

Chapter 9

The next Friday, even while working, I can't help but think about my conversation with Elena again. A baby... She started crying after telling me about Nathaniel being the father. I was unable to say anything and just felt useless, listening to her. I just found out she is my cousin, and now she is also pregnant.

Eventually, that friend of hers, Daniel, took the phone and said they would call back. I haven't heard from them since then, but I know she probably just needs some time.

I still felt bad for Elena, though. If she is not Nathaniel's girlfriend or anything, how will she handle this pregnancy? It explains why she was so distant from him yesterday, also why Daniel and Bobo were so adamant about protecting her during the battle. A pregnant werewolf can't shape-shift, not without risking the baby's life— the shapeshifting is too much of a struggle on the body after the first few weeks. I wonder how far how along she is?

I'm too busy to think about it any deeper, though. Earlier this week, a garbage boy took a last-minute sick-leave, and I had to replace him for the

day. Turns out, Chef Michel was so happy with my performance in his kitchen that day, he fought with Narcissa to keep me there. So now, I must switch all the time between the kitchen and the restaurant, even during the actual service. Not that I would complain, though. I like working in the kitchen so much!

Chef Michel and I are now on a first-name basis. It has become a habit now that I would come and help the kitchen staff in the morning. I am nowhere near the level of the cooks or aides here, but they are always teaching me things and even asking for my opinion at times. It's thrilling to keep up with the rhythm in the kitchen, but I'm doing my best. Once again, everyone was surprised how well I handle the pressure. Truthfully, I'm a bit proud of it. Like any chef, Michel yells a lot, but this is really nothing compared to what I've felt before.

Once the service is done and we start cleaning up, Chef Michel suddenly calls me, sending someone else to take over for me. He is smoking at the back of the restaurant, like always. I don't really like the smell; I just stand a few steps away not to be impolite.

"You called for me, chef?"

"Yes. You did a perfect job today, Nora. Again. And what was that suggestion you made this morning? For the dessert?"

"Using rosemary to flavor the caramel?"

“Yeah, that one. How did you think of that?”

I blush a bit, overwhelmed by the compliments. How do I explain this? I feel a bit embarrassed about my background. Even though I seem to know a lot, I only have elementary experience in cooking. You can't learn it all from books...

“I just really like using herbs and spices while cooking, so... I tried balancing with sweet flavors for a change and found out some pairings work really well.”

“Like what?”

I feel like this is some sort of test. I try to think of an answer I would give anyone, not to an experienced chef. “Like basil and strawberries. Or honey and lavender.”

I see him smile. “You're good, Nora. You really got a talent for that. Why didn't you apply to be in the kitchen instead of a waitress?”

“I... I have no experience and no training to be in a kitchen.”

He shakes his head. “You got the basics, that’s all it takes. Good sense of taste, multitasking, and reactive. You’re hard-working, and you can handle the pressure. Starting tomorrow, you’ll work as an apprentice in the kitchen.”

“What? But Narcissa...”

“I don’t care what Narcissa says. I’ll call the Boss, if necessary. You can start with Sam at the sauces for now. The old man could use an assistant.”

I gasp. I don’t even know what to say! Being a saucier’s apprentice is already more than anything I could have asked for!

“Chef, I...”

“Don’t thank me yet. We’ll see how you can handle the old man first; he’s twice more stubborn than I am, so that should—”

He suddenly stops talking and turns his head towards the end of the alley. I do the same. My wolf is growling, sensing something’s wrong, too. Who is that? There’s a horrible smell coming from a block away. Chef Michel throws his cigarette on the ground, his eyes not leaving the end of the alley a single second. We both stare at the same spot, waiting to see if the intruder will come closer or not.

No one is supposed to be there. There is a wooden fence at the end of the street, and only the restaurant's employees should be able to come here. That smell doesn't belong to anyone from the restaurant. It's such a disgusting smell! A mix of alcohol, rotten flesh, and cheap cologne, reeking so much I can't even distinguish its owner's scent.

"Who is that...?" I whisper.

"Someone who's not supposed to be here," growls Chef Michel.

I feel him tensing up, ready to shapeshift at any moment. I tell my wolf to be prepared, too. However, the smell disappears. Did they run away? We wait for a few seconds, but whoever it was is gone. I turn to Chef Michel, still frowning. "A rogue?"

"...It looks like it. I must tell the Boss. Let's go back in. Tell Boyan to come and get you. I don't like this."

To my surprise, it's not only Bobo who shows up, but as well. Unlike other days, there is no car, but just a big, black motorbike. I look at the engine, a bit worried. "Please tell me I'm not supposed to get on that thing."

"What's wrong with my bike?"

"I've never even been on a bicycle, Liam!"

He laughs, but this is just plain scary! “Don’t be a baby, Nora. You just need to hang on tight, I’ll drive safely, I promise. Come on, we have to change quickly before we get to the party, or we’ll be late.”

Late for what, exactly? I get on the motorbike despite my fear. At least, Liam seems experienced with it. And he’s right. We are finally the 14th, and I want to see what all this fuss was about. To think Damian came to dine with me last night, and now I’m going to go to his party behind his back... But I need to know what he is hiding from me. I want to think Damian is being sincere, yet there is this invisible wall between us that I need to take down. And I’ll see what kind of wall it is tonight.

Once we get home, I go straight to my room to shower and get ready. Choosing a dress is quicker with the guys than when Tonia is here, mostly because they let me pick it myself. I go for a rather simple empire dress with a silver glitter top and a long white skirt. Elegant yet straightforward—it should be good enough. For my makeup, even if I’ve been practicing these last few days while getting to read for work, I usually keep it really simple. For tonight, though, I have to make extra efforts. I look at a couple of online tutorials before getting started and proceed very slowly and carefully. The result is alright, I think... I put on a natural peach eyeshadow, a thin trail of eyeliner, some mascara, and a light pink blush. When Bobo comes into the room, I’m putting on the final touch, a rosy lipstick. I turn to him.

“How is it?”

“Very pretty. You look more natural than last time.”

“Because I didn’t put as much stuff... I can’t remember half the names of the products the makeup artist gave me anyway.”

Bobo smiles. “Are you going to be okay...?” He asks

“I don’t even know what I’m supposed to see, so... Is it bad?”

He stays silent for a second. “...You should get your heart ready.”

I stay silent. The more I hear about it, the harder it is to think it’s a good idea...

Turns out, Boyan is good at braiding my hair and helps me put it up into a Greek goddess-like hairstyle. It also matches my dress perfectly, so I’m more than happy with it. Once we return to the main room, Liam is desperately trying to do his necktie. He turns to us, but before he can even ask, we shake our heads. I have no idea how to do this... He frowns, and takes it off, undoing his first button.

“Forget it, I’m not going to impress anyone, anyway. Are you ready, my lady?”

Indeed, I am, though I'm shaking a bit... I grab my white coat and put my necklace on. The little diamond moon is shining bright and matches my dress just fine.

"I just hope I'm dressed enough..." I sigh, taking an overall view in the mirror again.

Liam rolls his eyes. "Yes, you are. You're wearing a \$5,000 Dior dress and a diamond \$2,000 necklace. What else do you...?"

"I'm wearing what?" I scream, shocked.

"Oh, get over it, you know my brother is like, crazy rich."

"Liam!"

"Oh, come on, Nora, you should be used to it by now. So, if you are done being scandalized, can we go, please? Trust me, the price of your dress will be the last of your concerns after tonight."

While in the car, I'm still sending annoyed looks at Liam. I hate it when he plays with my nerves like that! And he's doing it on purpose, I know it. Even now, he won't bother to hide his smirk. I growl at him.

Bobo is driving, and no one is saying a word. I'm too nervous to talk, to be honest. I have no idea what to expect. While I imagine several scenarios, Liam's phone rings.

"Hi, Nate. What's up?"

I can recognize his brother's voice, but even with my enhanced hearing, I can't tell what Nathaniel's saying... Liam starts smiling. He lets his brother speak for a while before interrupting him. "Don't worry Nate, I'm on my way. ...Yup. No, I'm dressed as I should be, tuxedo and all. ...No, I borrowed someone's girlfriend to be precise."

His brother stays silent for a few seconds while Liam smiles. I heard my name, but Liam answers before I can say anything.

"Good guess! ...First, we both know Damian would never touch me. Plus, I bet Nora would kill him first. She deserves to know, don't you think? ...Do you really want to have the conversation about managing love relationships, Nate?"

Touché. Though I think that one was a bit mean from Liam... For a few seconds, I think about Elena's baby. Neither of them probably knows about the pregnancy yet. Nathaniel's love life is about to get a lot more complicated...

Both brothers stay silent for a while again, and I wonder if Nathaniel can do anything to prevent me from going. He could probably revoke Liam's invitation, no? To my surprise, Liam starts to smile again. "Really? You're going to help us?"

I hear Nathaniel yell something, but Liam laughs and hangs up. Even if he said otherwise, not doing anything is basically the same as helping us. Though Liam is happy about it, this call didn't make me feel better at all. I wonder if it's too late to turn back, but I don't even know what I'm supposed to fear! When Bobo finally stops the car, I recognize where we are. It's the entrance of the Grand Hotel, a five-star and one of the most luxurious hotels in Silver City. I'm feeling kind of better about my overpriced dress now...

Liam helps me out of the car, and Bobo follows us. It's my first time seeing the two of them dressed up, but there is quite a difference. Liam obviously chose a very luxurious tuxedo, while Bobo's outfit is much more discreet. He looks like a bodyguard with this look and size, and well, I guess that's kind of what he is for tonight?

A doorman guides us to the 32nd floor without even asking for an invitation. Liam winks at me. I guess he didn't need one, being one of the infamous Black Brothers... Once we finally arrive, the doors open on a gigantic Reception Hall.

It's very luxurious and intimidating. The marble floor is so clean and polished, I can see my reflection in it, and it's the same for the walls. Large

chandeliers are hanging from the roof, with real candles lit up. On my right, a large bar with five barmen working swiftly, and on the left, a large glass-wall like the one in my apartment offers a breath-taking night view.

The place is crowded. Now I know why Liam said I wouldn't be overdressed. Every person standing in the room is wearing luxurious brand items, jewelry, and outfits. My dress doesn't seem out of place, and it's not the fanciest. Some ladies even have real gemstones embroidered on their dresses, when they are not wearing it as jewelry.

Liam gives me his arm to hold on, and I don't let go. I feel way too intimidated. For the first time, I see him really being a Black Brother. As we walk, people get out of our way, and I hear whispers all around us. A lot of the guests are eyeing Liam yet avoid his gaze. A few steps behind us, Bobo is also definitely making an impression too.

People are staring at me, as well, probably because I'm accompanying Liam. They observe me from head to toe, and they are not even trying to hide it. I feel like I just stepped into a nest of snakes...

"Well, well, look who is there!"

I turn around, and to my surprise, Lysandra Jones, the Purple Clan Alpha, is walking up to us. This time she is wearing clothes, a superb purple combi with assorted jewelry, and gold rings in her hair or as piercings on her nose, ears, and eyebrow. She stands in front of us, with a wide smile.

“Hi, Lysandra,” Says Liam.

“You brat... You fought with my guys again this week, didn’t ya? How many times do I have to tell you to stay out of my territory?”

“Come on, I thought we were just training? Are they tired yet?”

“Don’t be too cheeky... One day I will come myself to give you that kick in the ass you’re asking for.”

“Any time!” Replies Liam with a cheeky smile.

Though the conversation seems heated, I feel like Lysandra is more amused by Liam’s attitude than annoyed. I wonder why he has to go so often to provoke her warriors? Is it because they are strong rivals? She turns to me.

“Nice to see you in human form, whitey girl.”

“How did you recognize me?” I ask.

“Blue eyes, a big scar on your face, and those guys around ya? Come on.”

Right... I guess my visible scar in both my forms is a big giveaway. I tend to forget about it these days. Now I feel stupid... Indeed, anyone could recognize me, then. Lysandra doesn't mind that I'm staying silent, she starts talking again.

“By the way... I wondered which pack you were from, but seeing you're with these two, I guess you're a Blood Moon?”

I shake my head. “Not really. I'm more of a... free spirit now?”

This is a dangerous thing to say in a room full of werewolves, admitting that I don't belong to any Clan. But Lysandra just laughs. “Nice one! Well, if you ever get past this free-spirit phase, you can come to the Purple Clan anytime. We value fighters in my pack, so you would definitely be welcomed with what I saw the other week.”

Wow, I didn't expect that... I whisper thanks, too shocked to think of anything else. Liam growls, though. “Don't dream about it. Nora will belong to my brother's pack.”

“Who knows... The girl might change her mind?”

“If so, then you can always join the Sea Moon Wolves, too!”

We turn around. It's Grandpa Seaver! He walks up to us, flanked by two young people. The girl looks about my age or younger, with chubby cheeks and a brownish ponytail. She is wearing a sea-green dress and aquamarine earrings. The young man, probably her brother since they look so alike, is wearing a brown suit and has a large scar across his neck.

"Old Man!" Says Liam.

"Oh, shut up, kiddo. I'm here for the young lady, not you."

Is there an Alpha that Liam hasn't angered out there? They all seem annoyed at him! But he just laughs while the old man turns to me. "So, you're named Nora, are you? Patrick Seaver. Here are my children, Marina and Arthur. You saved both their lives last week."

The young Sea Moon she-wolf waves at me, a bit shy. Her brother just nods, but his eyes are glaring at Liam. Gosh, he really loves messing with everyone...

"It's nothing. We were in the middle of a battle, after all."

"Hopefully, the last one! I'm done with vampires for this lifetime!"

"Don't get your hopes up, old man. Those bloodsuckers will be back. Remember the last Council?" Sighs Lysandra.

“Everyone thinks the same?” I ask.

Lysandra nods. “All those who bothered to show up, anyway. The Sapphire Moon Clan really is a bunch of cowards, I tell you!”

Now that I think about it, among all the big Clans of Silver City, the Sapphire Moon Clan is the only one whose wolves didn’t show up at all... They are one of the strongest Clans around, though. I would say they only lose to the Blood Moon, and Gold Moon Clans in terms of power. But other than that, those three are the strongest out there.

“...Even those weaklings from the Jade Moon Clan showed up!”

Liam scoffs. Gosh, I really didn’t need to hear this... Seeing something is wrong, Lysandra frowns and asks about it. Liam is only too happy to answer. “Nora is the Jade Moon Clan... how do you call it? Owner?”

“Stop it, I don’t own anything...” I whisper, embarrassed. “They just gave me their allegiance.”

“Wait, you little girl controls half the east territory?” Asks Patrick.

I hesitate and nod. I guess this is a way of putting it... Lysandra suddenly claps her hands. “Right! The boys did tell me someone kicked Greene’s butt a few weeks ago! Well done, whitey!”

...Is she really going to keep on calling me like that?

“Interesting. It seems like the Blood Moon Clan is really working on their connections...” mutters Arthur Seaver.

His father scratches his beard. “Right, son. Can’t blame the kid, though. Times are hard. Lots of little mutts are showing up everywhere.”

“Who cares about the rogues? What he wants is to contain the Sapphire Moon Clan. If they can’t reach an agreement, things might get ugly!” Says Lysandra.

What agreement? I turn to Liam, lost. What is this about? I knew that the Blood Moon Clan and the Sapphire Moon Clan weren’t on good terms, but I didn’t think things were that bad...

“They are a proud Clan, the Sapphires. I doubt they will ever listen to Black. Though I’m not fond of the Gold Clan, either. Too greedy.” grumbles old man Seaver.

“Yeah, I’m not too fond of the idea either...” Says Lysandra

What about the Gold Moon Clan? Is Damian trying to make them his allies? I turn to Liam, asking him with my eyes what this is about, but he shrugs. The two Alphas change subjects, arguing about the limit between their turfs. Liam gently pulls me to the bar, leaving them. One of the barmen immediately walks up to us with a professional smile.

“What would you like, Mister Black?”

Liam is only too happy to answer to that and asks for two cocktails. I frown. We are underage! Plus, my alcohol tolerance is definitely not cocktail proof yet. But before I can even protest, he hands me a turquoise drink that smells a lot like vodka. I’m wondering if I can give it back, when my phone rings. It’s Tonia...

“Nora! Where are you? I’m at your place, and no one is here. Bobo isn’t picking up his phone.”

Uh-oh. I turn to Bobo, not knowing what to say. He probably turned his phone off on purpose. I have a feeling his sister is going to freak out just like Nathaniel. I hesitate and finally answer.

“Tonia, I’m all right. ...I’m at the party.”

“The party... What? At the party? Who told you about the party?”

She yells at the other end of the phone, but I really don't want to argue with her now. I'm mad at her for not telling me about it, too. Liam grabs my smartphone. I bet he is only too happy to make things worse... I ignore them and take a sip of my cocktail. Gosh, this is strong!

Suddenly, I hear a lot of chatter. A young woman just made her entrance. She is stunning, from what I can see before a lot of people run to her like bees gathering around honey. She has gorgeous brown hair, and golden eyes like Elena, though hers are darker, brownish. I'm not particularly inclined to fashion, but her dress is gorgeous. She looks like an actress, wearing a gold gown and a white fur coat.

"It's Alessandra King, daughter of the Gold Moon Alpha," whispers Bobo.

I get the information, but as my eyes follow her, some unease rises in my heart— a pain thumping in my chest. I watch her walk across the room; She has a perfect smile on her face and walks like a queen.

Everyone steps aside to let her through, and at the end of this path, I see Damian. Damian, standing there in a gorgeous black suit. He has a glass of champagne in his hand and is standing a few meters away from me, but I can see his features clearly. He is expressionless, looking at Alessandra. Once she arrives at his side, they slowly bow to each other.

I'm almost choking. My wolf is growling furiously. Something's wrong. Something's out of place. My fingers tremble around my drink, and my mind goes blank. She's putting her hand on his arm. Why does he let her do that? Why do they talk so casually? Why is nobody reacting? Isn't there something wrong with this? I feel sick, disgusted. Someone else is touching my mate! Why is she standing so close to him, their arms are touching!

While I'm running out of breath, watching them with my thoughts going wild, Liam comes next to me and whispers to my ear. "Welcome to my brother's engagement party, Nora."

Damian's... what?

My mind goes blank, yet my eyes can't stop watching them. This couple, standing across the room. Next to each other, a black and gold movie-like scene. I can't think; I just stare like some mindless idiot. I feel so stupid...

In the crowd of werewolves around them, no one is surprised to see those two together. They all know. Except for me. Nobody told me, and worse, they all made sure not to. Foolish, ignorant, blind Nora.

"Nora, are you okay?" Someone asks.

I don't know. How am I supposed to feel? I feel nothing right now. My heart just fell, somewhere really, really low. I'm numb as if my body is

covered in ice. I can't even cry. I have both eyes fixated on them, and I have no idea what to do or how to react. Damian is talking to someone else, while that woman is still attached to him, her arm around his like he belongs to her.

"He is mine!"

My wolf is screaming inside, growling and crying her guts out. Her pain hits me like a hurricane. My chest is so painful, I can't breathe.

I take a step back. I want to run away from here. Why can't I stop watching when it's so painful? I can't stay here. Her. With him. The two of them, side by side. My mate and that girl together. I don't want to see that! The more I watch, the crazier my mind goes. Thoughts like a raging fire, burning me from the inside. How long? Since when? Why her? Does she love him? Does he love her? Does he love her more than me? Does he love me at all!

I can't stay here. I take another step back and realize there's broken glass at my feet. Is this mine? When I raise my head again, a lot of eyes are on me. Among them, a pair of silver eyes, wide open with surprise.

"Nora, watch out, you—"

I push them back. I can't take anyone touching me now. Not Bobo, not Liam, not anyone. I want to run from this horrible place, from this world.

I turn around and start running. I hear Damian's voice calling my name behind me, and his brother's.

I run to the elevator, and a surprised waiter steps out to let me in. I push the ground level button, again and again, but I hear Damian's steps without looking up. Just as the door closes, he rushes in the tiny elevator space, and I instinctively retreat until my back hits the wall.

"Nora, listen to me. Look at me."

I avoid his eyes. I don't want to talk to him right now. I don't want to look at him. It's too painful! If I look at Damian, I'll see that vision of him with her again! I see his hands coming close, and I scream. "Don't fucking touch me!"

That's when I realize I'm crying. From my scorched voice. I'm crying hard and shaking. His hands freeze just before he touches me.

"Okay, okay. I won't touch you. But Nora, you must listen to me. It's not what you think."

Who cares about what I think? It's what I just saw and heard that matters! And I'm not ready to listen to it again! I feel like my heart will stop beating if I do! I cross my arms around me, shielding myself from him, staying the furthest away I can from Damian.

Why does it have to be me? I can take a hundred hits from Alec, but I can't take this! I trusted him. I knew something was wrong, somewhere in my mind I had that thought, but I still decided to trust him. Why now? Why this? After all this time? I love him, I love this man so badly, and that's why it hurts.

I raise my head, looking at him in the eyes, and between my tears, I hear my own voice. "Tell me it's not true. Tell me you're not engaged, Damian."

Maybe Liam lied. Perhaps I saw it wrong, and maybe that girl is just a close friend. Maybe it's was all just a joke, maybe I'm dreaming, some nightmare I need to wake up from.

I see Damian open his mouth, hesitating, but he stays silent, and this time, he is the one to avoid my gaze. I can't believe it. I cover my eyes with my hand, trying to calm down my crying, but gosh, it's hard.

"Nora, listen to me, please. It's true, I am engaged to Alessandra, but..."

"Shut up."

I don't want to hear her name in his mouth. I don't want to hear anymore. He's been with me for two months now. Yet he's still having this

engagement party. I don't think of any good reason for this. He had weeks to call it off or break up with me. I... Who am I to him?

“...I thought you loved me.”

He looks at me with scandalized eyes. “...What? Nora, I do! Do you seriously think I don't love you? I...”

“Then why the fuck is she the one you're going to marry! Why?”

“Nora, Alessandra is not the one I love, you are! She will just be my official Luna!”

I look at him, stunned beyond words. Is he mad? Does he have any idea of what he is saying right now? His Luna? What would I be, then? I think of the apartment he gave me. So, he wants to keep me in that tower, like a bird in a golden cage? I shake my head, at a loss for words.

The elevator reaches the ground level and opens. He is still in front of me, barring the exit.

“Move out of my way, Damian.”

“Nora, no. You're hurt, and...”

“You’re the one who hurt me!” I yell, ignoring all the people in the lobby. “I’ve had broken bones and a hundred wounds, but never have I ever been in pain like now! You took me for an idiot, Damian! Now, out of my way!”

As I yell those last words, he brutally retreats oddly, like he’s pushed back or something. I don’t even care. I run out in the lobby, with a lot of people staring at me. I must be looking crazy... I try to wipe out my flowing tears, I can barely see in front of me, I’m so angry, sad, and confused. I bump into someone, a man. I try to step aside and go on my way, but before I can make two steps, he suddenly grabs my arm.

“...Queen Diane?”

What the...?

He looks at me, his eyes confused. Who is this guy? I shake my head and elude him, running away. I run to the entrance of the hotel, to outside where it’s pouring. I hate the rain... I keep walking anyway. I don’t care about the rain or the cold, I just want to put as much distance as possible between Damian and me. I don’t want him following me or something.

After a while of walking and crying, I finally stop. Gosh, I have no idea where I am... And Liam kept my phone, too. Who would I call anyway? I don’t want to see any of them, they all lied to me all this time! The Black Brothers, even the siblings! Who can I trust now?

Suddenly, I remember Elena. I'm so agitated that it takes me a while to mind-link her, though.

"...Nora? Nora, why are you crying? Are you okay? What's wrong?"

"Elena, can I come to your place? I have nowhere to go."

"What? But what about your...?"

"I'm not going back there."

I know she can feel my distress. I'm tired, cold, and angrier than I have ever been. And even sadder than that.

"Okay, okay. Do you know where you are? We will come and get you, okay?"

After a couple more streets, I finally find the name of a nearby restaurant to give her.

They arrive ten minutes later, in a car. Elena takes me to sit with her in the back seat, covering me with a thick blanket they brought. A blonde guy is driving, probably her friend Daniel. His human form is different from

what I expected. He is thin, tall, and has a rather pretty face, with blue eyes and small, round glasses. With his little goatee and fold-over sweater, he looks like a bit of a bookworm. He starts the engine, and Elena turns to me, handing a tissue.

“Nora... What happened?”

“Wait, it smells like blood, babe,” says Daniel.

Elena looks down, and we both see my injured feet. Gosh, I didn’t even realize I was cut.

“Oh, my Goddess, Nora!”

The broken glass from earlier pierced my shoes and cut me all over. My previously white shoes are now covered in red. Oh... I didn’t even feel any pain, I was too angry. Now that I’m staring at it, it does feel quite painful. I sigh, too tired to even react to this. Elena, however, looks deeply concerned.

“Danny, you think you can handle that? Or do we take her to the hospital?”

He looks over his shoulder a couple of times, inspecting my wound, and frowns. Oh right, Daniel is a medicine student, isn’t he?

“It should be okay, but we need to disinfect it quickly.”

“My Goddess, Nora... What happened to you?”

I start explaining everything. I start crying again in the middle of it, with my chest and heart being painful. Elena and Daniel stay silent. She pats my back, looking deeply concerned. When I’m done talking, we have entered a part of the city that I don’t know at all.

“...Men are jerks.”

“Not helpful, Danny,” sighs Elena. “Nora, I’m so sorry about what you went through tonight, really. But don’t worry, okay? Tonight, you can stay at our place, have a good sleep, and calm down. And we can talk about it tomorrow when you feel better, okay?”

“What is there to talk about? She needs to ditch the guy and basta.”

“Danny, park the damn car and shut up!” Growls Elena.

Once we arrive, Daniel decides to carry me on his back, so I wouldn’t hurt my feet anymore, and Elena keeps the blanket around me as we go to their flat.

We enter a very cozy apartment, and I love it instantly. It's small, but full of warm colors, with a small kitchen counter, a sizeable bottle-green couch, and a fluffy carpet. There are three large bouquets of flowers dispersed in the room and a strong smell of coffee, freesia, and citrus.

Daniel helps me sit on the couch and goes behind a door. He comes back with an extensive first aid kit and surgical gloves, and Elena sits next to me while he helps me take off my shoes.

“How is it, Danny?”

“Well, bleeding. I'm going to have to make sure she doesn't have any glass left in her foot, but it should be okay. Not a good idea to run around with your feet in that state, sweetheart.”

“Sorry... I didn't realize it.”

Daniel sighs, but puts the gloves on and starts taking care of my feet carefully.

“Do you want a cup of coffee, Nora?” Asks Elena.

“If you have some tea...”

“I would love a cappuccino, too,” says Daniel.

“I wasn’t asking you!”

“Thank you, babe.”

Apparently, they are both used to those kinds of arguments because Elena gets up and does take out three cups. Daniel turns his head into her direction and clicks his tongue. “No coffee for you, mama!”

She growls. “Crap, I forgot...”

Right, I forgot she’s pregnant too. Has she told Nathaniel yet? It’s been a week or two now. Now that I’m thinking about it, Elena is wearing a large sweater. She had boyish clothes on too last time, but this one is clearly oversized. Even if there was a baby bump, it wouldn’t be showing with this kind of top on.

While she is pouring some milk in the cup, her phone rings. She frowns when she sees the number and shows her screen to us.

“It’s Nate...”

“...They are probably looking for her. You should answer before the whole Blood Moon Clan rushes to our territory.”

Elena hesitates for a while, but after a few seconds and looking at me, she answers the call. “Yes, Nate? I’m okay, thanks... I know, sorry, I’ve been busy. ...Yes, she’s here with me, at my place. ...Yeah, she’s okay. Well, a bit shook up, but she is safe, and Daniel is taking care of her feet... Not tonight, Nate. It’s not a good idea. Nora is still upset; she needs some time. ...Yes, of course. As long as she needs.”

She stays silent for a while, apparently waiting for Nathaniel’s answer. I hear him talking, though I can’t really get what he is saying. Elena frowns. “...That’s none of your business, Nate. ...Fine, I can ask. ...Nora?”

“Yes?”

“Bobo wants to come and see you tomorrow morning... Is that okay?”

I hesitate a bit. Bobo also kept the truth from me, but... he is still my best friend. I don’t want to see Damian or even Liam, but I guess I can see Bobo. I nod.

“...She said yes. ...Okay. Yes, I’m fine, I told you. Good night, Nathaniel.”

Elena hangs up, a bit too fast to act normal. She sighs and comes back to us with the cups. Daniel is observing her with a genuinely worried look.

“...Are you okay, babe?”

“I am. Anyway, Nora is the one to be worried about.”

“Well, she should be happy, Bobo is coming for her.”

Is that... jealousy I hear? Elena rolls her eyes. “Oh, stop being a baby, Danny! Bobo is worried about Nora as a friend! Now drop the jealousy act, or, baby or not, I’m really kicking your scrawny ass!”

Oh my gosh!

“So, you’re Bobo’s mysterious boyfriend!” I exclaim.

“Okay, it’s time you girls both get to bed,” he says, blushing.

The next morning, I wake up with a very annoying headache. I’m a bit disoriented, and for a while, I have no idea where I am. Until I remember about last night. The party.

I wish I had forgotten a bit longer. I get up. Oh, right, Daniel gave me his bed. Their apartment only has two tiny bedrooms, so he slept on the couch. I walk into the main room, but it seems like I'm the last one up. Elena is curled up on the sofa, and Daniel is busy making hot chocolates behind the kitchen counter. It's still pouring outside, and so dark I can't tell how late it is.

"Good morning, cousin," she says with a smile.

I can't help but smile when I hear that. It does sound good... I sit on the couch with my cousin, and Daniel brings us the cups.

"So, everyone decided to wake up early," sighs Daniel. "What is the program for today, ladies?"

"Waiting for Bobo, for now," says Elena. "And I'm not going anywhere with this rain and this hellish nausea."

"...How is the baby?" I ask.

She smiles. "Fine, thank you. I think..."

Before she can finish her sentence, the doorbell rings. She smiles at Daniel, who is slightly blushing. He rolls his eyes and gets up to go open the door. Bobo appears, carrying a little paper bag that smells terribly

good. Daniel, still blushing, tries to avoid looking at him in the eyes. Still, Bobo grabs him around the shoulders anyway and kisses his forehead. Oh, my Goddess, Daniel is so red, it's like his hair is about to change color, too.

“S... stop it. Just... come in. What's with the ba...bag?”

Next to me, Elena laughs behind her cup. “I never see Daniel stutter like this, unless Bobo is there. Never. It's so cute,” she whispers to me.

Indeed, it's too cute and funny to watch. Bobo's eyes are fixated on his beloved with a little smile, while Daniel is clumsily trying to ignore him. However, he's red like a tomato, and his eyes blinking way too many times. He goes to the kitchen, but still stumbles halfway. I can't help but chuckle, too. I didn't know there was someone who could be worse than me around their mate...

Bobo walks up to us, and Elena opens the bag with hungry eyes. “Croissants! Moon Goddess, thank you, Bobo, we didn't get any breakfast yet,” she says while taking one.

“It's from Nathaniel, actually. Did you tell him about...?”

Elena frowns and shakes her head. “No, he doesn't know about the baby yet.”

“Oh... He was worried about you. You should give him a call.”

“Mh.”

She doesn't say anything else and starts eating her croissant. Too soon, I guess...

Then, Bobo comes closer and sits just next to me, on the floor. He is so tall that it's doesn't really make a difference, though.

“Hi, Nora,” he says with his usual smile.

“I'm mad at you, too, you know,” I reply with a pout.

My wolf raises her head, a bit annoyed at me. She likes Bobo; she is not mad at him. I decide to ignore her.

“I know,” he says. “I just came to check on you. How are you?”

“Are we talking about my feet or my feelings?”

“Both.”

“My feet are fine.”

I’m really hurt by their lies, though. I still can’t believe none of them told me anything. About Damian’s engagement or that woman, Alessandra King, whoever she is. Do I mean nothing in their eyes? Don’t I deserve to know the truth? Even Bobo didn’t say a thing... I sigh. “I don’t know, Bobo, I can’t get what Damian’s thinking. He... He said he loves me, but...”

My voice breaks, and I feel tears coming. I don’t know what to believe anymore... I love him, I really do. Nothing to do with that stupid mate thing. I just love Damian. His silver eyes and the way he looks at me. His voice, so deep. How he treats me like I’m so precious, his hands, and gentle touch. I don’t want to lose him.

Bobo puts his large hand on mine. “He loves you, Nora, a lot more than you think. He really does. If you had seen him after you left yesterday...”

“But what about this engagement, then?”

Why would he get engaged to another woman! He knew I existed, that he had a mate, for years! If he was searching for me, what was the point if he planned to marry someone else anyway? I start crying silently, and I hate it. I hate feeling so lost and powerless. I have no idea what to do, what to

say to them. Am I supposed to make decisions now? My mind is in such a mess! I don't want to.

Elena starts patting my back. "Hey, Nora, it's okay. Why don't you take a couple of days to cool off, hm? I think you might need a little break to think things over. Stay here with us for the weekend."

I look at Daniel and Elena. Is that okay? I do feel like I really need a break right now. "What about Daniel? You are not going to keep sleeping on the couch..."

"Daniel can sleep at my place," says Bobo immediately.

"You...your place?" Stutters Daniel, blushing again.

"Great idea!" Says Elena with a big smile.

"What great idea! I haven't agreed to it. ...Yet. Maybe I... I like the couch," mumbles Daniel.

"Oh, please. I'm done with you complaining about Bobo staying with Nora all the time, so now you enjoy your man all you want, and I'll spend time with my cousin. Come on, baby, you know you want it," says Elena, pushing him gently with her feet.

“Elena!”

We both laugh at his offended look. Daniel is so red and embarrassed, it’s way too cute. Bobo starts whispering something into his ear, and Elena winks at me. A few seconds later, Daniel is red like a tomato again and pushing Bobo away.

“Okay, okay, okay! I’m coming, but please, stop that! Where did you learn to say such... stuff!”

He steps away from his boyfriend and comes to grab a croissant before sitting between Elena and me, who tease him again. I know this whole scene is also to help me cheer up a bit. Bobo comes to joins us, sitting on the floor next to me again.

While Elena is arguing with Daniel about some sweatshirt that she apparently took from him, Bobo comes closer to me. “He canceled the party yesterday.”

I stare at him, surprised. “...Really?”

He nods. “Right after you left. He sent everyone home, and he didn’t want to see anyone, either. It took a while to calm him down.”

I remember Damian's eyes from yesterday. Usually, they shine with assurance, but all I saw last night was confusion, and even fear. He was genuinely panicked. I play with my pendant between my fingers for a while, remembering the night he gave it to me. I finally raise my head to look Bobo in the eye. "...So, he really doesn't love her... Alessandra?"

He shakes his head and gently tightens his hand around mine. "No. Trust me, Nora. I may not be the closest one to the Boss, but one thing I've seen is the way he looks at you. The way he is with you, he isn't like that with anyone else. Before he found you, he was like a machine. The only ones who could approach him without any fear were his brothers. You are immune to his aura, so you don't know, but for anyone else, Damian Black is the most terrifying man-wolf in this city."

It's strange to hear it all from Bobo's mouth. It's like I was blinded for a while. I know how much Damian tried to protect me, but along the way, I also forgot what kind of man he was, and the responsibilities that come with it. And how lucky I've been so far...

Without Damian, I would be dead, killed by my own brother's hands. He gave me everything I needed and more. For two months, I have been living without any worries about where to sleep or what to eat. Compared to the last ten years of my existence, it's... It doesn't change what I saw yesterday, but I can't just blame Damian and forget everything he's done for me either. That would be too unfair of me.

“I need time, Bobo. Thank you for talking to me, but this is still too fresh for me. No matter Damian’s reasons... He kept it hidden from me for weeks. He should have told me. I’ve had too many secrets in my life already. I want to be able to trust my mate. For real.”

He nods. “I understand. I just wanted to tell you. Also, um... Liam wants to talk to you, too.”

“Liam?”

He suddenly takes something out of his pocket. My phone! Right, I left it at the party last night... I open it. Six missed calls from Damian, and two from Tonia. He also left a message on the voicemail... I hesitate and decide I’ll listen to it later. Not now, not in front of these three. Whatever he said in that message, I am not ready to listen to it now.

Liam left me a text, though, so I open it. He apologizes for last night, saying he feels I deserved the truth. He wants to talk to me face to face. “No surprises this time.”

I reply, a quick text to say we can meet tonight. I finally feel a bit better now. I take a sip of Daniel’s delicious hot chocolate, warming myself up from the outside a little. Elena is right. All I might need right now is a bit of time.

Since the downpour should continue all day, we decide not to go out. Daniel must prepare some exam coming up and surrounds himself with lots of enormous books. Apparently, he wants to specialize in psychology. Elena is a business student, but she doesn't feel like studying today. She goes to shower first, changing into some jeans and an oversized top, then lends me some of her clothes to change into.

Once I come out of the shower, it turns out that she fell asleep on the couch while waiting, despite the radio station playing in the kitchen.

Daniel raises his head from his books. "Don't worry, it's like that since she learned about her pregnancy. She will wake up from her mini-nap in ten minutes or so."

"Is she okay?" I ask.

"Yeah, it happens to some pregnant women. She feels sleepy suddenly, and within a minute, she's napping. Don't worry, she's fine."

I nod. Elena is curled up on one corner of the couch, and they covered her with a blanket. Bobo is sitting at the opposite corner, busy with his phone. I make myself some tea and come back, joining Daniel who's sitting on the carpet, bent over the little table with all his books and a computer. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

“How did you meet Elena?”

He smiles and takes off his glasses to look at his sleeping friend. “When we were really young, like five or six. The same pack, but we didn’t really fit with the other kids. I would always get mocked by the other boys for being tinier, weaker than them. Elena was an orphan, so she was ostracized, too, but unlike me, she was the one who would come and beat those kids once they were done kicking my ass.” He chuckles at the memory. “She made them cry a lot. She was a real little punk, even picking fights with kids bigger than her.”

“So, she helped you?”

“Oh no, she kicked my ass and called me a weakling a lot of times, too! But after that, she would always come and share her cookie with me or something. She was like that. Even when she lost and got beaten up, Elena would never hold it against them. She moved on and trained harder. So, I trained harder, too.”

“Pfft... You cried whenever I trained you.”

Elena just woke up and is looking at us with a grumpy look.

Daniel sticks his tongue out to her. “That is not how I recall it, mama. And for the record, you were a violent, thick-headed little punk.”

“Not going to deny that...”

I laugh. It’s funny to witness their interactions. They are best friends, but also like brother and sister, bickering non-stop. I suppose Daniel will always be there for her, even if she decides to part ways with Nathaniel...

Here I go thinking about Damian again. He brought more people into my life than I thought I could ever have. Bobo is like a big, protective brother to me. Liam is a bit of a brat, but he still is someone I trust and like having around. Tonia, too, is like an older sister. I never had anyone like those three in my life before.

Elena was right about the downpour. It rained all day, but despite that and everything else, we enjoyed it. Those two basically listen to music from dawn until dusk and even dance around sometimes. They made me cook for lunch, and in the afternoon, I trained a bit with Elena, while Bobo helped Daniel review his notes. We couldn’t do any boxing or shapeshift because of her condition. Still, she did show me some new workout exercises and moves. She also explained to me some meditation techniques to help me interact better with my inner wolf, things I had never tried before. It was like opening a new door, and at the same time, seeing things differently, better.

The training helped me empty my mind for a while. Also, I had no time to be anxious before Liam's arrival, though it came quickly.

As planned, he showed up around eight, alone. "Hi, Nora. Ready for our little date?"

I smile and grab the coat Elena landed me.

"Yes. Where do you want to go?"

"Since you met with the Sea Moon Wolves, how about the harbor? There is a little café by the docks I used to go to a lot when I was a kid, and the lady there makes mean hot chocolates..."

Liam takes his favorite black bike, and since it's only the two of us, we arrive quickly at the docks. As we enter the Sea Moon Wolves' turf, some wolves come, but they recognize us and let us through. As we had fought side by side only a couple of weeks ago, they have no real reason to argue with us. Not today.

Liam finally parks his bike in front of a family restaurant, a large one facing the sea. The building has been built in one of the dock's warehouses entirely renovated to give it a seventies decoration, with leather seats, neon lights, and a retro feel. Once we enter, a few heads turn, mostly sailors and dockers, but nobody says a thing. I guess the word must have been given, as everyone quickly go back to their meal.

A waitress runs up to us, a plump woman in her fifties. She smiles at Liam and opens her arms.

“Liam, boy! It’s been a while, sweetie! Moon Goddess, you are so grown up already! How old are you now?”

“Eighteen, Nina! How is my favorite waitress? I missed you!”

“Oh, you little sweet-talker...” They quickly hug, and the adorable lady turns to me. “Did you bring a girlfriend this time? Hello, darling!”

“Hi, I’m Nora.”

“She’s my brother’s girlfriend. I stole her for a date,” says Liam with a wink, putting his arm around my shoulders.

Nina laughs and adjusts her red bun before grabbing two menus. “I see, I see, well, come on, I got your favorite table available, sweetie.”

She takes us to a great spot, a little table with a view on the ocean. Giving us the menus, she is still looking fondly at Liam. “Oh, sweetie, I feel so nostalgic seeing you there again! You know, darling, this boy used to come here every single day when he was a kid! Oh, Liam, I remember you doing

all your homework on this very table, with that little mint diabolo you always had.”

“And you would always give me free refills, Nina. Can I get that diabolo today?”

“Sure, you can, sweetie! What would you like, young lady?”

“I’ll have the same as Liam.”

“Okay! Take your time, I’ll come back for your order. Our special today is the fish and chips; I would recommend it!” She takes off quickly, and Liam sighs with a smile.

“She loves you a lot,” I say.

“Nina is the sweetest waitress in the world. She didn’t just give me refills, you know. Most of the time, she didn’t take any money for those diabolos.”

“So, you really came here often?” I ask.

Liam nods, but before saying anything else, Nina comes back with our diabolos, takes our orders. I pick the fish and chips, the biggest burger for

Liam. Once Nina leaves, he starts playing with his straw and looks at me.
“How are you, Nora?”

“I’m fine, I suppose... Better than last night.”

“Looks like it. I was a bit worried. Well, a lot actually. I was afraid that might have been a big blow for you.”

I frown and push my drink aside to lean closer to him. “Why did you take me there, Liam?”

I want to know what he was trying to achieve. After all, he was the only one among all the others who chose to do so.

He frowns and sighs. “To be honest with you, Nora, I didn’t do it for you. I did it for Damian. That engagement is total bullshit, and I don’t want him to be unhappy, tied to a bitch like Alessandra King.”

He says her name with so much disgust, I do feel a bit better.

“Why did you bring me to the party, then? Couldn’t you just talk to him before all this? Liam, now that it’s done, I’m... It’s just plain painful for me!”

Does he realize how much I suffered last night? Seeing Damian with another woman... No matter the reasons Liam had, I still feel like I was just brought there to watch this nightmare and suffer. Why use me in all this?

Liam stays silent for a while, apparently thinking. After a while, he turns his head to the docks, and a soft smile appears. "...You know, my brother is the worst liar."

What does he mean now? Sometimes I can't decipher Liam. One minute he is acting like a kid, and the next one, he is there acting all mysterious and plotting behind his brothers' backs... He points to the docks, and I follow his finger.

"When I was young, Damian used to work right there. He started when he was ten. After school, I would go see my mom at the hospital, and then Damian would take me to this restaurant. I'd do my homework and drink diabolos while he was working. He worked, on this very dock, for five or six hours straight every day. He carried huge boxes back and forth from boats to the dock. Whenever he stopped, he just came here to check up on me, and he went back right away."

I try to imagine a young Damian, working there, sweating under the weight of heavy containers. It's hard to imagine how his youth was like...

“Those boxes were awfully huge and heavy. It was a job even a lot of adults didn’t want because it was hard. Old man Seaver let my brother work there, because he never complained, never took a day off. When he was done, if I said I was tired, he would carry me home. Whenever I asked, he lied, saying he wasn’t tired.”

He must have been. How could he have not been, after working like that... And Liam and Damian have a six-year age difference. No matter how young Liam was, he must have been heavy for Damian to carry after all that...

Liam chuckles. “He lied all the time. He made me believe for ten years that he didn’t like chocolate because our Mom often gave me chocolates for the three of us, and I loved it. So, Damian would say he didn’t want it, and I’d eat his share without knowing.”

I can’t help but smile, imagining a young Liam happily eating chocolate... Our plates arrive, and after thanking Nina, Liam goes on.

“Nate and Damian always hid stuff from me. I learned very late that they had to work because our father didn’t give us any money. We ate fish that Damian would bring back from his work. They both dropped out of high school to work full time. Yet, they never let me see any of the hardships. Every time, they made it look like a game.”

Now I know why they are so adamant about Liam going to high school properly... They are genuinely caring for their youngest brother. The three of them had to protect each other, but Liam more because he was the youngest. It's a miracle they turned out the way they did, given their family situation... Liam stops eating to play with his fork.

“You know, I suffer from claustrophobia because of them. When I was a kid, they made up a game where I had to sleep in a hole under Nate's bed. Moon Goddess, I hated that game! It was a stupid hole, with just a blanket. Damian took my bed whenever he'd make me sleep in there. With Nate's mattress above, I couldn't see a thing. I thought for years that they were messing with me, the kind of stupid jokes you would play on your younger siblings, you know?”

Liam shakes his head, frowning at the memory. Why would they put him in a hole? I don't see Damian or Nate playing this kind of mean jokes on him just for fun.

“It took me a long time to realize. Every time I was in that hole, it was a night when our father would come home.”

Oh, Moon Goddess. Does he mean...?

“Yes, Nora, you got it. Nate and Damian hid me in that hole so our father wouldn't hit me when he was drunk. Most of the time, I fell asleep fast and didn't hear a thing. Only when I grew older, I started to realize

Damian and Dad fought when I was in that hole. Nate used the mind-link to tell me to stay hidden until it was over. Then, I would come out and find my brother beaten up bad. Nate, too, sometimes.”

Liam looks very sad when telling this. He plays with his fork with a sullen look, bending it and putting it back, with that same frown as Damian when he’s conflicted. Suddenly, he looks at me, and from his eyes, I feel like he is holding his tears.

“You know what’s worse? The one that dirtbag really wanted to beat up was me. But my brothers never let him touch me, so he would beat Damian instead. He let our father hit him until he was satisfied, because once he had enough, he would go out again and stop looking for me. You have no idea how many times I found Damian soaked in blood, Nora. He was strong, so my father never held up. But Damian never complained, not a single time. Instead, he just smiled at me anytime he saw me, saying he was fine. Lying again, to protect me.”

I feel tears coming from hearing this. Liam had already told me that Damian fought with their father and confronted him a lot, but... This all sounds way too real. Liam’s voice is breaking. What kind of mess did they grow up in? I hate their father so much! He was a monster to his own kids. Liam wipes away a couple of tears and drinks a bit before going on.

“Damian is that kind of guy, Nora. He never shows how hard it is for him. Do you know why he rarely visited our mom in the hospital? Because most of the time, he had bruises and cuts, all from our father’s beating,

and he didn't want mom to see it. Damian is doing the same with you now."

I frown. What does he mean with that? Damian's engagement, that whole situation, how is it related to me?

Looking more serene, Liam takes a severe tone. "Nora, you are the most important person in my brother's life. He would do anything, and I mean anything, to protect you. Just like he did for our mom and me. And sometimes, that idiot is willing to make foolish decisions, sacrificing himself for this."

"...Like the engagement, you mean?"

He takes some fries and nods. "Exactly. He accepted the Gold Moon Clan's proposal because he believed he could protect you, and us, with it."

I don't get it. I shake my head. "Liam, you're going to have to be a lot more precise if you want me to believe that Damian got engaged to another woman for my sake."

"Nora, Damian has treated you like a little princess, shielding you from whatever is going on in Silver City right now. But trust me, my brother is going to need a lot of help from now on, and I don't agree with getting it from that King bitch."

“What are you talking about? What is going on in Silver City?”

Liam smiles and eats another portion of his burger. Why can't he answer me first before stuffing himself? It's nerve-wracking! After a few very long and annoying bites, he takes a gulp of his diabolito, and just when I'm about to lose patience, he smiles at me.

“A war, Nora. Forget vampires and witches. Silver City is about to get in a mean, violent, and bloody war between all the werewolf Clans if we don't do something soon.”

I stare at him, totally confused. A war in Silver City? The last war happened not ten years ago when Damian killed their father to take over the Blood Moon Clan! Why would another one erupt now? I thought the Black Brothers were unmatched in terms of strength, so why would anyone choose to start a war now?

“Liam, I don't get it. I thought...”

“We were the untouchable Black Brothers? Well, that part is true, but a werewolf Clan isn't all about its Alpha, Nora. Sure, Damian is the big bad wolf in town, no questioning that. If he had to single out any Alpha in the area, he'd win. Easily. But what if he had to fight fifty wolves at once?”

He's right... The Black Brothers are feared by many because they win in terms of power, dominance, strength. No one would be stupid enough to force them into a duel. If anyone wanted to overthrow them, it would have to be in a massive attack, with enough people to attack not only Damian but the whole pack. Now I'm worried.

"You're telling me other packs want to attack the Blood Moon."

"We are not popular, Nora. Our father's reputation did a lot of damage, and for most of the population, Damian is just as fearsome."

"But Damian is not your father! He is not looking to fight the other packs! He—"

I stop, realizing I started yelling a bit too loud. A lot of eyes are now staring at us, and I mumble some apology before turning back to Liam. That idiot is smiling, mocking me.

"So cute... You are so prone to defend my brother; I'm feeling reassured now."

"Oh, shut up! Tell me, who wants to fight the Blood Moon?"

Liam takes three of the sauce pots, placing them in a triangle.

“Right now, the situation is like this: the three main Clans are ours, the Gold Moon Clan, and the Sapphire Moon Clan. In terms of power, number, and wealth, those three clans hold the most power. But those two are still behind us. The Gold Moon is large, but their Alpha and warriors aren’t that strong. As for the Sapphire Moon, it’s the other way around: they got strength, but they are not as numerous or wealthy.”

“If those two are still behind, what is the problem, then?” I ask, confused.

I already know that through the Black Corporation he established, Damian made sure his Clan had the most possessions in Silver City. They dominate about one-third of the City, leaving the other packs to share what’s left. Liam moves some fries, placing them behind the sauce pots.

I observe his patterns and take a guess. “The Clan alliances?”

He nods. “Exactly. The other Clans are not going to grow any bigger until years now. However, some of them started to understand that having allies might be much more profitable and efficient than waiting. Guess what the other Clans did once they understood that befriending some rogues and people from the former Black Moon Clan was how Damian and Nate beat our father?”

“...They would start seeking internal alliances,” I whisper.

Liam nods.

This is crazy... Werewolves are usually secluded to their own packs. Outside of our packs, we may be “friends” with other wolves, but it doesn’t involve any exchange, unless necessary. Like the Jade Moon and the Pearl Moon. I have always seen the two packs being friendly, but we never acted as one. They had their own fights, and we would never interfere. The most we exchanged was information about possible rogue attacks, but we never acted together against them.

I turn to Liam.

“How are things, then?”

He smiles. “You understand quickly. We weren’t sure of anything until two weeks ago. We knew the Rising Moon Clan had agreed to ally with the Gold Moon Clan, but we had no idea about the others.”

“Until the fight against the vampires, right? All the packs had to react, so the alliances naturally showed.”

I start recalling the events. That’s right. The Blood Moon rallied the White Moon and Opal Moon in the North, but the Gold Moon Clan headed south with the Rising Moon Clan, confirming those two are allies. Also, the Pearl Moon Clan moved to help the Jade Moon, so Vince probably has an alliance going with their Alpha. Then, I recall one crucial detail.

“The Sapphire Moon. They are the only ones that didn’t move.”

Liam nods. “Exactly. But the truth is, they are not the only ones. The Violet Moon also didn’t make a move, while their branch Clan, the Purple Moon, came to help the Sea Moon here.”

“However, the Sea Moon Clan is neutral, isn’t it?”

“Yes. My guess is Lysandra acted against her father, the Violet Moon Alpha, to help Old man Seaver. She is not one to miss the action, and I bet she didn’t like being told to stay on the sidelines.”

“If that’s so, the Violet Moon and Sapphire Moon Clan are allies...”

This means that their power would now be equal with the Blood Moon Clan! The Jones family is a powerful line of Alphas, and their Clan holds a lot of people. Not to mention Lysandra’s warriors! I’ve seen them in action, and they are real war machines. I try to make the math in my head, but no matter how many times I try to think of it, the Sapphire Clan, if allied with the Violet Moon, really is more powerful than the Black Brother’s Clan...

“...And they hate the Blood Moon Clan”.

“Exactly, Nora. Alcott Blue, the previous Sapphire Moon Alpha, had a long feud with our father, and it didn’t die with his son William taking over. He wants nothing to do with us and thinks Damian is not the right Alpha King for Silver City. So, he is waiting for an opportunity to overthrow us at any time.”

The pieces of the puzzle are finally assembling, letting me see the larger picture. I can’t believe I didn’t know any of this earlier. How could I be so blind? Seeing all the packs work together to fight off the vampires, I had no idea so many people were making their moves in the shadows. I look up to Liam.

“So, the Gold Moon wants to ally with Damian?”

He frowns but nods, eating the fries he had left on the table.

“Exactly. They were the second most powerful clan after us. Still, now, the Sapphire Moon bested them by allying with the Violet Moon, and the Rising Moon is nowhere as good as the Jones. So instead, they came to Damian with this proposal.”

I finally get it now. If the Sapphire Moon is after them, they must change alliances quickly and assert their position to avoid a war. But why an engagement for that? I’m still so mad! I understand that the Gold Moon Clan would be the most powerful Clan to ally themselves with, but this

condition is... Gosh, I'm annoyed just thinking about it! My wolf is furiously growling, too. I'm not okay with this!

"Hey, hey, Nora, calm down. Your Alpha aura is scaring everyone, girl," whispers Liam.

I look around. Oh, Liam is right... Everyone is staring at us, and some people instinctively backed away a few steps from our table. Did I do that? My wolf was angry, but I never noticed I could let others feel my aura... I calm myself down a bit, embarrassed. Liam laughs.

"Wow, it's the first time I see you acting like an Alpha. Except for that time with the Jade Moon, I mean. Girl, you do have fangs after all!"

"It's not funny, Liam! I don't even know how I just did this..."

"It's an Alpha thing. If our wolf gets mad, other wolves will feel it and react to our aura. Yours is unusual, even I felt it... other Alphas are usually immune. Guess it's your Royal side acting up, too."

"We are not sure I am a..."

"Oh, stop it, Nora, you know damn well you are by now. Who needs those stupid tests?"

I shake my head. I'm not having this discussion now, and we have more important matters to discuss. I try to think calmly about this alliance with the Gold Moon Clan. Wasn't there any better option?

"What about the other Clans?" I ask.

Liam shakes his head. "We tried, but those who don't fear us, hate us. A lot of the Clans will choose to remain neutral, and it's better they do because we probably wouldn't be their first choice anyway."

"What about the White Moon Clan?"

"Same, Nora, they want to remain neutral. They were grateful we helped them, but they have a long history with the Sapphire Moon, they are not going to betray them. Plus, they hate the Gold Moon Clan, too."

I can't believe it... This situation is impossible. I try to think it over, but for now, I don't see any way to help Damian. The Jade Moon Clan is nothing compared to the others, and I won't bring Damian any help with this.

"So, you're telling me their only way out is for Damian to marry that... girl?"

Liam growls, annoyed. “I don’t like it, and Nate doesn’t either. We tried to talk Damian out of it, and trust me, our brother doesn’t want it either.”

“Why didn’t he tell me then?”

“Because they were already engaged when we finally found you, Nora! Damian doesn’t want you to throw you in the middle of this mess! If the war explodes, guess who they will attack first to hurt Damian?”

His Luna. That’s who they would attack first, to weaken the Alpha, especially if that Luna is his fated mate; it will hurt much more. I’m stunned. That explains his words... “You won’t be my official Luna.” He didn’t mean to have me as his mistress, but to hide me from people who would want to hurt him. I’m... I’m nothing but a weakness to Damian now! My wolf whimpers, too sad from this thought. Why are we so powerless!

“I told you everything, Nora, because I don’t want Damian to make a decision he would regret. Even if he doesn’t want you involved, I think you might be the solution to all this.”

I look at Liam, dumbfounded. The solution, me? I’m just a powerless mate! I only have ownership of one of the weakest clans around, what could I possibly bring Damian that he doesn’t already have?

Liam clenches his fist and looks at me right in the eye. “Nora, I know it’s hard, but my brother loves you. He has loved you, and only you, for ten years. ...Ten years ago, one night, my father came home really, really drunk and angry. He started hitting Damian. Harder than he had ever hit him any time before. I was terrified. It was so bad that Damian told Nate to run with me. As always, Nate obeyed. I struggled to stay, but the last thing I saw was my oldest brother being beaten to death by our father. I was certain he would kill him, Nora. I cried so much because I was so sure Damian was going to die back there.”

I see Liam looking infuriated for the first time, clenching his fists. “When we came back, our father was gone, but so was Damian. All was left was blood, all over the floor, so much blood. We thought he had been killed. Nate panicked; he couldn’t feel our brother’s wolf anymore. I remember I ran, went through every room of the apartment, yelling his name. He was gone, Nora, and I was terrified.”

He stays silent for a while, and, to my surprise, a gentle smile suddenly appears. “For a full week, Nate searched for him, everywhere, even looking for a body. He went through all the territories, despite the risks. Our father didn’t come back either, we had no idea what had happened. Suddenly, after eight days, Damian reappeared, looking perfectly fine! No wound, not even scars. I thought he was a ghost, but honestly, I didn’t care. My brother was back. Do you know what the first thing he said was?”

He raises his eyes, looking into mine, smiling.

“He told us a little princess with the most beautiful blue eyes had saved his life.”

...A little princess with blue eyes? Damian meant me? Is that when the two of us met, during those eight days? I can't remember any of it. How could he come out perfectly fine? If their father's beating was as hard as Liam said.

“What else did he say?” I ask, impatient.

Liam shakes his head. “Not much. Damian never told us the details about your encounter. He just talked about his little princess all the time, his fated mate. I never saw him looking happier than the days that followed. Sometimes, he would just close his eyes to feel you, even if you couldn't feel him, and smile. Though after that, he realized he couldn't find you anymore, and that's when we all started looking for you. He was desperate, Nora. Sometimes, he would get so angry, because he could feel you getting hurt. He became crazy. It's like he was closing his heart all over again. He was obsessed with finding you because he knew you were in pain.”

I know. It's all I could think of once I knew Damian had been linked with me since my childhood. Every time I got hurt, he was on the other end, feeling the blow and my pain with it. To think he looked for me for ten years...

Suddenly, I feel the need to be close to my mate. I want to see Damian, to be in my mate's arms again. I want to look into his silver eyes. I don't care for all those power struggles, the Clans tactics, or any battle. I want him.

I fight to calm my wolf and silence my urge. I massage my temples. What is wrong with me? Liam looks at me, intrigued, but I just shake my head as if it was nothing. We resume eating, and I take a few bites before talking again.

“You have a plan, don't you? You wouldn't have sabotaged this engagement party and brought me there otherwise.”

He smiles. “It's more an idea than a plan, for now, to be honest.”

“Are you going to actually tell me about it, Liam?”

“Are you going to reconcile with my brother?” He asks right back.

What game is he playing? I don't like his little smirk. So, what, he won't tell me anything unless I forgive Damian? How can he toy with my feelings right now! I growl at him, but he ignores me and keeps eating, waiting for my answer.

“I’m still mad at him, you know!”

“I know.”

And yet he keeps smiling like some mischievous kid. I really don’t like his attitude! He is acting like I’m so gullible! Who said I was going to forgive Damian so easily? He got engaged to another woman, for Moon Goddess’ sake! Whatever reasons he had, how am I supposed to get over this, and it hasn’t been two days, either!

While I’m fighting with my emotions, my wolf is fidgeting, too. She wants to see our mate badly. She is angry, but she misses him a lot also. Can’t we go see him? I want to tell her to shut up, but I know she is me, too. A part of me that longs for her other half.

I’m still thinking it over and over when Nina comes to take our empty plates away. This time, Liam chooses the desserts for the two of us without even looking at the menus, and I don’t mind it. I’m too busy fighting my inner turmoil to argue over desserts right now.

“Talk with Damian.”

I glare at Liam, annoyed at him.

“I’m serious, Nora. Talk to him, at least. You two love each other.”

I hate that look he is giving me right now. Why does he have to be always right? And so sure of himself, too.

“I still don’t understand how I can help Damian.”

“Nora, you are much stronger than you think. You don’t realize it yet. I know you; you are not going to let that girl get Damian.”

My wolf starts growling. Hell no, he is our mate, ours! It takes me a few seconds to calm her down. I wish I were better at taming my inner wolf, but that whole fated mate thing doesn’t make it easy.

Nina brings our desserts, crepes topped with fruits and chocolate, with two hot chocolates covered with marshmallows. Gosh, how can Liam eat so much? He practically jumps on his dessert like he hasn’t eaten in three days.

I sigh. “Okay, I will talk with Damian. I don’t promise anything else.”

“Mm,” he replies, his mouth full.

I start eating my dessert, too, and though it is delicious, my mind is still lingering somewhere else. What am I supposed to say to my engaged

mate? Liam just gave me a lot of information about whatever was going on, but I really need to hear it from Damian. Last night, I lost all trust I had in him, and now, it's like picking up the pieces of broken glass. It's sharp and painful, and I know the cracks will remain. I don't want to go through something like this ever again.

"I've had enough with all the secrets."

Liam raises his head, and I realize I subconsciously used my wolf's voice to talk. He smiles and puts his spoon back on the table. His eyes wander outside, watching the rain and the sea.

"You know, I overheard my brothers' last secret recently," he says.

What is he talking about now? He keeps talking, his eyes still looking outside.

"There was a reason my father hated me, why I was the one he always wanted to beat up. Our mom... She got sick because of me."

Because of Liam? They never gave me details about whatever their mother suffered from, but I know she died slowly, very weakened. Liam's eyes are undecipherable, but he won't stop gazing outside.

“Our father already fought a lot before I was born. Mostly against vampires. There were several Clans here, in Silver City, a few years ago, constantly fighting with us werewolves. One day, he attacked the wrong one. He killed a vampire’s loved one, so... that vampire took revenge on him.”

“...He attacked your mother?”

Liam nods. “Vampire bites are poisonous to wolves. Usually, we can survive if we don’t get too much of their venom, and our wolf form will heal it for us, but when that vampire attacked our mom, he wanted to kill her. Our mother was a strong wolf, though. She should have been able to fight him off, but... From Elena, you probably know that pregnant werewolves can’t shapeshift, right?”

So that’s it... Their mother didn’t die of sickness but from a vampire’s venom, because she was pregnant with Liam and couldn’t shapeshift to take her wolf form. Hence, she had no choice but to get poisoned. Past a certain level of venom, our wolf abilities can’t do anything; it’s too late. Their mother was infected...

“You didn’t know?”

He shakes his head. “I just thought our mom was sick. They never said a thing, and neither did she. It does explain a lot of things.”

It really does... Even their father's hatred for vampires, why he chased all of them out. I think about Liam, and his brothers, hiding him the truth. Why they did it...

"It wasn't your fault, Liam."

He nods. "I know. I already had that talk with Nathaniel. He and Damian chose not to tell me so I wouldn't be hurt or feel guilty. My mom probably felt the same, too. It doesn't change the fact that our father was a monster, but..."

He turns to me, and grabs my hand, looking at me very seriously.

"It made me realize how much they have overprotected me, again. And this time, Nora, I'm not willing to let Damian make all the sacrifices by himself. I want to be the one to protect them, and I'm going to need your help with that. So please, don't abandon Damian."

Much later, I'm back in Elena and Daniel's apartment, though the latter is now gone, off to spend the night with Bobo. I'm left with my cousin, who fell asleep a few minutes ago. I can't sleep at all.

Everything Liam and I talked about today keeps circling in my mind, and I can't shake it off. How many more hardships will the brothers have to face from now on? This war is coming... Damian, how is he going to face it? I keep seeing him, next to that woman. Remembering that scene still

hurts, but I am a werewolf. I need to start thinking like one, and that includes everything that is going on for the Clans right now. I need to start taking decisions.

I get up silently, trying not to wake up Elena. In the living room, the clock indicates it's one in the morning. It's still pouring outside... I grab one of the blankets and sit in the kitchen. I take a few minutes, calming myself and observing the rain. This is going to be hard... I finally take out my phone and look for Damian's voicemail to listen. He left it about two hours after I left yesterday. I take a deep breath.

For a few seconds, the message is entirely silent. I check several times if it's really playing, but after a while, I suddenly hear some sounds. Oh my gosh, is Damian... crying?

I feel my heart tightening. It's muffled, but I'm almost sure this is what I think. I feel my own tears running down my cheeks, hearing my mate's pain. He breathes in, and finally, starts talking, slowly, with a broken voice.

“Nora... I'm so sorry, Nora... I'm sorry. I... I know I should have told you, I... I'm such an idiot. Nora, I never know what's the right thing to do when it comes to you. Nora... I want to protect you so much. You're the most important thing to me. I love you, Nora, I love you. I love you so much it hurts because I never know. I don't know how to make you happy, and I don't know how to protect you. I... That engagement, that woman, they mean nothing to me, Nora. They are nothing. I swear. You're the only one

in my mind, you've been the only one forever. I... I need you, Nora. I don't care about any of the rest. My Clan, my people, my brothers... I can't do this without you, Nora. I'll go mad, and I... I can't take it. I need you. I really need you. Nora..."

He breathes in, and I do the same, not holding my tears back anymore. But there's more, Damian's voice comes in a whisper.

"...I love you. I love your blue eyes, the way you look at me and make me feel like a better man than I am. I want you, in my arms, every single second that goes by. Nora... I don't want to lose you, and I love you. I... I'm so, so sorry. Please, Nora. Don't leave me, please. I... Can we talk? I want to explain to you. I know it's late, but..."

He goes silent again, but I can hear his breathing, calmer than before. After a while, he chuckles.

"I'm a fucking idiot... And I'm always too late when it comes to you, aren't I? I... I don't want to lose you again, Nora. I can't. I don't know how long it will take, but... I just hope you will forgive me. Tell me what it will take, I'll do it. I just want you back, Nora. I'm sorry. And I'm a dumbass."

I can't help but laugh between my tears when he says that. I never heard Damian pronounce that kind of word. A long silence, again, but I can hear his breathing, so I keep listening until he starts talking again.

“Nora... I hope you’ll listen to this. I don’t feel stupid, talking alone here. If I just imagine you are listening to this... I already feel better. I know I should feel bad, but I... Damn, I miss you already... I love you, Nora. I should have told you sooner, not in that stupid elevator, not like this... I told you, I’m always too late... But I’ll say it again. I love you. I’ll say it as many times as it takes, as many times as you want to hear it. I love you, Nora Bluemoon, I love you.”

I burst into tears, listening to his voice, whispering those three words again and again.

The next morning, I wake up on the couch. I fell asleep there, listening to Damian’s voice. My first reflex is to check that his message wasn’t deleted or anything, but it seems like my phone archived it on its own. It turns out the battery is almost dead because it stayed online most of the night. I use the last of it to listen to Damian’s message one more time.

It feels so unreal... Every time I hear it, I’m brought to tears. His voice breaking, his words, repeating how much he loves me. It takes me a few minutes to calm down. My wolf, too, is going crazy, begging to see Damian. I have a hard time taming her, and my heartbeat is going wild. Is the room spinning? And I feel hot suddenly...

I hear Elena’s voice, calling my name. What is wrong with me? I’m burning, and a bit dizzy... When I wake up again, I’m feeling cold. Elena is next to me, gently caressing my hair. I recognize her living room; I’m

still on the couch... What happened? I'm so thirsty! She notices I'm awake when I try to sit up.

"Nora! How do you feel?"

She helps me sit up, but all I can think of is this hellish thirst.

"Elena, can I get some water?" I ask with a raspy voice.

"Oh, sure!"

She hands me a water bottle, and I start drinking like I haven't had any in weeks. Once I'm done, I feel a lot better. Daniel takes the bottle away, and Elena smiles at me and puts her hand on my forehead like a doctor.

"You should feel a lot better now. Do you still feel hot?"

I shake my head, still confused. "Elena, what's going on? What happened?"

"I found you there this morning; you looked very sick. I thought of taking you to the hospital, but it was just a slight fever. Too many emotions these days, huh?"

I nod. I didn't think I'd feel sick just from all that... Probably the rain from the other day, too... Elena sighs, "Don't worry, we already gave you some medicine. It works great on werewolves, so you should be fine now."

So that's why I feel a bit cold instead of hot... I don't feel my wolf either; it's like she is half-asleep.

"Thank you, Elena"

She nods and gives me an extra blanket. "It's alright. You can sleep anyway; it's Sunday. Will you be okay about going to work tomorrow?"

Right, work... I can't believe I have to go to work after everything that happened. It feels a bit surreal, but after all, I wanted this job. I nod. I may not be too happy with it for once, but I guess I must. And it's not like Damian will come, anyway.

"Okay. Well, just rest for today, Nora."

I spend the Sunday resting on Elena's couch. I feel cold and a bit drowsy for most of the day, and when I'm not talking to Elena or Daniel, I just sleep. All those semi-naps allow me to take time to think, a lot. About Damian and our relationship. What I want to do next. About the whole situation of Silver City, too. Sadly, I can't come up with any solution regarding the Clans.

Regarding my mate, however, I know exactly what my feelings are. When Monday comes, Bobo brings me some of my clothes from the apartment. Elena lent me hers for the weekend, but she is taller than me, and I need to wear my own clothes for work. I put on a denim skirt and a white top, my earrings and my necklace, and Bobo drives me to work after breakfast.

It feels good to be back to work. There is so much to do that I don't have time to think about anything else. Chef Michel keeps me busy all day, and every other minute, Narcissa is the one giving me chores. During my break, Liam and Tonia send me messages to hear some of my news. Honestly, I'm fine.

I feel better than I have been in a long time. Once my shift is over, Bobo comes to pick me up as promised.

"Are we going back to Elena's?" He asks while starting the car.

"No, Bobo. Can you bring me back to the apartment? I want to take a shower and change. I will go see Damian after that."

"Okay."

The apartment is just as I left it, but colder. Bobo waits for me while I take my shower. It feels nice to wash my hair after a long day of work. When

I'm done, I put my denim skirt back on, and pick a white sweater to go with it. Bobo helps me dry my hair while I put some light makeup on.

"How do you feel?"

"I'm okay, Bobo. Talking with Liam was... enlightening. Have you heard about Damian?"

He nods in the mirror, still focused on braiding my hair. "He is not doing well, according to Neal. He didn't go to work today. Only Nathaniel can approach him..."

That doesn't sound too good... I remember his voicemail once again. I know it almost by heart now; I listened to it so many times. It is high time we talk. After a few more minutes, I'm finally ready.

In the car, surprisingly, I'm calmer than I have ever been in a long while. My wolf and I are finally synching our feelings, and it's more peaceful this way. I just want to see Damian for now. It's only been two days, but it feels like I haven't seen him in weeks...

We arrive at the Company building, and Bobo accompanies me to the elevator, pressing the button to the top floor for me. Now I'm starting to feel anxious. I play nervously with my necklace as the numbers grow on the little panel. 24th floor, 25th... Calm down, Nora. My wolf is starting to get restless, too.

When we finally arrive, to my surprise, Nathaniel is at the entrance, talking to someone on the phone. As soon as he sees me, he hangs up, surprised.

“Nora? What are you...?”

“I came to see Damian. Is he here?”

He nods. “He is upstairs, in his apartment, but...”

“Can I go see him?”

It takes a few seconds, but he nods and steps aside to let me through. I don’t really know where his apartment is, but I remember his office layout from last time. There was a small corridor with some stairs, and I quickly find the door I’m looking for.

When I enter, everything is dark. All the curtains are down. Didn’t anyone at least put the lights on? I wouldn’t be able to take a step in if it wasn’t for my wolf’s night vision. It’s not only the room that is in the dark— all the furniture is either black, grey, or dark wood. Very different from my own... This place is much colder, neat, and sober. It doesn’t feel like a place to live in.

I leave my shoes at the entrance and walk silently. It's my first time here, but I can just rely on my wolf's instinct to find her mate. I progress slowly in the apartment until I reach the master bedroom. Next to a large king bed, pieces of furniture are scattered, like someone broke them violently. Probably the remains of a bed-side table...

“Nora...?”

Damian is sitting next to the glass wall. He looks like a wreck... He's shirtless but wearing the same pants as last Friday and a three-day beard. He has dark circles under his eyes, and his black hair is in a mess. When I walk up to him, his silver eyes are filled with surprise. I crouch down in front of him, calmer than I expected, despite being so close to him.

He reaches his hand to caress my cheek, and I can see in his eyes he is checking if I'm real. I breathe in, gathering my confidence. “Hi, Damian.”

My voice seems to give him a shock, and he suddenly gets agitated. “Nora, Nora, I'm so sorry! I've been an idiot, I... I know I should've told you about all this. I'm so, so sorry, Nora...”

I put my hands on his scratchy cheeks, looking into his eyes, trying to calm him down. Our faces are so close. He keeps shaking his head, whispering excuses with a broken voice.

“Damian, calm down,” I murmur calmly.

“I’m so sorry, Nora, I’m sorry...”

He seems to calm down, and without being able to refrain myself any longer, I lean in to kiss his lips. Gosh, I missed this taste... I retreat, and he stares at me, surprised.

“I’m still mad at you,” I clarify. “...But I listened to your voicemail. That, and I talked to Liam, too.”

“My message... I didn’t think you would really listen to it...”

“Well, I did.”

He nods and sighs. He looks really tired... Don’t tell me he hasn’t gotten any sleep since Friday night? It can’t be...

“I meant everything I said. I’m so sorry, Nora... I should have talked to you.”

“Damian, we can’t keep going like this.”

He frowns and looks at me in the eye. I need to say this now because I can't take it anymore. I take his face in my hands, talking very seriously now.

"Don't hide things from me. I know you want to protect me, but this is just hurting me more. I don't want to have to learn things from others again. Tell me, Damian. Anything I'm involved with, everything I need to know. You should have told me about the issues with your Clan and this engagement sooner. I can handle it, okay? Stop protecting me so much."

He shakes his head. "I will never stop protecting you, Nora. I don't want you to suffer or be caught in any of this mess."

"You are making me suffer more with those secrets! Damian, I love you too, but if I can't trust you, I can't stay with you."

Damian suddenly grabs me by the waist, bringing me closer to him with an anxious expression I've never seen before. I'm straddling him, but we are both too agitated for any other thoughts right now.

"Don't leave me, Nora. I don't want to go through this ever again," he says, looking more serious than ever.

I put my hands behind his head and look him right in the eye. "Then promise me. No more secrets, Damian. About me, about you, or the Clan. Don't deliberately hide things from me again."

“What if you don’t like it?”

“I can handle it. I’m a big girl, Damian, not a defenseless pup.”

I see him hesitating, frowning. He is thinking so hard, it’s like I can hear his inner turmoil from here. He closes his eyes and rests his head on my shoulder. I instinctively start caressing the base of his hairline, brushing his short hair with my fingertips. His arms slide around my waist, hugging me close.

“...What if you don’t love me because of what you are going to hear?”

“Damian, I came back after hearing you were engaged to another woman. Unless you have a wife and kids somewhere, I should be able to handle it.”

He chuckles, and I slap his shoulder, annoyed. It’s not funny! I’m still mad about this whole engagement thing...

I feel him sigh against my neck. “I’m a fighter, Nora. I’ve killed people before, and I will do it again if needed. Not only my own father, but I have a lot of blood on my hands. You are so pure and innocent, sometimes I’m scared all this darkness will scare you away.”

I know that. I knew from the start that one doesn't become Alpha in a city of werewolves just with relations and money. We live in a world filled with violence. The Black Brothers are not just the three nice young men I know. They hold the lives of hundreds of people in their hands, and many more depend on them. It's a scary world hiding in their shadows. Even if Liam is a teen like me, he is a fighter. Nathaniel, too, fully supports Damian. Lastly, Damian is the King of this city, the most powerful man and the most dangerous wolf. I never forget that. Even now, when he is in my arms.

"You won't, Damian. I promise."

He raises his head and kisses me without warning. A loving, tender kiss. I respond to it, unable to resist. I've missed him so much for those two days... His strong arms holding me, the touch of his hands in my hair and on my waist. His body heat and smell melting with mine. After a few seconds of getting drunk on his lips, I gather whatever is left of my self-control to push him away.

"Stop kissing me, Damian. You didn't promise. Please."

He sighs, playing with my curls between his fingers. When he speaks again, he looks at me in the eye, very seriously. "No more secrets, Nora. I promise."

I smile. Finally! Now that I have his word, and I hope he will keep it, I have to ask a question that has been on the back of my mind all weekend. Truth is, I'm a bit scared. I really hope he will give me the answer I need to hear. I take a deep breath and ask him very seriously.

“Damian, that woman... Did you sleep with her?”

I can't even describe how scared I am right now. It's like my stomach is filled with ice.

For a second, Damian looks perplexed by my question, and after a while, he sighs and gives me a faint smile. “No. I swear, Nora, I've never even kissed her. I don't love her, Nora, you're the only one for me. You've always been the only one.”

I want to believe him, I really do. I guess it will just take some time now, after everything that happened. I nod to his answer, feeling definitely better, and Damian smiles and gives me a quick kiss. He makes it look so simple...

Just when I'm about to say something, he suddenly starts searching for something around us with his hand. I see him grab one of the wooden pieces left on the floor. It's small, but triangle-shaped, looking quite sharp. I want to ask what he is going to do with this, but before I can say a thing, he suddenly uses it to pierce his own hand!

“Damian! What the...?”

I grab his wrist to look at his wound, panicked. Why the hell did he just do this? It looks deep, too!

Damian stays very calm, his eyes still on me. “You said no more secrets. So now, I need you to kiss me.”

“What? Are you mad? It’s not the time for kisses, Damian, you’re bleeding!”

He is bleeding! I want to do something, call Nate or someone, but Damian suddenly grabs me by the waist, forcing a kiss on me. I try to push him away. Who wants to kiss at a time like this! But of course, he is way too strong for me. He is so passionate, his forceful lips playing against mine. I’m still worried, but it’s like a conditioned response for me to move my lips. For a few seconds, our breaths intertwine, while my mind is half enjoying it and half worried about his injury. I retreat after one or two seconds.

“Damian, stop! You need—”

“Nora, look.”

Cutting me in the middle of my sentence, he shows me his hand. His perfectly fine hand... What just happened? There was a deep cut right in the middle of his palm just a few seconds ago! Yet now, it looks completely normal, except for a bit of dried blood around it. Even for a werewolf, healing this fast from a wound like this is insane!

“But, how...?”

“It’s you, Nora.”

Me? I stare at Damian, confused. What does he mean by that? Does he mean this kiss was for...? I take his hand in mine, rechecking it, making sure I’m not hallucinating or something. A bit of fresh blood is still there, drying already, but the wound has completely disappeared.

“I don’t get it...”

“I don’t really know how it works, either, but if I kiss you, all my wounds will heal much faster than usual just like this,” he explains.

“How did you know...?”

“From our first meeting. You saved my life like this.”

I suddenly remember the story Liam told me last Saturday. How badly their father injured Damian ten years ago. Liam did say he thought his brother might actually have died from it at that time. Those were no light injuries. They even thought he might have died, but Damian showed up alive and completely fine a few days later... I blink, stunned by what it all means.

“Damian Black, are you telling me you kissed a seven-year-old girl and magically healed from death-threatening injuries that way?”

He smiles, amused by my shocked reaction. I can’t believe him! He knew for ten years that I can do those... weird magically healing kisses, and never said a thing!

“Don’t laugh! You knew since the very beginning that I can do this, and you never told me!”

“I had my reasons. First, it’s tiring for you, isn’t it?”

Now that he says it, I do feel a bit more tired than two minutes ago. Like after a workout or something similar. Not to the point of exhaustion, but I still feel sleepy.

“The first time you did it, you collapsed, Nora. I didn’t want to put you in danger this way. Thankfully, this ability only seems to tire you out if I need healing. As you already know, if we kiss when I’m fine, nothing

happens to you. I also think this is linked to you not being able to fast-heal. Since you can heal me, it probably takes away a bit of your own ability, and I don't really like that."

It kind of makes sense, in a way... Is it because I'm half a Royal, then? Could it be some sort of secret ability? Healing others instead of myself? But, with a kiss? It's still a bit... odd.

"Do you think it only works on you, because you are my fated mate? Or maybe..."

What if I used it on others? Well, it's not like I plan on going around kissing people to try, but still, I wonder if it's just between the two of us or if it could work on anyone. Damian suddenly makes an angry face after hearing me. Uh-oh.

"Don't even think about it, Nora," he growls.

I forgot how possessive he can be, sometimes...

"Wait a second... Don't tell me that is the real reason why you never told me."

I wait for an answer, but he actually stays silent, avoiding my eyes. What...? I can't believe him! How can he be so selfish and jealous?

Keeping this a secret the whole time was just because he was afraid I would go around kissing other people? Really!

“Damian Black! You—”

Before I can unleash my anger at him, he suddenly grabs me by the waist again and makes me shut up with a kiss. Gosh, this man!

However, my anger subsides naturally after a few seconds. I’m comfortable in Damian’s arms, leaning on his chest to answer his kiss. I feel his hand, caressing my cheek, playing with my hair, holding me close. I don’t want to part with him. This is where I belong. In this man’s embrace, surrounded by his caresses. Moon Goddess, I feel so much better now, pressed against his chest.

After a long while, our lips finally part. We face each other, Damian’s arms around me. His silver eyes are glowing in the dark...

“I’ve missed you...” He whispers.

“I missed you, too.”

I observe him. He looks older, with the lack of sleep, and the beard. It’s my first time seeing his bare chest, too. I never realized how muscular he was, underneath all the clothes. I can’t help myself and slowly follow the

lines of his muscles with my fingertips. He has perfectly shaped abs, like a Greek sculpture. I like it... a lot.

He grabs my hand with his. “My Love, I’m happy that you enjoy the view, but if your fingers go any lower, then you’re going to make things difficult for me.”

I blush a little. Silly, Nora. I kind of forgot which position we are in... He chuckles at my embarrassment, and brings my fingers to his lips, kissing them one by one.

“You work out?” I ask, trying to chase my uneasiness.

“When I have free time. It helps to keep my wolf under control.”

The whole Alpha thing. I guess it’s like me when I can’t manage my anger properly, letting everyone around me feel it. Is that why he stayed here? I look around, my eyes falling on the remnants of furniture.

“Seems like this self-control thing isn’t perfect yet...”

He sighs. “Only when it comes to you... I’m the most irrational man there is. Neal and Nate lectured me lots already.”

I can't help but feel sorry about all this, too. It seems like this weekend was a nightmare for him...

He leans on my shoulder again, closing his eyes.

"Damian, you should get some sleep, you look exhausted..."

"...Stay with me."

"I will," I answer without thinking.

For a few seconds, he stays silent, and I wonder if he fell asleep. To my surprise, he suddenly gets up, carrying me with him, and take us both to the bed. We land heavily on the dark sheets, Damian still holding me against him. We are so close, his lips are almost touching my forehead. I touch his spiky chin again with my fingertips.

"I like it. Your beard."

"I'll keep it that way then," he whispers.

I hear his breath slow down until he falls asleep. I fall into slumber, too, a while later, soothed by Damian's embrace, the silence around us, and the darkness.