

Chapter 6

I keep punching, aiming right at the targets like Tonia told me. I'm sweating like crazy, as I have been at it for two hours now. But I'm genuinely feeling great. I finally got back to the gym, and I really missed our morning workout sessions. She lets me hit a couple more times the target, encouraging me all along. When we finally stop, I'm panting.

"You're doing great, baby girl!"

"I still feel this is never going to be enough, Tonia. Nathaniel is crazy."

She rolls her eyes and helps me take off the gloves. We are both wearing dark workout outfits, but that makes the difference between us all the more visible. Tonia is one head taller than me, and she shows a lot more muscles under her tan skin. Even if I did gain a few new pounds and can now last longer at training, I still feel like I'm lacking and weak. How am I supposed to defeat a grown man, an Alpha to boot?

"No, it will be enough. It's all in the head, baby girl. What you need is to work on is your willpower, and to avoid being hurt."

Here we go. Tonia and Nathaniel have this crazy theory that I have some Alpha potential, enough to be able to make Vincent submit. I know he is not the strongest Alpha around, but still, I'm just a teenage girl who's only known how to take a hit before! I shake my head.

"Tonia, you overestimate me. I can only stand against Damian because he is my mate, not because I can actually dominate an Alpha!"

"Not only the Boss, Nora. Do you realize you've done it with any Alpha you've met? Even Liam! No one but his brothers can talk back to him like you did. Even I couldn't, and my wolf is pretty strong! But we are wolves, and wolves stick to their ranks. I'm a Beta, and I tell you, you're an Alpha down to the bone, and your wolf should never have submitted to that pathetic guy in the first place."

I feel a growl inside. My wolf agrees with her. She never wants to submit again, and she's quite angry about it. What, you've been hiding for years, and now you're ready to go all claws out against Vincent? I sigh. The new mystery about my birth that unexpectedly arose since Nathaniel came has me thinking a lot, too. I remember my parents. I know I looked a lot like my dad, and he loved me lots. However, my mother was more distant, and we didn't have much in common. They sometimes argued, even if I don't remember what it was about. While thinking it over last night, I remembered something Alec said: "Whose fault is it that I am an orphan?"

What could he mean by that? We both lost our parents most tragically. I still remember that day vividly, but Moon Goddess, I wish I didn't. I've already lost most of my childhood memories before that event due to the trauma... Because of that memory, I can't remember meeting Damian, either.

I haven't seen him since our kiss yesterday, but I understand he's working. I quickly called him this morning to thank him for the job at Nathaniel's restaurant and let him know I was feeling a lot better too. It felt great, being able to communicate simply with him, though I blushed the entire call. He even said I should go out shopping with Tonia. I feel like they have something planned, but I don't mind.

When we go back to the apartment, I take a well-deserved shower, as usual, and take my time dressing up for once, since we are going out. We're now at the end of November, so I go for white pants, a cute-patterned sweater, and some brown leather heels. I'm still inspecting myself in the mirror, unsure about my choice when Tonia comes in. She is wearing her black leather pants and jacket, and a sexy white gym top with only one strap. She whistles when she sees me.

"Hello, baby girl," she says with a playful smile. "Damn, I wish I was as thin as you, you look like some princess from a fairy tale! Oh, wait, you need accessories. Let me pick some for you."

"I look like a child," I sigh while putting on the earrings and bracelets she gives me.

I've always hated my thin and small build. Maybe it's from malnutrition, but I've always been one of those petites, slender girls. I wish I had some more curves and muscles like Tonia. Damian looks so tall next to me! Thinking about his build makes me reminisce about the touch of his hands on me... I get a hot shiver. It still seems so unbelievable. Damian always treats me like I'm some precious flower, yet when I look in the mirror, all I see is this horrendous scar on my face...

"Nora?"

Tonia is looking at me, worried. I unconsciously brought my finger to touch my scar, following the long red thread, running from my right eyebrow to my jaw.

"Sorry, I was thinking."

"Your scar... You never talk about it. How did you get it?" She asks while sitting on my bed.

What do I say? An accident? It was not an accident... I bite my lip, trying to look for some explanation that won't leave her too shocked. I really don't want to get into the details, but I don't want to lie to Tonia again, either.

“It was some sort of domestic incident, with a knife. When I was very young. But I don’t want to talk about it, Tonia, sorry.”

She nods, still frowning. I really don’t want to talk about this memory. Not now and not here. I put on a smile and grab a coat.

We head outside, with Bobo following us as usual. I’m starting to wonder if I will ever see him in his human form at all. The elevator takes us to an underground garage, and Tonia heads for a black SUV that looks brand new. Bobo jumps on the back seat while Tonia and I take the front ones, and she drives out.

I’m so happy to go outside again! I aim to open my window, but Tonia closes it as soon as I do.

“No, no, baby Girl. Too dangerous.”

I frown. Why can’t I open the window? It’s not like some sniper is after me! I pout, but I don’t want to argue with Tonia when we just barely exited the building. Now that I think about it, the car does seem to have tinted windows. They are not kidding about my security... It’s almost like I can see Damian’s shadow surrounding us.

“Tonia?”

“Hm?”

“What is Damian’s job exactly?”

She thinks for a while before answering me. She put on some aviator glasses and rock music on the stereo. She looks so cool while driving, I’m envious!

“Basically, a businessman. The Boss runs the Black Corporation along with his brother Nathaniel. He is the CEO and main shareholder, so he has to show up to meetings every now and then. He’s excellent, but he hates going to those and always says they don’t need him. He sends our brother, Neal, to replace him sometimes, but according to him, they all go crazy when the Boss is not there.”

“Is that why you always call him Boss?”

She laughs at my question and plays with her ring while waiting for the light to go green.

“Sort of. It’s Bobo who started, actually. Since we are werewolves, there are always big internal struggles with the money, deeds, and who gets more power and stuff. It’s like a Mafia, and the Boss certainly works that way. He never forgives anyone who oversteps their boundaries or tries to double-cross him. He has them all shaking whenever he enters a room.

Thanks to that, it's going smoothly, but trust me, some guys can never sleep well."

This doesn't come as a surprise to me. Saying that it works like a Mafia doesn't only apply to Damian's group, but all the packs as well. It's all about power between werewolves. We learn to respect and submit to the strongest and fight to survive. The territory wars are no joke. Some packs are known to be more peaceful than others, but no one wants to step a foot on the wrong turf.

Considering this, the Blood Moon Pack needs just as many assets to strengthen its power over Silver City. Being a strong wolf means nothing if you have to beg others for money, or don't have a proper place to let your pack live in. From what I've seen so far, Damian doesn't have this kind of problem... I wonder how and when he got that powerful.

Tonia finally parks in front of a colossal shopping mall I've never seen before. She is smiling so brightly, it's almost blinding.

"Here we go! Shopping time!"

Bobo lets out a low growl, and I'm pretty sure he's not as enthusiastic as his sister.

I soon understand why. It was nice for the five or six first shops we visited. Tonia loves to try on lots of different things, dress me up like a doll, and

run around to see what she might have missed. Her shopping technique is a bit scary, as I've never seen someone pick out clothes so fast. Only brands too! I feel a bit shy standing in the middle of such high-class items, but Tonia is clearly used to it. I wonder how she gets the money to pay for all that, though she only buys one-tenth of everything she tries. I try to keep her from buying me things, too, as my wardrobes are already full, but Tonia doesn't care. When we leave the tenth shop, I'm carrying more shopping bags than decent, and my feet are killing me. I have to beg Tonia for mercy.

"Tonia, I'm just going to grab something to drink. Can you meet us at the café we saw upstairs earlier?"

"Sure, sure. But stay with Bobo!" She says while looking into a pair of jeans.

"Promise."

The big wolf is only too happy to accompany me to the third floor and escape his sister's shopping marathon. We walk away side by side, and, once again, I wonder how come nobody says anything about the enormous beast walking around in broad daylight. I mean, werewolves are nothing new in Silver City, but he's as big as a bear!

We find a table in a corner, and Bobo hops on the bench. I order two lemonades since I've seen him drink some at home. Gosh, I'm so tired! I don't know how Tonia can run around on her heels all day.

The mall is actually not so crowded. It's a Tuesday, after all, so no surprise there. I like this place, it's all white, rather neat, and clean without being too pompous. There are three floors, the two upper ones being open so we can see downstairs. I like to look around to watch what people are doing. It's mostly early Christmas shoppers, I would say. December is already starting next week, after all.

While I'm lost in thoughts, I suddenly get a chill. My wolf starts growling, and I instinctively get on my guard, too. I feel like someone's observing me. I look around, but aside from us, the café barely has more than a couple of customers. I still can't shake off this uneasy feeling. Something's off.

“Bobo?”

He stood up and has started growling, too, standing against my leg in a protective stance. We wait, looking all around to understand what's going on, but for a while, nothing happens. The uneasy feeling gradually disappears, and after a couple of minutes, I spot Tonia running towards us.

“Nora! What's wrong? Bobo said something was happening!”

“I don’t know. I feel like someone was watching me. I’m not sure, and we saw no one.” I answer while looking nervously around me.

Tonia looks all around us, too, but everything seems normal. I’m sure someone was staring at me, and it gave me the creeps. My wolf instincts don’t lie.

“Whatever it was, it’s gone... But I don’t like this. If someone’s watching you, that’s no good, Nora.”

“Could it be someone else Damian sent to protect me?”

Tonia shakes her head.

“No. The Boss only trusts Bobo and me for your security. He would have told me if anyone else was supposed to watch you. And Bobo didn’t pick up any familiar scent either; it’s definitely not someone from our pack.”

She sits, still on her guard. But I think whoever it was, they’re gone... Tonia then grabs one of the bags and gives it to me. I frown while opening it and turns out it contains a small box wrapped with a Christmas-themed paper. She gives me a smile.

“Sorry, it’s actually for your birthday, but they only had this kind of wrapping. An early birthday present, though you should have had one sooner.”

I open the present, curious to know what it is. It’s a brand-new smartphone! I know this Korean brand, and it’s the latest model, too! Tonia even picked a white case and some very girly and shiny stickers so I can decorate it. She shows me how to use it, and in the contacts, she already put her number, as well as Damian’s.

Without warning, I can’t help but let out a few tears.

“Nora! What’s wrong, baby girl, why are you crying? You don’t like it? Should I have picked a different model? Or is it the color?”

She is so panicked about my tears that I can’t help but laugh at her questions. I wipe out my tears to answer, a bit embarrassed to be crying in public.

“No, no, Tonia, it’s awesome, really. I... I just... I haven’t received a present in years, so I’m really touched. Thank you so much.”

“Oh, Nora, you are so cute...”

She comes and gives me a hug. I really am sincerely touched. Back in the Jade Moon Clan, nobody cared about my birthday—most of them didn't even know when that was. Alec gradually forgot about it, too, since he didn't care anyway.

Tonia orders coffee and enthusiastically shows me some of her favorite apps since it's my first time using one. She suggests I get a mailbox and some games. Apparently, she uses her own phone a lot.

“Does Bobo have a phone?”

She nods and takes a second phone out of one of her jacket inner pockets, a black one. This one is an older version and looks used.

“I keep it for him most of the time. He doesn't like using it too much anyway, except for listening to music. He loves Latino stuff, like reggaeton.”

“Really?”

It's funny to imagine that this big, lazy, and aloof wolf loves dancing music! Tonia nods with a smile while petting her brother's fluffy ears. I noticed Bobo really loves to be pet, like a house dog.

“You should see him dancing! It’s the only time he doesn’t want to sleep. Put the big boy on a dancefloor, and he becomes a real killer. We will take you out dancing someday!”

“I want to see that someday, Bobo!”

We laugh a bit, but then I focus again on the smartphone. Tonia shows me a few more things, and I think I understand quickly enough how it works. She lets me use it for a while as she drinks her coffee, and I even download and try a cooking game for a bit.

“Okay, enough playing Nora. How about trying to make a call?”

Her smile speaks volumes about who I should try to call, and I blush immediately. To call Damian? Out of the blue? What am I supposed to tell him! What if he is busy? I ponder for a while, but I really do want to try calling him. Okay, but if I’m to call him, I need some intimacy! I get up and exit the café to stand in the hall, and Tonia and Bobo can still clearly see me from the glass wall, as I’m barely a few steps away.

I try to ignore the fact that Bobo will probably be able to hear me since he is in his wolf form, and I call Damian. It rings for a while, and I wonder if he might be busy, like in a meeting or something. But suddenly, someone picks up.

“Who is this?”

I frown. It's a masculine voice, but not Damian's. I don't think it's Nathaniel either, and I don't recognize that tone at all. Did Tonia put the wrong number?

"Hum, hello, is this Damian... I mean, mister Black's phone?" I mumble, confused.

"It is. I asked, who are you?"

"Oh, sorry, it's Nora, Nora Bluemoon."

"Nora? Oh, my apologies; wait a second."

His tone changed completely as soon as he heard my name! I hear someone taking the phone, and this time, it's Damian's voice.

"Nora?"

"Damian! Hi... Sorry, I... Tonia got me this new phone, and I wanted to try calling you. Are you busy?"

Gosh, I must be so red right now. Calm down, Nora, calm down.

“No, no, it’s okay, sorry about that. Neal usually answers when it’s an unknown number. I’ll be sure to save it for next time. How are you? Everything okay?”

Oh, so that voice was Bobo and Tonia’s older brother! I forgot he was Damian’s Beta. What’s with him and having others answer his phone, anyway? Last time it was Nathaniel, too. So intimidating!

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. Tonia took me to this huge mall today, so we are out shopping. It’s nice to go out. Oh, but Bobo is with us, so don’t worry.”

“I know, Tonia texted me. Did you find anything you like?”

“A few things, yes. Tonia is good at choosing for me; actually, I don’t know how she can pick so many clothes so fast!”

“You should choose things you like, too, Nora. Don’t let Tonia do it all for you.”

“I chose a few things... But I... I don’t really have any money yet, so...”

“Who cares? This mall belongs to the Black Group. Pick whatever you like, Nora.”

Ohm Moon Goddess. Of course, he owns this mall, too... That's probably why Tonia picked this one in the first place. For some reason, I feel so embarrassed now. I blush and nod, before remembering he can't see me. Let's just change the topic.

"...Are you at work?"

I hear a sigh on his end.

"I am. Getting ready for a meeting."

"Tonia told me you... scare your associates."

"I do. People work faster and better when they think I will kick their asses if they don't."

I chuckle a bit. We both stay silent for a while, and I find myself brushing my hair with my fingers nervously.

"...I love to hear your voice." He suddenly says, making me blush

"I love to hear yours, too," I whisper, embarrassed. "When can I see you again?"

“I’m busy with work, for now, since I missed a lot recently... And Neal is glaring at me right now, so I guess it will be hard to take some time off. But you can call me anytime.”

“Okay, I’ll do that, then.”

“I have to go. I’ll call you later.”

He hangs up, and I can’t help but feel a little bit disappointed. I know he is busy with work, but still. I feel like we only talked for, like, two seconds. I bite my lip.

While I was about to go back inside the café, my eyes suddenly catch a movement in the corner. I turn around, and I spot him. He is wearing a black cap and a large jacket. He is looking straight at me from across the hall.

Alec.

I can’t believe my own eyes. He looks thinner and messy, but it’s my brother, Alec. And he is staring at me, too. What is he doing here, of all places? Is he looking for me? What do I do? He doesn’t look like he wants to approach me. More like... He is glaring at me.

I run back into the café, panicked.

“Bobo, Tonia, my brother’s here!”

Both jump on their feet and follow me outside. But Alec’s gone. I run to the place I spotted him, but there is no one. Damn! Where did he go now? I look down at Bobo.

“Did you pick up his scent?”

“He’s not sure. There are too many different smells, it’s a public place after all... Nora, are you sure it was your brother?”

“A hundred percent sure. Alec was definitely standing there, and he saw me, too, he was watching me.”

“You think he was the one watching you earlier?”

I wouldn’t be too sure about that. The feeling was... Different. I shake my head, looking at Bobo, who is still sniffing every inch of the floor. Tonia asks me how he was dressed and picks up her phone to give out orders. She is sending out people to look for Alec, but I can’t help but feel nervous. I keep looking around, hoping to spot him somewhere among the crowd. I don’t like the way he was looking at me, so full of hatred... Even worse than before.

I shiver, and it has nothing to do with the temperature. Bobo notices and comes to lean against me. My wolf tells me he means it's okay, not to worry. I just nod, too anxious to speak. Why do I feel so nervous all of a sudden? I don't like this situation. Something's off.

"Nora? You okay?"

Tonia comes to put a hand on my shoulder, but I shake my head.

"I want to go home. Now." I say, staring where Alec stood.

"Okay. Let's get back to the parking lot, then."

I don't say a word for the whole trip back. I know Tonia keeps glancing at me, but I ignore it. I just feel anxious for some reason, and I can't shake this weird feeling off. I really wish Damian was here. I'm nervously playing with my phone, but I can't bring myself to call him. I know he's busy, and I don't want to bother him for something so trivial. Maybe it's just me being paranoid.

Once we are back at the apartment, Bobo is stuck to me. I know he is trying to reassure me, and I'm thankful for that. For a second, I wonder what to do, but I decided to go change into one of my gym outfits and

grab my boxing gloves from my room. Without asking Tonia anything, I just head to the gym upstairs, Bobo following me as usual.

I don't like this feeling. I try to punch it off on the sandbags, irritated. What is Alec planning? He clearly wanted me to see him, so what now? I never know where to stand with my brother... Alec has never acted like a sibling to me. He was the worst back when we were still in the Jade Moon pack, and showed no remorse hitting me. Yet I could never wholly resent him. Because he is my brother and I know what happened to our parents messed him up a lot. Maybe I was blinded all along.

I remember the last time I saw him. He was ready to let Marcus rape me and to kill me. He would have if Bobo and Tonia didn't intervene. I throw a couple more punches, with all my strength. What is wrong with him? Why does he hate me so much? I feel like I'm missing something here, and I can't let it go anymore. I need to settle things with my brother for real. For good.

I keep the punches coming and even fail to notice Tonia entering the gym. I only realize she's there when she starts talking.

"I see someone needed to blow off some steam."

"Did you find him?" I ask, panting.

She shakes her head and hands me a few black-and-white pictures. I take off my gloves to look at it while she puts my hair into a ponytail.

“The surveillance cameras caught him at the west entrance of the mall, but that’s all we could gather. What do you want to do?”

This is the first time she is asking for my decision. I take a while to think, but I already know what should be done. I give her the pictures back.

“I need to find him. I need to talk to my brother seriously. You have his full name, and we know he’s still in town. Without a Clan, I doubt he would go anywhere on the other Clans’ turfs, and I think he is watching me. He’s probably somewhere in the Blood Moon Clan’s territory.”

My wolf agrees with me, though she wants to go find him herself. But that would be reckless, and I promised Damian I wouldn’t do anything dangerous. Somehow, I feel Alec is up to no good following me, and I just can’t leave it like that. Tonia nods with a big smile.

“Now that’s an Alpha talking!”

I roll my eyes. Since we discovered this whole mystery about my secret birth, Tonia and Nathaniel have been going on about my hypothetical Alpha genes whenever they get an opportunity. I don’t really want to have to think too deeply about it. This whole matter about my non-recorded existence is already enough of a headache as it is. But, as a matter of fact,

I also believe my brother may be able to enlighten me about that. Even more reasons to get ahold of him.

A couple more days pass without any sign of Alec.

It's nerve-wracking. I try to chase my worries away by keeping myself busy, switching between my studies and workout sessions, but it's no use. We can't confirm Alec's location. I have no idea what he wants, but I really want to ask him some questions about our parents and the mystery surrounding me.

Damian barely has any time to call me at all. It seems like he really is as busy as Tonia said. I only manage to have him on the phone a few minutes a day. Apparently, they are about to reach an agreement with the Gold Moon Clan, making the neighboring packs uneasy, and thus, some conflicts are bound to rise.

"My brother said you made your decision," says Damian the next day I have him on the phone.

"Yes. I'm not sure this is a good idea yet, but... maybe it's worth trying. I need to end things once and for all with the Jade Moon Clan."

I'm sitting on the couch, brushing my hair with my fingers while holding up the phone. It's almost midnight, and Bobo is sleeping like a baby

against my legs. Damian sounds dead tired, yet he gave me a call, as promised.

“You can do it, Nora. Put that scum back into his place, or I’ll come and do it for you.”

I can’t help but smile. I’ve noticed Damian is more straight-forward and less polite when he is tired.

“I’ll do my best.”

“We’re still looking for your brother. He really knows how to stay under the radar. Nathaniel even gave the word to our allies, but no one has spotted him yet.”

I have been thinking about this matter a lot. Recently, I had an idea about how to get ahold of Alec, but I’m not sure this will work.

“Damian, I think I know when we can catch him.”

“Tell me.”

“I think he will be there at the duel against Vincent. Alec is rancorous. Peter and Vincent banished him, so I’m sure he will want to be there to

see the Alpha being demoted. He will definitely find a way to see the fight, we will have a chance to catch him.”

“We can have people watching the grounds. Two days is more than enough to prepare; I’ll ask Nathaniel to take care of it.”

I leave out a sigh. If Alec has been watching me recently, why is he so cautiously staying away? Does he already know my connection to the Blood Moon Clan? I haven’t told anyone that Alec was the one who tried to strangle me that night, and I’m not sure if I should say it. Damian might seriously kill him if he knows...

We discuss a bit longer about what preparations should be made to be sure to catch Alec, but I still feel uneasy. What if we do catch him?

“Damian, can you promise me something?”

“What is it?”

“When we catch Alec... Promise me you won’t attack him.”

“Nora, what is this about?”

I know he suspects something. He probably wonders why I would be worried about him hurting Alec, but I can't tell him the truth. I can't even be sure that Alec won't talk and spill the beans. Moreover, my brother is always so harsh while talking to me, and Damian is not the most patient person... I must be sure he won't lose patience before I get my answers.

"Just promise me, please."

He stays silent for a while.

"...Okay, I promise."

That's one last thing to worry about, at least. I sigh, tired by all the anxiousness. I rest my head on the sofa and close my eyes for a second.

"I miss you," I whisper.

"...Same here."

"I wish I could see you right now."

"Same here."

I chuckle a bit. He really is tired.

“Are you just going to keep saying that?”

He stays silent for a while, and I’m thinking we should hang up to both catch some sleep, but I hear his voice before I can talk.

“...I want to come all the way over there and kiss you again.”

I blush, embarrassed, and hide my face with my hair even though he can’t see me.

“...Same here.” I whisper.

The next day is the last one before the duel against Vincent.

To be honest, I’m not as worried over the duel as I am about Alec’s matter. It feels like my brother has all the answers I’m looking for, and I’m afraid we might miss him again. Even the siblings feel my anxiety and stay next to me all day. Tonia helps me train for a few hours, though it doesn’t help me relax.

However, when we get back to the apartment, to my surprise, both Nathaniel and Liam are there. As elegant as ever, Nathaniel is standing

still in the kitchen while discussing with his younger brother. Liam is lazily lying on the couch but sits up when I walk in. He casually waves at me.

“Hello, princess,” says Nathaniel.

“What are you both doing here?” I ask.

The two of them coming to the apartment doesn't seem like a simple, friendly visit. And I know I can't trust Nathaniel's smiles. Liam rolls his eyes and leans back on the couch, leaving the explanation to his older brother.

“We just wanted to come and see you before the duel. How do you feel?”

“I'm fine,” I answer honestly.

It's true. I've been living away from my Clan for a whole month, seeing things differently. Now, Vincent doesn't seem as threatening as he once was. I'm not overconfident about my fighting abilities, given that I have only shape-shifted a couple of times before, but I don't intend to hold back and act scared either. I just wish to settle things for good.

“Good! Well, Liam and I will be there tomorrow, as well. Damian wants to make sure his princess doesn't run into some... unnecessary trouble.”

He means if the Jade Moon Clan meddles in. They could try to hurt me before the duel, or even find someone else to challenge me again and again if I win over Vincent. Moreover, during a fight for the Alpha Position, a Clan is usually weakened, making it easier for Rogues and other packs to attack. However, none of the local packs will dare to do such a thing if the Blood Moon Clan is there. With Liam and Nathaniel Black present, the Jade Moon pack members will have no choice but to acknowledge the duel's result.

“Thank you. Did you talk to Damian?”

I'm sure the two of them already discussed the matter of Alec. Nathaniel nods with a smile.

“Yes. Don't worry. We will prepare accordingly to be sure to catch your brother.”

“Just focus on your duel, Nora. Trust me, we won't miss him,” adds Liam.

I feel better knowing the Black brothers will be there. As expected, Damian most likely won't be able to come, but I know I can trust these two. Even if no one from the Jade Moon Clan will be on my side, they will.

“What of Marcus Sickels?” I ask.

No one dared to bring back that matter on the table for a while, but I need to ask. I’m sure Nathaniel was on it, and I need to know if there is a chance he will show up, too. But he just shakes his head.

“Still no trace, sorry, princess. We are still looking into it.”

If I stabbed him, he couldn’t have gotten very far without help. And I remember how much blood there was, it was no light wound!

Well, for now, I should just focus on the upcoming duel with Vincent. While I go to sit on the couch next to Liam, Nathaniel keeps talking.

“Your birth matter is still a blur, too. Your parents were indeed part of the Gold Moon Clan, both of them. It’s a pack we are on good terms with at the moment, I got some info. Apparently, the Blackwoods got married in their mid-twenties after your mother got pregnant with your older brother. They shortly bought a house to start their family, and it seems like they got less involved with their Clan after that. More importantly, no one remembers them having a daughter.”

“To be honest, I don’t remember living among another Clan before the Jade Moon, either,” I admit.

It's not so rare for young werewolf couples to detach themselves from the matters of their pack to focus on their family. Especially those with young pups.

“What happened to them, then?” Suddenly asks Liam.

All eyes converge on me. I bet Nathaniel already knows... He probably already told Damian about his findings, too. But now that Liam is asking me, and with the siblings there, I can't really hide it anymore. I really don't want to say too much, and my memory isn't too good either. I might as well keep it to what Nathaniel should know, as it is all in the police report. I take a deep breath to answer as calmly as I can.

“They died. About ten years ago. When I was six, my... my mother killed my father and then took her own life.”

Liam and the siblings look at me, dumbfounded. Only Nathaniel acts very calmly, going to the kitchen to grab drinks for everyone. Liam is the first one to react after a minute of heavy silence.

“Wait, what?”

“It's as I said. Our mother was... mentally unstable. She was often depressed or anxious. She had been ill for a few months before it happened, and she had a sort of... crisis. She went mad and... aggressive. She stabbed my father.”

“The police report did mention that Alice Blackwood was under serious medication for her mental health.”

I just nod. I really don't feel like reminiscing any further, so I'm not going to give any detail. This is the darkest memory of my six-year-old self, and I don't want to linger on it any more than necessary. It seems like Nathaniel already dug up all that there was. I take a cup of tea Nathaniel prepared and drink from it, letting everyone stay silent for a while. Bobo and Tonia are looking at me, but I don't want to seem pitiful. Liam, however, is frowning with an odd expression.

“What's with your last name, then? You told us you were named Bluemoon. Isn't that odd you don't even remember being called Blackwood at all? What about your brother? Did you guys ever use either name at all?”

“I never had to. Since Vincent picked us up, I... I spent all my life in the main house. I never had to do any official documents; I just assumed everything already was in order, or that Vincent or Peter took care of it for us. Before Nathaniel brought it up, I never imagined there was absolutely nothing about me!”

“What about the school, then?”

I shook my head.

“I never went to school. The pack just gave me tasks, one after another, and no one ever brought it up. I knew how to read and write, I assumed it was enough. I just studied whatever books were in the basement with me.”

They look at me, clearly shocked.

I remember spending hours reading old books no one wanted, like *Wuthering Heights*, *Metamorphoses*, or *Hamlet*. *Treasures of Literature* with beautiful covers, yet no one ever looked at them. No one cared for the dusty, massive bookshelves since screens and video games were available upstairs. There were also full collections encyclopedias and dictionaries, and I just read them all to complete my vocabulary. I would even pick up history books when I was bored or couldn't sleep.

“...Lucky you.” Mumbled Liam, but Nathaniel gave him a tap behind the head

I can't help but chuckle over his grumpy teenager's face. I wonder if Liam skips school often. It feels like his brothers are keeping a close watch on him, and I can't help but feel a hint of jealousy. Nathaniel turns to me.

“I can't believe they didn't even bother to send you to school... It is intriguing, however, how the Jade Moon Clan also never cared about your legal existence at all. I wonder if they know anything about your origin.”

“I doubt it... Vincent found us in the streets. I guess he was only too happy to find a useful pair of orphans.”

“But he never treated your brother like you?”

I brush my hair with my fingers, absentmindedly, trying to remember our first days with the Jade Moon pack.

“A bit, at first... But Alec just pushed all his chores onto me and seeing I never complained, Vince didn’t really care. My brother blended more easily into the Clan, I guess. Vincent scolded him once, and Alec tried running away. He couldn’t get past the warriors, but after that, Vincent officially admitted us into the Clan so we wouldn’t try to leave anymore. Alec was ecstatic to have joined the Clan, and I... I was compliant, so that was it.”

Liam growls, visibly pissed.

“I can’t believe you submitted to such a weak Alpha... You should have just let me kill him the other day, Nate.”

But his brother shakes his head.

“Don’t be so reckless, Liam. After all, Nora needs to get back at him for all she endured. Let her give him what he deserves herself.”

“You better kick his ass tomorrow!” Says Liam.

I’m not as enthusiastic as he is. They are all eager to see me get my revenge, but that’s not my state of mind now. Sure, I have past grievances over Vincent, but I don’t have that thing for revenge. I just want to settle things once and for all and sever my ties to the Jade Moon.

My main objective will be to get ahold of Alec. I really hope we catch him tomorrow as planned. The brothers didn’t really tell me what kind of preparations they’ve made, but it mostly must be asking a lot of people to chase after my brother once he shows up. The more I think about it, the more I’m convinced he will. I just hope I’m not wrong.

“Nora, are you still okay with beginning next Monday?”

I look at Nathaniel. Oh, that’s right, I told him I was accepting the job. Ready or not, I do need a job, and I have to give it a try.

“Ah, yes. Do I need to bring anything specific?”

“No, not really. Dress casually, and Liam will come and pick you up to bring you there. For the first day, it’s okay if you just stay close to Narcissa, the manager, and watch how everyone works.”

“All right, then.”

After discussing some more, Liam and Nathaniel stayed over for dinner. Since my future boss was here, I did my best cooking, and everyone seemed to enjoy it. Liam insisted on giving me pieces of advice about the fight, making me curious about how experimented he could be. For a high schooler, he does seem prone to fights. Apparently, he’s also taking boxing classes weekly, and was happy to discuss it with me. Obviously, Liam is the most hot-blooded of the three, while Nathaniel always seems very calm and rational. He stayed quiet for most of the dinner, but I did notice he spent a lot of time texting on his phone. The second brother’s face never shows what his real thoughts are. He smiles easily and usually comes as quite charming and polite. However, I won’t forget how he was definitely the scariest one back when facing Vincent.

How can I be worried when I know those two will have my back tomorrow? As I go to bed, I look blankly at my phone’s screen, wondering if I should call Damian or not. Nathaniel did mention he was busy, and... Well, he knows what is waiting for me.

I wake up early.

The only one who is up before me is Liam, who’s having breakfast alone in the kitchen. I salute him when entering.

“Did you have a good sleep?”

“How could I? Bobo snores like a pig.” He growls. “I have no idea how you can get any sleep with him in the same room!”

I can’t help but chuckle as I grab the tea.

“I’m used to sleeping with a lot of noise. The basement I was living in was directly under the recreation room, and there was always someone to watch TV or make noise until late. I had to get used to it. And Bobo’s snoring isn’t that bad.”

He looks at me like I’m some alien, but I ignore him and sip on my cup of tea. We both stay silent for a while. He is on his phone playing a game, and I’m just watching the sunrise behind the glass wall.

“Nate’s on his way.” Says Liam out of the blue

“He didn’t sleep here?”

They explained to me last night that the apartment downstairs was actually one of Nathaniel’s places. He didn’t sleep there often unless he had to work until late in one of the close restaurants, so Liam would use it every now and then.

He shakes his head.

“No, he slept with one of his women.”

So, Nathaniel is a player... You really can't judge a book by its cover.

“I thought he had a mate already...”

“Not really. Well, he almost had one. An older woman. But she was already married, and Nate was a nobody then. It was before Damian took over the Clan. Nathaniel didn't really have anything, and that woman was with a rich guy, with the dream house and everything. She said he wasn't worth the trouble and rejected him.”

What? How heartless! I bite my lip, feeling bad for Nathaniel. How did he endure such a rejection? I can't imagine how I would have felt if Damian had rejected me... I suddenly feel something fluffy on my legs and realize Bobo is up. He casually walks past me to put his head in the fridge.

“Don't tell him I told you, okay?” says Liam. “Nate doesn't like people talking about it. And he's over it now; it's been years.”

I nod and take a new sip. Being a player now doesn't necessarily mean he forgot what happened... I feel bad for Nathaniel all of a sudden. Now I

understand better why he's the type to hide his emotions. What a heartless woman! I feel angry, just thinking about it.

After everyone woke up and had breakfast without rush, I head back to my room to dress up, picking a comfy and sporty outfit. I will shapeshift and get dirty, no need to pretty up today. I put my hair up in a ponytail and choose a dark sweater with some sneakers.

I want to go upstairs and train some more, but Tonia keeps me from it, saying I should save my energy for tonight. But I don't want to do anything either. It's Liam who ends up spending most of his day keeping me company, as he brought his school backpack, and for some reason, we end up studying together on his homework for most of the afternoon. Solving exercises and copying his lessons had the benefit of keeping me too busy to think about the fight. Around four, we paused our math exercises and get ready to go.

Nathaniel meets us downstairs in the garage, wearing his usual smile. He went for a more casual look than what he usually wears, so I suspect he will be ready to shape-shift at any moment, too. Liam, however, didn't even bother changing and is already in his wolf form, like Bobo. Like last time, we take two cars to go.

I start to feel nervous on the way. Tonia casually talks to me, and I suspect she's just trying to distract me. We discuss the songs played on the radio, what weather to expect for the coming days and clothing brands. None of

those really manage to distract me, though, so I do think about the upcoming fight.

I wonder why Nathaniel picked East Point Ground. It's a large plaza in the middle of the industrial area, covered in graffiti and on open grounds. It's a place where skaters or delinquents could gather at night to drink. However, it is not usually crowded, unlike tonight. When I exit the car, I'm shocked. There are dozens of people!

I suddenly get why Nathaniel specifically selected this spot: It isn't part of any turf. Hence, a lot of people from the Jade Moon or the Blood Moon Clan freely came to watch. Duels for the Alpha position are usually private matters inside a pack; however, the Black brothers want to make this one public. Once again, I feel that Nathaniel has a lot more in mind than he let on.

A lot of people are eyeing me as I exit the car, most of them whom I don't know or recognize. With both Bobo and Liam in their wolf forms next to me, I don't feel as intimidated as I could have been. On the contrary, I can't help but look at the crowd.

People from other Clans came to watch the fight. I recognize people wearing markings from the Pearl Moon Clan, the Gold Moon Clan, or the Rising Moon Clan. To my surprise, even a few members of the White Moon Clan are there, too. Don't they have a terrible history with the Blood Moon Clan? But they are clearly harboring the White Moon marking... How odd.

Of course, almost all the Jade Moon Clan is there, too.

Almost all of them are glaring at me. I suppose that's what I should expect, considering the situation. Most of the Clan is here to support Vincent, of course. He is a carefree leader, letting his people do whatever they want most of the time, as long as they don't cause any trouble. He only focuses on his hunters and warriors most of the time.

I finally see him among the crowd. He is discussing with his wife and one of the warriors, probably Peter's replacement as the Beta. He looks tired, has dark circles under his eyes, and his beard is messy. When his eyes find mine, he frowns and ignores me. I wonder if he is having regrets now...

Nathaniel's arrival causes a lot of people to react. They stare at us and move to not be on our way to the center of the plaza. The only ones that didn't move are the Blood Moon Clan's.

I see him smiling. Is he excited about the fight? Or because of the large crowd? I don't understand why they made sure a lot of people could see it... I realize that Bobo is moving his head non-stop, he must be scanning the area, searching for Alec. I had almost forgotten about my brother. I'm still clueless about how many people are actually going to help us catch him. I start looking around, too, but Nathaniel walks up to the center of the plaza.

“Good evening, Jade Moon Clan. I see you didn’t dare to run away from this.”

“I’m not going to run away and leave my turf in the hands of a brat,” growls Vincent.

“We will see that with the outcome of this fight. So, do you acknowledge that if Nora wins, you will let her entirely decide your pack’s fate?”

Vincent looks at me, seeming hesitant. He must be wondering if I really do have a chance to defeat him. Honestly, I don’t feel too confident right now. I don’t trust my Alpha blood as much as Nathaniel and Tonia do. I barely have any experience shape-shifting, and I just learned how to fight. For most people, this would seem a lot like suicide.

However, inside, my wolf is already growling. The battle has already begun, though nobody else can see it. Vincent and I are staring at each other, judging our strength, testing our wolves. I know what his wolf looks like. I know he must be growling just as much as mine right now. It is way too late to back down.

“I will, only on the condition that you guys let us have a fair fight. No interference from your people to help her. She must fight me alone.”

Nathaniel puts on a shocked expression, looking a bit too dramatic to be true.

“Oh, you think we would actually cheat?”

He steps closer to Vincent, and I can tell the Alpha is fighting hard against his instincts not to step back. They may both be Alphas, but the difference is clearly showing. Anyone watching can tell who has the upper hand.

Nathaniel whispers to answer him, but somehow everyone can clearly hear him.

“If we wanted to cheat, we would not bother to organize a public fight here and now. If we wanted an easy win, I would have taken my warriors to kill your pathetic lot of dogs the day Nora led us to you. You wouldn’t have a chance to answer back, and you wouldn’t be standing on your two feet.”

Vincent is obviously shaking with fear. The ice-cold look in Nathaniel’s eyes is terrifying, even for him.

“So now, you’re going to be a good boy and let our precious princess beat you all she wants to settle for everything you have done to her. And I can predict you’re going to think this is heaven compared to what my brother and I have in store for you once she is done.”

Being in the middle of a crowd is nothing reassuring. It's even worse when you know half the people present are wishing for you to get killed. All eyes are directed at me or Nathaniel. I feel grateful to Bobo for standing close to me. His enormous figure attracts attention, and a lot of people seem surprised by his appearance, too. He is almost twice the size of a regular wolf, and those who are there in their animal form are showing signs of nervousness. I would be worried, too, if he wasn't my bodyguard.

Nathaniel's threats to Vincent are quite efficient. Some of the Clan's warriors have started growling, but I also see a lot of them slowly step back. Liam is walking, circling us while growling at anyone who dares to approach this invisible circle. Tonia is standing at the back, arms crossed, and I notice she now has a wireless earbud in, and she's talking to someone. I wonder who she is talking to.

Now, it's only me, Nathaniel, and Bobo facing Vincent and his new Beta. Everyone else is watching us, waiting.

"She is just a kid. She won't win," says the Beta.

"Shut up," says Vince immediately, annoyed. "Go with the others."

His Beta gives me a mean look, but he can't help but obey. I turn to Nathaniel, too. It's time. He just smiles at me and turns back to join Tonia. I put my hand on Bobo's back, and his green eyes turn to me. I give him a smile. I know he's reluctant to go.

“Don’t worry, Bobo. Go.”

He lets out a short sound and goes, too, but not without growling at Vincent. He’s so loud, the Jade Moon pack’s Alpha jumps from surprise. If Bobo had Alpha potential, he would be unstoppable... But I guess it’s evident that despite his size and strength, his temper is more Beta-like.

I’m left alone with Vincent. He considers me from head to toe with a sneer. I try to be as unreadable as Nathaniel, hiding my emotions.

“You will regret it, Nora. Did you think you suddenly got big because you have a strong back-up?”

I ignore his remarks. My wolf is growling like crazy, and she’s the only one I intend to rely on tonight. I might lack experience, but I know I’m tenacious and strong-willed.

I wonder if I should take off my sweater now, but it’s still chilly. We both step back to a ten-foot distance between each other and start walking slowly. Everyone tenses up around us, feeling the battle’s about to start. I wish Damian was here. I would be even more confident with him behind me. But he’s not.

It’s just going to be me and you, girl, I whisper to my inner wolf.

I mentally recite all of Tonia and Liam's advice. Mind the distances. Watch his eyes, the way he moves. I'm weaker, but I'm faster and smaller. Liam told me every weak point I should aim at, for his wolf form and his human one. Duels between werewolves don't really have rules, aside from being one-to-one, and no weapons are allowed. We can shape-shift whenever we want.

I have tried shape-shifting a few times, and Tonia immediately pointed out my strong point: I can shape-shift extremely fast. I have to make use of that. Liam said the best outcome for me would be a short fight. I need to take advantage quickly.

We take a few steps, walking in a circle while observing each other. I tried to guess when Vincent is going to attack. Liam predicted that he would take the initiative to launch the first attack. Vincent won't want this to take long either, as he is worried for his pack.

And he does. I see him suddenly shift his balance and run towards me. Try not to take any hits, said Liam, you are too weak to endure several injuries. I dodge his fist at the very last moment and slide under his arm to stand behind him. I immediately kick behind his knee as Liam showed me.

It works! He can't help but bend and get on his knee. Don't miss an occasion. I go to launch my fist, aiming for his jaw, but before I can reach him, I see a leg expanding, and I'm suddenly kicked in my stomach. He

pivoted at the last second, and I couldn't do anything to stop him. I'm ejected a few meters back and fall miserably on the ground. Wow, that really hurts... I feel like throwing up. It's been a while since I've taken such a hit, but Tonia's advice comes back to mind immediately. Never stay down. I get up, ignoring the pain.

“Are you trying to get killed, Nora? What is the point? Do you think you can be an Alpha all of a sudden and win my Jade Moon pack over like this? Or is it that you want us all killed and at His feet?”

“Do you think you can call yourself an Alpha, Vincent?” I ask.

He looks at me, frowning, confused by my question. I take off my sweatshirt and tighten my ponytail.

“What now, are you going to complain about how we treated you again? Are you playing the pitiful girl now that you have found your wealthier pack to lounge at?”

“I'm not talking about myself. You are weak, unable to make decisions, and ready to bow to other Clans anytime just so you can take it easy. You don't control your young ones and let them roam freely and unsupervised. You don't train them. You don't care about others. You mind your own business as if you were a Rogue.”

“Careful with your words! Don't you insult me!” He growls.

“Oh, do you really want to have the talk about insults? Mockery?” I shout back.

He growls even louder but doesn't talk back. Instead, I see him look towards where Nathaniel is. But he hasn't moved. He appears very relaxed, standing next to Tonia and Liam, and Bobo is now the one walking in large circles around us. Liam was right. Having the Black brothers watching us will not let him concentrate on the fight. I know I can take my chance. This time, I jump at him while he is still staring at Nathaniel and throw a punch to his solar plexus.

He saw me coming at the last second, and to my surprise, he doesn't dodge. He takes the hit, contracting his muscles. Does he want to show he is more robust than me? I don't care, I still throw my fist as hard as I can, and a second later, he obviously regrets not protecting himself. I've learned how to throw a punch now. His breath is cut short, and for a second, he is choking, falling on his knees, and desperately gasping for air. I hear growls and angry voices rising around us, but I don't listen. I knew this kind of thing would happen, and I trust the others to control the crowd one way or another.

While Vincent is still choking, I take a couple of steps back and get ready to hit again. My wolf warns me just in time. He's shape-shifting.

It takes about two or three long seconds to Vincent to turn into a dark-brown wolf. That is way longer than me, but still. Facing a wolf is way

different from facing a human man. I adjust my position and throw a kick at the right moment to send him away. He falls a bit further, but I know I was just lucky his shapeshifting took long enough for me to be able to prepare my kick. Now, I will be facing a wolf, and that's a whole different thing. I need to shape-shift and let my wolf take over, too. But at the right moment.

I take a couple of steps back, and I feel my wolf getting impatient. Just a few seconds, girl. Wait for it, wait... And there he goes. As expected, he jumps as soon as he can get on his feet again, running towards me. I stand ready, carefully waiting for the right time. He runs closer, and when he's almost at me, all fangs out, I shape-shift.

I erase my human self, letting my wolf completely take over. It's even shorter than a split second for me. Like going through a wall of fresh snow. I jump on the other side; the sudden change brings my wolf-self right at the perfect spot to attack his exposed neck. She bites furiously, with a newfound rage, and he lets out a plaintive whimper. Her fangs on his throat are powerful, I can already smell the fresh blood. He struggles, trying to kick her off him, but she won't let go. She's clenching her fangs hard, not giving the slightest care for his pain.

Around us, people start yelling loudly, calling me names, or telling their Alpha to free himself. Not a chance. I'm not letting go. We won't. He knows what he has to do, and he just doesn't want to. He tries fighting back for a while, but I can taste his blood in my mouth. He is running out of time. My wolf wants him to submit, or she'll kill him. His pack encourages him not to give up. Are they blind? I'm biting his throat! I

could kill him with just a snap, though I don't want to kill anyone. Is he counting on it? I won't. I can control my wolf perfectly; she and I are one. I'm not like some of us who can't resist their beast instincts and attack randomly.

Suddenly, I feel a vivid pain to my flank, and let go by instinct. I don't know what happened, but he probably managed to scratch me deep enough. I feel the blood flowing from my injury, but not enough to worry me. We are not done yet.

I trust my wolf. I know she can keep up a fight now that she's tasted blood. I let her take control. Most of the crowd are now cheering, but others are all stunned by my appearance. I hear comments on my blue eyes and white fur. Liam seems overexcited, leaning forward and growling loudly.

“...Stay with your wolf.”

Vincent suddenly attacks, and the voice in my head surprises me enough to almost not see him coming at me. I react at the last moment, throwing my fangs at him.

“Don't let him dominate you!”

Who is guiding me? I listen to her anyway, and start fighting him off. I growl loudly and don't let him take the upper hand. He is bigger, but I'm beginning to understand his tactics. I can dodge some of his moves

smoothly and manage to bite him back for every time he manages to injure me. I can see he hasn't fought for a while. He tries to get a hold of me, but I won't let him. I'm careful not to let him too close or get on top of me. I'm starting to get tired, though. It feels like this goes on for a while before I finally see an opening on his flank. I aim for his shoulder with no restraint and bite as hard as I can.

"Take him down."

I use my strength and his sudden reaction to the pain to push him down to the ground, laying on his flank. He is still fighting me off, but his shoulder and throat are obviously painful for him.

"Go for his neck."

The voice in my head is guiding me all the way, I don't have any time to wonder who is mind-linking with me. I fiercely bite Vincent's neck and hold him down. This time my fangs won't let go, and he can barely move, let alone free himself. I'm smaller, but my front legs are on his back, and the continuous pain is getting to him.

"You got him."

I hope she's right and hold my position. The crowd's getting louder, but I don't care. I'm waiting for Vincent to admit his defeat. I'm tired, I want to finish this soon. His pack keeps encouraging him, but some are starting

to yell at him for being weak. The other Clans seem to have lost interest in the fight, the outcome is clear now. They are patiently waiting to see it.

Finally, Vincent submits. He stops fighting, his tail between his legs, and whimpers. This is it. I slowly let go and retreat a few steps back. Tonia comes up to me to give me my sweatshirt so I can cover myself when shifting back to my human form. This is quite embarrassing in front of so many people, even if it's for a split second! Thankfully, Bobo stands in front of me, too, and I suppose the best anyone got was a quick peek at my butt before I got my panties on.

I stand up and look at Vincent. He takes his time to shift back, and his wife brings him a pair of jeans to put on. I wish he would hurry up, I'm freezing with my bare legs... Gosh, while looking down, I just noticed I'm bleeding from under my sweatshirt, probably my flank injury. Some got on Bobo's brown fur, too, as he is standing right next to me. I try to gently push him away, but it's like trying to move a mountain, he doesn't care one bit. He is focused on Vincent, growling at him and his pack, making sure no one dares to come at me. Meanwhile, I see Nathaniel walking up to me. He smirks at Vincent.

“So?”

Vincent growls, but bends one knee and lowers his head, his neck covered in blood... I can't believe I really did this. He is visibly furious, but with so many witnesses, he has no choice.

“I acknowledge my defeat. Nora Bluemoon is now free to lead the Jade Moon Pack if she wants.”

A lot of unhappy pack members growl, but they don't have a say in this matter. Vincent raises his eyes to look at me, filled with hatred. I look around. Is that right? I see Nathaniel smiling, but Liam is still fiercely growling. A few pack members have come to gather behind their Alpha.

Vincent might be a lousy Alpha, but his Clan still values him very much, as the Greene Family took over the Jade Moon Clan a few generations ago already. I sigh. What do I do now? I could take over, and they would have no choice but to obey me, but...

“Do it, Nora. Isn't it what you wanted?” Says Vincent.

I realize everyone is waiting for my decision. I turn to Nathaniel, but he's still smiling mysteriously, leaving me to decide. I breathe in.

“I don't want to be your Alpha. That will only be an excuse for you guys to hate me more than you already do, and you will turn against me on the first occasion. I don't want to have to fight every day until one of you gets to kill me.”

Everyone is looking at me, surprised. They probably didn't expect me to reach such a decision. I see the beginning of a smile on Vincent's face. Oh no, you won't get away that easily.

“However, I do have conditions,” I say.

Now everyone is back to growling again, but other than the Jade Moon pack members, everyone is staring at me, all ears, waiting for it. I look straight at Vincent’s eyes.

“The Jade Moon Clan will pledge full and complete allegiance to the Blood Moon Clan from today on. Your turf will become part of their territory, and your Clan members will follow the same rules as theirs.”

“What? What kind of condition is that!” Yells Greg.

I glare at him, annoyed by their attitude. I take a step forward, and Bobo follows me, growling loudly at them.

“I just dominated your Alpha, I’m free to do whatever I please with this pack. You guys never cared about training properly, so it’s high time for things to change. Your turf is one of the first grounds outside of Silver City. If anyone launches an attack on the area, you will be the first wall of defense. Do you want to stand on the frontlines being unprepared like you are now?”

They look at me, dumbfounded by my words. I turn back to Vincent.

“And you, you’ll have to finally act like a real Alpha. You will train the young ones properly, watch the border, and make sure everyone in your Clan is treated fairly. Am I clear?”

My apparent calm may have led him to think he could answer back. He growls at me.

“Who are you to decide what kind of Alpha I should be? Aren’t you washing your hands of my pack? You are giving us to Him, and now you get to decide what we...”

“protecting their pack is the duty of any alpha here!” I start yelling. “Stop being so lazy and do what you were named Alpha for! You may have their respect, but you are worse than a dog if you think you can sit comfortably and relax just because of that! Any Clan could overpower yours, and yet I’m giving you a chance to keep your turf and pack and turn them into a proper one! If you don’t like it, all of you leave!”

A long silence befalls on the assistance. I’m fuming, pissed at their attitude, and Vincent’s ignorance. But all of a sudden, I feel an arm around my waist, and a familiar smell surrounds me.

“...It seems like my coming here wasn’t necessary.”

I turn around, facing him. I can’t believe he really came!

Damian is holding me tightly against him, but his silver eyes are glaring at Vincent. I notice that everyone in the plaza has reacted to his presence. A lot of people have instinctively stepped back, shapeshifting to their wolf forms or regrouping with their peers. I'm sure some people even ran from the scene right away.

But the most scared one is definitively Vincent. He doesn't dare to look up now and is shaking. Honestly, I don't feel sorry for him; I'm tired of his attitude, and if Damian can finally get him to understand his place, so be it.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper.

"I couldn't sit still while you were fighting this trash. And I have a few things to settle once you're done with him..."

His ice-cold voice is definitely aimed at Vincent. Even his pack members don't seem so sure about staying close to him now, as nobody wants to have a share of Damian's wrath. But I'm not like them; I don't fear him. Instead, I'm feeling even more confident with my mate next to me. I glance at Vincent, too, letting him make up his mind.

He is now looking at me, carefully avoiding Damian's piercing glare.

“We agree to your terms, but we would like to pledge allegiance to you, Nora. I promise to do as you said, and I do recognize that I have lacked as an Alpha.”

To me? I don't understand why they would obey me instead of Damian. Aren't they supposed to form alliances with other Clans instead of a single person? Now it's like he is submitting his Clan to me, but I'm not sure I want to be responsible for the Jade Moon Clan... Though in this configuration, it would be more like having ownership while Vincent is managing it, I suppose? When our eyes meet, I think I get it. My earlier words really did have an impact on him. Is it possible that I do have Alpha potential, as Tonia and Nathaniel thought? I exchange a look with Damian, but his eyes are still on my former Alpha. He is clear: I can do whatever I please with them. I turn to Vincent.

“That's fine for me, then.”

“All right... The Jade Moon Clan, with me, Vincent Greene, as its acting Alpha, swears a total and willing allegiance to Nora Bluemoon. May the Moon Goddess be our witness tonight.”

A few people in the plaza applauds or whistles. Nathaniel and Damian both seem content too, and my mate gives me a swift kiss on my forehead.

“Well done, princess.”

I smile and blush, still a bit shy. I think it's the first time Damian called me by something else than my first name... I lean my head against his chest. I'm tired, but his warmth is the best thing right now. He glances down and frowns with an angry look all of a sudden. I forgot the blood running from under my sweatshirt. I shake my head and try awkwardly to lower my clothing on my thighs.

“It's okay, it's not that bad.”

Damian is not listening to me, his eyes fixated on the thin trail of blood. I want to say something, but suddenly, both Bobo and I turn our heads in the same direction.

Alec's smell. I'm sure of it. Bobo jumps ahead of me and starts running in that direction. I only take a second to shapeshift, escaping Damian's embrace. I hear Tonia behind me.

“Nora, no! Don't!”

I'm not listening and not stopping. Running on all fours, I'm right behind Bobo, following Alec's scent in the north-west direction. I'm sure my brother was close just a second ago— we can't lose him again. Bobo is much bigger, but I still catch up to him, proving that I'm definitely faster than most. We run side by side, chasing the same person.

I hear, or sense, other people running behind us, too, but no one can catch up to us. We have to act fast; I can't slow down. We chase him for a long time and enter further into the industrial area of the city, running past several warehouses. Is that where he was hiding? This is a remote area of the town; it could make a good hide-out.

I finally spot my brother running in his wolf form ahead of me. He is a mix of light brown, white, and sand colors that I can easily recognize even in the dark. He is fast, too, but not as fast as I am, and I'm catching up. It's only a matter of seconds now. We have arrived at the Docks area, which I am not familiar with. From what I can see, there is nothing but old warehouses on our left and the sea on our right. If Alec keeps going North, we will end up on the Sea Moon Clan territory, though. I definitely don't want to enter there; we will be attacked right away.

I'm almost on him! I realize I ran ahead of Bobo and lost him, but I can't think about it now, and he can't be too far behind. He will probably catch up soon. I have to focus on catching my brother. Without warning, Alec suddenly turns around to face me.

I wasn't prepared for that. I try to slow down as much as I can. Alec seizes the occasion right away and jumps on me. For a second, I think he's going to attack. I realize I'm wrong a second too late. He pushes me with all his strength. I'm already unsteady because of my run, and I can't defend myself. In a split second, I realize what he is doing. He just pushed me in the sea. ...Alec knows I don't know how to swim.

My body brutally hits the surface, and I gulp a lot of water unwillingly. I try to paddle, but I'm disoriented by my sudden fall and the freezing waves surrounding me. I can't believe he got rid of me so easily!

I have to find the surface, but I'm choking, unable to breathe. I panic, trying to fight off the water blindly, desperate for air. I start to feel numb and tired. A dark veil is taking over me, and my head is spinning...

"Hang on!"

Air! I feel myself being pulled out of the water, and I start coughing unstopably. Someone's patting my back, helping me breathe and pulling my hair out of my face. I hadn't even realized I had shifted back.

"Are you okay?"

That's the voice that was talking to me during the fight! I want to answer, but I'm drowsy and just nod while trying to catch my breath.

"It's okay, breathe. Use the mind-link to talk to me, don't waste your strength."

How do I do that? I try to formulate a clear thought, and I feel my wolf helping me somewhere in the process.

“Thanks.”

I feel her shapeshifting next to me before I can take a glance at her. But when I look up, I immediately recognize her creamy-white fur and her gold, mesmerizing amber eyes. I’ve seen this wolf before. She was the wolf accompanying Nathaniel when I went to the Jade Moon Clan a few days ago.

“Don’t worry; they’ll be here soon. Bobo got him. Just catch your breath, your mate is coming. I got to go,” her voice echoes in my mind.

“Wait! Who are you?”

“I can’t stay. I am not supposed to be here. Don’t worry, I’ll find you again. Don’t tell anyone about me. Especially not Nate.”

I want to say something, but before I do, she’s gone, and I am in no condition to try catching her. I’m exhausted and can only lie on the ground. I close my eyes to try and chase the dizziness away, but an unknown smell suddenly grabs my attention. Other wolves.

I hear growling and try to stand up, but I’m way too tired. It’s not good... I look up and see a bunch of unfamiliar wolves slowly circling me, menacing. I’m sure they are from the Sea Moon Clan. This is really bad.

I'm lying on the ground, too tired to defend myself, or even return to my wolf form! A guy in his human form goes ahead of his peers with a nasty look on his face.

“Look what we got here... A pretty mermaid just landed on our docks, boys. Are you lost, sweetheart?”

I answer with a growl. That guy is making fun of me. Gosh, why do I have to be defenseless and naked now! He frowns at my growl, unhappy with my response. I wish I could be more menacing than that, but even my growl shows how weak I am at the moment. In response, all of them start growling back and come closer.

Suddenly, a large shadow flies over us, and a young black wolf attacks them without warning. He pins one of them to the ground and breaks a neck in one swift motion. All of the Sea Moon wolves take a few steps back, some getting ready to attack, some afraid. I finally recognize Liam's fur, and by then, another beast comes.

He is pitch black, darker than night. He moves slowly, his fangs showing, the menacing wolf exudes the most dominating aura I've ever felt. He seems even bigger, surrounded by shadows. I gasp. All of the Sea Moon wolves are focused on his presence, obviously wary of him. No one dares to move an inch.

Damian finally reaches me, standing above my naked body, in a protective position. He is guarding me and looking straight at the man who talked to me with killer eyes. The guy gulps, his gaze going from Damian to me back and forth. The terrified look in his eyes says it all.

“I... We didn’t know, we just... wanted to check on her. It’s...”

Damian’s silver eyes are still on him, without blinking. He is not growling or moving, but even I can feel his anger from here. Liam lets go of the neck he had his fangs in and shapeshifts. I try not to look at the naked teen in front of me.

“Hey, I thought you guys wanted to play, what’s this?”

Gosh, Liam, you’re having way too much fun right now.

“We don’t want to cause a fight. We just came to check why intruders were approaching. And you attacked us first!” He shows his injured comrades, still lying on the ground. I can’t tell if they are unconscious or dead, but the amount of blood on the asphalt is not okay. Liam doesn’t care.

“So what? Do you want to complain? You guys should have stayed put instead of coming to take a peek at my brother’s mate while she was vulnerable.”

“We did not know who she was!”

But Liam shrugs. Above me, Damian lowers his head, gently pressing his muzzle against my cheek. He’s worried about me. I raise my hand to lose my fingers through his fur. I’m so tired, I feel like I could fall asleep here on the ground. I hear a car coming and steps rushing towards us.

“Nora!”

It’s Tonia. She approaches me and covers me with a large coat. Finally, someone bothered about me being naked. Damian has been covering most of me with his body, but still. He gets up, and I can hear him changing back, too. When I look up, Damian already and only has a pair of jeans on despite the cold. I can see his bare torso; I never noticed how muscular he is. I look away, though I’m probably too cold to blush any more.

Suddenly, I feel strong arms pulling me up, and Damian taking me off the ground. It’s a bit embarrassing to be carried like a princess against his chest when I’m wearing nothing but a coat! And in the middle of a territory dispute, to boot. I’m soaked, tired, and I probably stink more than I can smell.

“Can’t we just go home already?” I ask.

Liam turns to me with a pout, visibly annoyed that I'm ruining his fun. Damian doesn't care, though. He heads back to the car without a glance at the dozen hostile wolves behind him, Tonia behind us.

"What about Alec?" I ask.

"Bobo got him, don't worry."

Behind us, I hear Liam growling. He and the Sea Moon Wolves haven't moved. We reach the car, Damian sits at the back, with me on his lap.

"Liam!"

The youngest Black brother can't disobey, but he still gives a glare to the guy.

"Next time, guys."

He dashes to join us and finally sits in the car while Tonia drives away. I notice a few wolves outside that must have come with them, but they all quickly disperse as soon as the car starts. I try looking for the creamy white wolf from earlier, but I don't recognize anyone.

"What about Nathaniel?" I ask.

“He stayed behind to take care of things with the Jade Moon Clan.”

I nod. Why didn't that female werewolf want Nathaniel to know about her presence? I assumed she was from the Blood Moon Clan, but it seems more complicated than that. How could that woman mind-link with me? She is not from the Jade Moon Clan, and aside from that, only relatives or bonded mates can do such a thing!

Unlike I thought, I couldn't fall asleep in the car. I don't know what kept me awake, despite the long trip and my exhaustion. For a while, I just stared at Liam's silhouette against the window and the city's nightlife behind him. Tonia put the heater on, and I'm starting to feel better already. She has some jazz music playing on the radio, not too loud, though. Sitting on Damian's lap, I feel his hands gently brushing my hair. Gosh, I always feel so safe whenever I am in his embrace. I'm cold, soaked, and exhausted, yet I am content being there. What happened in just a few hours seems crazy.

“You okay?” Asks Damian

“Just a bit tired... What about Alec?”

“We caught him. Boyan is taking him to one of our houses as we speak.”

“Are we heading there?”

I want to settle things with my brother now. After selling me, and trying to kill me twice, I think it is high time we have a little conversation. Tonia stops me in my reflections.

“No, we are not. We’re going to the hospital. Nora, in case you haven’t noticed, you are bleeding.”

“Well, I know, but I figured I would just... heal.”

“I meant you are still bleeding.”

I realize Tonia’s tone was a bit worrying for a reason. I check the cut on my thigh, and it is indeed still leaking a bit of fresh blood. And it stings, thanks to the seawater. It may be deep, but I thought my wolf would have taken care of that by now. Why am I not healing fast? Any werewolf is supposed to do that! That’s part of the checklist: Shapeshifting, enhanced sense of smell, mind-linking, night vision, and healing fast! Why don’t I?

I try to get to my wolf to explain this, without success. Meanwhile, Damian lifts a bit of the coat, too, checking my injury with a frown. I bite my lip. Okay, this deep cut is worrying. Liam is looking, also, a bit curious until realizing that this is still my bare leg, and thus, his brother is glaring at him. He quickly looks away, but I’m pretty sure he is blushing. Sorry, Liam.

“Why aren’t you healing?” Asks Damian.

“I wish I knew... I thought I would heal like any werewolf now that my wolf is fully awake, but... I don’t get it. Maybe it’s the salt from the seawater?”

“You’re not a bad spirit, Nora, salt doesn’t affect werewolves...” sighs Liam.

“Maybe a Witch’s curse, then?”

“You mean the ones that our father would be stupid enough to keep living in a city full of werewolves instead of exterminating them...?”

I feel Damian stiffen all of a sudden, but Liam doesn’t notice it. I knew about their father having chased all vampires out of Silver City years ago. That’s not a secret for anyone. He made sure it was... blatant. I don’t think I have heard anything about witches, though. Is it the mention of their father that makes him react then...?

“Liam’s right, I don’t think we have any witches in the area, and anyway, I don’t see why a witch would have anything against you. You were under the radar until a few days ago,” says Tonia.

Well, I don't have any other ideas. I keep looking at my cut, disturbed, but Damian puts his hand on it, slowing the bleeding. I sigh and rest my head on his shoulder once again. He presses his lips against my forehead gently.

"It's okay, we're almost there, baby girl."

"Thanks, Tonia, but... I don't get it. Why don't I heal? There is already enough going on, with my brother and all the mystery surrounding my birth, and now this..."

Nobody answers, but I feel Damian tensing up. I should have known. If it appears that I am really unable to heal myself, my already very protective mate will probably not like it at all... We finally arrive at the hospital, but no VIP room this time. Damian carries me straight to the ER, and an old lady doctor comes to examine me. She is tall, skinny, with long white hair. She seems acquainted with Tonia, judging how they are openly conversing about my injuries and sharing her notes. Apparently, other than my apparent cuts, I have a broken rib and a few bruises. After a few stitches and the bandaging, I'm only left with some swelling and an ice pack. Liam gives me a wink. "Not bad for a first battle."

"Nana, any idea why Nora isn't able to heal herself?" Tonia asks the doctor.

Wait, what? Does this mean this woman is actually Bobo and Tonia's grandmother? She does look a bit like the siblings now that I think about

it... She has the same chocolate-colored skin and Bobo's greenish eyes. Well, that would explain how Tonia knows so much medical stuff without being a medic herself.

"I don't know, sweetie. This is the first time I see such a thing. Well, you are healing a bit faster than a human, to be honest, but a regular werewolf would already be healed by now."

"Then what is it? Maybe a spell?"

The doctor rolls her eyes at Tonia.

"What's this idiotic idea? No witchcraft can prevent a werewolf from healing herself. Trust me, I know enough about black and white magic to know this has nothing to do with it."

I'm even more curious now. Bobo and Tonia's grandmother seems to be acquainted with magic, how cool is that? She smiles at me and shows my banded injury with a comforting smile.

"It's going to be fine. You just have to bear it the human way."

"I can do that. It's not like this is my first time..."

Liam smiles, but his brother is clearly not happy about it. Damian remained silent until the doctor came and was next to me for the whole examination. Now though, I think it might have been better for him to stay outside. He reacts so negatively each time I'm wounded...

We exchange a look, and he exits the room without a word. Tonia's grandma watches him go, but she clearly isn't affected by his Alpha aura.

She is not one of us, whispers my wolf.

Oh, that certainly explains it. I wonder how she got werewolves grandchildren then? After all, she still seems to know quite a lot about werewolf specifics.

"He probably just went to call Nate or Neal," explains Liam.

I nod and turn to Tonia and her grandmother.

"Then, can I go now, doctor? I have spent enough time in the hospital as it is, recently."

"Oh, you can call me Nana or Granny Adriana, sweetie. And yes, just make sure you take your medicine, and you're free to go. Rest well tonight, and make sure you eat enough, sweetie. Antonia, tell your brothers they have to come to see their old Nana sometime."

Granny Adriana gives us a smile and exits the room. Liam and I turn to Tonia with the same smirk.

“Antonia?” I tease.

“Oh, shut up, you two. I hate my first name,” she grumbles.

About an hour later, I finally exit the hospital. It is dark outside, but Damian carries me straight to the car despite my protest. I want to see my brother, but the three of them are against it.

“You need to go home and rest baby girl, you heard Nana. Your brother can wait.”

“Don’t worry, Bobo and Nate are watching him. He’s not going anywhere,” says Liam.

Damian doesn’t say a thing, but he clearly agrees with them. He’s barely said a word since the hospital. I wonder what he is thinking. But to be honest, I’m too tired for any deep thinking right now.

Once we finally reach the apartment, Damian carries me all the way to my bathroom before exiting to take a call. I can finally take the hot shower I

dreamed about on the road. It was high time; I really do stink after the battle and that short swim. Tonia comes in to help me wash my hair, as I'm too tired to stand after all that. I really have to work on improving my stamina.

When I'm done, I finally feel clean in my blue pajamas. I arrange my hair in a low bun for the night and prepare myself to sleep when Tonia comes back carrying a tray with a three-course meal on it. I frown.

"No, don't you say you don't want it," warns Tonia. "If you do, I can call the Boss and have him spoon feed you like a baby."

I can't really say anything after that. Tonia puts it in front of me on the bed. Well, it does look good. Vol Au vent, pesto pasta, and even an almond cake for dessert. I bet all of this came straight from one of Nathaniel's restaurants.

I start eating under Tonia's close surveillance. We don't really talk since she is busy texting someone, and I'm lost in my own thinking. I haven't forgotten about the she-wolf that helped me during my fight and pulled me out of the water. Seeing how she called him "Nate," I guess she is related to the second brother somehow. But then why wouldn't she want him to know she was there? He didn't seem to have anything to say when she was with us at the Jade Moon territory... I wish I knew her human form or saw her Clan marking. She said we would meet again soon, but how? I don't even know her name!

“Nora?”

Damian came back to the room, followed by Liam. Apparently, I’m not the only one that showered, the youngest brother also smells like soap. I’m not done eating, so he sits in front of me on the bed while Liam walks to the window, standing next to Tonia with his arms crossed.

Damian’s silver eyes are glowing scarily, and I’m instantly worried. Did something bad happen?

“What is it?”

“Why does Bobo say that your brother is the guy that attacked you?”

Oh, crap.

I forgot about that. I didn’t even think Bobo would be able to identify him, considering how it was raining that day. Still, he did chase after Alec and hurt him. He must have identified him then, and that also explains how he recognized his scent as quickly as I did earlier today. I bite my lip. Damian looks really angry, and Tonia is staring at me with wide eyes, too. I put my fork down. How do I handle this now?

“Nora!”

“Don’t yell at me! Yes, Alec is the one that tried to kill me.”

They all look at me, shocked.

“I thought that Marcus guy was the one!” Yells Tonia.

“No, the guy you saw that night in the alley was Alec.”

“I thought you only wanted to find your brother to ask him about your birth thing?” Says Liam.

“Yes, that, too, but Alec hates me, and yes, he tried to kill me.”

Twice, actually, but they don’t need to know that. Gosh, Damian looks furious. I feel bad for not telling them the truth earlier, but I’m a hundred percent sure he would have killed him on the spot if he knew everything.

“I knew something was odd about your brother,” exclaims Liam. “When we were at the Jade Moon Clan that day, your former Alpha and that weakling girl did mention he had been wronging you, and you said he lied, too.”

“No wonder he wanted to avoid us so badly now,” says Tonia.

The only one that remains silent is Damian, despite his fuming eyes on me. I try to reach for his hand, but he gets up. Both of his fists are clenched.

“Damian, say something, please.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I didn’t want you to get mad at him.”

“Really, Nora?”

Okay, I do realize it is way too late now. Damian is obviously furious and mad at me, also. I sigh, trying to find my words.

“Damian, I need to solve things with my brother. Yes, Alec hates me, and he tried to kill me. But that’s my problem, okay? I need to talk to him and solve things with him. I can’t do that if you kill him first!”

“I want to kill him, Nora!” He yells. “I don’t give a damn about him being your brother! I’ll slaughter anyone who touches you, and he fucking tried to kill you! You would be dead if it wasn’t for Tonia and Boyan! You lost your voice, and you were in a coma for days! How do you think I felt after

I finally found you, and yet I had to watch you while you were unconscious in a hospital bed day after day!”

“I am mad, too! How do you think I feel after my own brother tried to strangle me? Damian, for the last ten years, there wasn’t a single day Alec was nice to me! He was the worst, but he is still my only blood relative left, and I need to know why he is like this! I’m not protecting him; I just want to face him myself! Damian, I need you to let me do this!”

He stays silent, and I can tell he is seriously thinking right now. Gosh, why do we always end up yelling somehow? I’m even more exhausted now. And in front of Liam and Tonia, too, though they both seem concerned.

I get up and grab Damian’s arm. He ignores me, but I still hold his hand and look at him.

“Damian, please. Alec’s attitude changed after my parents’ death, and I need to know why. He is the only one that can help me know why my birth was kept a secret. After I talk things through with him, I promise he will be out of my life.”

He stays silent for a while, then turns to me, with his ice-cold eyes.

“That’s why you didn’t want me to hurt him.”

“Yes. You promised me, Damian.”

“That was before I knew he tried to kill you!”

“Damian!”

He can't go back on his promise now! We both glare at each other for a long time. I'm not going to let him touch Alec. Then, I see his eyes shift slightly, and he points at my scar.

“Is he the one who did this?”

“What? No, Alec has nothing to do with my scar, I swear.”

I'm telling the truth this time, and I really hope he will believe me. He keeps staring at my scar, and I hate it. He usually ignores it, so why is he curious about it now? I tighten my grip on his hand, seeing how conflicted he is. Can't he stay here with me? I just want to go to bed, sleep in his embrace, and forget about all this for a few hours. But the anger in his eyes is not reducing in the slightest. I bite my lip.

“Damian, please. You promised me you won't hurt him.”

He looks at me again, and all of a sudden, leans in to kiss my forehead, before storming out. I stay there, completely blank. Where did he go now? I turn to the others, but a long silence follows for a while.

“Don’t worry,” says Liam, “my brother never breaks a promise.”

I wouldn’t be so sure about that. Damian looked really, really angry. What do I do? I turn to Tonia, worried. What if he really kills Alec? I need him to talk! After staring for a while, she rolls her eyes and takes out her phone.

“All right, I’ll call Neal. But I can’t guarantee the Boss will listen, Nora.”

I nod, biting my lip anxiously. It’s better than doing nothing... I haven’t met Neal yet, but seeing how mad he was just now, I doubt even Nathaniel will be able to stop him if he really decided to kill Alec. I just need to talk to my brother. Why do I have to worry that Damian will actually slice him or something?

Tonia exits the room to call her brother, and I sit back on the bed, exhausted by all this tension. Liam comes to sit with me, pushing the tray towards me so I can finish eating.

“Your brother is a real piece of shit.”

“He wasn’t always like that... When we were kids, he was nice to me. My mother never really liked me, but Alec and my dad did. He changed when she died.”

“Do you have any idea why?”

I shake my head and finish eating my pasta while thinking. Why, indeed? How did my brother come to hate me overnight?

“He said something like it’s my fault we are orphans.”

“About your parents’ death? You said it’s just your mom that went nuts. How could it be your fault? The police report Nate found was the same.”

I sigh. I really don’t understand either. I was there when our parents died, and that was the most horrifying thing I ever saw. Alec was there, too, we both saw the same thing. So why does it feel like I’m the one missing a piece of the puzzle?

Liam takes a bit of my cake, frowning. He looks a lot like Damian when he does that. The three brothers really look a lot like each other despite their different personalities. Nathaniel is the only one who is blonde with blue eyes, and he’s about the same size as Damian. Liam’s eyes are a mix of blue and grey, and since he is younger, he still has room to grow, but I bet he can get taller than them in the future.

He notices I'm observing him and frowns again.

“What? Is it because I took your cake?”

I laugh a bit and shake my head. Liam may be the same age as me, but he can be really childish sometimes.

“No, I was just thinking. You guys are close.”

He shrugs. “We had to. Our father was... He never gave a damn about us. He was obsessed with his Alpha stuff and never cared about his family. The only one he ever cared about was his mate, our mom, but he changed a lot after suddenly becoming the Alpha. He became more and more of an asshole... And our mom was sick for as long as I remember, but she loved us. She was the best.”

Looks like Liam was really fond of their mother... I wonder what she looked like. Did they take after her? As for me, I didn't resemble my mother, nor did I ever feel close to her... She clearly always preferred Alec, but she wasn't cold to me either. Until... Liam takes a new piece of the cake and keeps talking while eating.

“We took it hard when she died... But the worst was our father; he got even more violent. Her death really made him snap.”

I frown and get closer. I recognize that dark look in Liam's eyes. I know it all too well. Could it be...?

"He beat you?" I ask softly

He nods, avoiding my eyes. "He beat anyone... any reason was good. Damian and Nate took most of the hits. They always protected me because I was younger. That just made our father even madder. Life with our father was hell. Damian stood up to him every day, despite still being a teen, and even his Beta couldn't stand him. He fought with anyone like some mad dog. He always was crazy about gaining more territory, more power, killing vampires, fighting other clans..."

I didn't know that. Back when I was young, the former Blood Moon Alpha was famous for being ruthless and extremely violent. Still, I never imagined he was even abusing his own children. I remember how people respected him a lot for chasing the vampires out of Silver City, years ago. But I guess none of them knew what kind of man he really was... No wonder Damian got as strong and fierce as he is today if he had to face this kind of monster since they were young. Liam growls and turns his head to me with a frown.

"Honestly, Nora, if your brother is the same kind of bastard as my father was..." He sighs and shakes his head with a disgusted face.

I know. I think I finally understand Damian's anger towards my brother. Moreover, he experienced all of my hardships through our bond, too... He can't ignore it like that. Who would have thought our families had so many similarities?

I finish eating with Liam's help. Apparently, he and Tonia will sleep here tonight. I wonder if Bobo is guarding my brother with Nathaniel. It's a bit weird to not see that big brown wolf following me everywhere tonight. I guess I got used to his presence.

Despite my exhaustion, I have a troubled sleep that night. I have nightmares about drowning, Alec hitting me, and a young black-haired boy crying. Images of everything that happened today keep coming, more vivid and intense. When I wake up in a cold sweat, I am trembling and feeling more tired than I was before going to sleep. It is about five in the morning and still dark outside.

I know I won't be able to go back to sleep. I used to have such nights back in the basement, it's nothing new to me. Instead, I get up and head for my bathroom. I check my injuries while dressing up. Thank Moon Goddess, it does look a lot better than yesterday. I give up and leave my hair as it is after an attempt to brush it and put on a hoodie, as I'm still feeling chilly. Fully awake, I head to the kitchen as silently as possible. However, I didn't expect to find Damian there.

His dark silhouette is standing still, facing the large window with a cup of what smells like dark coffee in hand. He changed clothes and even shaved. Seeing me enter, he frowns and walks up to me.

“Nora? Why are you up at this hour?”

“I could ask you the same thing. When did you come back?”

He sighs and puts his cup down to embrace me. Gosh, it’s only been a few hours, and I already missed being in his arms... It seems like his anger has dissipated. The question is, how...?

“Half an hour ago. I didn’t kill your brother. Neal called me on the way, convinced me not to. I went to the office to work instead.”

So, he just went to work? In the middle of the night? I hope nobody was around to receive his anger on the way to his office... I need to thank Tonia’s older brother later. I wonder what kind of Beta he is, but obviously, he knows how to handle Damian reasonably well.

“To work? You didn’t sleep?” I ask.

“I did, for about three hours. I have a private loft above my office.”

Of course, he does... I don't even want to try thinking about how rich he must be. The less I know, the better. For now, at least.

He puts his hand on my cheek, examining me despite the darkness. I must look tired. It's a bit embarrassing.

"How are you?"

"I'm okay. I just couldn't sleep..."

All of a sudden, he lifts me up to have me sit on the kitchen counter, facing him. He is still taller than me, so I have to look up. Standing so close to each other like this, with him between my legs, is kind of embarrassing. But he doesn't seem to care. Instead, he keeps his hands on my waist and lands a soft kiss on my forehead. Then, he retreats to look at me in the eye with a stern expression.

"Are you worried? About facing your brother?"

I just nod, biting my lip anxiously. I have to admit I am. It's not like we will be thrilled to see each other... And we will have to discuss some really, really painful memories.

"I hope I will get the answers I'm looking for. It kills me to be in the dark, not knowing why Alec resents me so much, why he hated me all this

time...Why he hurt me so. I just... I don't know how I can find the strength to face him after everything that happened."

Damian gently brushes my hair and leans to gently kiss my neck. I shiver slightly, but his lips keep going, flying like butterflies from my neck to my jawline, to my cheek, before he finally takes my lips for a sweet, long kiss. I answer his kiss, and a small fire ignites inside. Whenever Damian touches me, it's like the most natural thing in the world. All of my anxiety goes away, replaced by this instinctive desire for my mate. Yet, I don't want to let go of my human self, a bit shy and clumsy. I place my hands around his neck, looking to gather some self-confidence I don't have. It's like Damian's strength is getting to me, and when our lips eventually part, I feel a lot better already.

He looks into my eyes and whispers, "Nora, I won't let him do anything to you anymore. Don't worry. I swear, I won't let anyone touch you, hurt you, ever again."

I smile at him and put my hand on his cheek. I love this man.

I don't know when I realized it, and I don't really care. I just know I do. The way he is so dangerous, yet so protective of those who matter to him. The way his silver eyes look at me as if he could capture me. His warmth, the feeling of his skin against mine, and how he kisses me, forceful yet so tender. It feels so dangerous, so wild, yet so right. It's like I'm a different person, a version of myself I had yet to reveal. Being with Damian can be scary at times, but I still find myself wanting more.

Like this, when I lean to kiss him, despite blushing like crazy. It's thrilling, and I feel a bit proud, being able to show my feelings, too. He smiles softly, obviously pleased by my boldness. Then he takes his turn to kiss me again.

"Oh please, can't you guys get a room?"

I jump, surprised by Liam's voice. Why can't anyone sleep at this hour! He is looking at us with a disgusted face, with only his pants on and his hair all messy. Damian sighs and retreats a bit, leaving his hands around me but still watching his brother's moves. Actually, Liam ignores us and walks to the fridge, opening it with a grumpy face on, scratching his bare stomach. He frowns and turns to me.

"Nora, you guys don't have anything ready to eat here? I'm starving!"

Now that I think about it, I didn't see him have dinner yesterday, aside from my almond cake. I don't know who usually cooks for him, considering that he lives downstairs, but Liam is obviously clueless while looking at the fridge's content. Damian sighs and lets me get down of the counter.

"I'll make something if you can wait a bit."

“Yes!”

He makes a winning gesture with his fist, and I just roll my eyes. I guess it’s okay to cook breakfast at five in the morning if everyone is up anyway... Tonia is still sleeping, but she will probably get up sometime soon, too, per usual.

Turns out I was right. An hour later, the four of us are sitting around the table, having breakfast while it’s still totally dark outside. Tonia turns to Liam as I’m serving orange juice. “What about the school, kid?”

Liam rolls his eyes and is about to say something, but then his eyes cross those of his brother. In a split second, Liam’s attitude changes and he sighs. “I... I’m going. After breakfast.”

I can’t help but smile. Apparently, Liam can be cheeky with others, but he won’t risk it in front of his older brothers... I already noticed it before with Nathaniel. He sighs, but Damian is just quietly enjoying his coffee. Now, Tonia is smirking while Liam is frowning at his breakfast.

I start drinking tea, absorbed by the first rays of sunlight, throwing orange and pink shades into the sky outside. Now that I think of it, we are on the 1st of December. It’s already been over two months since I met Damian, his brothers, and the siblings. My life really did change a lot in just a few weeks. So much, it’s almost unbelievable. I still feel like I could wake up

at any moment, finding myself back in the basement and realizing this was all just a dream.

“What are you thinking about?”

Damian caught me daydreaming, and I blush a bit.

“Not much... When are we going?”

“It’s up to you, princess!”

I turn around. Nathaniel just arrived, looking very proper as usual. He walks up to us and helps himself with the coffee. Judging from the large cup, he probably didn’t get much sleep either.

“What about Alec?” I ask.

I was almost prepared to see him followed by my brother, maybe even Bobo, but he came alone. Now that I think about it, I didn’t even see them catching Alec

“It’s okay. Your brother is under tight surveillance and all ears for your questions.”

I frown. I don't like the way he said this. He might be smiling, but I still don't really believe it, not with his choice of words. I turn to Damian, hoping he did respect his promise, but he is eating his breakfast silently. I put my cup back and get up to face Nathaniel.

“Okay, let's go see him now, then.”

Nathaniel nods.

About twenty minutes later, the four of us are in the familiar white car that I assume to be Nathaniel's as he is driving instead of Tonia. Liam stayed home to finish his breakfast before going to school. While in the car, I feel the anxiousness rise again. I turn to Damian, but he is just looking at his phone, his hand on mine. It seems like he is reading emails, probably working.

I try thinking about something else instead. Looking at Nathaniel in the mirror, I suddenly remember the she-wolf from yesterday. She mentioned him specifically, even referring to him as “Nate.” Aside from Liam, no one seems to call him that. Now that I'm reminiscing about her... something does feel familiar. No, it smells familiar! It's her smell, I'm sure of it. Why can I smell it all over Nathaniel's car...?

It's a bit disturbing, now that I'm focusing on it. It's definitely that she-wolf smell... Doesn't that mean she comes in here often? But if she's close

to Nathaniel, why would she hide from him that she intervened last night to save me...? What could be between those two?

Moreover, her relationship with Nathaniel aside, I still have to understand how she could mind-link with me. That was my first time experiencing it for real, and it felt so natural, so clear. I wish I could hear her voice again. She said she would find me. How? She sounded confident, but I'm guarded non-stop by either Damian and his brothers or Tonia and Bobo. Is she okay contacting me with them around? Will she?

While I'm lost in my thoughts, the car finally stops in front of a large, modern-looking company building. We have arrived. For some reason, I was expecting something more secluded, maybe a warehouse, like in Tonia's action movies.

Damian opens the door for me and takes my hand to guide me in the building. There's even a middle-aged doorman, and he politely inclines when the brothers walk in. He's not a werewolf though, is he? The building looks pretty standard, against all my expectations. We walk into a lobby, and two ladies welcome us from behind the reception desk. Gosh, this is a bit intimidating... Isn't this an office building? I'm glad I dressed up a bit more than my usual hoodie. I'm wearing a white sweater and a pair of dark jeans, but I wish I had put heels on instead of my sneakers... Well, Tonia is wearing a jean ensemble and her usual sports bra, so I guess it's okay.

There are a lot of office workers despite the early hour, but nobody really pays attention to us. Damian leads us into an elevator. Some people that were queuing to get in immediately step aside to let us through. Why does everybody turn so silent as soon as they notice Damian? It's like he's some mafia boss; we walk out of the elevator, and once again, a lot of people turn around or politely salute him wherever we go. It's a bit embarrassing. Nathaniel and Tonia don't say a thing, and Damian still hasn't let go of my hand, caressing it with his thumb.

"Is this your office building?" I finally ask.

"One of them," answers Nathaniel. "Damian and I work at the headquarters; this is just a secondary office. We have a dozen like this across the city."

I had no idea... I should really start learning more about the Black Brothers' businesses, I hate feeling so clueless like this. We are now on the eighteenth floor, which looks empty. It's frigid, with grey walls, empty open spaces, and almost no decorations. Nathaniel guides us through several corridors until we finally enter a large meeting room.

I gasp. It's reeking of blood here! I cover up my mouth, feeling immediately disgusted by the smell. But I have more to be concerned about.

The room is almost empty, except for chairs. There are three people already present. A large and tall guy, the exact same skin tone as Tonia, is leaning against a wall, playing with a knife. His hair is completely shaved, he has a ring piercing on his eyebrow, and with his black suit, he could be the protagonist of any spy action movie. He salutes Damian as soon as we enter the room. “Hello, Boss.”

Is that Neal? He looks a lot like Tonia and older. Plus, Bobo is there, too, in his wolf form as always, sitting in the corner of the room. He sees us come in but doesn’t move. Neal walks up to us, but I don’t care.

All I can see is Alec, sat up in a chair in the middle of the room, looking like he just came back from hell.

I’m not exaggerating. My brother has a lot of blood on his face and his clothes. As I noticed back at the mall, he’s a lot thinner than before. His upper lip and one of his eyebrows have significant cuts, still open and bleeding, and he has a black eye. His shirt is ripped open, and his chest shows contusions and large lacerations. He’s a total wreck. They even actually put a large plastic cover under his chair so all the blood wouldn’t stain the floor!

“You promised not to hurt him!” I yell, furious.

I want to run to Alec, check on him, but Damian holds me back. I glare at him, but he won’t let go of my hand.

“Oh, Damian didn’t,” says Nathaniel.

I stop and turn to face him. The second brother is smiling at me with a look I don’t like at all. He walks up in front, and he and Neal both raise hands.

“We did, princess. You can be mad at us, but we didn’t promise anything.”

Who are they kidding? They just took advantage of my own words! I glare and even growl at both of them, furious, but they obviously don’t care. Neal has a blank expression, and Nathaniel keeps his annoying smile on. They act like this is some funny joke, but I’m miles from being entertained right now!

“Stop laughing! I didn’t want you to hurt him!”

Neal rolls his eyes. “Oh, please. We were already nice, considering what he did to you and how much he struggled. If it wasn’t for you, this would be settled already.”

I know what he means by “settled,” but I’m not scared by their words. I’m too mad right now. Are they telling me they didn’t go all the way to kill Alec for my sake? How is that supposed to be a proper explanation for his current state? Before I can add a thing, a laugh starts from behind them.

All eyes turn to Alec. My brother is laughing like a mad man while looking at me. “There she is... My precious little sister! What now, huh, Nora? Don’t you want to finish the job and kill me yourself? You must have wished for this all these years...”

Is that really my brother? I look at him, disgusted. He has that crazy look in his bloodshot eyes, in the way he stares at me that makes me really uncomfortable. But I can’t step back now. I’m done being intimidated by Alec or his words.

“Enough with this, Alec. I never wanted you dead.”

He scoffs and suddenly stops laughing. “Too bad. Because I want you dead.”

Damian immediately starts growling loudly while heading towards him, looking furious. I try to hold him, but it’s actually Neal that comes and stands between Alec and him. They struggle a few seconds, but with Neal and me holding him back, he eases up a little. Tonia is growling, too, less loudly, and Nathaniel is just staring at Alec like he’s observing some curious science experiment subject. Bobo stood up, also, and starts walking in circles around Alec. I know he’s ready to attack and kill him at any moment, though he doesn’t look agitated at all.

With nobody actually stopping him, Alec keeps talking.

“Mom should have just killed you in the first place. Too bad, she missed!”

“Stop talking like this!” I shout back.

“Why? You don’t like it? But it’s the truth, isn’t it?”

“No. Mom was sick, she...”

“You made her sick in the first place!” He suddenly yells.

I don’t get it! What do I have to do with our mother’s sickness and our parents’ death? Why is it my fault? How can it be my fault? I was six years old! I remember way too vividly what happened, and I had nothing to do with it!

I remember it all too well. It was the end of November, ten years ago. Our mother had started acting strangely for months already. She had always been a very calm and discreet woman. I don’t think we had many visitors, her whole life revolved around her father and us. She took care of the house, watched us, and didn’t work. Dad was the one always away for work, for days sometimes. I suppose that had to do with the pack, though I don’t really remember it.

Our mother never seemed unhappy, but she was clearly happier when Dad was home. I don't think that she didn't like us, but somehow, she was never a very loving and caring mother to me. It seemed more like a job, a mission she had been assigned on since we were born. Alec was the one always looking for mom's warmth. I was okay with her passive attitude. She never scolded us or got angry. All she wanted was for our dad to be with her, look at her. When he was, it was like her whole world illuminated. The entire house was much happier then.

She was a pretty woman, with her long brown hair and dark eyes, but she was like a lifeless doll unless our dad was here. She would always make herself very pretty and tell us to behave when he came back. Those were the best days for everyone, as dad was home, and mom was nice and happy. As time passed, it somehow got worse.

She kept ignoring Alec and me, and always looked for my dad. Mother paid less and less attention to us, as she wondered how to look prettier for him. I remember her spending most days in front of her mirror, talking to herself. She couldn't stand him being away. Sometimes, when he was away for work, she sat and blankly looked outside the window for hours, not hearing a thing around her. She could get confused about what time it was, or the date of the day. She asked where our father was a hundred times a day. She only ever talked about him. As children, it was complicated to understand what was going on, but Alec and I somehow got used to it. We spoke to her when we felt she needed it, or we didn't. I was just a child then. I had no idea how bad it could go.

On that day, it snowed for the first time of the year, so I got home all happy. I loved the snow because the snow kept my dad home. I don't remember where I was before that. I think I was with a friend... I can't really remember. I just remember how I played in the snow on the way home, jumping around and leaving my little boot footprints on the white coating of powder.

As I walked closer to our house, I started hearing terrible screams. I recognized my mother's voice right away and started running. I had no idea what was going on; I was just worried about my mother. I pushed our front door and followed where the screams came from, completely panicked. When I entered the room, my parents were there, loudly fighting and struggling. Mom, her hair all over the place, had a large kitchen knife in her hands and kept trying to stab my father with it. Dad was holding her wrists, yelling at her to calm down. Alec was there too, crying, begging her to stop. It was the most terrifying thing ever. I had no idea what was going on. Dad was yelling. Mom was screaming, tears running down her face. She looked crazy and... desperate.

I wanted to run away, but I was so scared something wrong would happen to my dad. I walked towards them. I didn't even make it all the way. A slashing sound and blood covered my favorite white coat. I saw my father's chest cut open, and his eyes wide open in surprise. His knees gave away, and he fell on his side, right next to me. I remember how my eyes slowly turned down to him. He was looking right at me.

He muttered my name very slowly. As if he had just realized I was standing there. For a second, the scene froze. My mother's yelling

stopped, and she looked at me in shock. I thought it would end, that she would realize what she had done.

The next second, a silver flash, and the left side of my face became horribly painful. My vision went completely red. I saw my mother branding the knife one more time. I am going to die, I thought.

I was pinned to the ground. My head hit hard against the floor. A dark silhouette had come over me at the last second. I cried from the pain, but the fear was even worse. The thing covering me wasn't moving. I couldn't see a thing. I could only listen to my dad's erratic breathing next to my ear. Mom's screams started again, and more slashing sounds followed. His body twitched over and over again.

I was so scared. The side of my face hurt, and I could hear terrifying sounds, yet I was blind. My mother kept screaming. Alec kept crying. It seemed to last for hours. I heard my father's breathing stop right before I fainted.

I take a deep breath.

"When I came back to my senses, mother had stabbed herself, too," I say. "The knife was still there, right in the middle of her chest, and you were crying, Alec. Dad's body was still on me, and I struggled to get up. I really remember it. We spent a long time there, both crying in silence. When you

got up and left, without saying a thing, I just followed you. That's how we ended up in the streets, and Vincent found us a few days later."

"Oh, Moon Goddess, Nora... And you were just a kid..." Muttered Tonia.

They are all looking at me with wide-open, shocked eyes. I can't blame them. It's my first time telling this story out loud, and it's horrible for me, too. I really didn't want to reminisce, but it's time to clear this up with Alec.

Damian's hand is still firmly holding mine, thank Moon Goddess, because I'm shaking. All those emotions are overwhelming me, and my wolf is quietly whimpering, too. My parents' death is like a big black hole in my heart; there is no way I can talk about it calmly.

Alec stares at me with eyes of contempt, not moved in the slightest.

"Sorry, was I supposed to cry?"

"You can say what you want, Alec, but I did not kill our parents," I retort with a hoarse voice.

"Really? You think that's it? You're so clueless, it's pathetic, Nora."

“What?”

I want to believe he is the one who is acting crazy and making no sense, but for a second, he looks so composed and sure of himself that I can't help but wonder. Is it really possible? Something I possibly missed in that memory? Something that only Alec? It can't be. I saw it with my own eyes, and I'm a hundred percent sure of this memory.

Alec laughs at my confused expression. “Oh, you can stop thinking, Nora. You have no idea, do you? You're so pathetic... You think you're a victim, that you couldn't have done anything wrong? But guess what, sis. You didn't have to do anything! You did anyway!”

He's crazy. His sentences make no sense. Why do I have to listen to all this? I shake my head. “Enough, Alec!”

“You were freaking born! Here's what you did wrong!” He yells.

What? What is this now? This makes no sense... While I'm lost by my brother's words, Tonia suddenly walks up to him and slaps Alec with all her strength. She looks furious.

“I'm done with your stupid word games! Spill it now, you damn junkie, or I swear I'm finishing you myself!”

“I said it! If she wasn’t born, my family would have been perfectly fine!”

“What do you mean?” Asks Nathaniel, getting impatient too.

Alec spits a bit of blood to the ground, probably because of Tonia’s hit. She growls and steps back to let him talk. Alec stares at Nathaniel then Tonia before his glare comes back to Damian and me.

“Mom wasn’t sick,” he says, “she was just in love. She had loved our father for many years since they were kids. They were from the same Clan, and they grew up together. The only one mom ever loved was him, but they weren’t fated mates. So, even if she tried, for years, our father ignored her. He believed he might find his mate someday...”

His eyes shift from me to Damian with a smirk. Damian growls again, but I put my hand on his chest to have him wait. Alec annoys me, too, but I want to hear it. Damian’s hand covers mine and presses it gently. His growling gets a little softer, but he still glares at my brother.

“As years passed, it became clear neither of them found their mates, so he eventually agreed to start dating mom. A few months later, she got pregnant with me, and they got married. Can you imagine how happy she was? The love of her life finally marrying her, letting her have his children!”

I don’t like how he makes it sounds...

“Father was one of the Clan’s hunters. He wasn’t very good at it, to be honest, and our grounds weren’t the best either. Father wandered further and further into the North, apparently to patrol. Every time he was away, Mom disliked it, as you remember. Yet there was another reason. As our dad went away, she started to wonder. What if he was still searching for his fated mate?”

Insecurity? Is that what it was? But our father never found another woman...

“Yet, father always came back home, and every time, Mom’s worries disappeared just as easily. For three years, she was all right. She just missed him while he was hunting. She soon forgot about her doubts, because no matter what, dad always came back and eased her. One night, while he had been gone for days, Mom was awakened by a baby’s cries. That’s how you came into our lives, Nora. A newborn baby, crying on our doorstep.”

Wait, what? It can’t be. They told me... I mean, I was sure I was born from Mom! And plus, I resemble my father! That’s when I suddenly understand. Oh, Moon Goddess, no, no, no...

Seeing the expression on my face, Alec smirks.

“Do you start to understand, Nora? Mother took you in. After all, you were just a newborn baby, and your parents were nowhere to be found. When dad came home, he agreed with it right away! How funny, huh? Mom had no idea back then. She started taking care of you, too, as her own daughter. After all, Dad loved you, didn’t he? Do you start to understand, Nora? What sort of bastard our father was?”

I shake my head. No, I don’t want to hear it. My dad didn’t do that. Alec sighs and smiles.

“So, years passed! Mom was fine, letting you believe you were her daughter since it made our father happy that way. Yet she slowly started to doubt, watching you grow. Because somehow, you looked like me, you looked like Dad. How amazing is that? Whenever dad was away, our clueless, stupid mother was left with the two of us and her doubts. Despite our three years difference, it started to show, Nora. Our nose, like Dad’s. Our curly black hair. Even our voices. All those little, but intriguing similarities. Can you imagine how much Mom started to think and wonder? What if? What if you really were our Dad’s daughter?”

Tears silently start running down my face. I wish he was lying. I hope this was all a made-up story, something twisted that Alec invented to hurt me. Yet why does it feel like this is the truth? The last, scary piece of the puzzle.

“Years and years to wonder, Nora. She never dared to ask. If she was wrong, Dad might get angry and leave her. That thought alone kept her

silent for almost seven freaking years. Can you imagine what it does to the mind, Nora? All this time, every single minute, wondering if you are raising your husband's child, yet knowing it's not yours? But she loved him. Oh, Moon Goddess, she loved him so much she kept her doubts to herself for so long. Until that day."

That fateful day. And all this time I thought my mother just had gone crazy all of a sudden... I had no idea she had to keep it bottled for so many years. How did she feel every time she looked at me? Did she despair inside, yet hide it? She never said a thing...

Alec closes his eyes, and I suddenly see a tear among the blood on his face.

"One day, she finally asked him, Nora, she did. I was upstairs. I heard them yelling... When I came down, Mom was... she was crying. She kept asking him how he could do this? Have a child with someone else and leave another woman's baby on her doorstep? He didn't say a thing all these years, keeping the lie alive! But you know the worst, Nora?"

This time, we are both crying. Tears flow, and I can't stop. Alec doesn't care, he keeps talking, half smiling, half crying. He looks crazy again, and his tone keeps changing. Yet this time, no one is stopping him. We are all listening, stunned by the truth unveiled.

“He didn’t even do it for her! It’s not because he wanted to keep his marriage! Not even because he was afraid of leaving her, or because he wanted to stay with his family. He lied for you, Nora, all for you. He wanted his daughter to have a normal family, to be able to grow up with a mother and a father. With a Clan to protect her. All his lies, all he did, he did it for you!”

I’m crying desperately, shaking my head. I can’t hear it. I can’t believe it.

“You did it! Because of you, my father became this man! He drove my mother mad, and he lied to us! Just because of you, Nora! Because of you!” Yells Alec.

I can’t hear him. I’m crying and sobbing hard; I don’t want to listen to this. My head is spinning. I want to leave this room; I want to forget this. Little black dots cover my vision. I hear Damian’s voice, but I don’t understand. Strong arms hold me, and I fight the dizziness to stay awake. I blink several times, trying to breathe to calm down. I feel a hand on my back, patting me. Tonia’s voice reaches my ears.

“That’s it, baby girl, breathe, slowly. Calm down, it’s okay. It’s okay.”

“Nora, Nora...”

I hear Damian repeating my name, and I feel his arms around me. I'm in his arms again, but I still feel colder than ever. I close my eyes a bit to rest against his chest while trying to slow my breathing and stop crying.

"She has a bit of a fever, boss, probably from last night... "

"Let's take her back."

"No."

I don't know where I found the strength to protest, but I open my eyes and clumsily try to stand up again. Damian helps me, and I can rest on him while regaining my composure as I can. I turn to Alec.

"What about my mother, then? My... birth-mother."

He shrugs. "How would I know? I figure the bitch is dead... How about you join her?"

Bobo and Neal both angrily growl as a warning. Damian turns to his Beta. "We're done with him."

"No, stop!" I yell.

After all this, Alec is a victim, too. What happened to our family was not his fault. He was just a kid, also, only ten! He loved our mother so much, and... after what happened, I can't blame him for hating dad and me. I know how awful he was to me, I didn't forget any of it, but... but I don't know what I'm feeling right now, I'm baffled. Too confused to make any right decision. I can't let Damian have him killed. I don't want to regret it later.

Alec laughs at me again with a smirk.

“What, you want to save me, Nora? Play the nice sister? The pitiful one? When are you going to get it? I hate you! And I don't regret a thing I did to you! Every single time I hit you was fucking worth it! I wish I had killed you that night!”

All of a sudden, I lose balance and see Damian rush towards Alec. He's way too fast. Bobo jumps to stop him, but Damian punches him away like a sandbag. Neal steps in a second later, but Damian runs into him with full force. The Beta is projected against the wall.

Damian shapeshifts into a black wolf, his fangs ready to take my brother's throat. I scream.

He's about to kill Alec. For a split second, I see my brother dead. The black wolf rushes towards my brother, and it takes me a couple of seconds

to realize there are no two black wolves. I didn't even see Nathaniel jump in. Everything happens so fast.

As soon as he realizes it's his brother, Damian steps back, growling furiously. Yet Nathaniel keeps standing in front of Alec, his pale blue eyes fixated on Damian. The two wolves growl and glare at each other, and for a while, I'm terrified they'll fight.

"Don't worry," says Tonia. "the Boss would never attack one of his brothers. Nathaniel is convincing him to let your brother live."

I nod, fighting the dizziness while Bobo and Neal both get back up. Bobo comes to my side to support me, while Neal walks to his Alpha, probably arguing with him, too. I wish I could hear it. Damian won't stop growling.

After what seems like an eternity to me, Damian turns back to me and shapeshifts swiftly. He only puts his pants back on while I'm shyly looking away. Nathaniel probably shifted back, too, because I can hear his voice.

"Let me handle him, Nora," he says. "Don't worry, I promise we won't hurt him anymore."

When I look, he is putting tape on Alec's mouth to shut him up. I don't know how I feel about this. I want to make sure Nathaniel's not tricking me again, but he speaks before I get to it, guessing my thoughts.

“Don’t worry, I’m serious. I will have him put up for a psychological evaluation and rehab, okay? We will keep him under surveillance at the hospital.”

I don’t really get how they are going to take him to the hospital after they did this to him themselves, but I don’t care anymore at this point. I’m still way too shocked by his earlier revelations. I’m still teary and tired. Just when I was about to try and get up again, Damian walks up to me and takes me outside, carrying me away from the scene. Behind us, Tonia and Bobo are ready to follow, but Damian growls.

“Leave us alone.”

Tonia frowns, but we are already at the elevator. Damian steps in and turns around. I hear him pushing one of the buttons, and the door closes. He’s still carrying me, my head against his shoulder when he softly whispers. “It’s okay, Nora.”

Just as he says these words, something I was holding up until now suddenly breaks loose. I start sobbing loudly against his neck. I can’t stop it. My arms around Damian’s neck, I cry like a little girl while he holds me tightly against him. It’s unstoppable. I feel so weak, so overtaken by everything I just heard. I can’t deal with all those emotions at once. I feel so stupid! All these years, I had no idea what had happened between our parents. How could I be so clueless and naive!

I keep crying, unable to bear it any other way. Damian is walking again, but I have no idea where he is taking me. I just want to exult my pain somehow and keep crying.

At some point, he sits down. His hands move, one to caress my hair, holding my neck against him, the other around my waist. I feel his lips pressed against my temple as he tries to help me calm down.

“It wasn’t your fault, Nora. Don’t cry...”

I can’t. Tears flow, and my heart tightens painfully. My family was destroyed from within, and I was the cause of it. I can’t forgive myself for being ignorant all these years. I was the little seed that implanted the madness in our mother’s mind. I can’t even blame my father! What happened to my birth mother? Why didn’t I grow up with her? If Dad had a lover, why did he stay with Alec’s mother all these years without saying a thing? Did my biological mother die, as Alec said? I have more questions than I can handle, and so much grief, I can barely breathe.

Damian is whispering softly against my ear, trying to calm me down. I’m shaking in his arms, sobbing uncontrollably.

“You’re okay, Nora. None of this is your fault. You didn’t know. You were too young. It’s okay, you’re okay...”

He keeps caressing my hair and murmuring comforting words, leaning kisses on my head or temple from time to time. Despite all this, being in Damian's arms makes it all a little easier. He rubs my back, soothing me. After a while, I lean back a bit, still sitting on his lap but facing him. He brought us to what looks like an immaculate office, probably his. I look at him, still teary and probably looking really messy after all this crying.

"I... I can't believe it. My dad, he..."

"He probably did this to protect you, Nora. I don't know what happened to your birth mother, but he made sure to keep you with him, and he protected you until the end."

"I'm the reason he died! And mother, too! She went insane because of me! Because I existed!"

Damian shakes his head and puts his hand on my cheek, caressing me gently with his thumb, keeping me close to him. "No, Nora. Your parents had issues. Your father should have told the truth, and your mother probably had troubles before you came. Nora, you are not to blame. You were a baby, you had no idea."

"But Alec, he..."

"Your brother took his frustration out on you. He had no right to. Despite what happened, you were not responsible, Nora."

I have a hard time believing it. No matter what Damian says, everything happened because of me, because I was born from my dad's affair with another woman. How do I live with this? What do I do with it from now on? I never knew, but now...

Damian suddenly kisses me, taking me by surprise. His lips are gentle against mine yet passionate as usual. After a few seconds, I answer his kiss, carried by the movement. I don't want to fight it. I need his comforting presence; I need him. His warm hands on my skin, his fingers grabbing my hair. I love this feeling, this wave of heat coming from inside, like a low fire burning within. I grab some air and continue the kiss, my arms around his neck. Is this really okay? After all that happened, it seems crazy to be having a moment with him in this office. It's just the two of us, and everything is quiet. Behind Damian, this fantastic view of the city that makes it look like I'm in Heaven with him...

His lips get more passionate against mine, and I don't say no. Our breathing accelerates, and I feel hotter than before. I shiver, feeling his fingers on my skin. One of his hands is under my shirt, caressing my back and giving me delightful shivers. I gasp and hear him chuckle. Is he amused by my awkward reactions? I'm shy, I can't help it!

I try to kiss him a bit forcefully to make up for it, and I can tell Damian is smiling against my lips. His fingers clench tighter in my hair, and his other hand holds me closer to him until I'm actually sitting astride him. Our kiss gets more intense, and I hear our breath intertwine, echoing loudly in my

ear. Our lips part and Damian aims for my neck with ruthless kisses. I bite my lip and find myself leaning on the side to offer him more of me. What's happening to me? I should be embarrassed, but my desire for more overtakes it all. My hands are on his back, caressing his neck and putting my fingers in his dark hair.

“Nora, Nora...”

His voice whispering my name is making me crazy. I seek his lips once again, and our kiss starts anew. His hands progress on my skin, caressing me gently. ...But suddenly, a cold shiver rises.

“...good girl, Nora. ...don't you play hard to get now.”

I gasp and stop the kiss, panicked. Damian doesn't notice and keeps kissing me. His hands keep going, and I shiver all the more, but not from pleasure this time. I'm scared.

“Stop, Damian, stop!” I almost scream. I struggle, getting off his arms, stumbling, panicked. He looks at me, shocked by my reaction. He tries to hold me back, still confused, but that only scares me more. I fight him off, and when he finally releases me, I almost fall on all fours on the side.

“Nora? Nora, what's wrong?”

I get up and cross my arms in front of me, tearing up again. I can't believe it. I'm scared. I'm afraid of Damian's touch! He gets up and wants to come close, but I shake my head and retreat. Kissing was okay, but... He looks at me, confused. Oh gosh, I'm so, so sorry... I'm about to cry again. Damian stops and sighs.

“Nora, tell me what is it.”

His imperious tone, as usual. But I can't even utter a word right now. I'm scared and horribly ashamed. How can I compare Marcus and Damian? Why now? I shiver and shake my head again, my arms around me like I'm shielding myself. He grabs his phone.

“Tonia, get here. Now.”

He sounds so angry. I wish I could hide somewhere. It's my fault. This kiss was intense, perfect, and yet here I am, rejecting him like a crazy girl. As if I needed this now. I thought I needed Damian, so why do I find myself eluding him! I wish I could run back into his arms, ask for his warm kisses again, but I'm terrified. Those cold shivers won't leave me, and I don't think I can reject him twice.

He keeps glancing at me, silent. He must think I'm crazy, maybe he even regrets having such a troublesome mate! That's not the end of my dark thoughts, but thank Moon Goddess Tonia finally enters, followed closely by Bobo and Neal, the later back in his human form.

“Everything okay?” She asks, worried, as soon as she enters. She comes to me, taking my face into her hands. She frowns almost immediately. “Nora, you’re burning! I knew you had a fever. Boss? We really need to take her home,” she tells Damian.

“Take her back.”

Damian is still staring at me, but he won’t show his emotions. Tonia, understanding there is something wrong between the two of us, puts an arm around my shoulder and pushes me toward the exit of the office. “Okay, baby girl. Let’s get you home now, you need some rest.”

I nod weakly, still dizzy and a mess. Damian watches me exit the room, but I can’t decipher his cold silver eyes. I feel numb while Tonia escorts me out of the office. As we pass the door, I hear Neal’s voice. “Why the murderous look?”

The ding from the elevator makes me jump, and Tonia softly pushes me inside while my mind is still somewhere with Damian. I start sobbing again when the machine starts, and Tonia sighs. “Oh, Nora, you’ve had a tough day, huh? You have dark circles under your eyes, too...”

She rubs my back, trying to comfort me. Gosh, I just want to go home and curl up in my bed to cry once and for all...