

Kings Breeder 411

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The Fake Ciana

Ciana

It was late afternoon when I saw that the coast was clear, and I decided to go ahead and go to my parents' house. I could tell Warren had moved in because the light was on in the Master suite.

I had a feeling that Raymond would insist that Warren take the best room in the house.

I would have to sneak in like a common thief, but once I was in there and with Warren, I should be safe. I didn't think that the servants would be hanging around Warren too much since he could easily just tell them to leave him be.

I could see Warren pacing around the room. Carefully, so as not to fall or draw attention to myself, I made my way to the window of the Master suite. Keeping my balance, I situated my knees on the window sill and knocked on the window.

He jumped a bit when he saw me, and then rushed over to open the window, helping me inside. "Thank the goddess you're here! I was worried. It seemed to have taken you a while. Did you run into trouble?"

"No. Sorry to make you worry," I said. "I wanted to make sure no one saw me." I straightened my clothing and took a deep breath, happy to have made it in. Now, I felt relatively safe-at least for the moment.

"You have a beautiful home! I'm impressed," Warren praised. He poured me a glass of cool water from a pitcher and handed it over. He was so thoughtful-unlike some people.....

"Thank you. Mom and Dad poured their love into this house. It indeed is a wonderful place." I couldn't help but smile.

"Is this the Luna and Alpha's bedroom?"

"Yes. Why?" I asked him, taking a sip of the drink. The cold water felt good going down my throat. I looked around at the familiar space and instantly missed my parents.

My heart felt heavy as my eyes landed on a picture of the three of us that was sitting on my mother's dresser.

When would they be home?

"I should've asked for another room," Warren said, causing me to give him my full attention.

"No, you're totally fine. Even if my parents were home, they'd put you here. You're the prince. You're not just another visitor."

His cheeks pinked slightly with my compliment. "Still, Ciana, I feel rude."

“It’s all good, Warren. I promise.”

Just then, we heard voices in the hallway. I lifted a finger to my lips to signal him to be quiet.

Maids. They were passing by in a bit of a rush. I assumed they had decided the whole rest of the house needed a thorough cleaning now that a distinguished guest was staying here.

“I wonder if Miss Ciana has met him yet,” one of the women was saying.

“No, I believe she’s still out in the garden,” the other said. “She sure does love to tend the flowers. Her mother will be proud to see how they are doing when she gets back.”

Once they were out of earshot, I said, “Since she is nearby, we should go do some observation.”

I had always loved to take care of the garden in the past, so I was curious to see how this new version of me did when it came to pruning the hedges and tending the flowers. Any information we could gather about her could be helpful.

Warren nodded. “I think that’s a splendid idea, but we’ll have to make sure no one sees you.”

I nodded. Luckily, it was getting dark, as long as we were careful, it shouldn’t be a problem. Otherwise, our entire plan could quickly go off track.

Warren went first, and I followed behind him. He was careful to watch for servants or anyone else who might see us.

Eventually, we made it out to the back garden. It was easy to find a place to hide out there because of all of the high bushes, shrubs, and trees.

The moment my eyes landed on her, a wave of fury washed over me. I wanted to run right over to her and accuse her of pretending to be me. But I knew that wouldn’t work because I had called her out the last time I was here, and clearly, no one had believed she wasn’t me.

Now, she was kneeling in front of my mother’s prize rose bushes, a pair of shears in hand, trimming away the weeds and some of the undergrowth.

We moved down closer to a curve in the stone path and took up a position behind a large blooming tree. It smelled lovely, but I couldn’t think about the beauty of the garden or the fact that I was finally home again at the moment.

Instead, I needed to concentrate on listening to what the servants who had accompanied her outside were saying.

There were four of them, and I recognized them as people who had worked in my parents’ home for a few years.

I didn’t spend much time around them myself because I preferred to be by myself most of the time. But this Ciana must’ve been different because they were clearly there as her attendants.

And they were talking. About her.

“Really, being off at the palace has matured her quite a bit, don’t you think?” One of them, an older woman, was talking to a man.

“Yes, yes, I agree. They must’ve given the girls etiquette

lessons,” he surmised. “After all, she seems so much more graceful.”

“I appreciate how much self-control the Alpha’s daughter is able to exhibit now,” another woman was saying. She had her hands folded in front of her, standing like a statue, all prim and proper. “Do you recall how she used to always be running about, getting dirty, and tracking filth into the house?”

“Oh, yes,” the last of them, an older man said, shaking his head. “It was nearly impossible to keep the dust out of the drapes when Miss Ciana would come running in, wildly, covered in dirt and debris.”

“I think she is truly a charming young woman now,” the first woman said with a nod of approval. “Fit to marry a prince. It’s too bad that Prince Theo didn’t choose her.”

“Well, perhaps the rumors are true, and Prince Warren is here for her hand.”

I turned to look at Warren then, my eyes widening, but he wouldn’t meet my gaze, and since we were being sneaky, I couldn’t verify this with him.

The servants continued to go on and on about how elegant “I” was now until it started to irritate me. I didn’t want to listen to them, but they continued to comment on how I used to live my life.

“Don’t listen to them,” Warren said, leaning in closely. His warm breath tickled my cheek. “They don’t know what they’re talking about. Uppity snobs.” He made a face, and I had to cover my mouth to keep from laughing.

He was right. These people’s opinions shouldn’t matter to me, and they all sounded like they were simply trying to impress one another with their knowledge of etiquette and manners.

“I am finished,” the fake Ciana announced standing and removing her gardening gloves. “I would like to go inside and rest.”

“Yes, of course, my lady,” the first woman said, rushing over to take her gloves. “We shall accompany you.”

The party began heading in our direction. They would walk past the bushes we were hiding behind, but they were thick, so I wasn’t worried about them seeing us.

One of the men gathered up the basket of flowers fake Ciana

must’ve cut at some other point. He was walking down the stone path in front of her. I ducked down lower, and Warren swiveled to make sure he was hidden as well.

The stones were uneven on the path. Somehow, the servant managed to catch his toe. He pitched forward, and the basket launched its contents everywhere.

My imposter was behind him and she tried to dodge him but failed. She managed to trip over the back of him, falling toward the bushes where we were hiding.

“Ahh-!”

So much for this us not being discovered. Why were there always accidents when I tried to hide?

In that split moment, Warren stood up, though, and he managed to grab fake Ciana mid-fall before she could see me and before she could further injure herself. Luckily, it was dark, and we were close to a corner, so he probably could pass as if running into her by accident.

“Whoa!” he said, wrapping his arms around her and steadying her. “Are you all right, Ciana?” he asked, setting her back on her feet.

Immediately, the servants broke out in exclamations. Not only did they want to make sure that she was all right, but they also were shocked to see Warren.

“Prince Warren! What are you doing here in the garden?” a maid asked him, surprised but not asking in a rude manner.

“Just taking a walk. Sorry, I was distracted by this beautiful garden and didn’t see you.” Then he asked the fake me concernedly, “Are you alright? Are you injured?”

“Prince Warren?” She seemed shocked, but she quickly collected her composure. “I’m fine, thank you kindly, sir.”

Except, now I noticed the bright blush that reddened her cheeks. Then, she dropped her eyes to the ground, staring at the points of her shoes, and a faint smile was still on her face.

A very typical reaction from girls when they first met the handsome, graceful and gentle Prince Warren.

“I’m glad to hear you are okay. By the way, thank you for inviting me to stay at your house.”

“You’re so welcome,” she replied, still blushing, “It was my pleasure.”

Warren released her, and he maintained his warm smile, but then he asked, “Ciana, why are you acting like this?”

Fake Ciana was confused. I saw her eyebrows knit together. “What do you mean, sir, I mean, Your Highness?” she asked him.

Warren chuckled. “You’re acting like you’ve never even met me before, Ciana. We spent so much time together back at the palace. Why are you behaving so oddly?”

I saw the faces of the others as they exchanged glances with one another. They were obviously confused as well.

“Oh...um... Your Highness... because I just didn’t expect to see you here,” she explained. Then, realizing she’d gotten caught up in a situation she needed to get herself out of, she exclaimed. “Ouch! My ankle! I must have sprained it when I almost fell.”

“Your ankle?” Warren asked. “Do you want some help getting back to the-“

But before he could finish the sentence, the servants all rushed over and surrounded her.

“Miss Ciana!”

“Oh, Goddess! It must hurt!”

“Let us help you!”

“Take me to the healer, please,” she told them. Immediately, one of them shifted to a wolf and the others helped her to get on his back.

Before she left, she didn’t forget to excuse herself from

Warren politely, “Forgive me for not being able to show you around, Your Highness. Please make yourself at home.”

Then the group ran off as fast as they could, leaving Warren standing there on his own.

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Trick The Trickster

I watched my clone get carried away from Warren after faking a broken ankle. The servants were so worried about her that I could tell that whoever she was, she was loved here.

Yet, looking around, I was standing in my own garden, afraid to show my face.

Warren walked back to where I stood, making sure that no one else was around in the garden.

“She’s gone?” I asked, looking into his eyes.

He nodded. “The resemblance is uncanny. You would never know she wasn’t you.”

I sighed, “Yes, I could tell that everyone in the pack believed that she was me, a better version of me.”

That hurt.

“Are you okay?” Warren placed a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“I...I...” words failed me at that moment. I couldn’t lie to myself. I wasn’t okay. All I could do was shake my head. “I don’t know! She was taking Raymond’s side and everyone would soon follow suit, but that’ll lead us to destruction!”

I continued to murmur, not sure whether I was telling him or talking to myself. “What if... no one believes me? They seemed to like her so much more.”

Although I knew I had to figure this out, because I was the only one who knew she was working with Raymond to lead our pack to destruction, it still didn’t change the fact that all of a sudden I got emotional.

Perhaps, it was due to everything that happened lately in the palace, perhaps it was because I missed my parents, or perhaps I was overly frustrated with the situation in the pack... Whatever it was, all of a sudden, it got to me.

Tears brimmed into my eyes blurring my vision, I was barely able to hold them back.

“What am I supposed to do?”

"It's okay." Warren gently pulled me into his arms and held me to his chest. He knew I wasn't really asking him that question, so he just gently patted my back. "It's going to be fine. I promise."

I allowed him to hold me because at this moment, I needed the support.

I was well aware that being upset at this moment was useless, but I wasn't able to help it. "Sorry about that. I didn't mean to be so... weak."

"You're not weak, Ciana. You just need a moment, and then you'll figure it out. I have faith in you."

The way his dark eyes locked on mine seemed to be silently passing strength into me.

"Thank you." I was a bit embarrassed. "I don't even have this kind of confidence in myself."

"You're Ciana, you'll always find a way."

His words and his bright smile warmed my heart. I looked at him feeling that much more hopeful. It was no wonder so many fell prey to his charm.

Then it hit me like a lightning bolt. Was it crazy? Maybe. Was it slightly dangerous? I think so. But it may work!

As I regained my composure, I pulled away and stared at him.

"I know that look." He analyzed my face. "It's your I-have-something-up-my-sleeve look."

"Uh, yes, I did think of something," I confessed, "But I'll need your help."

"Of course. I'm here for you. Ciana. You know that."

"Okay, this may sound crazy. Well actually, it is crazy. But this is the only plan I have."

"I'm listening."

"I think fake Ciana has a thing for you. I saw the way she blushed when you helped her. The way she got a little flustered when you spoke. She's definitely into you."

He shook his head. "No. What you saw there was a fish out of water. She got flustered because I mentioned that we were close in the palace. She needed to make a swift getaway."

"I know girls, Warren. And that girl is into you."

He was silent for a moment, so I continued, "You use your charm on her... get her to let her guard down so we can figure out what Raymond might be planning."

His eyebrows furrowed. "You want me to flirt with her? I don't think so, Ciana."

"Please Warren. I know it's a sacrifice, but you're doing this to help my people, not for a selfish reason. You don't need to do anything immoral, just talk to her more and... smile at her."

I paused, and thought of what the servants were talking about earlier. "Besides, didn't they say you were here to ask for her hand?"

He stared at me for a moment as if he wanted to correct me. His eyes glistened against the moonlight, but he didn't say anything.

Finally, he let out a breath and shook his head. "I am not in full support of this, but I told you that I'm here for you. Whatever you need from me I will do it."

"Thank you." I was grateful.

"Anytime." The words were simple but heavy.

Three days later, I crouched behind the bush with a black hoodie and baseball cap on. I had applied some fake facial hair and light make up to give myself the features of a young man. It wasn't my finest work but it would do in the dark.

Fake Ciana was at the edge of the garden tearing at something. I couldn't see what it was and the moon was waning so light was limited out here.

Warren gave me a little signal letting me know that he was going in.

"Hey," Warren said, startling her. "Fancy meeting you here."

She whipped around with eyes wide open. She held some of the papers she had been tearing to her chest.

Warren's steps faltered. "What are you doing? What are these?"

He crouched down and looked over the pieces of paper.

"These are pictures?"

My heart thumped in my chest. She was tearing up my pictures. All my memories and my keepsakes.

A slow anger bubbled up from inside of me.

Fake Ciana looked away a little shy. I could see the slight crease in her brows. "I don't look good in any of them. They just don't seem like me."

Of course they don't seem like you, you little witch. They were of me.

Warren let out a soft little chuckle that had her smiling slightly. "You look great Ciana. In fact, you haven't changed much at all. You are still as striking as ever."

He was good. I gave him a thumbs up in my mind.

"That... that was so kind of you to say," she replied softly and shyly.

Then Warren skillfully started other casual topics, and her full attention was drawn on him. It appeared to me that she truly enjoyed his company.

Now that the plan was in full motion I could relax a bit.

I continued to watch them from a distance. Making sure to catch onto everything she was saying.

Suddenly, I felt something, or someone, was behind me. Then I smelled a faint but familiar musky, masculine scent, which

reminded me of the forest after a fresh rain.

I whipped around and saw a shadowy figure watching me in the distance. I couldn't see that person's face as it was mostly hidden. I tilted my head to the side and watched the figure as he watched me. A chill crept up my spine.

Then he suddenly bolted.

I couldn't shake the feeling that I knew this figure. They seemed so familiar to me. So I did the only logical thing I could

think of.

I chased after him leaving my original plan to play itself out.

Warren could handle it alone. I trusted him.

Theo

Shit.

I pushed my legs faster trying to get rid of her. But when I Youchers looked over my shoulder there she was. How the hell was she so fast?

I wove through the thick trees trying to confuse her a little bit. When I was sure I had lost her I hid behind the tree trying to catch my breath.

But as soon as I peered my head around the tree I saw her standing only a few feet from where I was hiding. I quickly ducked away from her view and cursed silently.

"You know I saw you, right? You literally ducked behind the tree just now."

I closed my eyes wishing that this was not happening right now. I had only meant to be looking after her. Now this complicated a lot of things.

I let out a heavy sigh and plastered on my best poker face. "You caught me." I kept my voice stone cold and stern. She needed to believe that I was someone else.

I held my hands up in my mock surrender keeping my hood plastered on my head.

"Take off your hood."

"You didn't say please."

"Do it!"

Slowly, I lowered my hood and watched for her reaction carefully. Her eyes went wide for a second or two and her lips parted in a small gasp.

“Theo?”

My heart stopped in my chest. How the hell could she tell it was me? I couldn't even recognize myself looking in the mirror.

Then I realized that she was just testing me. If she knew it was really me, she could call me “Your Highness” or “Prince Theo” instead.

So I kept my composure and didn't respond.

“Is that...you?” She took a step toward me. Her eyes were solely focused on me. They never strayed or wandered anywhere else.

I was a little taken aback, because the person standing in front of me had the face of a young man-an average looking young man.

She did a good job on her disguise, but I knew it was her, because I'd been keeping an eye on her from afar, and because no one else had that pair of stunning eyes.

Those shining blue eyes of hers.

I'd seen them so many times in my dreams lately, and now they were right in front of me. I didn't want to move away from them.

I didn't know how this happened, but somehow, we were looking at each other's disguise, and it appeared that we both knew who the other person truly was.

“Ah you have found him!” Nelson practically came out of the woods and said to her. Then he turned to me. “Tallis, I have been looking everywhere for you!”

This was perfect timing.

“Tallis?” Ciana blinked. “Who are you both?”

Nelson bowed dramatically, “My name is Nelson. Enchanté. I am the grandmaster of the traveling carnival, young lord. I am in charge of entertaining young and old minds.”

“A carnival?” Ciana looked between me and Nelson. “And how do you know him?”

Now was my cue.

“My name isn't Theo. I don't know who told you that but whoever did is incredibly stupid. My name is Tallis.”

She stared at me.

Nelson chimed in, “Young sir, Tallis is my younger brother. Did you mistake him for someone else?”

Her frown deepened. “How is it possible...”

“You don't have to believe me. This is just simply a true fact.”

My hair had been dyed to blonde and I had placed some blue contacts in my eyes. I had allowed the stubble on my chin to grow out a little more giving me that rugged look. I hated it but it did the job in regards to concealing my identity. For everyone else anyway.

“Tallis, you can’t run off like that. You make me worry.” Nelson walked up to me and patted my back. “We are a family, we move as one unit.”

She completely ignored Nelson as her eyes continued to scan my face.

Nelson smiled at Ciana again, “Well, we have much preparation to do. See you around, young sir! Tallis, let’s go.”

Ciana kept her gaze on me like she was trying to unmask me. I could tell she didn’t believe me but that didn’t matter. She could continue to second guess.

As long as she couldn’t verify it was me, that was all I could ask for. I could watch after her, keep her safe from a distance. She wouldn’t know it was me, once everything was back to normal, I could go home and leave her in peace.

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How Did You End Up Here Too?

Ciana

At my parents’ house, I waited for Warren to get back. Things with that fake Ciana must have been going well because it was taking a while for him to return.

I stood up and started pacing around the living room. Warren was taking longer than I thought. A part of me started to worry about him, but he was Prince Warren. Not even Beta Raymond was stupid enough to move against a prince. I knew

Warren could take care of himself.

My mind kept wandering back to the man I’d seen, Tallis. Well, that was what Nelson called him, but he just felt like Theo.

He stood like him, talked like him, and even had his scent. I’d been around the Dark Prince enough to know the kind of person he was, and this Tallis just reminded me of Theo.

Although, he did look different once I got the chance to get a closer view of him.

But, if I could disguise myself well enough that people thought I was a boy, and if “Fake Ciana” could use magic to look like me, why couldn’t someone do the same with Theo?

Maybe Theo was trying to disguise himself as an unknown carnival worker. But this was Prince Theo! There was no reason for him to do so.

First of all, he hadn’t cared that I was leaving, he hadn’t even come to say goodbye to me. Why would he follow me all the way to my pack? Why would he care what was going on in my pack?

He’d made it pretty clear in the days before I left that he didn’t care.

Besides, if that Tallis guy was Theo, why try to hide it, especially from me? The only reason Theo would come here would be to make good on his word and help my pack. Not because he cared about me but because he was keeping his word as a prince. But then, he wouldn't have to hide his identity from me.

Sighing, I rubbed my hands on my thighs and sat down on the couch.

As soon as my butt hit the cushion, the doorknob clicked and Warren walked through the front door with a grin on his face.

"I take it your chat went well?" I asked, jumping up to greet him.

'He nodded. "Your look alike invited me on a date. We'll meet up three nights from now in the packhouse gardens," he said.

Something flickered in his eyes and his smile fell slightly.

"Packhouse? So she didn't want to come back here?" I murmured to myself, but that didn't matter. "Isn't that a good thing?"

"Yes, it is a good time for me to fish more information out of her. I'll see if I can poke some more holes in her identity. It could help later," he suggested.

"That's a good idea. I'd say, mission accomplished for the night," I grinned at him.

"Agreed," he said with a nod. Warren sighed heavily and headed to the couch, flopping down.

"But you're not happy. I'm sorry that I forced you into doing this."

We were getting exactly what we wanted, but Warren obviously still felt bad tricking a young girl.

I sat in a chair across from him and leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "You know, you truly have a good heart. If this is getting too hard, we can figure something else out. I don't want to see you suffer."

Warren's lips quirked up. "I said I'd help, Ciana. Besides, I can't just sit around when I know there is someone trying to steal your life and your identity. You don't deserve that. You're an Alpha's daughter!"

"I really appreciate what you are doing," I added. "I hope you understand how much it means to me and my people."

Nelson's traveling carnival had set up a large tent on Alvar territory. It wasn't unusual for traveling entertainment groups to show up from time to time in different pack territories. They didn't belong to any pack, but they had to follow the laws and rules of whoever's territory they were in.

I couldn't imagine not having a pack and family. I loved mine too much, which was why I was so determined to stop Raymond from his insane plan to rebel against the crown.

After a good night's rest, my suspicions of Tallis hadn't diminished any. I put on my disguise so that no one in my pack could recognize me and headed to the carnival tent to find Nelson and figure out whatever I could from him about this Theo lookalike, or feelalike, to be precise.

It would be too much of a coincidence for there to be a Ciana and Theo imposter in my pack at the same time.

The tent was busy. I saw a few women walk by on their hands. Others were dressed in glittering unitards, trapeze slung over their shoulders. One burly, hairy man was walking around with a bull whip coiled around his arm.

It looked like they were getting ready for a big performance.

“Hey, you’re the young lord from last night. Good day!” Nelson greeted me when he saw me, laughing heartily and clutching his chest.

“I’m sorry for the misunderstanding. I just dropped by to learn more about your performance program, is that okay?” I asked using a deep voice, sounding as casual as possible.

“Of course! I can tell a fellow carnival fan when I meet one.

Come to my office,” he said, beckoning me to follow.

Nelson’s office was a small corner of the tent blocked off with red, silk curtains. He used a collapsible table for a desk and old milk crates for a filing cabinet.

I could hear snarls and growls from animals in another section of the tent. There was also a sharp cracking sound. Probably the bullwhip that animal tamer had been carrying around.

“It sounds like you have some pretty extreme acts in your carnival,” I said when the whip cracked again.

“We’ve got it all,” Nelson said, rummaging through the papers on his makeshift desk. “We’ve got exotic animals, high flying trapeze swingers, jugglers, clowns, and a tightrope walker. I can assure you, we have the finest array of performing artists you’ll ever see in addition to normal rides.”

“I bet,” I muttered.

I needed to find out more about Tallis, but I didn’t want to be too obvious. I had to keep it focused on the carnival. That was something I figured Nelson would talk about all day long.

“Here you go,” he said, finally fishing a program pamphlet out. He handed it across the desk.

I flipped through the pamphlet and saw pictures of the animal tamer and trapeze artists. Nelson was featured on the cover, too, but there wasn’t a single picture of Tallis or any mention of him. The other performers were named in the sections about their acts.

“I don’t see Tallis in the program,” I commented, using that as my perfect segway to bring him up again.

Nelson shrugged casually. “My little brother likes to think he can make it on his own. He tends to get in trouble with that bad attitude of his. So, he comes and goes. I help him whenever he gets himself in a tight mess.”

“What are older brothers for?” I asked, grinning at Nelson.

He chuckled and nodded in agreement.

“I’ve never understood him, though I’ve tried. He has always been so surly and bad tempered, but he’s never struggled with the ladies, if you know what I mean. They always flock to him.

“I’m a successful, attractive, nice guy and it isn’t the same for me.” Nelson sighed and shook his head.

“Girls like bad boys,” I commented.

The words flew out of my mouth before I could stop them and I hated myself for saying that.

“Do you have sisters or female friends who are interested in my brother, then?” Nelson asked, arching an eyebrow.

I set the pamphlet back on his desk, shaking my head rapidly. “No. Not in that regard. I did have some questions about his act, though. Where can I find him?”

“Ahh, I see that carnival spark in your eye,” Nelson teased.

He turned away from me and looked at a standing white board in the corner of his temporary office. There was a very complicated, color coded schedule written on the white board.

I couldn’t make sense of it, but Nelson seemed to know exactly what it said.

“Tallis is in the pack square with some of our visual arts performers, you know the woman with a beard, strongest man in the world, those acts that people can enjoy without sitting down for the full performance.”

“Thanks.”

In the pack square, there were a lot of performers already drawing in a crowd. I kept my hood up and my head down to avoid being noticed. I still caught a few of the incredible stunts the performers were doing.

There was a contortionist that could bend and twist in ways I didn’t think were possible. A fire eater was juggling flaming torches and swallowing them. There were a few hula hoop dancers putting on an incredible show.

So many oohs and ahhs went through the gathered onlookers.

I was grateful for the performers because it meant people were distracted and no one noticed me moving through the crowd.

When I found Tallis, he was standing in the middle of the square while a bunch of performing artists worked to set up their collapsible stages. He was standing there, arms crossed, deep scowl on his brow, and just staring off into space.

I rolled my eyes. Yup, that was a Theo thing to do.

Not only did he resemble Theo in his figure and voice, but he emulated the prince’s posture and expressions, too. That definitely couldn’t be a coincidence.

I pushed my hood back and pulled my hair loose, sidling up beside him as casually as possible. He just kept staring off into space like he was deep in thought. He probably hadn't even noticed me approaching.

I wanted to test him, get a real reaction out of him and see if I could throw him off guard.

"So, how did you end up here, too, Your Highness?" I asked, glancing sideways at him.

Tallis sniffed and turned toward me slightly. His scowl deepened even more and I couldn't see into his eyes.

"What do you mean? I don't even know you," he snarled gruffly.

I took a half step back, a little taken aback by his harshness. Nelson was right, he did have an attitude problem.

"You remind me of someone," I said, keeping my voice steady. I shrugged. "Rather, I thought you were someone else."

Tallis grunted and shook his head, looking down his nose at me, like I was an insignificant bug.

"What's wrong with you? My brother told you last night that I'm not who you are looking for."

"I, um..."

"Get away from me," he warned. However, seeing that I didn't move, he gave another order instead.

"You stay right here!"

Then he stalked away.

I stared after him, mouth agape.

With an attitude like that, he could definitely be the Dark Prince

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Just Passing By

"Ready to go?" Warren asked me, poking his head into the bathroom.

I tightened the drawstrings of my hoodie, pulling it snug around my head.

"I'm ready. Don't you clean up nice?" I asked, turning to smirk at him.

Warren held his arms out and turned from side to side. "I suppose I don't look so bad."

"She doesn't stand a chance," I teased, sticking my tongue out.

It was the night of Warren's date with the fake Ciana, but I didn't want to sit around the house waiting for him to get back. I needed to see and hear what was going on first hand since I missed part of it last time.

While he spiffed up his hair and put on a nice outfit, I ruffled my hair into a mess and applied some disguise makeup.

I didn't want anyone to be able to recognize me, so I used some makeup to make my eyebrows look thicker and added a little "shadow" to my chin that would look like facial hair in the darkness.

I covered my head in a hoodie and wore baggy pants.

Hopefully, I wouldn't be seen at all, but this way, I was covered just in case.

"You better get going if you're going to find a hiding place before she shows up," Warren suggested, shaking his head at me.

I left my parents' place and went to the packhouse backyard ahead of Warren. This garden was much bigger than the one at home, which made it even easier for me to hide.

It didn't take long for Warren and fake Ciana to show up. She had her arm looped through his and they were walking together looking very friendly.

If Sophia could see them, she'd be so pissed!

I shook my head and focused on listening to what they were saying. I had to strain my ears a little because of how far away they were.

"I know I was at the castle for your brother, but I never felt like I had a connection to him. I wish it had been you I'd been sent to the castle for," fake Ciana said, her cheeks turning red in the strong lights that lit up the garden.

"I won't deny wishing that, too," Warren admitted in a friendly, gentle tone.

He was so good at being the "good guy." What else did I expect? When I'd met him when we were younger, he'd done a huge favor for me, getting that Sun Blossom. I always thought it made me special but maybe Warren was just like that with everyone.

"You're so nice to me. Why are you so nice to me?" she asked, resting her head on Warren's shoulder for a moment as they walked through the garden path.

They got to a stone bench and I ducked around the tree to get a closer look at them as they sat down together.

Warren put his arm around her and she leaned against him. Her eyes were lit up and she kept smiling. I wondered who she really was. What kind of girl would pretend to be someone else? What was her real name? Did she even know who I was?

Why did she want to hurt my pack?

"You know the answer to that. I've felt like we share something special, ever since you reminded me of our past," Warren explained soothingly.

He was being careful not to give her too much information but just enough to allow her to keep pretending to be me. That was smart. If he made it seem like he suspected she wasn't the real me, this would go bad.

"Warren, have to confess something to you."

“Should I be concerned?” He arched his brow.

She lifted her eyes to his. “I’m in love with you.”

For a moment, I thought Warren was going to blow his cover. His brow creased and I could see how tense he was from where I was hiding. The next minute, he was smiling and hugging the fake Ciana closer.

“I’m so glad you showed up when you did. Being back in the pack has been... hard,” she admitted in a defeated tone.

I rolled my eyes.

“I thought you wanted to come back home,” Warren said.

He was testing her responses now.

“I did,” fake Ciana said quickly, raising her head. “I thought it was what I needed. But there has been so much pressure on me since I came back. Not to mention Hawke.”

“Hawke, you mean Beta Raymond’s son?” Warren asked.

“Yes! He is always hanging around. Half the time, he seems mad at me and like he wants to hurt me. Other times, he makes me uncomfortable with his dirty language,” she explained, shaking her head and sighed.

“That does sound rough,” Warren admitted.

She took his hands in hers and held them to her chest. “Do you think you could help me escape from him?”

I strained my ears to keep listening but the rancid scent of alcohol and the one person I didn’t want to see filled my nostrils. My stomach turned and I was distracted from my * eavesdropping.

“What’re you doing ou’herr?” Hawke slurred as he came over to me.

I moved away from him but he dropped down on the ground beside me.

“None of your business,” I hissed, making my voice lower and deeper. I hoped I sounded like a boy to him, but as drunk as he was, he probably wouldn’t notice.

“Hmm... der I kno’youuu?” he asked, his unfocused eyes roaming over my body.

“No,” I insisted in a low whisper.

Hawke sniffed the air, then he leaned closer and sniffed me.

I stayed as still as possible, despite the revulsion rising in my throat like bile. If I made a scene, it would just draw attention to us and that was the last thing I wanted. I needed to make sure Warren had enough time to be with the fake Ciana tonight.

“Youuu don’t smell like a... guy,” Hawke said, chuckling and covering his mouth like he was embarrassed.

“Oh no. You smell like a sexy, fuckable bitch in heat.”

“Excuse me?” I snarled in a harsh whisper.

He leaned closer to me, his arms in casts from Theo’s last visit.

“You heard me. Mmm, that sweet bitch scent makes me so horny. I could take you right here, right now,” Hawke muttered, licking his lips and smirking at me.

I leaned away from him, as much as I could without exposing myself around the hedge.

“You’re really twisted if you think a guy smells like a woman,” I hissed with a sharp snort.

Hawke’s eyes widened for a moment and then he wrinkled his nose. “Your voice... you sound f-f-familier.” His voice was still heavy with drink.

With any luck, I could get away from him and he’d think it was all some drunken dream.

“We’ve never met. I’m just here as Prince Warren’s squire,” I assured, keeping my voice deep.

“No, no, no,” Hawke insisted. “Not a squire, a ripe, sweet cherry that is ready to be picked.”

He wiggled his eyebrows at me and panted heavily. His hot breath bathed my face, smelling sickly sweet with alcohol.

My stomach churned and I felt nauseated. I looped an arm around myself and tried to push him away.

Hawke grunted and leaned forward, pressing his nose to my arm and inhaling deeply, sniffing me again.

“Mmm,” he groaned. His left hand, which he seemed to have some control of, grabbed the bulge of his crotch. “I’m going to fuck your tight little ass. I don’t care who or what you are. You smell sooo goood.”

Swallowing hard, I scampered backward, using my hands to pull me across the ground so the hedges kept me hidden. My heart hammered in my chest.

A flash of Hawke leaning over me while his cronies held me down flew through my mind. How he’d pulled his pants down and gone for my skirt.

My arms trembled as I hurried away from him, not taking my eyes off him. Even though he was drunk, I knew he could do some damage.

“Hey! Where d’you think urr goin?” Hawke slurred, crawling on his knees toward me. “I haven’t gotten a taste of your sweet cherry yet.”

He grinned, showing me all his teeth, the smile twisting his face.

Suddenly, the sound of flesh slamming into flesh rang in my ears and Hawke froze. He teetered on his knees for a moment and then gasped, falling forward and landing face first in the dirt. He didn’t move and after a moment, he started snoring.

Behind Hawke stood a figure completely hidden by the shadow of the tree. Slowly, I rose to my feet so I could see who had come to my rescue.

The man looked familiar.

“The... Tallis?” I asked, correcting myself when I saw he was wearing one of the carnival uniforms.

Quickly, I darted my eyes toward the garden and made sure that Warren and fake Ciana were still talking. It didn't look like they'd heard anything or suspected anything.

"What of it?" he growled coldly.

"You just knocked him out," I muttered, pointing at Hawke.

Tallis shrugged. "Would you have preferred that I left him awake?"

"No," I said, shaking my head quickly. "I'm grateful for the help. Thank you."

Was it just a coincidence that Tallis had come to my rescue? It was another very Theo-like thing to do. It seemed that every time I was in danger, he'd somehow show up.

"What are you doing here?" I questioned.

"Hmph," Tallis muttered, tossing his head back dismissively.

"You weren't... were you keeping an eye on me?" I asked, biting my lip and looking down.

Tallis snorted and crossed his arms. "I was just passing by and I heard a commotion."

"That's all? You weren't worried about me or anything?" I pressed, testing him again. I still didn't believe Tallis was who he said he was.

"I was just passing by." he snapped. "There's nothing to read into, no hidden motive. Now, if you really are grateful, stop pestering me about these fantasies of yours!"

I bit my tongue to hold back my retort and I took a half step back. Tallis snorted and stormed off.

What was going on with him? One minute he was saving me, the next he was back to being surly and rude.

I couldn't figure him out-just like I was never able to figure out Theo.

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Faking Love

I watched his back as he was leaving, and pondered what he just said.

'I was just passing by.'

That was a lie.

Tallis was hiding something, I knew he was. There was a familiarity about him that I just couldn't shake. It was this air of calm and cold that he carried. I had felt it once before and only with one other person.

But could it be?

I had asked him numerous times and each time he refuted my claims. He was not the somber prince I knew.

So why did they both carry the same aura?

I shook my head thinking I had lost my damn mind. First the fake Ciana and now this. My problems and questions kept piling up with each passing day.

It didn't matter now though. I had more important matters to attend to.

My mind was turning fast. Fake Ciana had professed her undying love to Warren. This was what I had been hoping for. Phase one of the plan was complete and now it was time to move onto phase two.

Whoever Tallis was, he could wait.

I turned on my heel ready to walk back to where fake Ciana and Warren had been, but I slammed into a warm wall.

I stumbled a few steps back before a pair of strong arms came out and caught me.

"You okay there, Ciana?"

Warren helped me to steady myself.

"Yeah," I looked up at him. "Where is the other Ciana? What happened? I had to leave because..."

My voice trailed off as the words got stuck in my throat. I didn't want to worry Warren. He had a tendency to somehow shift blame of every bad thing that happens onto himself, especially when it regarded me.

I often thought that he had too much honor at times. I wished he would be a little less chivalrous.

"Because?" He pressed.

"It's nothing. Now tell me what's going on with her?"

Warren stepped closer, crossing into that imaginary bubble I had around me.

"What happened, Ciana?" His eyes held mine.

"I told you nothing."

"It doesn't sound like nothing. Your heart's racing, you have that little nervous nose twitch you do when you're hiding something. So spill it."

I stood still for a moment in complete shock. "How do you know about the twitch?"

He rolled his eyes. "I notice everything about you, Black. Now spill it."

I let out a sigh and bit down on my lip. "Hawke came by."

I saw his body visibly tense. By now, he probably has heard about Hawke a few times, both from me catching him up on the important players in the pack, and from the girl he just spent a good amount of time with.

"And?" His voice was tight and tense.

"And he may have tried to harass me, a little bit," I blurted out. "But he was drunk and he had two broken arms so he wasn't really that much of a threat."

His eyes darkened. "I need to have a word with him."

I couldn't help but compare Warren and Theo in my mind. In a situation like this, if it was Theo, he probably would just beat Hawke up....like Tallis had done.

I reached my hand out and grabbed his arm. "No need to. And besides, Tallis took care of him."

"Tallis?"

I nodded. "But we aren't talking about Hawke. We are talking about you and fake me. What did she say?"

A somber look overtook Warren's face. My heart immediately dropped and I felt all the hope drain from my body.

"She agreed to elope with me."

The joy returned to my body and I bounced on the balls of my feet. "This is great news! You are the best! But... I could tell you're upset. Sorry again for putting you through all this."

"Don't get me wrong, I am happy for the progress. But it's just...I feel like I'm going against my moral code."

The smile slipped from my face. "I know..."

"This girl, fake you, loves me. She actually loves me for real and I just lied to her. I told her I loved her too and told her I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. What kind of man does that make me?"

I stepped up toward him and placed my hand on his chest right above his heart. I could feel the strong thumping on my palm. It was racing and I didn't know whether it was from guilt or nerves. But whatever it was, I wanted it to calm down.

He had no business feeling guilty for this. If anything, all of this was my burden to bear.

"You are a good man, Warren. A great man in fact. I told you this many times before and now I will tell you again. What you are doing for me is a service that I will never be able to repay you for. However, please don't feel guilty for what you're doing with her either."

He locked his gaze on me, waiting for me to continue.

"First of all, this girl is not fully innocent. She has taken my identity and is trying to take over my home. This is wrong, and I will claim my name back."

"And I want that for you."

I nodded. "That being said, she can't keep my identity forever. The most important thing is that she didn't want this life. I could tell. No one would want to be someone else for the rest of their lives. So you're helping her. You're helping her to get out of here and get away from people that she is afraid of, like Raymond, like Hawke."

I could tell Warren's expression was softer.

“So remove the guilt from your heart. You’re helping me and her. She might feel bad once she finds out you don’t really love her, but by then, at least she would have the freedom to carry on her own life, and that’s way more important than her being stuck here.”

He leaned his forehead against mine and let out one long breath that fanned my face. His scent of pine and morning grass surrounded me.

When he pulled away he offered me a small smile. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Know exactly what to say and when to say it.” He tucked away a stray piece of hair that had come out from under my hood.

I cleared my throat trying to make light of the situation. “I’m just stating the fact.”

Then I stepped away from him. “Shall we?”

He nodded and we walked away from the garden.

The alliance ceremony would be in two days. That was when we would have the elopement announcement.

In order for the alliance to go through, both Luther and Ciana would need to present. If Ciana suddenly went missing due to her recent nuptials, then no alliance would be formed. Raymond would be powerless without her backing.

That was stage one of the plan. The other stage was a little trickier.

I needed to steal the sacred artifact. Well, was it really stealing if it belonged to my parents? Depends on which angle you looked at it from.

Warren sat opposite me. We had been going over everything for the past two hours. We made sure there were no cracks in our plans.

“Will you still meet her tonight?” I asked him.

He nodded. “I need to keep up appearances, right?”

“Agreed.” I stood from my seat at the table. “We can convene again tomorrow. Go have fun with your fake fiancée.”

I meant it to come out a little light hearted but he didn’t take it lightly.

“Not funny. I don’t have to go, you know that right? I can tell her something came up.”

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have joked about it,” I apologized sincerely.

“You’re forgiven,” he smiled.

“She needs to believe you two are madly in love, though. Unfortunately, for the sake of our plan, it would be better for you to go tonight.”

He sighed, "Okay."

We said our goodbyes and went our separate ways.

Having Warren on board really did take a lot of the pressure off my back. He made this serious situation more bearable.

I decided to take a walk.

Not too long ago, my world had flipped upside down when I was sent to the royal palace, and now returning home my world had flipped yet again. But like my father had always taught me, I would brave the storm. Because that was exactly what us Blacks did. We moved with tides and rolled with punches.

I didn't know how long I had been wandering until I found myself at Nelson's cabin that was embedded deep within the forest.

that there were people milling around and carrying boxes and loading them onto a large truck.

I saw Nelson walk out the cabin with a large box in his hands. When he noticed me he smiled and headed over my way.

"Look what the cat dragged in. You look like shit there my friend."

I cleared my throat, deepening my voice a tad. "Rough night."

"I get that. I was up all night trying to get sequins out of my places that sequins should never be." He let out a light hearted laugh but I could tell from the pain in his eyes it had not been funny at the time.

"Where are you guys going?"

"Oh, it's almost time for us to head out as soon as the ceremony is done. We don't want to overstay our welcome here in the pack." He dropped the box down at his feet. "We made a few people laugh and put smiles on some grouchy people's faces. I would say that this was a resounding success."

"That's a short stay..."

"We need to move on to other packs. We have to keep spreading the joy, you feel me? And staying in one place for too long gets boring. We are nomads, kid. We roam the land and see where the Goddess takes us."

I nodded. "I get that. It's just I'll miss you guys around here. You added joy here."

"And now we get to spread joy elsewhere." Nelson patted my back and then picked up the box. "Maybe we will see you around."

"Yeah, that would be nice." I managed to smile. "Do you know where Tallis is by chance?"

"Oh yeah," Nelson nodded to the cabin. "He's out back. Probably still trying to find the pins I lost last night."

"Thanks Nelson. I'll see you around." I walked into the house dodging people carrying large boxes. The fact they had to lug so much stuff around from pack to pack was impressive. But I didn't know if I would ever be able to live such a lifestyle.

I walked out the back door and saw Tallis sitting on the porch looking out to the forest.

“What do you want?” He didn’t even turn to see if it was me.

“How did you-never mind.” I walked up to the steps where he was sitting and sat beside him.

Tallis tensed up a little when I sat down.

We sat in an uncomfortable silence for a few seconds. The words were all jumbled in my mind. I didn’t know exactly what I wanted or even should say.

“Are you going to speak or are you just going to sit there?”

I shifted little in my seat. “Well, firstly I just wanted to say thank you for what you did for me yesterday with Hawke. You didn’t need to step in but you did it anyway. For that, I’m grateful.”

“I didn’t do much.”

I shook my head and moved a little closer. “Enough to save me from him.”

I stared at him for a moment, trying to catch his gaze but he kept his eyes locked on the ground.

He then shot up from his seat and turned to face me. “Look, I didn’t even mean to save you, I just didn’t like that guy, so stop looking at me like I’m your superman, it’s kind of creepy.”

“...”

“And also, I don’t swing your way. I like women, not men.”

It took me a few seconds to grasp what he was saying, and then I realized something important-I had been pretending to be a dude!

“I don’t know if you had any hopes of something happening between us, but let me just clarify. There is no hope. Please just do both of us a favor and leave me alone.”

Tallis walked back into the house leaving me on the porch.

Heat rose to my cheeks completely and I was utterly mortified.

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I’ll Take That as a Yes.

Alright, Tallis and Theo might be two different people, but they both could be jerks!

Since the conversation with Tallis didn’t go anywhere, I decided to call it a night.

But what I didn’t expect was a group of thick, muscular thugs that appeared from nowhere, blocking my way back to my parents’ house. They snickered and closed in around me.

“What do you want?” I asked harshly.

“They don’t want anything. However, we have an unfinished score to settle,” Hawke’s angry, frustrated voice barked out from behind the thugs.

"I didn't do anything to you," I insisted, crossing my arms and trying to act more like a guy.

"Well, the last time we spoke, I ended up knocked out and face down in the dirt. You're telling me that you had nothing to do with that?" Hawke shouted viciously.

Apparently, he remembered more than I hoped. He wasn't drunk tonight, either.

"Grab this little twit!" Hawke ordered.

His thugs jumped at me. I jumped back, but they'd already closed in around me and one caught me from behind. All four of them grabbed my arms and legs and pinned me down to the ground.

I struggled against them, hissing and trying to bite whatever got close to my mouth. Hawke's thugs were too well trained and they were too strong!

"Hold that little swine down. I'm going to teach him a lesson for messing with me," Hawke chuckled, shoving the toe of his boot into the ground.

Now that I was eye level with his boots, I could see they were steel toed. If he kicked me with those, he'd break every bone in my body. I had to stall him.

"That's funny, seeing as the last time we met, you seemed to be interested in me, regardless of me being a boy," I hissed, still struggling against his cronies holding me down.

One of them nearly let me go as his head whipped around to Hawke.

Hawke sneered and shook his head. "Don't listen to this piece of crap. He's just trying to mess with you. Hold him steady."

Nothing I said now would turn their heads. Whether they were all loyal to Hawke or to Hawke's cunning dad, it wouldn't save me a good beating.

Hawke pulled his foot back, knee bent, ready to deliver a horrible kick to my side. I closed my eyes and held my breath, waiting for the heavy blow.

It never came.

"What the..."

I opened my eyes just as a pack of wild animals burst from the forest and attacked Hawke.

"Get them off, get them off!" Hawke screeched, flapping his partially broken arms around like he was fending off a swarm of bees.

His cronies ran at him, trying to pull the beasts away, but when

they got close, some of the smaller ones, the squirrels and rabbits, jumped on them and bit them. All of them were screaming and floundering around like they were on fire.

I sat up and rubbed my sore arms. Hawke looked so pathetic, trying to fight off a gaggle of wild animals with his near useless arms. His guys hardly seemed to know what to do, either.

The pack of wild animals pushed Hawke and his group further and further away from me.

That kind of organized attack had to have been summoned by someone. I glanced around the forest and saw a glimpse of shadow in the trees.

Sure enough, Tallis was standing in the trees. He could also organize an animal attack like that?

No way! I didn't believe in such a coincidence!

At a minimum, there must be some sort of connection between Theo and Tallis.

Getting to my feet, I ignored Hawke's continued cries for help and I went after Tallis. As soon as I started approaching the woods, he vanished between the trees. This time, I wasn't letting him get away.

Hurrying my pace, I caught up with him. He was acting like he was trying to evade me, which made me think he didn't want me to see him and made it even more suspicious.

"Hey, wait a minute," I called, reaching out to grab his arm before he could slip away.

Tallis growled and pulled away from me.

"What are you doing? Why are you following me? I told you, I'm not who you think I am. How many times do I have to ask you to leave me alone?" he snarled.

I needed to figure out some other way to approach him.

"No, I'm not after you for that. Can you just wait a minute, please?" I asked, my voice a little desperate.

Tallis stopped walking. He didn't turn to face me but at least, he wasn't running away.

I caught my breath and moved closer to him. "It is different this time because I need your help."

Now, he turned to me, one eyebrow arched. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

"No," I said, holding my hands up to show I wasn't joking. "Hawke has come after me three times now and I don't think

he will stop. I've been lucky, but if I stay in the pack, he will just continue."

"So?" Tallis asked sharply.

"You have a place to stay with the traveling carnival. Can I stay with you? I can't go back to the pack right now."

Tallis pressed his lips thin and glared at me. He was so surly and grumpy all the time. I almost thought he was more intolerable than the Dark Prince. Yet, here I was, doing everything I could to get closer to him.

What was wrong with me?!

I couldn't answer myself, but at this moment, I could tell myself that I had a valid reason to stay with the man in front of me. It was for my own safety after all.

"I don't have a safe place to stay. So, can I stay with you?" I asked again, pleading with him with my eyes. "Please?"

Tallis sighed heavily and started walking through the woods again. He hadn't confirmed I could stay with him but he hadn't flat out denied me, either. I decided to take that as a yes and I followed after him.

When we got to the carnival tent, it was quiet. It seemed like most of the performers had gone to bed for the night. Nelson

was still up and he waved casually at Tallis.

Of course, Tallis just waved in return.

I rolled my eyes at him. He couldn't even spare his friendly, charismatic brother a friendly greeting. Who else did I know that was just like that...?

"Who is with you, Tallis?" Nelson asked. "Ah, young sir, hello again!"

"He's going to stay with me," Tallis grumbled in a slightly annoyed tone.

I shot him a look. "Would it kill you to try to sound happy?"

apes 14 Take That as a Yes

Nelson looked absolutely surprised at us, and then laughed heartily and wiped a tear from his eye. "Yes, m'boy, it would probably kill Tallis to be happy."

Tallis scoffed and shook his head. I gave him a triumphant smile.

"Tell me, how did you two become... friends?" Nelson asked, motioning for us to follow him.

Tallis and I went into Nelson's curtain office. He had a hot plate going with a big pot of soup on it.

"Are you hungry? I just whipped this up," he said, dipping a ladle into the steaming broth and lifting it to his nose to smell.

"It smells delicious," I admitted, my stomach growling slightly.

"Sit, sit, I'll get some bowls," Nelson said, bustling around the small place.

There was only one chair and Tallis nodded toward it. I sat down and he stood right behind me. I'd half expected him to run off the moment someone else was there to watch me.

Nelson ladled up three bowls of soup and handed one to me and Tallis. He perched on the edge of his folding table desk to eat his own bowl.

I stirred the spoon around in my bowl, taking a look at what was in the soup. It was full of thickly sliced vegetables, beans, and some kind of meat. Nelson seemed like a good cook.

"For someone whose stomach was growling, you're being very picky," Tallis muttered.

"I just like to know what I'm eating," I replied, popping the full spoon into my mouth.

The warm broth was tangy on my taste buds and I smiled when I realized just how delicious the soup was. I took another bite, savoring the flavor and slowly rolling it around on my tongue.

"Ah-I see," Nelson said, sighing and fixing Tallis and me with a funny look.

“See what?” I asked, creasing my brow. I filled my mouth again.

“Keep eating, stop talking!” Tallis frowned.

Nelson’s eyes were even wider. Then he chuckled, “It’s no wonder Tallis never looked at any of the girls that threw themselves at him, regardless how pretty they were.”

I looked at Nelson confused. What was he trying to say?

“You know, you could have told me you were into guys.”

Nelson winked at Tallis.

Soup threatened to spew from my mouth. I covered my mouth with my hands and hoped it wouldn’t shoot out my nose instead. The shock of Nelson’s words had me ready to spit it all out all over his desk.

Behind me, Tallis was coughing and choking, pounding on his chest. Whatever he swallowed must have gone down the wrong pipe.

Nelson just laughed heartily. “It isn’t a big deal. If you’re happy, I’m happy!”

I swallowed the soup, gaining control of myself, and wiped a little stray broth off my mouth.

“Into guys?” I asked, glaring at him.

“I don’t think Tallis has ever brought anyone back to the tent or ever carried on a conversation with anyone. But now here you are, invited by him to join us for a pleasant dinner, and he will share his room-” Nelson said, chuckling and shaking his head.

Wait, invited by him? I invited myself, okay?

And what was with sharing a room?!

I looked up at Tallis and nudged him with my elbow. He just shook his head and stayed quiet. I wanted him to explain our relationship. I didn’t need anyone else thinking my male disguise liked men!

“Nelson, Phoebe got herself stuck in the bird cage again,”

someone called from outside his office.

“Oh, I better help the contortionist. A few glasses of wine, and she starts to think she can change her size, too,” Nelson said.

With one final chuckle, he set his bowl down and left the office.

I turned in my seat to face Tallis. “Why didn’t you clarify our relationship, or lack thereof?”

Tallis shrugged. “Explaining things is too time consuming.”

“I don’t want people to have the wrong idea,” I insisted, crossing my arms.

“They are going to think what they are going to think, regardless of what I say. If you have any issues, you’re welcome to leave,” Tallis said dismissively.

I glowered at him. Oh, was he going to get on my nerves...

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A Long Torturous Night

"Well, the contortionist is safe but we have another problem," Nelson said, coming back into his office.

I stopped glaring at Tallis and turned my attention back to Nelson. He stood beside his desk, tapping his finger on a stack of papers.

"What's wrong?" Tallis demanded gruffly.

"There's been a landslide, not too far from here. Only about a mile away," he said somberly.

"A landslide? Is anyone hurt?" I asked, perking up.

"It happened late at night when no one was around. It does cover the road we were going to take to our next location, but no one was injured," Nelson assured with a nod.

I sighed and relaxed into the chair. The landslide must have

been on my pack territory. They weren't common, but I remembered one from my childhood that hurt a lot of people.

I was relieved to learn that it hadn't caused a lot of casualties this time.

"The road isn't a well traveled road, but it will be a while before they clear it, so we will be stuck here until it is cleared," he explained, "Anyway, we aren't planning to leave until the ceremony ends. So hopefully by then, the roads are cleared."

Tallis nodded in understanding. I couldn't tell whether he was upset about the news or not. For some reason, I was a bit happy.

"Now, because space is tight, your little friend is going to have to bunk with you, Tallis," Nelson said, winking at me again and swiftly changing the subject.

"What? No. That is unacceptable," Tallis argued, shaking his head. His brow creased deeply.

"You know how it is. The two of us are the only ones with actual rooms. The rest of the performers share a tent out on the lawn," Nelson said, arching an eyebrow at Tallis.

He grumbled and shook his head. Clearly he didn't like that idea either.

"If that doesn't appeal to you either, he can always stay with me," Nelson suggested, smirking at his brother.

Tallis snorted and glared at the floor..

It was a bit odd to have Nelson refer to me as 'he.' I needed to get used to it now that I was in disguise. Normally, when I was in disguise, I tried to avoid interacting with anyone. It had been to prevent people from recognizing me, not for me to role play long-term.

"Those are all our options," Nelson shrugged.

“Fine, he will stay with me,” he ground out through gritted teeth, his jaw tensing, eyes refusing to meet mine.

I glanced over at Nelson who smirked again and winked at me. My jaw loosened as I realized he’d planned that whole setup. He really wanted me to spend the night in a room with Tallis.

Maybe this was going too far. I didn’t even want to know what was going through Nelson’s mind...

Tallis made it clear he didn’t care what anyone else thought of him, but his brother was meddling with his love life now, and things could get very sticky and complicated. Maybe I was better off staying at the pack and putting up with Hawke...

“Then it is settled. The two of you will bunk together. I’m going to head off to bed and I’m going to assume the two of you will do the same,” Nelson said. He gave us a casual wave and left.

Sighing, I got to my feet and stretched, my back popping. Tallis was still standing there, looking grumpy. He might not have been tired, but I was exhausted.

I yawned, heavily hinting that I was ready to go to bed.

“Come on,” he said forcefully, motioning for me to follow him with a hand.

We headed across the big event tent to where there was another small room closed off by thick, velvety curtains. It was a cramped room with just one twin sized bed, which hardly fit in the small space uncomfortably.

Immediately, I crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed. I yawned again and rubbed my weary eyes.

When I looked at Tallis, he was standing there with his hands shoved in his pockets, his head turned toward the curtain door. Being inside a tent, there weren’t any real doors or windows anywhere. It was a little stuffy.

“If you’re really that miserable about having me bunk with you, you had other options,” I pointed out.

“You’re tired. You should rest,” he told me firmly.

I noticed how he didn’t really answer my question. He also refused to look at me. I laid down on the bed and looked up at the tent ceiling, red velvet.

Tallis still hadn’t moved and I wondered if I was being too needy or presumptuous, taking his bed. I got up and sat down on the ground. Tallis still didn’t say anything, so I curled up and closed my eyes.

It was probably too much to expect him to be a gentleman and actually offer the bed to me. He didn’t seem like the selfless type. When he didn’t say anything at all, it was hard to tell what he was thinking or what he wanted me to do.

I could have been lying on a bed or razor sharp rocks and it wouldn’t have mattered. For the first time in days, I actually felt as long as he was here, there wasn’t anything I needed to worry about, and that I could finally take a good night of rest.

With that thought, my body relaxed, my eyes dropped instantly and I fell asleep.

*Theo

I kept my eyes averted until Ciana's breathing evened out. Glancing at her, I saw her chest rising and falling evenly. Her eyelids rippled as underneath, her eyes shifted back and forth. She must have been dreaming already.

Even with the makeup that made her look like a boy, I could see her real beauty underneath. I wished she'd wash that crap off. Right now, I was Tallis, I wasn't Theo. I couldn't ask her why she was disguised as a boy or anything else that would

make her think I was curious about her.

In her sleep, Ciana sighed and rolled onto her back stretching her legs out on the ground. She looked peaceful but I knew she'd have a sore back in the morning from sleeping on the ground.

Wind whipped through the tent and she shuddered. Turning on her side again, Ciana hugged her knees to her chest and shivered in the cold air.

I chewed the inside of my cheek and glanced around. Could I really just leave her on the ground to freeze? No, I couldn't.

I sighed, stepped forward, scooped her up and brought her over to that tiny, sorry excuse for a bed I'd been sleeping on.

Ciana mumbled something in her sleep and curled into me, whispering something about warmth.

A smile tugged at my lips, but I fought it off.

Her delicate fingers tightened around my shirt as I lowered her onto the bed. She nuzzled her nose against my chest and

wouldn't let go.

Carefully, I tried to pull back once I was sure the thin, springy mattress was supporting her. On second thought, that horrible mattress was probably less comfortable than the ground...

Ciana muttered a protest and her hands pulled on my shirt. I wasn't balanced and I fell on top of her.

Before I could move, she had her arms and legs locked around me like a boa constrictor. Clearly, she'd been spending too

much time with Perceval.

I swallowed my irritated groan, realizing there was no way I could get away from her without waking her. Seeing as I was supposed to be a stranger, if she woke up and found us like this, she might freak out and I'd have a lot of explaining to do.

The warmth of her body pressed against me and her fingers clung desperately to my shirt. Despite myself, the heavy organ between my legs stiffened and pressed against her leg.

Damn it! This was going to be a long, torturous night.

Sighing, I tried to relax. I could feel every inch of her body pressing against me, her arms and legs clenching around me as she dreamt. My pants tightened and my desire ached for release. It should have been driving me crazy but I found I was addicted to being close to her, if only to feel something pleasant.

It was dangerous... I warned myself, but no matter how I tried, my body wouldn't move an inch away.

Ciana nuzzled her head against my neck. Her nose brushed my skin, her soft breath tickled down my throat. I swallowed hard, clenching my muscles against the desire to grab her and pull her closer.

Flashes of when we'd been together in the Moonlit Crystal realm surfaced in my mind. I could so clearly remember how warm and wet she'd felt, completely surrounding me and sucking me deep inside.

I bit my lip to stifle the equally pleased and annoyed groan that rose in my throat.

Fuck, how I wanted her!

I wanted to claim her body in the real world, not just in that vision we'd acted out.

Her warm lips grazed against my neck and she sighed, her head tilting back slightly. I caught a glimpse of her plump, pink lips, slightly parted in her sleep.

I'd felt her lips before. I knew well how warm and soft they were, and what feelings they elicited within me.

Again, I swallowed hard. Try as I might, I couldn't pull my eyes from her inviting lips. With her head tilted back, she was perfectly angled toward me, waiting.

Like a man possessed, I leaned in and pressed mine to hers.

Ciana moaned in her sleep and squirmed against me. Her legs tightened around my hips and she rolled her body against mine.

Heat flared through me and my throbbing cock was ready to burst at any moment.

I jerked my head away from her, breathing heavily. She still slept on, mumbling something incoherent as her arms got even tighter around me.

I'd had trouble with self-control lately. My powers had been all over the place, but it wasn't my fatal powers that I was concerned about right now.

It was the burning desire.

What was I doing?! Kissing a young woman in her sleep?! Theodore Crimson, how despicable you were!

Reluctantly, I pulled away from Ciana. There was nowhere else I would rather be than locked in her warm, enticing embrace all night. I was still concerned about how she'd react if she woke up.

The last time we'd been in a situation like that, she'd freaked out. I hadn't realized how big of a deal it was for her then. I wasn't going to make that same mistake now.

When I stood up, she sighed and reached to the empty space, like she was searching for me to pull me back. There was a moment where I thought about throwing it all away and just falling into her embrace again.

But I couldn't.

Sighing, I turned away from her.

It was better to let her rest.

I left the room desperately searching for a cold shower.

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Show Time

Ciana

The following day I didn't see Tallis at all. I'd woken up in his empty room and figured he'd gone to work. I went to find him, but it seemed as if he'd vanished. He didn't even return at night.

I sent word to let Warren know where I was and we met up somewhere in the woods to plan what to do about the alliance ceremony.

When the morning of the ceremony arrived, I steadily made my way to the location, cloaked in a ceremonial robe with an oversized hood like most pack members. My face was shielded. but otherwise undisguised.

Only a few hours remained until the contract was to be signed. After those signatures were marked in ink and blood it would be too late to go back.

I mingled among the shadows, away from people that moved around the pack square, getting ready for the big alliance ceremony. I could feel their excitement. They saw this as a step forward to greatness as Raymond had said in his speech to the pack a few days ago.

The man made my skin crawl.

Some people brushed past me, nearly knocking me off balance.

"Sorry," they muttered, continuing on their way.

I hadn't seen Warren since the morning, but he knew the plan.

The crowd would be gathering in the great hall for the ceremony, and I was nervous to say the least. I knew my people would come to my aid once they learnt the truth. But there was a part of me that still believed that Raymond could manipulate them in some way. He had done it before, what was stopping him from doing it again?

I made sure to keep to the shadows.

Fake Ciana walked onto the stage. She dressed in the pack colors of white and deep purple. The dress had a whimsical touch to it. The skirt flowed all the way to the floor, concealing her feet. The bodice was tight and cinched at her waist perfectly. It had a sweetheart neckline that gave her just the right amount of cleavage to remain tasteful.

Her hair had been pinned up and her face was kept natural.

I had to say she looked beautiful. If she hadn't had a nervous look etched on her face I would have thought she almost looked like a princess.

"She is stunning, isn't she?" a woman beside me whispered.

I simply nodded my reply.

I followed her every move as she made her way to Raymond who was wearing a ceremonial white gown, something only the Alpha was supposed to. It was then that I noticed the feather in her hand.

It was the same feather that was meant to be in my father's safe, but Raymond had hidden it. Fake Ciana gave a forced smile and went to sit at one of the chairs. She placed the feather on the table and zeroed in on it.

I walked toward the stage seeing Raymond talking to a rather tall looking man. The man's back was turned toward me but I could see Raymond's face clearly.

Raymond's brows were furrowed and his eyes were narrowed at the man before him.

I drew closer toward them trying to pick up on what they were talking about.

"What do you mean he isn't here? The ceremony is meant to begin within the next twenty minutes. We cannot have the union without him here." He bit out lowly. "Do you understand what it took to get us to this point? This could ruin everything."

SANT ANDRE &

The man bowed his head, "I'm sorry sir. There seems to have been some kind of landslide which may be blocking his way over here."

"We cannot wait. Time is of the essence. We will begin the announcement and when he arrives, he will join Ciana on stage. Then I will perform the ceremony. Go and prepare the contract, wax seal, and the feather."

The man bowed his head and left Raymond standing alone.

I walked back to the ground and took a seat among the rest of my pack members. I made sure to keep my head low and my hood on.

Each second felt like an hour as I waited for the twenty minutes to tick down.

After the time had passed Raymond walked onto the stage with a smile on his face. Oh, how I wanted to put my fist right in the middle of his face.

"My people!" He addressed the pack, "Today is a day of great honor for this pack. Today we unite not only two lands but we make history. We usher in a new age and opportunities that have never been seen before."

Everyone in the crowd cheered with joy.

If only they knew.

“Alpha Luther has had some trouble on his journey here, but he will be here shortly.” He then turned to look at the side of the stage. “But we have Alpha’s representative, our beloved Miss Ciana Black!”

The crowd roared again and chanted my name.

The place fell silent as everyone looked to Raymond for the proceedings to continue. He opened his mouth but a loud banging sound interrupted him.

Suddenly, Warren barged in through the doors dressed in a suit and tie.

Audible gasps could be heard from all over the area. Guests stood from their seats to get a closer look at the young prince who had just walked in.

“Stop this madness at once!” His graceful yet authoritative voice echoed. Everyone lowered their heads to show their respect. After all, Warren was a royal prince. He was born with Alphaness, just like his brother.

“Ciana Black is not going through with this alliance today,” he finished his words, staring at Raymond.

Raymond looked frustrated. “Prince Warren, what is the meaning of this?”

“The meaning of this?” Warren scoffed. He then turned to address the pack members. “The meaning of this is that I am a man in love. I thought I’d made myself clear the first day I arrived.”

The room grew silent and every single pair of eyes were on Warren.

“I have fallen in love with Ciana Black. She doesn’t want this.

She wants to be with me. Why should we deny true love? Is it not a gift from the Moon Goddess herself? Should it not be celebrated and honored?”

I heard a few hums of agreement.

Oh, he was selling this well. I was proud.

Warren then turned to Raymond. “Ciana is the one I have chosen. She is the one I want and she wants me. You denying us this right to be together will go against the royal court. And I don’t think you want to take on the royal court, now would you?”

If looks could kill, Warren would be six feet deep. Even from where I sat I could see the bulging vein on the side of Raymond’s forehead. “I’m sorry Prince Warren, but once the ceremony is over, we’d be happy to celebrate your union with Miss Ciana, but we need her for the agreement has already been made between Alpha Luther. And Ciana agreed in front of her pack.”

“Who’s this Alpha Luther?” Warren let out a soft chuckle, and interrupted Raymond who wanted to explain. “I don’t care. Whoever he is, my father and brother probably would know, but it’s none of my business. What I do know is that Ciana cannot be a part of this alliance because she is now a part of the royal court. She is already mine and I can’t wait a single minute more.”

Audible gasps filled the meeting hall.

“Let’s go!” Warren reached out to the fake Ciana with a warm smile on his face, and she stared at him in disbelief, but her shyness and the pink on her face told me that she was ready to go with Warren.

What girl could resist a romantic confession in public like this from a royal prince? I gave Warren a thumbs up in my mind.

Raymond’s face turned a bright red from the rage that filtered into his body. “Guards! Seize him!”

“No!” Fake Ciana cried.

Guards moved from the sides and went to capture the young prince. They bound him in chains and forced him to his knees.

Warren struggled in his chains but I knew that was only for show. I knew he could take on Raymond’s men and still come up on top.

He might not be as fierce as Theo, but he was still well trained by the best warriors in the world. Taking down normal pack guards should be just a piece of cake for him. He caught my eye in the crowd and he gave me a subtle nod.

Your turn. His look read.

They dropped Warren on the stage and Raymond faced the crowd again. “What Price Warren is trying to do is spread his disloyal and selfish corruption. Are we a people that go back on our word? No. We do not conform to the pressures of those sitting at the royal table. This is for the betterment of our pack. Miss Ciana, tell-Prince Warren to stop this nonsense! If he loves you, he should respect that you have your responsibilities!”

“Ciana, I’ve been waiting for this day. You have to make a choice, me, or your pack?” Warren shouted.

Fake Ciana had her eyes trained on Warren. Tears brimmed her eyes as she watched the man she loved in chains.

“Ciana!” Raymond bellowed.

She flinched but she did not take her eyes off of Warren. “I...I...”

The words refused to leave her lips.

“You!” A huge man came flying onto the stage like a bat out of hell. He headed straight for Warren and lifted him to his feet.

“You did this.”

Hawke then rushed up to the stage and kicked onto Warren’s stomach, causing him to double over.

“No! Please!” Fake Ciana got up from her chair but was held back by Raymond.

The crowd roared their disapproval for Hawke and I knew it was time to start making my way toward the stage.

After all of this was said and done I would be deeply indebted to him for what he had done.

“Hawke!” Raymond yelled to his son but he just kept going.

“That’s enough!”

“I will say it’s enough when I know it’s enough!” Hawke’s eyes were wild. I could see how dilated his pupils were.

“You are ruining the ceremony. Stand. Down. Now!”

Fake Ciana elbowed Raymond in the stomach and launched herself at Hawke. She managed to push him away from Warren and used her body to cover him on the floor.

Her body racked with panicked cries.

“All you want to do is get the power that Luther promised you, Raymond. This is not about the pack. This is about your greed!”

Everyone heard her words and from the looks on many people’s faces they were not happy.

Raymond let out a little laugh. “You see how the prince has brainwashed you, Ciana? You made a vow to your people that you will see this through. You made the vow to Alpha Luther.”

This was my cue.

headed up the small stairs that led to the stage and waited. He was trying to bait everyone into believing him.

“The alliance will take place today, Ciana. You are the sole heir.”

I removed my hood and allowed my hair to flow free.

“I’m afraid that the ceremony will be canceled, Raymond.” I walked onto the stage with my head held high and eyes up. was finally stepping back into the light and claiming what was rightfully mine.

“She is not the sole heir to this pack. I am!”

There was no going back now.

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Always

“She’s lying. This is just some power hungry imposter coming to disrupt our pack,” Raymond argued, stepping between me and the rest of the pack.

“I can prove that I am the real Ciana,” I said, holding the pack relic up over my head. I stepped around Raymond so the entire pack could see me.

Everyone gasped when they realized I had the feather. It was more than just a pack relic. This feather was a symbol of truth and justice. Anyone that spoke a lie while holding the feather would be punished by the Moon Goddess.

He wouldn’t dare attack me while I held the feather. It was a sacred pack relic and not even Raymond would think about putting it in harm’s way.

“Don’t listen to this bitch. She’s responsible for my son getting viciously attacked, multiple times. She was probably sent here as a spy for the Dark Prince so he can wipe us all out when it pleases him,” Raymond argued.

The rest of the pack murmured nervously and a lot of them looked at me with fear in their eyes. I couldn’t believe it! These were people I’d known all my life. Raymond had twisted them so much they didn’t know what was real and what wasn’t.

“That is a lie,” Warren said, speaking up. One of the guards hit him in the back of the head and he snarled.

“Prince Theo and the crown don’t destroy packs or spy on them. This man has you all confused,” Warren stated calmly yet firmly.

It wasn’t good enough. I had to use the feather’s fabled power to prove that I was who I said I was. The pack wouldn’t believe it otherwise. After seeing what the Moonlit Crystal could do, I didn’t doubt the power of the feather.

“I swear that I am the true and only Ciana Black, daughter of Alpha Soren Black of the Alvar Pack. As the Moon Goddess is my witness, I speak the truth of who I am. If I lie before this feather, may the Moon Goddess strike me down,” I announced aloud.

The entire crowd went silent. Even Raymond and Hawke held their breath. Nothing happened. No lightning bolts shot down from the sky to strike me down. An apparition of the Moon Goddess didn’t appear and condemn me for my lies.

A ripple of relief went through the gathered pack. Then they started murmuring to each other.

I smirked and glanced over at Raymond. With the power of the feather, I’d win back the loyalty of the pack in no time.

“Beta Raymond, would you like your fake Ciana to swear her identity before the Moon Goddess with the feather of justice?” I asked, holding the relic out to him.

Raymond snarled at me and pushed my hand away.

I turned to the fake me and held the feather out.

“How about it, ‘Ciana’?” I asked, putting a sarcastic emphasis on her name.

She shook her head and stared nervously at the feather. “Wh- what will happen to me?”

“Don’t even think about it!” Raymond snapped. He moved between me and the fake Ciana. “Ciana is whoever I say she is, and I say it is this girl.” He pointed to the fake Ciana.

She cowered a little and shot me a nervous look. Her eyes traveled over to Warren, who was still being held by Raymond’s guards. She looked really upset that Warren was held captive. She did seem to have a heart at least, unlike Raymond.

“You think you are smarter and wiser than the Moon Goddess?” I challenged, arching an eyebrow at him and waving the feather around tauntingly.

More murmurs went through the pack.

“What if Raymond is wrong?”

“I don’t want to be punished by the Moon Goddess.”

“Beta Raymond! Tell that girl to swear her identity before the Moon Goddess. If she does, then I will believe she is the real Ciana,” a pack member said. He stood up and pointed at fake Ciana.

“That’s enough! You dare question my authority and knowledge?” Raymond growled. He leapt off the dais and advanced on the man in the crowd.

My eyes widened as he tried to get away. With a snap of the fingers, Raymond had his guards hold the man in a tight grip.

Raymond leaned down to look right into the man’s eyes, a snarl fixed on his face. “You call yourself a loyal pack member, yet you have the audacity to question the identity of the Alpha’s daughter!”

The outcrier trembled slightly. He looked at me, his eyes pleading and helpless.

“The feather...”

Before he could get another word out, Raymond grabbed his head and twisted. A sickening crack rang out and the guards released him. The man fell in a crumple on the ground, dead.

I cringed, taking a half-step back.

Raymond was absolutely crazy. I thought that when the pack learned who I was, they would turn against him. He had planned everything so perfectly and he would force his control over them with fear.

“Now, Ciana, you do exactly as I say, you got that?” he growled, stalking over to the fake Ciana, a dark glare on his face.

Fake Ciana cowered and shrank away from him. If I wasn’t concerned about her safety, I would have berated her for representing me so poorly. My father had always taught me not to back down and to face bullies head on.

If Raymond had looked at me like that, I would have told him exactly what I thought of him!

“No!” Fake Ciana gasped. She pulled away from the guards standing near her and ran to me. “Please, you have to help me. He’s going to kill me.”

Raymond turned his eyes on both of us, daggers in his eyes. He would kill both of us if he had to, just to keep control of the pack. How could he betray my father like that? He’d worked side by side with my family for years. He’d always put the pack first. What had happened to make him turn into this power hungry beast?

“I’m so sorry,” fake Ciana said, grabbing my hand. “Beta Raymond told me he needed me to help save his pack. He asked a witch to cast a spell that made me look like you.”

“Don’t listen to her. She’s lying, gone insane by seeing someone that looks just like her,” Raymond argued, throwing a dismissive arm at both of us.

He stood before the gathered pack, maintaining his dominant status. I could see the pack members were too confused to make up their minds. They still didn’t know who to believe, even with the aid of the feather.

“I didn’t want to do any of this but he told me it was the only way. He said you were at the palace and couldn’t help, but the pack needed you now. I really, really thought I was helping the pack,” fake Ciana said, her eyes wide and glassy as she pleaded with me.

“I understand,” I said. “You can expose his lies. You’re the only one that knows the truth. Take the feather and tell everyone what he did.”

I held the feather out to her. Fake Ciana chewed her lower lip and looked from the feather back to Raymond. The Beta wrinkled his nose and glared at her.

“If you do anything to raise a hand against me, you’ll regret it,” he threatened.

“You said you wanted to help the pack. If you take the feather and expose his lies, you’ll free them all from his control,” I urged, pushing the feather to her again.

“He’ll kill me if I do this,” fake Ciana whispered. I could see fear in her eyes.

“That’s right, you know your place,” Raymond shouted at the back of her head.

Fake Ciana cringed. I wondered how much terror and abuse she’d suffered while trying to do what Raymond wanted her to do. I couldn’t imagine that he was the most agreeable person, even when she was doing what he said.

“If you really want to help, use the feather,” I said again, giving her a warm, friendly smile. “The pack will protect you once Raymond’s lies are revealed. They won’t support him anymore.”

As much as I hoped my words were true, I couldn’t guarantee it. They’d already been reluctant to believe that I was the real Ciana and so many of them chose to follow Raymond.

I hoped that having Warren there would be enough to sway them.

If they witnessed the truth being revealed in the presence of one of the princes and did nothing to oppose Raymond and restore my pack’s honor and loyalty to the crown, Warren being the presentative of the royal court, technically could have them ali hunted down and destroyed.

Not that he would, but they didn’t need to know that!

“You’ll keep me safe?” she asked again.

I nodded and fake Ciana extended a hand toward the feather.

Slowly, she turned toward the pack and held the feather up. “The truth is...”

“Arhwoo-” Raymond roared and jumped into the air.

He shifted midair, landing heavily on top of fake Ciana and knocking the feather out of her hand.

I dove at the feather, catching it before it hit the ground. Rolling, I jumped back to my feet and turned to tackle Raymond. I'd protect fake Ciana, as I promised.

Raymond was on top of her. Fake Ciana gave a strangled cry and then lay still. Raymond lifted his head, glaring bright eyed at me. He had blood staining his mouth.

"NO!" Warren shouted. He snarled and pulled away from the guards, showing his true strength again as a member of the royal family.

Fake Ciana took in a sharp, labored breath and turned on her side. Whimpering, she crawled toward Warren.

I stood there dumbly, just staring at them.

Raymond was still in wolf form. Panting and heaving, his fur bristling like porcupine quills.

Warren dropped to his knees by fake Ciana. Blood spurted from the wound on her neck and she was pale. Her arms trembled every time she tried to move.

"W-Warren," she gasped out.

"Shh, don't talk," Warren said. "Don't try to move. Save your strength."

My eyes prickled as I watched Warren with her. We both knew that she was going to die. There was no saving her now.

Warren had only pretended to date her and love her but I knew at this moment, he was being sweet and gentle genuinely. I expected nothing less of him.

"Warren, I'm so, so sorry," she whispered, her voice gurgling a little as blood frothed in her mouth.

"Shh... You did the right thing," he assured, running his fingers through her hair.

"I-I need you to kn-know... my real n-name is Jasmine. I... I d-do love you and I... would have... g- gone with you," she gasped out.

"I know," he told her softly.

"W-will you... re-remember me?" she asked, her voice a barely audible whisper.

Warren took her weak, trembling hand in his.

"Always."

He kissed the back of her hand.

Fake Ciana – Jasmine – mustered a weak smile. Her head fell to the side and the light left her eyes.

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I've Been Waiting For You

I stared at the fake me, Jasmine, on the ground. Warren was still leaning over her. His eyes were half-lidded, but I could see underneath the tears brimming in his eyes. I couldn't deny that I felt mortified, too. I promised we'd protect her, and I failed to honor my word.

"Everyone! We have all been fooled by the imposter!"

Raymond announced, waving dismissively at Jasmine's lifeless form. He had shifted back and someone had quickly dressed him with a cloak. "The Moon Goddess has sent us the real Ciana just in time. The pack can finish preparing for the arrival of our esteemed guest."

"Show some remorse!" I snapped, turning to glare at him. "You just murdered a young girl, one that you were using for horrible crimes."

Raymond scoffed and rolled his eyes at me, he whispered, "She understood the risks of disobeying me. If she wasn't going to do her part, she was no longer useful." His voice was so casual and uninterested.

"You're a monster! Moon Goddess above, in the name of Lord Lycaon, you'll get what you deserve!" Warren said, finding his voice. He stood and balled his hands into fists.

I didn't think I'd ever seen Warren so mad, but he was ready to fight for Jasmine's memory and keep his promise to always remember her.

"That is more corruption coming from a member of the royal family. You can't just come in here and throw your weight * around. We don't bow down to royal tyranny," Raymond scoffed loudly. "Take him into custody."

"You can't! You have no jurisdiction over the royal family," I argued.

Warren added, "You claimed that the crown are tyrants that lord over Alvar. What's your evidence?"

"Seize him!" Raymond didn't answer, only gave his order. His guards pounced on Warren.

"Now, what do you think the king is going to do to Alvar pack when he finds out what you've done to his son?" I asked. I glanced at the rest of the pack.

No one spoke up at all. They wouldn't look at me either.

"Hold him down. If he twitches, knock him out," Raymond demanded. He stood over Warren, smirking and leering in front of the captured prince.

Rage pumped through my veins and my hand tightened around the feather. I'd knock that smug, arrogant look right off his face!

"Your decoy is dead. There's no way you'll complete the alliance with Luther now," I said, pointing a finger at Raymond.

He smirked and chuckled darkly in a tone only audible to me. "I see you haven't let go of the feather, Ciana dear."

"The feather?" I asked, creasing my brow.

Suddenly, a tingle shot up my arm and it dropped limply at my side. I couldn't move it! I kept telling my fingers to release the feather, but they wouldn't respond.

That same tingle spread through my shoulders.

What was happening?!

Then my legs wobbled. I staggered to the side, catching myself on a nearby pillar.

"You're so predictable. I knew you'd come for the feather, so I made sure it would work to my advantage," he said with a toothy, wolfish grin. His eyes lit up.

My knees buckled and I fell to them on the ground. The tingling numbness kept spreading through my body. I couldn't feel my legs anymore and my mind was getting fuzzy. I fought to keep my eyes open and to stay alert.

I couldn't let Raymond win like this!

"I coated the feather with a paralytic. The effects will wear off soon. But until then, why don't you take some rest?" His smile

was malicious.

Then he turned to the crowd and announced loudly, "Don't worry! Ciana has been overcome by fatigue. But she is prepared to honor our alliance with Alpha Luther."

My stomach turned as his grin broadened from ear to ear. He was a snake! I half expected him to unhinge his jaw to devour me whole.

"This... this whole thing was a trap?" I muttered, trying to force my legs and arms to move.

Warren and I had planned everything out so carefully. He'd gained Jasmine's trust and we'd set this plan up without revealing it to anyone, but Raymond had been one step ahead of us.

My mind got woozy, but I blinked rapidly, forcing myself to stay awake.

"That's right. I always planned to capture you," Raymond taunted in a low voice.

He snapped to some of his guards and they stepped up to Jasmine's body. Warren watched with horrified eyes, still unable to move against the guards that were holding him back.

I was poisoned, and Warren was being held prisoner. After all, Warren was only one person, how could he defeat the entire pack?

In our plan, I'd trusted the pack to go against Raymond by now. Unfortunately, it didn't turn out that way.

Murmurs spread amongst the crowd, it was noisy, but no one dared to speak out again.

Ice crept down my spine. I wasn't sure if it was from the paralyzing poison or if it was because I realized how bad this situation was. Soon, I'd pass out from the poison and

Raymond could do whatever he wanted with me. Even give me to Hawke...

Was this the end of my endeavor to save my pack? It couldn't be... Father, Mother, what should I do? What else could I do?

"You'll be okay." I heard a deep, smooth voice utter beside me as my body finally collapsed onto the floor.

I couldn't turn my head anymore, but I flitted my eyes to see Tallis a few steps away from me.

"Do something, help me," I mouthed silently, I was no longer able to make a sound.

Tallis shook his head.

My heart sank. Tallis wasn't my biggest fan, but I couldn't believe that he was just going to let me get taken by Raymond for whatever horrible plan he had.

People soon came to the agreement that it would be for the best to believe Raymond's explanation.

Raymond's guys carried me off the stage. People parted to make way. As I moved through the crowd, I heard, "Just play along. This is your chance to find out what is really going on," Tallis' voice whispered.

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Was he kidding? I was about to faint and be completely helpless. Raymond could do anything... I would have shaken my head if I wasn't almost entirely paralyzed.

"You'll be fine. I'll follow and I won't let anything happen to you," Tallis promised.

Something in how sure he was that he could keep me safe made me believe him. That kind of confidence only came from the certainty that he'd succeed.

He was wearing a sweatshirt over his shirt and I could see an imprint of something pressing against the sweatshirt. It was familiar. I tried to place the familiar shape but my mind was slipping fast.

"Trust me. I'll make sure you are safe," he said again, lowering his voice so he wouldn't draw attention.

A lapel pin. The shape on Tallis' sweatshirt was a lapel pin. It was familiar because it was the same shape of the pin that I'd made for Theo.

I blinked again, my eyelids almost too heavy to lift, now. If Tallis was wearing a lapel pin I'd made for Theo, that meant Tallis was Theo!

I knew it!

A moment of relief swept through me as he stepped back before Raymond could notice him. I gave myself over to it, trusting that Theo would keep me safe. One last thought went through my mind before darkness consumed me...

Who in the world would wear a lapel pin under a sweatshirt anyway?

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When I blinked my eyes open, the first thing that I realized was that I was moving. My ears pricked up with the whirr of car tires and the gentle hum of an engine.

I was in a car, getting driven who knows where.

Sitting up, I rubbed my temples as a massive headache immediately pounded against my skull.

“Ugh,” I groaned, leaning forward and resting my forehead on the driver’s seat in front of me.

It was a luxury car with real leather seats and the leather was cool, helping my headache.

“Would you care for some water, Miss?” the driver asked. She was a young girl. I was sure she wasn’t anyone from my pack.

I looked up, meeting her eyes in the rearview mirror.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked. “Stop the car, let me out right now!”

“Apologies, Miss, but I can’t do that.” She smiled, handed me a water bottle and then closed the partition between us.

I knocked on it. “Hey! I’m not done talking to you. This is kidnapping. Let me out right now.”

There was no response. The car was probably soundproofed. I turned my attention out the darkly tinted window and looked for any familiar surroundings. I didn’t see anything that I recognized.

I drank my water. Partially because my throat was so extremely dry and partially to cool the fire in my head. It helped, but as soon as I finished it, my throat parched again and no amount of swallowing made a difference.

Quickly, I darted my eyes around the car. I was definitely alone, except for the driver. It was a nice town car, the kind that Alphas and royalty were driven around in.

How long had I been passed out? How far from the pack had Raymond gotten me?

I glanced down at my hands as they nervously twisted the plastic water bottle. That was when I saw I wasn’t in the clothes I wore when I’d gone to the alliance ceremony.

Someone had changed me into a dress. Not just any dress, a very nice evening gown.

The dress was a rose-gold color. Strapless, it clung to my bosom and made my cleavage pop out. My neck, shoulders, chest, and a large portion of my back were bare with how low-cut the dress was in the back.

It had corset lacing in the back and it was tied snugly, but not uncomfortably. The dress was floor length and had a small train off the back. It was a very elegant and shiny dress, silk if I wasn’t mistaken.

My shoes had changed, too. I was wearing a pair of stilettos that had light pink, sandal straps with sparkling rhinestones in them.

My heart sank. Who changed me? It better not be a man.

Hawke’s face flashed through my mind and I almost couldn’t suppress my desire to puke. It couldn’t be him! I dare not imagine his nasty eyes seeing my body. No, Tallis, Theo better not have let that happen...

The car pulled up in front of a large mansion I’d never seen before.

“We’re here,” the driver girl smiled professionally, “Sorry that I changed you without your permission, but you look gorgeous, Miss.”

I let out a sigh of relief. Thank the Goddess...

Lights were on inside but there was someone standing in the driveway where the car was pulling up.

He was dressed in a nice suit and wearing a bright, friendly smile on his face. Luther.

He came to my door when the driver pulled to a stop. Luther opened the door and held his hand out.

“Welcome, Ciana. You finally made it,” he said, his eyes flashing in the darkness.

I slid away from him in the car, but then Theo’s voice in the back of my head reminded me that I was here to figure out what was going on.

Taking Luther’s hand, he helped me out of the car. He lifted my hand and kissed the back of it. Inwardly, I cringed, but it didn’t show on my face.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” Luther said, smirking at me. “My dear Ciana Black.”