

Chapter 160 In Absentia

Alexander

As we neared the courthouse, traffic slowed to a halt. My lawyer sent me a text just seconds before Fiona and I started to see evidence of what he was notifying me about.

Brandon: Scarlet’s a no-show for court. Lindner says she’s MIA. Awaiting word on proceedings.

There was an absolute media frenzy around the courthouse.

News vans were parked and double-parked on every side of the block. Reporters with outstretched microphones rushed each and every court official to walk in or out of the building, some with boom operators shuffling behind holding recording devices high overhead. They were like a swarm of bees, pushing around in chaotic masses, their prattling voices all joining together into a vibrating wall of sound.

The Alpha King smacked his gavel on the podium at the first sound of whispers in the gallery, shouting, “ORDER!”

“Not another word will be spoken out of turn in this courtroom.” His face was set hard, his baritone voice raised to an almost deafening decibel.

Scarlet’s lawyer, Lindner, sat alone at the defense table. My father turned his attention to him next, asking for confirmation that the attorney had done all he could to attempt contact with his client, and making him swear on record that he had no knowledge of her current whereabouts.

“Very well,” the King said. “The court will proceed with the trial in absentia. Let the record show the defendant has failed to appear. We will begin with the prosecution’s closing arguments now...”

No one was surprised when, less than an hour later, Lindner shakily rested his case and the Alpha King issued his verdict immediately. He did not need time to deliberate.

The Queen was found Guilty on all charges. A warrant was issued for her arrest.

I walked out of the courtroom with my arm around Fiona, my vision tunneled on the path forward to our waiting car, my mind a tangle of darkening thoughts.

My wolf’s intuition is always right. And it was telling me that this situation was bad, very bad.

Fiona

Alexander’s mood started shifting as soon as he read the text from his attorney. It grew more and more intense throughout the final court proceedings, and now that we were in the car together on the way back to the palace, his heavy energy felt nearly intolerable.

“What’s going on?” I asked, very quietly. We were on the highway, but I was tempted to roll the window down anyway. Alexander was upset, and his heart was racing; heat was rolling off his body in waves.

My husband met my eyes, staring blankly. It seemed to take him several seconds to wrench free of a deep thought. Finally he reached out and took my hand. I got the distinct feeling he was using the touch to anchor himself in reality.

“Tell you when we get home,” he whispered, his eyes flicking up at the driver.

I dragged Alexander to bed with me and sat down, leaning back into the pillows. He was still quiet, locked into some secret place in his mind, but his hands became eager to assume a purpose and immediately started massaging my feet.

“Thank you.”

He looked up at me, but did not respond.

Then I asked for a second time, “What’s going on, Alex?”

He stared down at my body, massaging my ankles and calves now, and keeping his eyes on his work. “I want to tell you,” he said gravely, “but I don’t know if it’s a good idea.”

“Why would it not be a good idea?”

He gave my calves a simultaneous squeeze, then got up off the bed. He started taking off his jacket and tie, revealing as he did so that he was sweating severely, and wiped his forehead with an unbuttoned shirt sleeve.

“I know you are a strong woman, Fiona. And it’s only because your health is, well, somewhat delicate right now... it’s only because of that that I’m reluctant to tell you something that will be disturbing to hear. I don’t want to stress you out. It’s not good for you or the baby.”

I met his eyes, unflinching in my determination. “You cannot say something like that and then not tell me. I know now that something is wrong. Please just tell me what it is, Alex.”

When his hands went back to my legs, I leaned forward and grabbed them with my own.

“Look at me. I can handle it.”

He nodded. And then he jumped right into it, probably trying to get it out before he could change his mind.

“There are vampires in our world again, Fiona. They’re here. They’ve broken the treaty of surrender we brokered at the end of the last war. They started in the south a few weeks ago. The small, border villages. But my father hasn’t...” He sucked in a breath, shaking his head.

There were too many thoughts and feelings arising inside me at once for me to identify or process any of them. All I could do was breathe and keep listening.

“I don’t know how many there are, or where they are now. But I have a bad feeling, now, that Scarlet has gotten into bed with them. That’s she’s given them something in exchange for them assisting her escape.”

Shit. That made sense.

“There’s another war coming, Fiona.” Alexander looked up at me with a pained expression. “I’m sorry.”

I knew what he was apologizing for.

He was sorry because he was a war commander; the highest ranking war commander in the werewolf world, since his father had long ago retired from battle. And that meant, if there was going to be a war, Alexander was going away to fight it.

He was still talking. It must have been a relief to get this off his chest, because he was going into deep detail, seemingly unable to stop.

I swallowed down my shock and fear, holding a well-practiced neutral expression on my face, and listened to all of it.

What my husband was telling me was horrifying. But I had to prove to him that I was up for the job of standing bravely by his side through any threat to the kingdom. I had just married the future Alpha King, after all. I had signed on for this.

Finally, wiping his mouth with his hand, Alexander said, “I’m sorry. That was probably too much to learn all at once. It’s just... I think about this so much, and it’s been hard not to tell you. I’m sorry that I’ve kept it from you, and I hope you understand why. And I’m sorry, too, that I had to tell you now.”

“Don’t apologize.” I shook my head at him, the way he’d done to me this morning when I’d impulsively said I was sorry after crying out in pain from the false labor contractions.

We held a long moment of silence, looking into each other’s eyes. Thinking.

“Whatever happens,” I finally said, once I was sure I had the right words, “I will be here for you, in whatever way you need. We will get through this together.”

He leaned in and kissed me, and at nearly the exact same moment, I had another stab of pain in my abdomen, the same sudden cramping I’d been having intermittently all week. I managed not to grimace or cry out in any way, but I did gasp for breath and jump away from Alexander a little.

“What? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just need to use the bathroom, and when you leaned into my stomach like that, it put pressure on my bladder.” I had gotten very good at making up simple, believable white lies, after all the practice with my grandfather.

“Oh.” Alexander jumped up to get out of my way, extending a hand to help me off the bed.

“Thank you.”

I knew what this discomfort was, now that I had seen the doctor this morning. And yes, she did say to call her again if I had more pain, but it just didn’t seem necessary. Doctors just say things like that. I only needed a minute to breathe through the pain.

I closed the bathroom door behind me, grabbed a few fluffy towels off a rack, and used them to make a sort of nest for myself to sit on in the middle of the floor. I sat in a kneel first, and then pivoted down to lie on my side in a fetal position, happy now that I could let my face soothe up as much as it needed to, and tried very hard to focus on my breath.

It was difficult to stop thinking, though, about all the things I had just learned.

If Alexander and the pack went away to war, our baby and I would be left here alone.

And just when he and I were closer than ever.

I didn’t want to be without him at all. But it would be even worse having to worry every day if he’d been hurt or killed in battle.

Soon my pain abated. I got up as quickly as I could. Flushed the toilet and ran the sink and put one of the towels right into the hamper. The other one, I used to clean myself up, hoping a quick rinse of my face and body would be enough to rid me of the smell of sweat.