

“Nora, that’s amazing!”

I know. I... I did it without thinking! I’m not even sure I can do it again, now that my anger has vanished. I massage my throat, still a bit surprised. Am I really getting closer to shapeshifting? Can I ever let my wolf out someday? I must try it.

“But you didn’t really kill Marcus, did you?” Asks Elisabeth, returning to her seat.

She probably asked because of my slight demonstration, but we both know that's nothing compared to going into my wolf form. I shake my head.

"I haven't, but... I don't know. I'm not sure what happened back there, Liz. Everything is so confusing about what happened on that day. All I get are some random and blurry flashbacks."

She stares at me for a while. Elisabeth really has stopped the gossiping now. I can tell she's serious. She plays with her bracelets, seeming hesitant for a while, before finally speaking out.

"Nora, you can tell me. ...Marcus assaulted you?" She whispers.

I avoid her eyes. I don't want to talk about it, I really don't.

"That dog did what?"

Oh, no. Liam just came back and is standing on the doorstep, close enough that he probably heard what Elisabeth just said. Oh, this is not going to go well. He runs up to us and looks at me with a furious gaze.

"Nora, what the hell is that girl talking about? Who did what to you?"

He may not be Damian, but I can see a lot of resemblance between the two, especially when he is angry like that. Liam has the same ice-cold stare and furious look as his older brother. Why is he so angry? I thought he didn't really like me. Is it because I'm his brother's fated mate? He's menacing, but I'm not scared like I was yesterday with Damian, maybe because it's not directed at me.

But how am I supposed to handle this...? Elisabeth won't say a word now that Liam's back, and I don't want to talk about that topic either. Not to my mate's little brother! I just shake my head.

"It's nothing, Liam."

"What, nothing! Nora, if my brother knows..."

"Don't, Liam! Let's not talk about this now, okay? I really don't want to. Not now."

I try to be as convincing as I can, but I can tell he's seriously hesitating. I can almost hear him debating inside. Then, he glances at Elisabeth and lets out an annoyed growl.

"Okay, but only for now. Later, you tell me what this is about!"

"I promise, but you won't tell him a thing. Agreed?"

He looks at me with a sullen look for a while, but finally lets out a low growl of agreement. It seems like Liam and I keep bargaining today. At least I managed to have him let go of the annoying subject for now. I'm not sure he will really keep his promise not to tell Damian, but that was the best I could do.

Elisabeth's eyes go from me to him and back, and she grabs my hand without warning.

"Nora, come with me. We have to tell Vincent you're fine."

But I take my hand out of hers, filled with worry. Elisabeth seems confident, but I'm not sure everyone in the pack will be as happy to see me as she was. Did she forget how they treated me? I was no better than a slave back there, and I don't want to go back to that meaningless life of mine. I glance at Liam, but he is waiting for my decision. Wasn't I the one who wanted to come back here, after all?

Sure, I wanted to see what happened after my disappearance, but having my brother gone changed a lot of things. And I may still be part of the Jade Moon, but I refuse to be insulted or hit again. I ponder for a while, but no matter what, I must go somehow. One day or another, I will have to face my Alpha about what happened and decide what to do.

"Could you accompany me?" I ask Liam.

“Sure. But I warn you, if those guys do anything to you, I won’t let it slide. I was at the hospital when the doc examined you. I’m not dumb. And trust me, you should be glad it’s me rather than one of my brothers.”

“I know. I just need to settle things with them.”

“Okay, then. Don’t be a weakling.”

But instead of heading for the door, he goes behind the bar and starts undressing. Once he’s naked, he stuffs everything inside his school bag and changes to his wolf form. His transformation is extremely quick.

The youngest Black brother has a somewhat standard size for a wolf, but his big paws indicate he might not have reached his final size yet. He is dark, but not just black. He has some dark brown-red hair here and there, on the collar and below his ears. He comes up to me and gives me his backpack, and I turn back to Elisabeth.

“Okay, let’s go, then.”

Elisabeth gives me a happy smile and comes with us, closing the bar behind her.

I am in a terrible state of nervousness. If Liam wasn't walking beside me, I might have turned around already. We walk up until we can finally see the main house. I know the Jade Moon members can already smell us if they are in their wolf form, and there are always some guarding the area.

As expected, as soon as we approach, several wolves start following us, growling with a menacing tone. But most of them recognize Elisabeth and me, and no one approaches us. I suppose they are most cautious of Liam, who is a stranger, stepping on their turf. But he just keeps walking by my side, ignoring them.

"Alpha is coming," says Elisabeth next to me.

She probably is talking with some of them telepathically right now. I wish I could, too. I wonder what everyone is saying right now. We are a few meters away from the main house when I stop. I don't want to come in, and Vincent is coming anyway. He looks stunned, and his eyes keep switching between the black wolf now sitting at my feet and me. Liam acts like he doesn't care, patiently waiting, but I can tell he is watching what's going on very closely. Peter comes out right after Vince, and Liam growls lowly as they approach us.

He lets out a menacing bark when they're a few steps away, and they stop, aware it's a warning. Vincent looks at me, dumbfounded.

“Nora... I really didn’t recognize you from afar. What happened? We looked for you!”

Did they really? Damian mentioned Alec as soon as my brother was spotted looking for me, but I realize now that I haven’t heard from the Jade Moon Clan at all. Moreover, since Damian and Nathaniel were actively looking for which Clan I came from, I doubt they would have missed people asking around for me. The Jade Moon most likely already considered me dead and didn’t bother to check.

“Hello, Alpha. Beta.” I salute without averting my eyes. “Sorry I disappeared. Lots of things happened.”

“Lots of things? Nora, you better have a good explanation for why you were gone for...”

But before Peter finishes his sentence, Liam is growling loudly beside me, and everyone understands he’s most likely warning him to watch his words. Peter glares at the black wolf and turns to me.

“Who is this?”

“A friend.”

“From which Clan, Nora?”

I hesitate. Is it okay to reveal my new connection to the Blood Moon Clan now? I'm not sure if it's a good thing to do. After all, I have no official connection to them yet, and I'm not supposed to be here either. Neither is Liam. Will Damian be mad if he knows? I don't care about the Jade Moon, but I would rather not take chances with him. I decide to ignore Peter's question and turn to Vincent.

"You exiled Alec?"

"Yes, about a month ago. Your brother had become too troublesome. He stole from his Beta and kept borrowing money from everyone. Peter confronted him, and we decided to banish him."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"I don't know, and I couldn't care less. But you are not in a position to ask questions now, Nora. We need to discuss this. Come in."

They turn around and start walking to go to the main house, but I don't move. I am not going into that house ever again. I feel like I will be back in prison if I take a single step closer. Next to me, Liam hasn't moved either, but he is still growling at the other wolves circling us. Now I realize this situation is not so good either. I may have decided to not give in anymore, but that won't hold Vincent from getting mad at me. What if he

decides to punish me and attacks us? Liam is probably very strong since he is the Headhunter of his pack, but he is alone, and I can't shift.

I exchange a glance with the black wolf, he doesn't seem worried one bit.

"What are you waiting for?" Growls Vincent. "I said come in."

"We can discuss from here."

"Excuse me? Who do you think you are now?"

He growls again, but this time I can growl back, too, and I do. He will not force me to submit again. For some reason, I feel stronger and more confident than ever. My wolf agrees with me—she is done with this nonsense. She won't let me down on this one.

Me responding to the Alpha like this causes everyone else to fall silent from surprise. But suddenly, everyone starts threatening us back, loudly. Gosh, I really hope nobody is going to attack. I don't like how things look. Even the sky is getting darker and menacing. I focus on Vincent, perfectly aware that no one will dare to do a thing without a word from him. I can tell he is hesitating. His eyes went from shock to anger, but now he is considering the dark wolf and me.

“What is this, Nora? You disappear for weeks, and now you come back and actually dare to disobey your Alpha?” Says Peter.

“Why is nobody asking about my disappearance then?” I ask.

“We said we will talk about it inside. And without strangers,” replies the Beta, glaring at Liam.

“No, I’m not going anywhere, and neither is he. I will talk here, or I’ll go.”

“Don’t bargain with your Alpha!” Growls Peter.

But he isn’t scaring me anymore. I’m scared about the twenty or so wolves surrounding us, but the Alpha and Beta’s authority won’t work on me. How is that possible? Did they already banish me? Or is the fact that I’m getting closer to my wolf, allowing me to stand against them?

I can really feel her. She is with me, standing her ground and growling to show she’s no pushover anymore. They always considered me a fake, weak, useless wolf, but things are different now. I may be more vulnerable and unable to shapeshift, but I’m done being a slave for them to use. That doesn’t mean I’m not scared. I do my best to appear strong, but my hands are slightly shaking, and no confidence can take away all that I have endured these past years. I may not give in to the Alpha’s authority, but

I'm still very aware of how painful a wolf attack can be. I'm not going to provoke them and get myself killed today.

They look at me, probably gauging me all over again.

"There is still the matter of your attack on Marcus and Alec," suddenly says Vincent.

"I did not attack them!" I yell back, annoyed.

"Then why did you go that day? People saw you going with your brother."

He was dragging me out! But Liam is here, I'm not sure what I can tell.

"I did not attack Alec," I say. "He forced me to follow him."

"You liar!"

I turn around. Amber just arrived, looking furious, and pointing her finger at me. What does she want now? That woman was always acting like my brother's girlfriend, and Alec probably thought so, but everyone in the pack knows Amber used to cheat on him as she wanted. She's popular, with her honey-blond hair and curves, and loves the attention. I could

name at least five guys she's been sleeping with without thinking! She joins Peter and Vincent, looking at me like I'm some pest.

"She had Alec follow her, pretending she could solve their money problem. Then, she tried to kill Marcus to take his money! Everyone knows he was loaded!"

What is this crazy story? Where did she make this up from! I'm so shocked I can't even find the words. Peter turns to her with a frown.

"That's what Alec said, but you weren't there when it happened."

"No, but he told me!" insists Amber. "Oh, come on! Do you think Marcus disappeared on his own? And Alec hurt himself? This bitch did it! You know how much she hated them!"

"I did nothing! Alec lied!" I try to defend myself.

"Oh, really? Then why did you disappear for a month? And now, you come back looking all good and dressed up in fancy clothes? How dumb do you think we are, you murderer!"

"Shut up!" I yell, infuriated.

How can she say such things? She knows nothing, she just hates me! But now both the Alpha and the Beta are looking at me and my clothes with a suspicious look. Liz sighs.

“Oh, please! Vince, this is Nora we are talking about! Nobody believed Alec when he told that story, and now you’re going to actually listen to that whore?”

“Liz! Shut up and go back inside! Why are you getting yourself involved in this?”

Robert, who had been standing by until now, comes and grabs his daughter, taking her away. Elisabeth protests, but he’s much stronger. I can only watch as she is taken away to the side, still yelling at Amber. Now Vincent seems hesitant and Peter’s eyes keep going from Amber to me.

“Amber knows nothing, Alpha,” I say. “I was hospitalized, and someone helped me out. But I didn’t kill Marcus or took his money. And I didn’t do anything to my brother, either.”

But I can tell they don’t believe me. The mysterious friend helping me out of nowhere is a big loophole, and I know it. I glance down at Liam, wondering what to do. He is fiercely growling at other wolves, and about twenty Jade Moon wolves are only waiting to jump at us. How did I get into such a situation!

Peter takes a step and reaches his arm out to grab me. “Okay, that’s enough. Nora, you are coming with us. Tell your friend to go away, or we will attack him, too, if...”

But before he can finish his sentence or even touch me, a huge shadow jumps over him, and we hear bones getting crunched.

I see Peter’s arm hanging under Bobo’s enormous fangs. We hear a scream before I can even realize what just happened, as I’m still in shock. The Beta’s shoulder is bleeding in an endless flow where his arm was still attached a second ago.

I can barely keep myself from throwing up. Other people start screaming in shock or fear. In front of me, Bobo is standing like a massive barrier between me and the trio. Peter has lost consciousness between us, but the other two have stepped back.

“Looks like you guys are going to need a new Beta,” sighs a voice behind me.

I turn around and see Nathaniel standing there, smiling scarily.

I can’t believe what’s happening. Everyone has gone totally silent, and all eyes are set on Nathaniel. He is walking calmly to us, and it takes me a

few seconds to realize a dozen menacing wolves are following him. Among them, I notice a big one, and I realize it's probably Tonia, as her fur is slightly darker than her brother's, like she depicted.

Vincent looks even more shocked than I am. He is staring blankly at Nathaniel, his mouth open, looking totally lost. I know this is precisely what he always feared. Provoking a stronger pack. I can remember how stressed out he was about the whole dinner thing. He won't even look at Peter lying in a bloodbath next to him. He just stares blankly at Nathaniel, trying to understand what's going on. Amber has gone white as a sheet, and she is shaking from head to toe. No one dares to say a word.

Nathaniel slowly walks up to me, and I'm totally lost on what to say. I feel so bad. About all of this. But he gives me his usual gentle smile.

"Nora, you should have just told us, you know. Now I had to come all the way here and hear all this nonsense."

"I... I'm sorry, I just..."

But before I can figure out how to explain myself, Nathaniel reaches out his hand to gently caress my hair and shakes his head with a gentle smile.

"It's okay, princess. You should save it for when you see my brother. He is... not very happy about you sneaking out."

Oh, my Goddess, Damian knows. He is going to kill me. He must be dead furious now. And right after he finally came to see me, too! Nathaniel turns to Liam, crosses his arms, and sighs. His little brother just avoids his eyes like a kid who knows he is about to get scolded.

“You can’t help yourself, can you, Liam? Not only you skip school, but now you must help Nora run into trouble, too?”

He waits for a second, still looking at his younger sibling, and I realize Liam must be talking back to him. But Nathaniel shakes his head.

“Oh no, don’t even start trying to use our princess as an excuse, Liam. We are going to have a serious discussion once we get back. And yes, little brother, you’re grounded.”

Liam just lets out an annoyed growl, but apparently, he won’t stand up to his brother. The hierarchy is evident between the three of them.

Nathaniel now walks past us and stands next to Bobo, looking straight at Vincent. He is not smiling anymore. As all the Blood Moon Clan wolves are now growling fiercely, the Jade Moon ones have slowly started taking a few steps back. Even though some of them still try to keep growling, too, they clearly are frightened. Nathaniel’s wolves make it very clear who has the upper hand. Tonia walks up to me, standing opposite to Liam. I try

to whisper a “sorry,” but she is ignoring me. I guess I’ll have to deal with this once we get back...

“Prin... Princess?” Mumbles Vincent.

He seems to have realized who the black wolf that was accompanying me is by now. He is looking at me as if he’s seeing me for the first time, trying to process everything.

“Well, now I would love to hear an explanation,” says Nathaniel.

“Ex... Explanation? About what?” Stutters Vincent.

“Yes. An explanation to know why you guys hid and mistreated our precious princess.”

Nathaniel’s words are a cold shower for everyone here. Some members of the pack are looking at me with terrified eyes, probably reminiscing about when they last hit me or were rude to me in some manner. And it’s not just two or three people.

“What? We didn’t hide her...”

Suddenly, I remember the dinner night. Liam's voice asking, "Is that all your girls?" before he and Nathaniel left. That intriguing sentence angered Amber, but back then, I didn't really think about it twice. But what does it have to do with me? Nathaniel makes it sounds like the Black brothers were... looking for me. But how could that be?

"We asked you if we had met every girl from your clan, and you said we did. You had no one looking anything like Nora at the dinner. So now, let me ask you, how could we possibly have missed her if she was indeed one of your pack members?"

Vincent looks completely lost. He had me locked up in the basement that night. He didn't think I was worthy of meeting them, and honestly, how could he have imagined such a day would come? The weak, pathetic, hated, and disfigured girl turns out to be the most feared Alpha's mate. That's not something Vincent would ever imagine, not even in his worst nightmares. He looks at me, still trying to make a connection, unable to face the truth.

"How could this girl be of any... any interest to you? She's just a... a stray!"

Nathaniel is smiling, but I can tell he's not the slightest happy. I would say he's only getting even angrier. His eyes look like ice, and that's a frightening look I've seen before on both his brothers. Two grey eyes staring at Vincent like he could murder him on the spot. And I bet he could.

He takes a menacing step towards Vincent, and for a second, I think he really is about to kill him right here. All the blood seems to have left Vincent's face. When Nathaniel speaks, his voice is just as menacing as if he was holding a knife next to the Alpha's throat, and his sharp and cold voice gives me a chill.

“That ‘stray’ girl you are talking about is my older brother's fated mate.”

A chilling silence follows his words, and all eyes turn to me. For a few seconds, Vincent looks like he is about to collapse as he staggers, white as a sheet. He looks at me, so shocked he can't even utter a sound. But Nathaniel suddenly speaks up again, and takes a new step closer, making Vincent stagger and fall on his butt in front of him.

“So, now. Would you tell who is responsible for her scars? My brothers and I are really, really eager to know.”

I hear several people from the pack gasp or let out a whimper. Bobo is growling very loudly, and that's a frightening sound not three wolves together could make. He still has Peter's arm, and the blood is still leaking out in a gruesome manner beneath him. Vincent suddenly shakes his head, looking panicked.

“No, no, no, it's... it's not that. We... we really didn't know, she... Nora was...”

I look at him, disgusted. What, that the Alpha I used to fear all the time? He is blabbing nonsense, trying to come up with excuses. How could I ever fear such a pathetic man? Nathaniel stands there, emotionless, while Vincent is struggling pathetically.

“We... we welcomed them to... to our pack a few years ago. They were just... just homeless kids, they... She had nothing. We gave her food and shelter!”

“...Food and shelter?” I can’t help but repeat, shocked.

Both Nathaniel and Vincent turn to me, surprised to hear me speak out. But I shake my head, glaring at my pathetic Alpha. “You put me in the basement. You made me work from dawn until dusk, and never let me eat with you. You never even considered me a part of our pack.”

Liam starts growling again after hearing me, but I ignore him. Vincent is apparently not as scared of me as he is of Nathaniel and tries to defend himself.

“Everyone has to work to earn their living! You... you would have died in the streets if it wasn’t for me, Nora.”

I look at him, taken aback by his nerve. How can he still be standing there saying such things to my face? To earn a living? I was not even nine years

old when the Jade Moon Clan took me in! For almost nine years, they only let me live to work for them as a slave, giving me scraps!

“Nobody else would have helped you, but we did! Doesn’t that count?”
Asks Vincent.

I know he is trying to beg for his life. He’s aware Nathaniel only cares about me and won’t hesitate a single second to kill him and all the others. His Beta is dying in a blood pool at this very moment. Vincent is basically begging me to spare the rest of them. But I’m in no mood for his excuses.

“You never really meant to help me, did you? All you saw was a helpless child, a free slave you could make use of. I was young, and you know no one would protect me. Nobody would care no matter what happened to me. You never did.”

The hurtful words I could never say out loud are now flowing out, with tears, and I can’t stop it. All the suffering resurfaces. All those bitter memories that I can’t stand anymore. I’m giving up on any hope I had left in this Clan. This is the truth, and it has long waited to come out.

“You are not my Alpha! You never acted like one to me. You never protected me or considered me your family, not in the slightest. All you did was use me, like some tool you could throw away anytime. I was broken, and all you did was break me even more.”

I gave the last nine years of my life to this man, to this pack, and now I realize what a mess they have made of it. I was never meant to be that pitiful or weak, but they pushed me to the edge day after day. Whether they abused me or stayed as bystanders, no one in this pack ever gave me a hand. None of them ever cared about me, and they were content with it. Living their everyday lives, keeping their eyes closed and ignoring all I endured like it wasn't their problem.

“No, Nora. I didn't do it. I never laid a hand on you, did I? I even tried to keep Alec off your back, sometimes, I...”

“You didn't do anything! You let others do it for you, and that was it! You saw what they did to me, and you closed your eyes a million times! A million times, you could have put an end to it with a single word, and you never ever did! You are worse than any of them! You are not even worthy of being called an Alpha!” I yell, bursting with anger.

“I... I...”

But he has nothing else to say. He knows I'm right. Never saying anything doesn't mean I don't remember. Vincent shakes his head, trying to find something else to defend himself, but I am done with this. I turn around to wipe my tears, exhausted by all of this. Nathaniel is looking at me, and he seems impressed by my sudden burst, but I just feel angry and exhausted by all this yelling. But as I turn around, a voice suddenly arises.

“You wench! You should just shut up and be grateful the Alpha accepted a cursed, damn freak like you! No one wanted...”

Amber’s words die in her throat when Liam suddenly jumps at her with a loud growl. She has the reflexes to change into her wolf form to defend herself, but the battle is cut short. Within two seconds, his fangs lacerate her neck and face, and the golden wolf dies before our eyes before she even has a chance to fight back.

I cover my mouth, speechless. I can’t believe Amber just died as quickly as that. Liam leaves her corpse to go back to his brother, but his mouth covered in fresh blood is still growling angrily. Nathaniel looks straight into Vincent’s eyes, and this time there is no smile.

“This was the last time I hear one of you talk like that about Nora ever again. We will leave behind as many corpses as necessary for that.”

The Alpha is so stunned about what just happened, he can’t help but nod with a totally blank expression. Two of his wolves just died in front of him, and he couldn’t do a thing to stop it. And now the lives of his whole pack are hanging. He seems about to say something but doesn’t.

Suddenly, one of the Jade Moon wolves, who I recognize as Marc, one of Amber’s lovers, leaves the group to run towards us. He is clearly attacking us, but even before he is within reach, two of the Blood Moon wolves jump and kill him on the spot. Right behind him, I see his sister whimper,

and she starts running, too. But this time, no one stops her. She runs straight to us, visibly aiming for me.

But the she-wolf is suddenly stopped by Nathaniel's hand. I did not even see him move, but he managed to grab the brown wolf by the throat and holds her at arm's length, her paws not reaching the ground. She whimpers and tries to free herself from his grasp, but he is clutching, and we suddenly hear her neckbone breaking.

Nathaniel's eyes roam the assembly, but no one dares to move an inch anymore. He just killed a wolf with a single move, while still in his human form. He opens his hand, and the dead wolf falls at his feet.

"I warned you. Anyone else wants to try me?"

"Enough, enough, please!" Says Vincent, shaking.

Nathaniel turns to him.

"I have yet to hear any names."

"Nathaniel, stop it."

Surprised, both Alphas' eyes turn to me, but I'm only looking at Nathaniel.

I can't really feel sorry for the Jade Moon pack. I wonder if that's wrong of me, but I just don't. They were about to trust Amber's words instead of mine, and they probably didn't care to know if I was telling the truth anyway. If it wasn't for Nathaniel, I might already be back in the basement getting a beating by now. I can't feel sorry for them anymore.

However, even if I don't consider them my pack anymore, I can't let the Blood Moon just keep killing them without saying a thing. There are innocent families and children among them. I don't want to be the reason for bloodshed and tragedy.

I step up to the man I once considered my Alpha, and Bobo comes to stand close to me, acting like a bodyguard again. He finally spits out the lifeless arm. Ugh, I wish he had done that earlier, that's so gruesome. Nathaniel's wolves all start growling loudly, pushing Vincent's warriors to retreat away from him. I face Vincent, clenching my fist.

"I'm not stopping them because of you. I still hold you responsible for what happened. But this Clan needs its Alpha, and I'm done with seeing blood spilled today."

"From today on, the Blood Moon Clan is hostile to the Jade Moon Clan," declares Nathaniel. "Any of you takes one step into our turf, and you will face the consequences."

This is basically exiling the whole Clan out of Silver City. Even if the Black brothers only reign over half of the City, the remaining Clans won't take risks by having contact with the Jade Moon Clan. Any other pack's turf will now be a potential threat to them. Nathaniel just isolated the whole pack in two sentences. Vincent looks like he is about to cry, but unfortunately for him, this is not over yet.

“In ten days at dusk, I want this whole pack to come to the East Point Ground. If a single person is missing, no matter the reason, we will hunt them down. This is a challenge for the Alpha position.”

I stare at Nathaniel, dumbfounded.

A duel to take over the Jade Moon Clan?