

Kings Breeder 461

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Thomas turned to look at me, almost like he wasn't expecting to see me there so soon. Then he smiled and patted the bench beside him.

"Is everything okay? What about mom and dad?" I blurted out.

He smiled again. "Take a breath, Ciana. I'm not bringing you bad news, well, not too bad anyway. There are always some troubles out there, but nothing too crazy. Come, sit with me."

I let out a breath of relief. Nodding, I kicked my feet into action and sat down beside him. Thomas looped his arm around me and pulled me to him in a side hug.

"You look well. Palace life suits you," he said, winking at me.

I groaned and rolled my eyes. "How did you even know I was here?"

"I've got scouts around the kingdom. Scouts that are loyal to me and your parents. They send me updates now and then. I heard you spent some time in the Vaner pack and when it fell to Luther, you returned to the palace," he explained.

And that was the easy, watered down version. I laughed nervously and glanced back at the palace.

"So, tell me, are you well? What is it that drew you back here after you left home again?" he questioned.

"It's a long story," I did my best to summarize it, "Basically, I came back to help Theo save Warren, and in the process, defeated the evil King Sebastian."

Thomas didn't seem to be too surprised by what I said. I wondered whether there was anything that would surprise him. He was always composed, just like Dad.

"Sounds like you've accomplished what you wanted to do for your friends. I'm surprised that you are still hanging around here."

"Well, I've been helping King Theo out with his transition from prince to king," I said, coming up with the first thing that popped into my head.

I stayed because of him. He needed me, just like I needed him.

I did miss my pack and my family, even though I'd found a different one here with Theo, Brook, and Jake.

Then, my mind wandered a little bit. Theo and I really had come a long way to get to where we were. From the first kiss in the pavilion, to the recent date we went on, so much had changed and I couldn't imagine my life without him.

I loved waking up listening to his heartbeat every morning, and falling asleep in his arms at night. And the way he touched me and brought me to unbearably pleasurable heights....

My cheeks warmed and I looked down. I worried Thomas would see exactly what I was thinking on my face.

“Uh-huh. Sure,” Thomas said, rolling his eyes, as if he could read my mind.

“Come on, Thomas, tell me why you are here.” I quickly changed the topic, nudging him in fake annoyance.

“I wanted to speak with King Theo directly, but I suppose you should hear this as well,” he started, his smile fading, putting on a more serious expression. “You know a lot of the pack didn’t really support or like Raymond. They just went along because they were scared of him.”

“I know that,” I said, nodding.

“Unfortunately, there are still some divided loyalties. Not between your family and Raymond but between Sebastian’s regime and Luther’s. Many of them didn’t think Sebastian was a good king. Because of that, they want to support Luther and not the crown,” he explained.

“But, even under Sebastian’s reign, the royal court didn’t do anything particularly bad to our pack. Now that Theo is on the throne, things can only get better. Can’t you make them see that?”

“Well, that is the complication. Just because Sebastian didn’t attack our pack isn’t enough to make him or his descendants good kings. Theo is young, and being Sebastian’s son doesn’t help him gain popularity. They will compare Luther and Theo. That’s why a lot of people in our pack are starting to think that Luther should be king.”

“But they haven’t even given Theo a chance to show what he is capable of. That isn’t fair,” I argued, shaking my head.

“I know, dear. People are scared. They were scared of Sebastian and they don’t know what Theo will bring. That fear is making them want to place their trust in someone they think is more reliable,” he said.

“I should go back. I’ve spent a lot of time with Theo, I can tell them the kind of person he is and I can convince them to support him,” I said, standing up.

Thomas chuckled and grabbed my arm. He pulled me back down on the bench.

“That is probably a good idea. However, you don’t need to rush off right this second. I came by here because I’m heading out to find your parents,” he explained. “I’ve got to get the Alpha back. This is something he needs to handle.”

“My parents? They still aren’t back yet?” I asked. “Didn’t you let them know what happened with Raymond?”

“I did. They were confident I could handle it. However, under the new circumstances in the country, your father needs to come back. I’m worried that there will be an all-out war soon.”

“Thomas, where are my parents?” I asked, meeting his gaze.

Thomas’ gaze fixed on me. After a while, he sighed. “It’s a secret, but you’re old enough to know now. However, you should learn it from your parents, not me. I’m sure they will tell you when they get back.” He put a comforting hand on my shoulder.

There was no point pressing for an answer from Thomas. If he didn't want to tell a secret, no one would be able to get a single word out of him.

"I'm the only one that can contact them and get them back here. But I didn't want to leave the pack leaderless for a while, that's why I came here to talk to you. I'm glad you were planning to go back anyway. You are the Alpha's daughter and a symbol of hope for them," he said, touching my chin.

Thomas was right. More important than being an ambassador for Theo, I was the Alpha's daughter, and I needed to be there for my pack until my father could return.

"I don't like this plan." Theo looked at me through the mirror.

I didn't have much to pack, but still needed to quickly double check on a few necessities. After putting away my medicine sachet, I looked back at him.

"I don't like to leave you either, but I have to get my pack back on your side. Especially with Thomas away looking for my parents, I need to be there for my people, just like you have to be here for the country."

He came behind me and wrapped his arms around me and gave a soft sigh. I leaned into him.

"Still, doesn't mean I like it." He kissed my shoulder. "The last couple of times you went back, you ended up putting yourself in danger."

"It's fine now. Thomas put everything together, and you've seen Frederic and Murray. They're trustworthy people." I turned in his arms and placed my hands on his chest. "I promise to keep myself safe and I need you to trust me."

He pulled me in tight and kissed the top of my head. "I trust you. It's everyone else, I don't trust them."

I hugged him back and tightened my hold on him. I leaned my head up and pecked him on the lips softly.

He leaned his forehead against mine and let out a soft sigh. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"I know you are capable of handling yourself but I would feel better if you took Greg and Sherry as your escorts, just so I know that you are safe."

"Okay, just two of them, don't send any more. You are already shorthanded. I am safe and I will remain safe. Your focus needs to be here and sorting out the rebel issue."

"Deal." The sides of his lips tilted upward into a small smile. My chest fluttered.

"I love your smiles," I mumbled into his chest. "Makes me feel special. Like they are reserved just for me."

"They are, Ciana." He kissed the top of my head. "They always have been."

When we pulled apart we captured each other's lips in a heated kiss before a knock broke us apart.

Theo grunted in a low voice.

“Your Majesty, the consorts are ready to leave now. Each one of them was given gold, jewelry, and a badge that was issued by the crown to recognize their service to the royal court and country. We’ve arranged private transportation and escorts to make sure they get back to their packs safely. The ladies were all excited to go home.”

“Great! I’ll be there shortly.”

The guard left the door and Theo looked back down at me.

“I’ll miss this face.”

“I’ll miss you too. When things are settled, I will come running back to you, I promise.”

“You better.”

He crushed his lips down to mine again, held my hands and we relished the next few precious moments together before it was time for me to leave.

One hour later. Brook and I were bidding each other farewell at the palace gate.

“Oh Ciana,” Brook said and pulled me into a hug. “Promise me that you’ll come to visit sometime.”

I pulled away from her and smiled. “That is definitely on my list. Don’t cry. If everything goes well, we’ll see each other in a few months.”

She brushed away the little tears that had escaped from her eyes. “I’ll miss you.”

“If you feel sad, just think about the gold and status you bring home.” I gave her a wink. “That has to make you feel somewhat better.”

She let out a small laugh and rolled her eyes cutely. “Please. I am walking away with so much more than that. I made a life long friend here. That’s priceless.”

I gently tapped her nose and teased her, “I’ll tell Jake that he isn’t part of Brook’s life long-friend club, only I am. You think he would be jealous?”

“Hey Ciana, that’s not...” She didn’t know what to say, and I didn’t expect her to.

“The answer is no, he won’t!” I laughed, “Because he isn’t Brook’s friend, he is Brook’s boyfriend! Ha ha ha!”

Brook’s face turned bright red. “Alright Ciana, you totally ruined our sentimental moment!”

I held her hand with a soft smile.

“That’s the point! I hope you’ll smile when you think of me, my dear Brook. Take care!”

The trip back home was eventless, however, when I had just gotten to the pack house, I saw that there was a lot of commotion going on.

“Ciana? You’re home.” A small teenage girl ran up to me and hugged me without warning. “Thank goodness.’

I pulled out of her hold and looked her in the eyes. ‘Erin, what’s going on here?’

Erin, Susan’s daughter, pulled away. “You haven’t heard?’

I shook my head.

“Luther sent an ambassador to help convince the rest of the pack to go against the throne. She is this really fancy woman and she sounds convincing. She makes good points and everything, but after what Raymond tried to do with Luther, I don’t trust anything Luther does.’

“Well, you’re a very wise young lady, Erin,” I praised. “Do you know where she is?’

Erin nodded and pointed inside the house. “She should be in the foyer. You won’t miss her. She’s wearing a white cloak and a black mask.”

“Thank you, Erin. It’s good to see you.’ I gave her a hug goodbye and walked into the pack house.

As Erin said, there was a woman in a white cloak wearing a black mask talking to a group of pack members.

Then someone saw me and greeted me warmly. ‘Welcome back, Ciana.’

The rest of the group lowered their heads in greeting.

“Hello everyone.’

The woman in the cloak visibly stiffened. She smiled at the crowd, and in a low voice she said, “Let’s call it a day today. Thank you all for coming to listen to me.”

Her voice was a bit hoarse but sounded very familiar.

I stepped closer, “I’m Ciana Black. My father, Soren Black, is the Alpha here. And you are?’

“Greetings. Who I am isn’t important. You only need to know about Luther,’ she replied as she started walking away.

“Wait,” I called after her but she didn’t stop. She continued on and walked out of the back door of the pack house which led to the forest.

I followed her into the woods.

“Are you afraid of me?” I taunted her. ‘You don’t even dare to show your face, do you?’

The woman stopped dead in her tracks and slowly turned around.

“Show me your face,’ I commanded. She removed her mask ever so slowly and I held my breath as I watched her.

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When her mask was completely down I let out an audible gasp.

It can't be. How was this even possible?

"I was wondering whether you would come back." Maggie smiled at me softly.

"That's not possible...! watched you die!"

She chuckled lightly.

"Maggie, this isn't funny at all!" I snapped. "Are you the reason why Warren left the palace?"

"He doesn't belong there," she said with an even tone. Then she let out a pitiful sigh, "I'm guessing that my brother couldn't go through with the plan after all. Warren was supposed to kill you. Had he done that, Alvar pack would've been our ally by now.

Luther won't be happy at all.'

"You have been working with Luther the entire time?!" I looked at her with bewilderment, "What the hell is going on, Maggie? Had I not seen it with my eyes, I would never believe all this is true!"

"Theo didn't touch me, and he wouldn't be able to kill me without touching me, that I knew. I was worried that Theo would be suspicious about my death, but it all worked out well.'

She smiled softly like she always did. I used to admire that smile, but now, it was the most unbearable expression I'd ever seen.

I was there at her funeral. I watched Warren and Demarco both suffer day and night. I watched their broken hearts bleed for the woman they both loved so dearly.

"We mourned for you, Maggie. Warren and Demarco mourned for you!"

"Warren is a good kid, but he is too soft-hearted," she said casually as she tucked her wavy long hair behind her ear gracefully. "I faked my death hoping that the loss of me could toughen him up, but he still let Theo off the hook so easily. Being overly forgiving is never a good trait."

I remembered what Raymond said before his death and murmured, "So you were the woman Raymond mentioned. Why, Maggie? Why did you choose Luther?!"

"Why?" she scoffed, "Ciana, if you hadn't come into my life, I might not have taken this path! You forced my hand."

"What the hell are you talking about?!"

I reached out to grab her but she avoided me and sneered, "I said your arrival was the catalyst for my decision! Oh well, you've got help coming. I'm sure we'll see each other soon enough. By then we'll find out who your pack chooses to follow.'

"Don't mess with my pack, Maggie," I warned her as she disappeared into the woods. "Or I will personally deliver you to death's door myself!"

Maggie was no longer anywhere to be seen, leaving me still in utter shock.

"Ciana!" Sherry ran to me, "Is everything okay?"

I looked at her worried face and said to the fiery woman with bright red hair, "I'm okay. I just saw Maggie.'

She gasped.

They were here to protect me on Theo's order. My mind immediately flew to their Alpha.

What would Theo say or do if he was here? He would be as baffled as I was, but he most likely would come up with a plan shortly after the initial shock.

How I wish I could bounce ideas off him, or even just have him give me a hug. That would be enough to get me back on the right track to figure out my action plans...

Then it struck me. Since when had I grown so accustomed to having him near me? Now that I was away from him, I didn't feel whole.

I missed him terribly.

But I needed to be stronger. My pack was under threat and I needed to sort it out before Luther and Maggie got their claws into them.

◆Theo*

When we approached a pack that was rumored to be building a rebellion, Jake and I came up against a strong line of defense right at their territory border.

"It's like they were expecting us," Jake muttered.

Fortunately, I'd brought a group of men along.

"Let's try to talk them down, first," I said. I motioned to the guards to spread out so we didn't look so intimidating and threatening while approaching the warriors.

Jake stayed beside me and I made my way to the front of the line on my own.

"Who here is in charge?" Jake asked on my behalf.

One of the warriors stepped forward. "We know who you are, King Theo, and you aren't welcome here. Our pack answers to Luther and Luther alone.'

"We're not here to fight. We're here to talk to Alpha David,' Jake said.

"He won't see you! He doesn't trust you. Luther said not to let you talk or you'll kill us all!"

"Luther was wrong,' I announced, "There is no need for blood. You have my word. Again, I'm not here to fight!"

"The royal court is known to fucking break promises. You're going to have to fight. Men, attack!"

The warriors grouped into formation and launched themselves at us.

"Get ready!" I shouted over my shoulder at my warriors.

I headed straight into the attack. The first warrior I encountered, I grabbed him by the throat and tripped him with my foot. I slammed him into the ground, growling. Two more closed in on me. I reached out and punched them both in the stomachs, knocking them off their feet.

“Don’t kill anyone. Just incapacitate them and round them up. I don’t want any deaths today,” I ordered as Jake and my men moved in.

I didn’t want to start my reign as king with the slaughter of anyone who opposed me. It would make everyone think I was just like my father.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” my men chorused.

It didn’t take long to finish knocking out my opponents. Their wrists were quickly bound and they were pulled off to the side.

“Let’s go see this Alpha David,” I muttered.

We went into the pack territory and straight to the pack house. I noticed how a lot of the pack members ran into their houses. I could hear worried whispers and doors locking.

When we rounded a corner there was a woman clutching a baby to her breast. She shrieked when she saw me and backed up. She tripped and fell over.

“Get away from me! You’re going to kill me, just like all the others,” she wailed, burying her face in the bundle in her arms.

I sniffed and walked past her. “Jake, make sure she’s alright. Get her whatever medical treatment she needs for that fall,” I ordered.

Jake nodded and went to the woman. She seemed willing, at least, to let him tend to her. I wasn’t there to massacre anyone, especially not a defenseless woman and her child.

We got to the pack house, and I went right inside to face Alpha David of Bluvally. He was ready for me, his entire armed guard standing around him and his family.

“You’re not welcome here!” he cried when I walked in.

“Alpha David,” I paced in the room slowly and found myself a comfortable chair to sit down on. Then I gestured to David to also take a seat as well as I continued, “As a pack under my rule, I am not only welcome but I am obligated to ensure you have everything you need.”

I folded my hands and raised an eyebrow, looking into his eyes.

“Well... you’re not wanted. We don’t recognize you as our king, we recognize Luther,” he said, tilting his chin up. ‘I know you killed the shifters I sent to the border.’

“They are unharmed,” I assured him, ‘and are outside waiting for you.’

The Alpha gaped at me. He looked at his own guards who were looking around like they were lost and didn’t know who to believe.

“Luther said you’d come here and kill us if we didn’t obey you,” David said. He stood up and walked through his wall of guards. “What do you want?”

“I’m here to put all your doubts to rest,” I said, smiling humorlessly. ‘I’ve been hearing rumors about rebellions against the crown and disloyalty to my father. It is my mission to prove I am not my father.’”

“And what, you think that will make us bend the knee to you?” he snarled, throwing his arms out to the sides.

“Bend the knee or don’t, it is no worry of mine. You can follow Luther, and I’ll even allow you to keep your pack land. However,’ I smirked, “if you choose to recognize a different leader, I’ll have no choice but see you as an enemy, at which point, your pack will no longer be allowed to travel or trade freely in my lands. As far as I remember, your pack has plenty of gold, but relies heavily on other packs for food and medical supplies?’

“You can’t do that!’ David argued.

“Of course, I can. I’m not going to force you to follow me, but I’m not going to allow disloyal packs to cause potential safety issues for the rest of the kingdom. While I’ll leave your pack alone as I promised, you’ll also be monitored heavily for security reasons.’

I paused for a second and continued, ‘Of course, you always have the option to collect your belongings and leave my kingdom peacefully and settle in another place. Luther, if he is such a benevolent and great leader, should have plenty of space in his own land for his followers.’

“This pack territory has been in my family for generations! That’s... that’s unfair!’ David protested.

I leaned closer to him and stared him right in the eye. ‘Alpha David, then tell me what is fair? I could’ve killed most of your warriors and ordered you to obey me, or expel your entire pack by force, but I chose not to. In my opinion, I’m being more than fair.’”

“Are you threatening me?” David said, shaking his head. His shoulders sagged.

“No. I’m here to offer peace. Oh, one last thing,’ I added, “While I don’t like to kill, it doesn’t mean that I’m afraid to. I’ll give you time and freedom to make your choice, but my generosity can only go so far.”

The Alpha’s eyes widened and he swallowed audibly, taking a step back.

After another moment, he went down on one knee in front of me. The rest of his family and guards did the same.

“I swear by the Moon Goddess that we remain loyal to the sovereignty of the Dark King and all the protection and prosperity he provides,” David said.

I put my hand on his head and nodded.

“Very well. Rise. You remain under my protection and can stay on your pack territory,” I said. ‘I will have my officials here to finalize this oath.’”

Without more words, I headed outside while others helped wrap up things here.

Jake followed me outside. ‘Alpha, are you alright?*

“I’m fine,’ I muttered, shaking my head.

“You kind of rushed through that. He didn’t give a very good promise of loyalty,” Jake pointed out. “Are you worried about Ciana?’

I admitted that I was distracted. Seeing that woman earlier made me think of the most precious person in my heart and I wanted to know she was okay.

“I wonder what she’s doing. I should go see her,” I muttered.

Jake’s eyes bulged and his tone was hurried, “Alpha! Please reconsider it! We barely settled down here, and we have three more packs to go. You can’t-’

I raised a hand to interrupt him and sighed, ‘I know. I wasn’t really going to. Any news from Greg or Sherry?’

Jake shook his head and then added, ‘Alpha, no news is good news.

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Ciana

I left Maggie, still wondering why she was doing all of this. Greg and Sherry were close behind. They trailed after me like worrying parents, making sure I was safe.

“Okay, guys, if you’re going to hang around, you might as well talk to me,’ I turned to them. ‘Unlike your Alpha, I’m an extrovert and it helps to talk it through.’

Sherry chuckled and came to my side. She and I became good friends really quickly. I loved her energetic and upbeat vibe. Having her around was a lot of fun.

On the other hand, Greg was still a bit standoffish. I wondered if he was worried about how Theo would react if my “protection detail” got too involved with me.

What better way to protect me than to know everything that was going on?

“So, how is everything looking?” Sherry asked as they accompanied me to my house.

“Things are... not great. Because of Maggie’s influence, two of the most influential elders, Frederic and Murray, are now inclined to support Luther. They weren’t when I left,” I explained.

“But you’re the Alpha’s daughter, can’t you convince them that Alpha is a good king? They’ll listen to you, won’t they?” Greg asked, his voice contemplative.

“That’s my hope but... it feels like a lot of the pack members still treat me like I’m a little kid. I need to get Frederic and Murray’s support and then the rest of the pack will follow.”

Truthfully, the elders made me feel like I was an immature little girl. It wasn’t a good feeling, especially after everything I’d been through since going to the palace. I felt like I’d earned my stripes. But I needed to convince the rest of the pack, otherwise, they wouldn’t really support me.

But how could I convince them?

Frederic was my best bet. He had always doted on me when I was younger. Murray was picky and strict. He'd be harder to sway.

I made sure Greg and Sherry went back into hiding while I handled pack business.

Instead of going home, I went to Frederic's house. The first thing I noticed were the guards he had stationed outside. I didn't give it much thought because everyone was trying to be more careful these days.

"Ciana, come in, come in," Frederic said, meeting me on the porch.

"Hey. Uncle Frederic, I know we didn't get to catch up much the last time I was here. I hope you have time now," I said, walking up his steps.

"Of course, I always have time for you. I just made some tea."

We sat at his kitchen table together.

"I'm glad you're here, Ciana. I've had enough of Maggie and all her nonsense. I was hoping that you could send her away," he said, jumping right in.

I was surprised by his quick declaration. He picked up his tea and sipped, tapping his foot on the floor. I picked up my tea but I didn't drink yet.

"I can help with that." I nodded slowly.

Frederic wasn't usually that quick to make decisions. Besides, he'd been waiting for me, coming out on the porch to greet me. The guards were feeling more suspicious as well. Guards weren't welcoming to their Alpha's daughter.

Sighing, I set the tea down again and glanced out the window at the guards.

"Drink your tea, won't you?" Frederic asked.

"I'm not thirsty. Why do you have all these guards here, Uncle Frederic?" I asked casually.

Frederic growled and jumped up. "To protect you, of course!"

I pressed, "To protect me, or to monitor me?"

"This is for your own good, Ciana," Frederic said, trying to appease me now. "I don't want you to get involved or to get hurt. Regardless of what happens, I need to return you to your father unharmed and intact."

"So are you putting me under house arrest?" I stood up, pushing the tea down the table. "I'm an Alpha's daughter, you can't restrain my freedom like this! Also, what do you mean by 'regardless of what happens?'"

"Things are changing in this country, and it's best for a little girl like you to not get involved. Stay out of the way, and be good," Frederic said with a condescending sneer.

"I'm not a little girl, I'm an alpha's daughter! Last time I checked, I still have authority here. I'm here because I want what's best for the pack, not because I'm seeking protection" I reminded him.

“Well, you can’t really get out of here, can you? Don’t worry. I’m not like that bastard Raymond. I won’t hurt you, I just need you to stay out of this. When the Alpha is back, he’ll be happy to see the change to the pack and our country! If he blames me, I’ll gladly take it,” he declared, puffing up his chest.

Inwardly, I groaned, but I knew that Frederic was doing what he thought was best for the pack, not because he was selfish or wanted power.

I sighed and said, “Uncle Frederic, unfortunately, I can’t listen to you.’

I got up and left the house.

Frederic raced after me. “Ciana, get back here...”

He trailed off when he caught up to me and saw that all his guards were knocked out and scattered on the lawn.

I smirked and stepped off the porch. Greg and Sherry jumped off the roof and stood at my sides.

“I’m sorry, Elder Frederic, but they didn’t want to let us in. Greg and I had to teach them how to... put up a proper fight,” Sherry said, chuckling mischievously. “Don’t worry, they’

ll recover in a few days. I promise.”

Frederic gaped and pointed at the guards, then at us. He sputtered, his cheeks turning from red then blue, like he couldn’t breathe.

“You’ll be sorry for crossing me!” Frederic shouted, pointing a sharp finger at us.

“Ciana,” Sherry ignored Frederic’s flaring nostrils and commented, “Why does this old guy not get that he has nothing on us?”

Greg remained silent, but I could tell he was getting ready to fight.

I didn’t know who Frederic thought was going to capture us. All his guards were knocked out.

Heavy footsteps behind us drew our attention, and my heart sank. It sounded like a lot of guards approaching, and fast. Frederic’s reinforcements?

Sherry narrowed her eyes and turned around. She crouched down, standing back to back with me, ready to defend me. Greg moved in front of me.

“Frederic, stop this now!” Murray’s voice called from behind us.

I whipped around and saw Elder Murray and his guards as they approached. They circled around us, all the way to the porch.

Instantly, Greg and Sherry took up defensive positions. I shook my head, telling them to stand down for the moment. Murray didn’t seem like he was there to stop us.

I was honestly surprised by his presence. I’d anticipated him being the harder elder to sway. He always seemed more set in his ways. Maybe that meant he was so set in his ways he didn’t want to switch who he supported or see all these changes in the pack.

Inwardly, I was grateful to have one ally.

“This isn’t your business, Murray, get out of here!” Frederic shouted, throwing his arm out to the side.

“You don’t have a choice here,” Murray said, motioning to his guards. “You have to let Ciana go.”

Frederic sneered and walked into his house. He slammed the door behind him.

I winced. He’d always been such a loyal supporter and friend to my father. It was painful to see how much he opposed the crown.

Murray motioned for his guards to withdraw from Frederic’s house and I followed him as we headed in another direction.

“I’m glad you’re safe, Ciana. You shouldn’t be here. Too much is going on,” he chastised.

I shook my head.

Another Elder that wanted to treat me like I was a defenseless child. Had they all forgotten that my father had taught me self-defense and how to think like a leader? I wasn’t some random little girl!

“I hate to say it, but Frederic believes that the royal family is not worthy of Alvar Pack’s allegiance,” Murray explained as we headed toward his house.

“Is that what you think?” I asked, cutting to the chase before he had a chance to spin any story.

“No. However, I, like the other elders, have some concerns. I do not follow Luther but we do wonder about Theo. He is the son of Sebastian, and he has a brutal reputation,” Murray pointed out.

I rubbed the side of my head. I knew this was going to happen. Everyone thought of Theo and all they could see was that he’d done horrible things for his father.

“Well, to be entirely fair to Theo, he never would have done those things if Sebastian wasn’t controlling him. Sebastian turned him into a killer, used him as a weapon, and threatened those closest to him when Theo tried to stop,” I clarified.

“Even if those were true, we still don’t know what kind of king he’s going to be. The apple might not fall far from the tree.” Murray stroked his chin as he thought.

“He’s not like that. He hated the way Sebastian treated him and he would never do that to anyone else,” I assured.

“Ciana, a lot of pack members saw him kill dozens of warriors the last time he was here.”

“Yes, but that was to protect the pack. It was to stop Raymond, remember?” I asked.

“Yes, it was for a good reason, but there are those that are still scared of him. He could turn on anyone at any time.”

“But he won’t.”

I couldn't tell Murray that I knew Theo would never raise a hand against my pack. Not just because he wasn't like his father but because he and I were together. We didn't want to go public with our relationship yet.

"I promise, Murray, Theo isn't like his father. He is the one that ended his father's tyranny, with his own hands," I explained.

Murray stopped walking and raised an eyebrow at me.

"Really? He is the one who..."

"He is. I was there. It was a rough fight but Theo wasn't going to let his father hurt anyone else ever again. He's out there right now trying to stop these rebellions and show that he's a different kind of king."

"Well, that does sound like he's really trying. Look, Ciana, leave Frederic to me. I can deal with him and I will tell the other elders what you told me," he suggested.

"I'm not here to sit around and watch things unfold. I want to help. It is what my father would do," I replied, crossing my arms.

"I can handle Frederic. You need to keep yourself safe, for your father," Murray repeated.

Quickly, I thought over what my options were. I could put up a big argument and end up with Murray opposing me and Theo, too. Or, I could go along with what he wanted. He didn't say I couldn't help, just that I couldn't be directly involved.

"Alright, if you want me to stay out of it, I can. But would you at least tell me what your plan is to persuade Frederic?" I asked.

Murray pursed his lips and gave me a suspicious look. It was like he was questioning my willingness to agree. I gave him a moment to process all of it.

"Thank you, Ciana," he nodded first, and then answered my question, "Regarding my plan... I'm going to need some time to think about it. I'll fill you in on all the details once I have them. However, it really isn't something you should be worrying about."

"I know you don't want me involved in actions directly, but maybe I can help you come up with a plan... one that doesn't put me in danger," I smiled sweetly.

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Murray creased his brow. He turned away from me and casually glanced out his window. At least, he wasn't outright denying me. He wasn't putting up an argument, either. If anything, he seemed surprised by my offer.

"Look, I know Luther, I know Ma...Luther's ambassador, I know Theo, and I know Frederic. I've got all the insider information to come up with a workable plan," I added. I didn't want to mention Maggie's name because I'd had to explain a lot more to the elders and the pack and it could complicate things.

What would people think if the princess was against her own half-brother? Most people didn't know Maggie and Warren's real father anyway.

"You do know a lot of the players," Murray agreed.

"This is what I've come up with. Frederic's main goal is to keep the pack safe. He thinks supporting Luther is best for the pack. However, what he doesn't know is that Luther is less worried about pack safety and more worried about gaining followers," I explained.

"And how do you plan to use those two goals against each other?"

"Luther and his ambassador are willing to do whatever it takes to clear obstacles from their paths. We just need to show Frederic that Luther doesn't care about the safety of individual pack members."

"Neither Luther nor his ambassador will care what happens to individual pack members once they get what they want. If Luther gets power, he's going to step on all of us," I continued. "Once Frederic understands that, he won't support them anymore."

"But we have no way of getting Frederic to see that. He won't believe it if we just tell him," Murray said, shaking his head.

"Sure we do. That's where you come in. If you're up for a little misdirection. All you have to do is spread rumors to Luther's ambassador that Frederic doesn't support them because of his wife. Then they will try and remove Frederic's wife as an obstacle," I explained my plan.

"That seems... Well, you want me to kidnap Frederic's wife and plant fake evidence that it was Luther who did it? There are too many things that could go wrong with that plan. I'm not comfortable raising arms against another pack member." Murray frowned and shook his head firmly.

"I'm not suggesting you kidnap her or even lay a hand on her," I clarified. "Actually, you should make sure that Beryl is guarded and protected at all costs. Keep her in her house under constant guard."

"What? Ciana, that makes no sense. If you want Frederic to lose trust in Luther, then how is protecting Beryl going to help?" he asked, his frown deepening.

"This has to be subtle. I want you to help protect Beryl so nothing actually happens to her. As long as you can convince Luther's people that she is against them, I'm sure they will take action to go after Beryl, and at that point, they'll show Frederic the kind of people they are," I explained.

"Force Luther to show his true colors by tricking him to go after the one person that Frederic will always love, cherish and stand up for. Frederic would die before supporting anyone that tries to hurt Beryl," Murray agreed, nodding.

"Exactly." I smiled and nodded. "But he wouldn't be able to even get to Beryl, because we would be hiding her and protecting her."

Finally, Murray was seeing my plan. And he agreed with me. That was all I needed. It actually felt good for him to listen to me, seeing as he kept talking to me like I was a little girl. I hoped that if I gave him a good plan, he'd start taking me seriously.

The best part, for him, was that I didn't have to be put in harm's way for this plan. Technically, no one did, because it was based on rumors. No one would be able to trace back where the rumors started.

"I'll put guards on Beryl and I will begin to spread those rumors. A whisper here, a whisper there, it will take off," Murray agreed. He turned toward the door.

"Wait, there is one more thing I need," I said, stopping Murray.

He arched an eyebrow and glanced at me. "I told you, Ciana, I'm not letting you be directly involved. It is too dangerous."

"I know. I just... I want you to arrange a meeting with Beryl for me. At her house, preferably when Frederic isn't around. We need to chat, woman to woman," I said.

Fredric's home was mostly silent. I knew that he must have been out recruiting more people to be on Luther's side. This was my only chance.

I had promised Theo to be careful and not do anything risky. Climbing through the window of Fredric's home didn't break either of those promises, right?

I walked up the wooden stairs, carefully not to make them creek under my pressure. Tiptoeing, I came to the master bedroom door. The light shined from under the door into the hallway-she was awake.

As soon as I was in, I met her kind and warm brown eyes. She looked just the same as she did before. You would never guess that she was in her late forties. The woman did not age at all.

"Ciana?" She was laying on the bed with a slick robe on. Placing her book on the side, her eyes widened. "Is that you? Oh goddess, it is you!"

"It's great to see you. Beryl."

She hopped out of the bed and ran toward me, enveloping me in a big hug.

She pulled back with a smile on her face. "Haven't you grown into a fine young lady! Your parents will be so proud of what you've managed to do."

I blushed.

"I wish I was visiting you in better circumstances than this. But I have not come with great news."

The smile slipped from her face. "I had a feeling. There has been a lot of talk within the pack, especially some of the higher ranking officials. They want to swear allegiance to Luther."

I nodded solemnly. "Yes, this is very true. They want to go against the crown. But King Theo is nothing like Sebastian. He wants the very best for the people. I believe in him."

She grabbed my hands and looked me in the eyes. "Sweetheart, you don't have to convince me. I know Luther can't be trusted. I don't agree with Fredric at all. He has been blinded but he refuses to see sense. I told him many times before but he won't listen to what I have to say. I wish I knew how I could help in the cause."

My heart lifted a little. This was great news. She was on my side.

"I'm so happy you said this. I actually need your help."

"What do you mean?"

"I know of a way to get Fredric to not trust Luther."

"I'm listening."

A slow smile came. "I'm going to need to borrow your clothes."

After three hours of preparation, I looked at myself in the mirror and gave myself the once over. I wore a casual navy blue coat that was one of Beryl's favorites, and my hair was dyed to dark brown and trimmed shorter to match the length of hers. I would be walking around in the late afternoon. Any finer details would be concealed in the dimming sunlight.

On the way back to the pack, I learned from Sherry how to disguise myself like a pro and it paid off.

"You look so much like a younger version of me for sure." Beryl stepped up behind me. She smiled at me through the mirror before her expression became more somber and thoughtful. "I trust you, but promise to be careful, okay?"

I gave her an assuring smile and bid her goodbye.

Stepping out into the chilly weather, I pulled my coat tighter around me. I made sure to curtain my hair around my face to keep my face somewhat concealed.

I walked around in town for a while before heading into the woods. People needed to see that Beryl was up and about. One of Maggie's eyes and ears would notify and tell her of my whereabouts.

"Good evening Beryl," an elderly woman said to me as she passed by.

"Good evening," I replied in a soft tone.

As I passed people they greeted me politely but none stopped me to speak.

"Good evening, Beryl. Where are you going at this hour?" A guard greeted me from a little distance, I waved back but kept my gaze a little off to the side so he couldn't really see my eyes.

"I just need some herbs from the forest. You see, I threw my back out the other day. The healer suggested some that can provide pain relief."

"Be careful and don't stay out too long. There is a lot of unrest going on nowadays. We wouldn't want you to end up in any sticky situations."

"Noted." I smiled as I walked away. "Thankyou. You have a good night now."

I had done my rounds. Maggie would never try to take Beryl in the public. It was time to head to the forest.

The sun was about to set. Perfect timing.

I had been walking through the forest for the past twenty minutes and getting close to the outer ring of the pack when six wolves emerged from the shadows.

Here they came... as expected.

I turned as if ready to run but was quickly caught and held fast.

“Do not struggle, or else we can’t promise not to hurt you.” A rough male voice rang behind me.

I knew this would happen, so after some fighting back, I soon surrendered, allowing them to take me to their camp.

I put my faith in Greg and Sherry. Greg would stay hidden and close to me and Sherry would “find” the note that Beryl wrote and give it to Frederic. It was only a matter of time before he noticed that his wife was missing. After this, Luther would lose Frederic’s favor.

As we approached the camp, strong arms clamped around me and a white cloth came over my mouth and nose. The world began to fade in and out of focus as I inhaled the antiseptic they had doused the cloth in.

Theo

I watched the alpha drop to his knees.

“Please. Your Majesty, I was blind. I had believed the lies of a man who I should not have believed. You are the true king and the crown belongs to the correct bloodline.” He bowed before me, his hands stretching out on the floor. “Forgive me, Your Grace and have mercy on my pack and my people.”

“Swear your allegiance,” I ordered. “And you’ll be spared.”

The alpha widened his eyes in disbelief.

“That’s it? You’ll spare us without any other... any other consequence?”

I lifted my gaze and gave him a glance. “Do you want me to?”

“No, no!” The alpha clamored to his feet and he bowed his head, ‘thank you, your grace. You have our loyalty. When called upon we will answer the call.”

I nodded and turned away from him. “Very well. Then I shall see you all tomorrow morning to re-establish the oath contract.’

When I finally got to my tent and had a moment of peace, my mind wandered to Ciana. We had only been apart for a couple of weeks but my heart yearned for her. Her scent was still lingering around me. It was like she was there but not really.

The flap to my tent burst open and in came a wide-eyed Jake who looked panicked. Immediately my stomach dropped but I never let my face slip.

“What is it?”

“It’s Ciana, she’s been taken by Luther’s men.’

“What?!”

He went on about some plan that Ciana had to trick the elders of her pack into losing trust in Luther.

Dread slipped into my bloodstream. This was not what I had agreed with her at all. She had promised me she would be careful. How could she have allowed this to happen to her?

I moved toward the door without a single word to my beta.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to Alvar.”

“But what about our plans to head north tomorrow? They are getting agitated and another is due to attack...”

“You can handle it!” I shouted back my order as I shifted.

I needed to get to Ciana, right now!

There better not be one hair moved from her head. Otherwise I was going to rain down hell fire on Luther.

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«Discussion point»

Ciana

When I woke up again, Maggie had come toward me, grinning widely. I kept my face averted from her as she approached and spoke to me.

“I’ve heard a lot about you. Beryl. You’re Elder Frederic’s mate. I’m told he’d do anything for you. My... husband is very much the same.”

“Are we going to bond over loving husbands?” I asked in a softer voice, trying my best to mimic Beryl. I crossed my legs and glared at her. Thankfully, she was calling me by Beryl’s name. She hadn’t realized who I really was.

“Well, you see, I’ve heard that you don’t support Luther or me. Your husband’s opinion is highly valued in the pack. If you started to see things our way, his loyalty would be solidified, as would your pack’s loyalty to Luther’s cause,’ she explained. Again, she looked at me with that sweet and gentle smile.

I still couldn’t believe someone that looked so caring, innocent and even frail could be so cruel and vicious. She really had fooled all of us! Even her own twin.

“What’s in it for me?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Why are you being so uncooperative? This is best for your pack. The crown is brutal and vicious. They’ll kill you all,’ Maggie said. “We are nicer than that.”

“You haven’t done anything to make me believe that. Anyone that seeks power the way you do can’t be a better option than what we already have.”

Maggie sneered and walked away from me, shaking her head.

“Well, that is too bad. It looks like I won’t be able to convince you. How I wish we could be friends but... you leave me no choice,” she said with a soft sigh.

I shook my head and laughed. It was such a dramatic cliché and I’d had enough of her acting.

“I know you!” Maggie whipped around and glared at me. “Ciana Black!”

“Bingo!” I grinned even more. “Too bad you can’t use Frederic anymore. He won’t tolerate you going after his wife, kidnapping her and threatening her. Because guess what, everyone else thinks I am her.’

“What a surprise... It seemed like I underestimated you!” Maggie snarled. She came toward me like she was going to strangle me.

I stepped back and chuckled again. “Frederic won’t think that Luther is the best option for the pack once he finds out what you did to his ‘wife.’”

“Very...well!’ The word ‘well* was gritted through Maggie’s teeth. *I planned it all perfectly but then you had to interfere! Now, here’s the price you’ll have to pay!”

She took another step toward me.

I knew Greg would race in to protect me the moment he thought I was in danger. I clasped my hands behind my back and made a quick hand signal, telling him not to come to my aid yet. I could handle Maggie a little longer.

Besides, I didn’t want to tip off her guards too soon that I had backup.

I imagined that Greg was nervous and upset, especially since I told him to back off. He just had to trust me. I needed him to lay low until I got everything out of Maggie that I needed to.

“Before you kill me, let me take a stab at why you want me dead. It isn’t because I disrupted your plans. I bet it has more to do with the fact that you aren’t even a member of the royal family, not really. Aren’t you the illegitimate daughter of Lady Odelia and her guard?” I asked, stalling as much as I could.

Maggie sniffed and rolled her eyes. ‘That sperm donor doesn’t get to be called my father! And my mother... she made me terrified of ever having the truth come out,’ Maggie snarled. She turned away from me and growled under her breath.

“Let me guess, you grew up in fear of having your identity revealed. You thought that if Sebastian found out, he’d kill you and Warren. So, you chose to support Luther to get Sebastian out of power, then you and Warren could stop living in fear about whether and when your true identity would be revealed.”

Maggie didn’t respond. She relaxed her arms at her sides and stopped looking like she was going to pounce on me and strangle me. At least, not at that very moment.

“Well, well, you surprised me yet again, Ciana. You’re right. Warren is my brother and of course I have his best interest at heart. Being with me is the safest option for him!’ she replied, glancing over her shoulder at me.

“I’m full of surprises, I know.’ I nodded, trying to make myself look as confident and carefree as possible, because I knew she wouldn’t like me behaving like that. I could

tell she was coming apart because she kidnapped the wrong woman and I refused to fall in line with what she had planned.

I continued, “If that’s the case, I don’t get why you’re still doing this. You married Demarco and became part of his pack. He never would have let the king hurt you, regardless of your real father. Demarco’s pack is strong. As long as they obeyed the king, you would have always been protected.”

“Well, Sebastian wasn’t exactly known to be reasonable. Even if Demarco obeyed him all the time, Sebastian still could have wiped us out if he learned the truth. It wasn’t enough,’ she said, shaking her head.

“But... Sebastian is dead. Theo is king and he wouldn’t care about that. If you’re still opposing the crown, you must hate Theo... but, why? Can you help me understand that?’ I asked.

“Hate!?” Maggie asked, laughing frantically. “Hate? You think I hate Theo?”

Maggie’s face contorted, her features twisting. She looked absolutely evil.

“Yes, I guess ‘hate’ is the right word. I hate the fact that Theo isn’t mine!’ she cried.

“Wh-what!?”

“I’ve known for a long time that Theo wasn’t related to me by blood. So. ever since we were young I’ve admired him... and after he saved me that one time, that admiration turned into love! I loved him and how could he think about any other girl but me?”

“But Theo would never love you because he thought you were his sister,” I said.

“Well, as long as I knew he didn’t have a lover, I could live happily and peacefully. Demarco... he loved me so much. I could accept my life with him as long as I knew Theo didn’t have anyone else and I would still be the only woman that is special in his life and forever will be in his life as his family! But then you showed up and...’ Maggie’s face twisted more. “Everything changed.”

“Why would you want the man you love to be alone forever? That’s horrible,” I shouted, “and selfish!”

Maggie scoffed. ‘Then clearly, you don’t understand love. You don’t know what it truly means to know that he is your entire world, and you would do anything to be with him... in any way that is possible! I imagined that when Sebastian was gone, I would be able to tell Theo the truth and he could be mine!”

I shook my head and made a disgusted sound. Even if Theo knew the truth, I didn’t think he’d ever love Maggie. He still thought of her as a sister. Not to mention, she made him think he’d lost control of his power and killed her!

That wasn’t something he’d just forgive.

“But then... Well, Luther fed us information about a new woman in Theo’s life... you. The more I heard, the more I realized he was falling in love with you. I couldn’t have that!” Maggie continued.

“That’s not my fault. Theo has a right to love someone and be happy. Even if it isn’t with you,” I argued.

“No! I always told myself that if I couldn’t have him, no other woman would. But now I see that he loves you!” Maggie glared at me with pure hatred. “I have nothing now. I’ve been suffering for years just loving and longing. You don’t get to enjoy his love if I don’t!”

“Maggie...”

I never knew how much she hated me simply because Theo liked me.

“You’re a plague to me. Even my own twin brother is addicted to you! I have to get rid of you,” Maggie cried. Her eyes were wild with hatred.

I gaped at her and took another step back. Suddenly, everything was starting to make sense. It was a secret she’d kept for so long, but when I thought about it, the signs were there.

When Demarco had us put on that show for Maggie, I’d noticed how she looked at Theo, even though he was disguised as Tallis. She had recognized him. That’s why she hadn’t been able to take her eyes off of him.

Had she known it was Theo all along? Or had she just been so surprised by Demarco’s gesture with the play? Either way, I could clearly remember that look.

She’d gazed at him adoringly, longingly, and even with a hint of anger or jealousy.

She probably never thought she’d see Theo again, and be able to tell him how she felt. After years of being separated. I could imagine how that longing could return so strongly. It was the same way I used to feel when I thought about the boy I’d given my bracelet to.

I always imagined when we reunited, it would be so happy. All the longing I’d felt would vanish.

Maybe Maggie had the same fantasy about when she saw Theo again, telling him that she loved him and that they weren’t really brother and sister. She’d probably waited for that moment, only to see him again and be unable to tell him because Sebastian was still alive.

“It’s just not fair! I did everything I was supposed to. I waited and I planned. Now it is all ruined because of you!” Maggie cried.

Maggie was going to lose it big time. I’d gotten all the information from her I could and if I didn’t get out of there, she really would try to kill me.

I put my hands behind my back again and signaled Greg.

With a loud cry, Greg dropped out of a nearby tree and landed on Maggie.

Maggie shrieked and started fighting him off. I knew Greg could handle himself, so I took off into the woods, looking for a way to escape.

“Guards, get her!” Maggie screamed before Greg got control of her again.

All of the guards from the camp swarmed in around me. I punched one in the face and ran past him as he staggered. Several more closed in around me and I was completely surrounded.

I was just about to get ready to fight when a firm hand closed around my arm.

I looked over. It was Warren.

For a moment, I thought I was really in trouble. He'd knocked me out the last time I saw him!

"Warren!" I warned him, "Do not come close!"

His face softened and he wore a faint smile. It was bitter, but I could tell it was a real, friendly smile like the ones I used to see.

"I'm going to help you," he promised.

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Warren held my arm firmly and beckoned to Greg. He ducked down behind some bushes and pulled me with him as we waited for Greg to join us.

"Prince Warren? What are you doing here?" Greg growled.

"Saving you two."

"Shh!" I hushed them as guards raced by our hiding place.

Greg and Warren glared at each other. Of course, Theo would have told Greg about Warren running off, and possibly even about attacking me. He would be wary of Warren.

However, as soon as I saw Warren, I knew I could trust him, although I was still upset with him.

"Come on, we can slip out of the camp this way," Warren motioned to us, tugging on my arm and pulling me away from where the guards had run.

I stayed low and quiet between Warren and Greg until we were well outside of the camp. When I couldn't hear the guards anymore, I stood up and pulled my arm from Warren's grasp.

"Warren, fancy seeing you here!" I hissed, still speaking in a low voice.

"First, I want to apologize for attacking you, Ciana. It wasn't my intention to hurt you... I had just learned something about myself and it was confusing. I'm not saying that's an excuse... It just is what it is," he said sincerely. His eyes deepened and I could see the complicated emotions flickering on his face.

"I'm fine." I softened my tone. "You didn't hurt me or anything."

I wasn't sure if I was ready to fully forgive Warren, but he was making an effort to apologize. "Can you... can you tell me what was going on?"

Warren sighed and nodded.

"We have to keep moving," Greg warned. "We're too easy to find this close to the camp."

The three of us started walking through the woods again, careful not to step on sticks and draw attention to ourselves.

"I can't abandon my sister," Warren said. "She's my only family. I'm sure you know that by now."

It wasn't an answer to my question, but it explained his current thought process. I could relate to his desire to be loyal to his family.

He looked away from me. When he turned back, his lips curved into a bitter smile.

"All my life feels like a big joke, and I'm the punchline. What I thought my life was, who I thought I was, none of it was ever really mine."

I could hear the pain and confusion in Warren's voice.

"I don't even know who I am anymore. I don't know who to believe or trust and I don't know who or what I am supposed to be," Warren sighed and shook his head. "The only thing I know about myself now is that I'm not a prince. Theo isn't my brother, either. All my past discontent and jealousy... they mean nothing. It was all a joke.*"

I reached out and touched his arm. Warren stiffened under my touch, but he didn't pull away.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Warren, but I'm sure you'll figure it out.*"

"Can this wait until we get somewhere safe?" Greg asked sharply. He'd been leading the way through the woods, further from the camp.

"No one is following us,*" I said.

"We are still incredibly vulnerable out here," Greg muttered. I had a feeling he was more unsettled by the fact that I was talking to Warren and being friendly to him than by our dangerous situation.

"We'll be quiet," I said with a nod.

Greg grunted and went back to forging our path through the woods.

"Then, what are you planning to do?*" I asked Warren, keeping my voice low.

He shook his head again.

This was a different Warren I was seeing. I'd seen him go from warm and friendly to depressed and hostile. Now he was so... shaky and unconfident. He was going through a complete identity crisis.

I sighed. This was the second time within a month that his life had fallen apart. First, when he thought Maggie was dead, and now when he found out he'd been lied to his whole life. If I'd had that big of a bombshell dropped on me, I didn't know how I'd react.

"Come this way, I know of an escape route," Warren said loud enough to get Greg's attention.

"Why are you only bringing this up now?" Greg asked, circling around and glaring at Warren.

"Because it is to the left and you're angling to the right,*" Warren explained, holding his arm out in the correct direction. "You'll be able to get far away from the camp and back to safety.*"

“Why would you help us?”* Greg frowned. He stood toe to toe with Warren, glaring at him.

“Because I don’t want Ciana involved in this,” Warren stated firmly, crossing his arms.

“Guys, this isn’t the time or place,” I argued. I stood between them and pushed them both back a few steps. ‘Greg, we need Warren’s help to get out of here without being caught by Maggie.’

“I don’t trust him,” Greg said bluntly.

“Noted. Now/, let’s go,” I hissed. I motioned to Warren to lead the way.

He nodded and took the lead, subtly heading back toward the camp. Greg was getting more and more agitated, whispering to me that he thought Warren was leading us into a trap.

“Why would he go through all that trouble to save us and then bring us back to Maggie?” I asked.

“Well... I don’t know. But he must have some kind of plan,”* Greg insisted.

“Yes, to get the two of you out of here,’ Warren grumbled up ahead.

“It doesn’t make sense, that’s all I’m saying. If he’s so loyal to his sister, why is he helping us?” Greg asked.

“People make mistakes. Warren was hurt and confused, but he’ll figure out right from wrong.” He wouldn’t have opened up and confided in me if he was trying to play games. He would have used that time to try and get information out of me.

Warren was too emotional at the moment to be sly and sneaky. I could tell that he was struggling with his decision to help us escape from Maggie. He was loyal to her but he also didn’t want anything to happen to me.

I was hopeful that a part of him still felt loyalty to Theo too, even if they weren’t related by blood.

Warren needed to figure out who he was and who he wanted to be on his own. No one could influence that, not even Maggie.

I quickened my pace to walk with Warren instead of Greg.

“You don’t have to trust me, Ciana, but I do want to help you. Think of it as my apology for hurting you before,” he said, his voice dull and distant.

In just a few more steps, we made it to a road that led out of the forest. It was a narrow dirt road with lots of heavy footprints imprinted in the soft soil but I didn’t see or hear any guards. I glanced at Greg and he gave a convinced nod.

“Thank you, Warren,”* I said, touching his arm again.

Warren winced, like my touch was somehow painful or burned him.

“This road won’t have any guards. You can get to safety,” he said, slowly backing away from me.

My heart sank a little. I thought that maybe if I could get him to a place where he wasn’t being pressured by Maggie or Theo, he might be able to come to terms with things.

"Can't you come with us?" I asked when Warren turned to follow the road back to the camp.

Greg had already started heading in the opposite direction and he gave me a "look" for holding us up even more.

"Ciana..." Warren whispered my name tenderly.

"Please. I know you're dealing with a lot, but you should figure things out away from all of this," I pleaded. I widened my eyes, silently begging him to come along.

Warren's face contorted and he looked over his shoulder toward the camp, then back at me.

"I can't," he muttered.

My hope faded and I looked down. I didn't think that Warren would ever sort through all of this if he stayed with Maggie. She might have thought that Warren being with her was in his best interest, but she was wrong.

"Maggie is my twin. I can't abandon her. She still needs me," he explained with a heavy sigh.

"She has a lot of people to take care of her," I pointed out, crossing my arms.

"Ciana," Greg hissed urgently.

I waved him off. I wasn't going to leave until Warren and I sorted this out. There was a part of him that wanted to come with me, I could see it.

"Maggie's still pretty weak. I know she doesn't act it. but her illness weighs on her heavily. I can't bear to see her suffer, so I'm going to stand by her. She got a little stronger, after Sebastian died, just like how I woke up. Maybe, there is still hope for her to recover fully," he explained in a rush.

"Warren that's... that's really admirable, but look what she's done. She tricked all of us into thinking she was dead, turned you against Theo, and is trying to destroy my pack and the crown. Is she really the sister you know?" I asked. I was careful with my words, hoping it wouldn't piss him off and change his mind about helping us.

"I just want Maggie to live. We've both suffered enough and if I can help her get better, then I think she will stop being so angry and hateful,* he said, giving me a gentle, hopeful smile.

I wasn't convinced, but I couldn't argue. Warren had a dream, an ambition, to save someone important to him. I respected that because I would do the same.

"I'm not following her blindly. I hope you know that. There are lines I won't cross. I have no intention of killing anyone or badly hurting anyone for her. That's why I'm helping you escape. But I'm not going to abandon her while there is hope for saving her," he told me firmly.

"O-okay." I sighed, nodding slowly. "Well, in that case, Warren, hopefully, we'll meet again.'

Warren grinned and nodded. "Count on it."

My heart ached for Warren. So much had been taken from him. He was so confused, and through it all, he was still trying to be noble. I just hoped that in his efforts to save Maggie, he didn't lose himself entirely.

Also, what would Maggie do if she found out Warren helped us escape? She might not be so forgiving. After all, she seemed more interested in winning Theo as her own than rebuilding her family.

I turned away from Warren and headed toward Greg. He gave a relieved sigh and we headed down the road. I glanced back once to see Warren walking in the opposite direction. Once we went around a bend, he was gone completely.

"I know it isn't easy, Ciana, but you have to let him figure this out on his own. Warren is a big boy, he can handle it," Greg said, trying to be comforting.

"I hope so," I replied, more to myself.

Just as Warren said, there were no guards on the road. I was greatly relieved by that. It didn't take long before Greg and I could see the edge of the forest and the main road beyond. We'd be out of that place in just a few minutes!

Suddenly, a cold, sharp laugh echoed through the trees and I froze.

Beside me, Greg snarled and lowered into a crouch, ready to fight.

"Dear oh dear, how did the two of you get this far?" Maggie's voice chimed.

I turned to face her, my spine a stiff rod, palms clammy.

Maggie grinned and shook her head. "I knew Warren would betray me. He just doesn't have it in him. That weak, soft hearted fool. But it worked in my favor, because he dropped you exactly where I knew he would."

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I took a step back and narrowed my eyes. Maggie was really getting on my nerves. "Warren didn't betray you, or else he would be here with us now."

"Is that really the point, Ciana?" Greg asked. "We have to get out of here, now. She can't stop us on her own. Remember, she's weak, like Warren said." He grabbed my arm and tugged, but I wasn't ready to leave.

Maggie muttered, "Warren is my twin. I know him very well. He's too gentle and compassionate sometimes to do what is needed. That indecisiveness of his... it is such a curse because now, it could ruin my plan with Luther."

"All you care about is yourself. Have you thought about him? You destroyed your own twin's life."

"Don't be ridiculous. Like I said, Warren is a good kid, and as my brother, he has complete freedom in the shadows. I only arranged patrols to watch him from a distance to make sure he doesn't do anything to get himself into trouble. Unfortunately, he failed me."

“Get himself in trouble? Warren knows you are wrong but he still chooses to stay with you because he is devoted to you! In return, you tested him and insulted him. You’re the one who is not loyal to him!”

Part of me hoped that Warren was nearby, so he could see who his sister truly was. Maybe then, he wouldn’t work so hard to save her and help her!

“Come on, Ciana, we should just go. Warren chose his path,” Greg interjected, tugging on my arm again.

“Go? Oh no, it is much too late for that. You see, because of the patrols that watched Warren, I was aware of what he’d done from the moment you left camp. I knew exactly where he would leave you and there are several guards up ahead ready to take you into custody,” Maggie smiled casually.

“Great,” Greg muttered. His fingers loosened on my arm.

Even if we had left when Greg first suggested it, we wouldn’t have gotten very far.

“This time, you won’t get out alive. I’m not taking any more chances with you, Ciana,” Maggie cried.

Heavy footsteps came down the road and Maggie’s guards swarmed in. Maggie snapped her fingers and they all shifted, snarling and licking their lips as they closed in around us.

Greg and I stood back to back in the circle of wolves. Even if he shifted, we wouldn’t be able to fight off all of Maggie’s guards. She was right, we wouldn’t make it out of this... not unless we had reinforcements.

I’d planned for Murray and Frederic to come charging in, seeing as Frederic would think his mate had been kidnapped. But it would still take time for Murray and Frederic to rally the warriors.

Sherry would be coming for Greg, too, but even if she showed up now, we were severely outnumbered.

“I can’t take them all, Ciana. When they attack. I’ll distract them and you run,” Greg whispered harshly.

“No! I’m not leaving you,” I insisted.

“Ciana, I need to protect you. This is the king’s order,” he reminded me.

“You’re not going to die trying to fulfill your duties, I won’t allow it. I just need to think...”

If I could stall Maggie from giving the attack order, just long enough for Murray and Frederic to arrive, Greg and I would actually have a fighting chance. What was it that would keep Maggie’s attention?

“Of course,” I whispered to myself.

Maggie motioned for her wolves to part and she walked into the circle. She stood right in front of me, a twisted smile on her lips.

“Any last words, Ciana?” she sneered my name.

“Actually, yes.”

Maggie chuckled, “It really has been a long time since I met someone as interesting as you. Go ahead.”

“You love Theo, don’t you?” I asked.

Maggie paused, narrowing her eyes at me suspiciously.

“You want to talk about Theo, now?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Well, you’re going to kill me, so it seems like the only chance we’ll have,” I pointed out, nodding to her shifters as they licked their lips, ready to pounce any moment.

“Once you’re dead. I’ll have Theo all to myself. We don’t need to talk about it,” Maggie said with a shrug. She turned away from me.

Greg muttered under his breath, “Yeah, right.”

“Don’t you want to know why he fell in love with me?” I taunted her.

Maggie froze and slowly turned to face me again.

“Aren’t you the least bit curious as to why someone as cold and hard as Theo fell in love with me?” I asked again, challenging Maggie.

She pursed her lips, her eyes getting bloodshot.

“How would I know that!?” she snarled, flailing her arms around.

“Ciana, what are you doing?” Greg whispered behind me. I hadn’t had a chance to tell him my plan, and it was probably going to upset him, but I had to keep stalling.

Maggie ranted, “I think you are absolutely useless! You’re not smart, falling into my traps. You’re not beautiful, if anything, you’re just plain to look at. There are countless beautiful, smart women in the palace that he always overlooked.”

I knew she was just insulting me out of anger, but the words still stung a little.

“You’re nothing special at all. I don’t know how or why he fell in love with someone like you.”

“You’re right, I’m nothing special. I might be average on a lot of things where you are better than me, but there is one thing that you will never have,” I said as Maggie’s words led her exactly where I wanted her to be.

“Oh really, and what is that?” Maggie asked, crossing her arms in a huff. “What do you think you have that I don’t? I’ve got the brains, I’ve got the looks, I’ve got the ambition, I’ve got better breeding than you...”

I chuckled dryly and shook my head. “As you said, there are lots of women in the palace that have those things. So, why did Theo choose someone that doesn’t?”

“Tell me! Tell me why right now!” Maggie demanded in a roar.

“Well... Theo fell in love with me for one reason... and one reason alone,” I said, drawing it out as much as possible. It wouldn’t be too much longer until Murray and Frederic arrived.

Still, I wanted to drag this conversation out to the last minute. Behind me, Greg was bristling. Anything I said now would get back to Theo. I could tell him later that all I was doing was stalling Maggie.

“Stop dragging this out, bitch!” Maggie snarled. “Just spit it out!”

“So you want to know it so that you can do it too?” I smiled, “Well, then you have to be patient.”

Maggie stared at me dreadfully. I took the time to twirl a strand of my hair and gave her another smile. She must’ve hated me at this moment.

“There is something special about me that you don’t know about. Something about my body, and only mine, that makes Theo love me,” I went on.

“And that is…”

“I’m immune to Theo’s power.”

Her eyes widened.

“See, he can touch me and get close to me without draining the life out of me. That’s it, the only reason.”

“How… how is that possible?” Maggie asked.

I shrugged casually. “You know, if you have that same ability, he would fall in love with you instead. He’s known you longer, you are more beautiful than me. He’s probably just afraid of hurting you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Fine, don’t believe me, but if you kill me now, you’ll never know how to take my immunity from me,” I added, laying it on as thick as possible. I needed Maggie to think that she could take that power from me, even though I had no idea what caused it.

“Take it?” Maggie asked, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

“Well, I have a few theories on why I’m immune and no one else is. But I’m not 21 yet, so I can’t confirm it,” I explained.

If I set up all the right pieces, Maggie would understand what I was pushing toward.

“Your wolf! Your wolf is responsible for making you immune!” Maggie indeed came to the conclusion I wanted her to get to.

“It is only logical. If you were willing to wait until I turn 21, I’d give you my wolf in exchange for my freedom. That way, you can be immune. I just want to live my own life. I don’t care about… Theo’s love.”

I swallowed hard, my heart clenching at the lie. None of it was true. It was all just a ploy to stall Maggie, and it was working.

Behind me, I felt Greg tense. A low growl came from his throat. Apparently, I was being very convincing if even he thought I was telling the truth.

“You don’t want Theo’s love?” Maggie asked, giving me that same suspicious look.

“Why would I? He’s so cold and domineering. He rarely asks for my opinion and refuses to communicate openly. He’s a king and always so busy, never has time for me. Even when he tries to be romantic... well, it just always gets messed up,” I said.

I wanted to sound convincing by weaving some truth in with the lies. That way, Maggie wouldn’t think I was making stuff up. She knew Theo well enough to know what he was like and could imagine what he was like when trying to be romantic.

Greg would believe it too. I could tell he did already. He’d probably tell Theo before I got a chance to, but I knew that it would all work out. Theo would understand that it was my intention to stall Maggie by trying to give her what she wanted.

“You really don’t want him?” Maggie asked again, seeming perplexed.

“You can have my wolf and Theo as long as you let me go,” I said again.

Maggie took a deep breath and glanced around at her shifters. I could tell she was thinking things over.

“Alright, deal,” she said finally.

“Ciana, don’t do this!” Greg muttered.

“It’s already done,” I said with a sigh.

“Alright. Ciana, you’ll come back to my camp with me. When you turn 21, you’ll give your wolf, and your ability, to me and I will release you,” Maggie finalized the decision.

She raised her hands and her shifters backed off. Then she smirked at me.

“Though, I might just want to verify what you’re saying is true. If it isn’t, then I’ll kill you without hesitation,” she added.

I nodded. All I needed was to stall her. As long as she remained nearby or at her camp, I’d be rescued.

“There they are!” Murray’s voice shouted through the trees.

Maggie gasped and all her guards growled, turning their attention to Murray and Frederic as they led a huge battalion of Alvar warriors toward the road. Many of them had already shifted and were ready to fight.

“Ambassador, what is the meaning of this!?” Frederic cried, glancing at me and the shifters that surrounded me. “You and Luther were supposed to represent justice and put an end to tyranny.”

Maggie’s eyes darkened and I could see that she realized her mistake. She’d let her personal feelings for Theo get in the way and now my pack would withdraw their support. It would be a big loss for Luther.

“Not only did you try to kidnap Beryl, but now you’re threatening to kill the Alpha’s daughter? Is that the kind of justice that Luther supports? Even when King Sebastian ruled, he never interfered like this!” Frederic snarled.

“This isn’t what it looks like. Ciana is loyal to the crown, she’ll betray me and Luther to the king,” Maggie argued, pointing at me.

“So, instead of coming to us, you took matters into your own hands?” Murray asked, crossing his arms.

“Luther’s slogan is to bring justice and resist tyranny. Yet, here you are, making authoritative decisions for our pack,” Frederic pointed out.

“That’s not the justice and mercy you and Luther claim to represent and we won’t stand for it,” Murray declared.

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All hell broke loose. Murray and Fredric’s men shifted into their wolves and lunged for Maggie’s men. Everyone shifted and started to battle one another. All I could hear was the growling and snapping of teeth.

“No...” I heard Maggie say from beside me.

A wolf lunged for her but she ducked just in time to miss the attack. She stood to her full height and looked around the camp with wide eyes. She could no longer maintain her composure and I also saw anger swimming behind her irises.

She then turned to me and growled. “You always ruin everything. Can you see what you have done? Luther will not stand for this!”

“Looks like you picked the wrong side.” I smiled. “Good always wins out in the end, Maggie. You just have to believe that.”

Her eyes were burning with fury, and she muttered under her breath as a couple of her confidants lunged at me. “Take her with us. We’re out of here!”

They grabbed my arm roughly and dragged me toward the forest. I tried to cry for help but everyone else was busy fighting and Maggie’s guards shoved something in my mouth so I couldn’t make a sound anymore.

“Don’t kill her!” Maggie ordered, “I need her wolf!”

I almost rolled my eyes and told her she was delusional, but I kept that to myself. It was best not to anger the lunatic.

They pulled me past the tree line away from the battle.

I decided that now was as good a time as any to play dumb, so I forced myself to fall over and hit the ground hard.

“Ah!” I groaned.

Maggie stopped and her guards tried to pull me roughly to my feet. “What are you doing? Move!”

“My head, it’s spinning. I don’t know what’s wrong.” I only hoped that my acting skills were as good as I believed them to be.

She looked down at my knee and it was in fact bleeding. “Get up. You can still walk.”

I shook my head and pretended to pant heavily. “I can’t breathe. Everything is spinning.”

I fell to the ground again and pretended to be passed out.

I knew that she wouldn't leave me out here in the forest. I was too valuable to her. She needed me because she wanted my wolf which she now believed gave me immunity to Theo's powers.

"Of course, she freaking fainted!" she groaned.

Then I felt someone lift me up and drape my arm over their shoulders.

I kept my head hanging low and pretended I was unconscious the entire time.

Nov/ that I wasn't worried that my life was in danger, I thought I could play along and see if there was anything else Maggie was planning.

The war cries from the battlefield sounded further and further away as we moved deeper into the forest.

I didn't know how long we walked for but when they placed me against what felt like a tree trunk, it was quiet. I knew these forests well and I knew that we were either near the eastern border or the southeastern one.

"You, reach out to Luther and request reinforcements; You, start patrolling the area and report back in a couple of hours," Maggie ordered her two guards.

"Yes!"

Footsteps moved away from us and I was left alone with Maggie.

I wanted to understand Maggie more so I needed to figure out a way to keep her talking. But I couldn't risk waking up. She would force us to move and I would much prefer to remain on packlands.

"Theo..." I mumbled under my breath.

I heard her snap, "What did you say?"

I waited for a beat and said his name again.

"No, no, no! Theo is not yours, he belongs to me!" she muttered. I wasn't sure whether she was talking to me or to herself.

"You little witch! How dare you try to take him from me! He is mine! We have been through so much together. We have loved each other even before we knew what the word love truly meant."

Did she truly believe that Theo loved her in that way? They were siblings. As far as Theo knew, they were born sharing half of their blood.

"At first, I didn't really like Theo too much. He was always aloof, seemingly arrogant. He and Warren were so different!"

She drew her face closer to mine and placed her lips close to my ear. "Then, I found out that neither Warren nor I were Sebastian's children! Could you understand how that felt? Every day and every night, I lived in constant fear of my cruel father finding out about the truth! I had to put up an ignorant face even in front of my mother!"

She sighed gently. "I worried that they would find us out eventually. So I made sure to keep close connections with Justin and Queen Regina. They were my safety net if you will. Justin was set to be the next king and I believed if I had the heir's favor then Warren and I would be safe."

She pulled away from me. I could tell she started pacing back and forth based on the crunching of the leaves on the ground.

"But those two idiots had gone and committed treason! Could you imagine that just because I went to hang out with Justin sometimes, I was also thrown in jail with them? Regina and Justin were sentenced to death and I knew it was only a matter of time before I suffered the same fate!"

It was a shame that none of Sebastian's children had ever lived a normal childhood. I'd never been so thankful that I spent most of my childhood traveling with my parents or in the wild with the animals.

Maggie continued, "I had lost all hope. You would never understand the desperation of counting every second without knowing when it would be your last moment in the world. You watch those around you being pulled out from their cells one by one, and never return..."

She was trying to laugh but instead coughed a few times. "You knew it was coming and you couldn't escape. It was just so hopeless that I almost wanted to end myself. What was the point of enduring the torment while you knew you were at death's door?"

I sighed inwardly. I couldn't imagine what kind of mental torture she went through. I kept myself as still as possible hoping that she would continue to talk.

"But I was spared when that one person who was least expected came to my aid. Theo pleaded my case to Sebastian. He told Sebastian that I had been in my room the entire time and had nothing to do with treason, and Theo said I was as loyal as he was to the crown. After that, Sebastian released me the same night from the prison."

She let out a sing-song sigh. I did my best not to contort my face in annoyance.

"But of course, I later learned that the king would not listen." She said through gritted teeth. "That freaking bastard was ruthless and stubborn as a mule. But Theo went against his father for me that time."

Her tone softened. "Ever since then I have tried to get close to him. I owed him my life. I wanted to thank him, but he kept his distance. I tried my best to approach him. He was like us, lonely and out of place in the royal palace. The more I followed him around, the more I was attracted to him, until one day, I realized that I couldn't bear the thought of not seeing him or being with him. That was when I realized I was in love with him."

My stomach churned.

"But then as time went on, it seemed like he would never see me in that light. However, I never gave up hope. I went to pray to the Moon Goddess and one day, she responded to my prayer and gifted me a special bracelet! It was her blessing..."

I had to try my hardest to keep my eyes from opening and glaring at her. That was how the bracelet got to Warren!

Theo lost it in the Moon Goddess temple, and Maggie picked it up thinking it was a gift from the Goddess herself. Later, before she got married, she decided not to keep this token of love for Theo and gave it to Warren.

“When I turned 21, I thought I’d be the happiest woman in the world, only to realize my mate wasn’t Theo! It must have been a mistake! Demarco is a good man, but he can’t be my mate. I didn’t want him to be my mate! I already knew who the love of my life was and nothing could change it! So, I did what any woman in my position would do. I sought out to suppress my mate sense with Demarco.”

My heart skipped a beat in my chest. What had she said? The mate sense and mate bond were sacred and shouldn’t be tampered with. Could she even manage to do that? Only the Moon Goddess had such power.

“So I found this prayer rock. I carved my wishes on it and went to the sacred altar. I pleaded with the goddess to reverse the curse she had placed upon me. I loved Theo and he was meant to be mine. And that was where I met Luther.”

That was right... Luther was the owner of the Moonlit Crystal and he seemed to be well versed in spells and curses. It was probably the Ortiz pack’s specialty. I’d seen both Nita and Luther use those spells and curses before.

“Again, the Goddess heard my prayer! Luther was able to suppress my mate sense without impacting Demarco! That was perfect! This was not an easy process for me to undergo and my body has been weaker ever since, but Theo was worth it!”

I couldn’t explain how shocked I was. What Maggie did was such blasphemy to the Goddess and Demarco. I would never understand how overpowering and twisted Maggie’s obsession for Theo was. How could she descend into this utter madness?

“After it was done, I became Luther’s ambassador. Slowly bringing people to his side to execute his plan upon Sebastian so that one day, I could be with Theo again. Thanks to his ability, he would never have a mate, and that’s perfect. I just needed to be around him, support him, love him...even as his sister, or his family. It doesn’t matter as long as we’re together!”

She paused for a moment, and I could tell she moved closer. “What I never accounted for was you. How you just came into our lives and messed everything up. When he had disguised himself as Tallis, I knew it was him from the moment I laid eyes on him. I was so happy that he came to me again! Then, I saw the way he looked at you and I couldn’t stand it!”

She moved toward me again and this time I could feel her hot breath fanning my face.

“He loves you. I saw it and I didn’t understand why. That look in his eyes was something that I had craved for years but never received. I didn’t understand how he could so easily give it to you. You don’t know him like I do. You will never be able to love him the way that I love him.”

She sniffed, she must have been crying. “But once I’m able to acquire your wolf, he’ll change his mind. And you...you must be removed from the equation. That’s all.”

I had heard enough.

I snapped my eyes open and lunged for her, tackling her to the ground. I didn't give her enough time to react. I grabbed her arm and twisted it until I heard the sickening crack that I had been after.

"You witch!" she shrieked. "You broke my arm!"

I saw a little emerald stone and picked it up. I brought the stone close to my face and read the small inscription on it.

"That's mine!"

'Free me of Demarco's bond.'

It was her prayer that she had sent out. This was the wish she had made to the Moon Goddess.

I pocketed the stone and stared down at Maggie. And unrequited love was always painful but that was no excuse to become a monster and betray everyone she knew and loved.

She had tears brimming in her eyes as she clutched onto her arm.

"By the way," I said, "I lied. I don't know how to give you my power. I don't even know how I am immune to his touch. But even if I did, there is no way in hell that I would let you near Theo. You don't deserve him." "And you do? You do know he only loves you because he can touch you."

"Listen, Maggie," I stared into her eyes deeply and proudly, "Theo loves me not because of my immunity to his pov/er. He loves me for what I do and who I am!"

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I stood up and looked at the darkening sky, it was time for me to go home.

With Maggie weak and wounded, it was easy to tie her up.

"Let me go, you wretched witch!" she shouted.

I'd bring her to Murray and Frederic. They could decide what to do with her.

"Ciana, Stop!" Warren's worried voice startled me as he ran up to Maggie.

"Warren, I have to turn her in. My pack elders are going to take it from here," I explained.

However, Warren didn't listen to me. He looked at me with a deep, sad expression and he charged towards me with all his might. To keep my balance, I had to let go of Maggie.

"Sorry Ciana, but I can't let you do that," he shook his head and added, "If you try to stop us, I won't hold back like last time."

In his arms, Maggie groaned and leaned against him heavily. He tightened his grip around her.

My throat tightened when I saw how dark and serious his eyes were. As I hesitated, Warren shifted and Maggie got on his back. All I could do was watch the two of them run away.

After letting out a sigh, I headed back to the road where Murray and Frederic had led the attack against Maggie's shifters. My stomach gurgled, unsettled that I'd let Maggie get away. However, deep down... could I really bring myself to watch Maggie be sentenced to death by my pack? I didn't know.

When I got back to the battlefield, they were just rounding up the last of Maggie's shifters. I was pleased to see there were few Alvar casualties and injuries.

"Ciana, you're safe," Frederic said, running up to me and hugging me.

"I'm okay. The ambassador... she got away," I said somberly.

"We heard you stalled her attack until we could arrive and back you up," Elder Murray said, joining the conversation.

"I did what I had to to save myself," I grinned.

"And you were very smart and brave in doing so," Frederic commented, "Well done."

"I'm glad to see your father has rubbed off on you. It seems we've been unfair, treating you like a young child. Yet you handled this situation with dignity, calmly and strategically. You're a lot more grown up than we've given you credit for." Murray patted on my shoulder and beamed at me.

My cheeks warmed a little and I smiled. "Thanks."

"And thanks to you, there are minimal casualties to our pack, and Luther's true colors have come out. The rest of the pack has also agreed not to support him," Frederic added.

"Really?" I asked, brightening. That was the best news I'd heard all day!

"Well, honestly, it wasn't just because of what Luther's ambassador did. You see, we got some help winning this battle from an unexpected source," Frederic added with a sly look.

"We never thought he'd be so willing to step in and help our pack. Especially given who his father is..."

My heart leapt into my throat. I thought they meant Warren because he had been nearby. It wasn't common knowledge that Warren wasn't Sebastian's son.

But a small hope rose in my heart. What if... they meant Theo?

However, I knew it couldn't be him. Theo was off trying to stop rebellions.

"He's still a brutal warrior, but at least he is on our side," Murray said, chuckling.

My heart raced in my chest and I looked around at all the warriors, some were still in wolf form. My legs trembled a little as I looked for him.

Suddenly, he was there, standing by a large tree. Our eyes locked together and I lost my breath. I just stared at him. Seeing him after so long, I could have melted into a puddle right there.

His face was serious, eyes dark and cold, but it didn't matter. Theo was there, helping my pack. If that wasn't romantic...

Snarling, Theo strode toward me. Everyone else backed away quickly.

Alright, I might have spoken too soon.

My joy and elation quickly faded a little-just a little.

I couldn't move. Part of me wanted to run to him and hug him, but we hadn't gone public with our relationship, and the way he looked at me told me I was better off staying put.

Theo cupped my face in his hands and narrowed his eyes. Then, he crashed his lips down on mine, kissing me right in front of my entire pack!

I was worried that he was going to be mad that I put myself in danger. I also put Greg and Sherry in danger as well. But now...maybe I was able to get away with it this time.

I gasped and responded instantly, kissing him back. It had been too long since I'd felt his lips on mine, since I'd felt the gentle caress of his thumbs on my face.

My core heated and my knees trembled. It was like his lips sucked out all my strength, in a good way, not in his life sucking way. Blissfully drunk off his kiss, I leaned against him, wrapping my arms around his neck.

We could have kissed for five seconds, five hours, or five years. The entire world fell away and I was surrounded by Theo. Nothing else mattered except that we were together again, locked in that moment.

Finally, Theo pulled away and pressed his forehead to mine. His eyes were still dark and accusing.

"You have a lot of guts, don't you, girl?" he snarled.

Oh well. Obviously, the kiss didn't distract him enough!

"I... uh..."

"You should never have made such a dangerous plan," he added.

I knew his domineering nature came out because he'd been worried about me and was being protective. My heart continued to race in my chest. I'd never seen him act like that with me when there were other people around.

My cheeks burned crimson and I glanced around at the rest of the pack. They all stared at us. A few more conservative members looked a little awkward at seeing our public display, while most of the others just seemed surprised and smiled and murmured to each other.

"I... I had to. Maggie and Luther were winning over my pack and I needed them to see what they were really like. I didn't want them to turn against you. I know it was extreme and dangerous, but it was the only way," I explained in a hurried whisper. "Are you not surprised? About Maggie?"

"I got the report from Greg and Sherry already."

He didn't comment more on Maggie, Warren or Luther anymore, as if they were the least of his concerns.

"Oh." I dropped my gaze to the ground, not daring to look him in the eye, worrying that he was still upset with me.

Theo sighed, lifted my chin with his slender finger and gave me a long, contemplative look. "Well, you're safe now. and I'm going to make sure you stay that way," he declared.

Next thing I knew, I was scooped up and thrown over his shoulder.

“Theo!” I cried out.

He didn’t reply, he just carried me away from the pack, all of them staring after us in complete shock. I couldn’t see very well while I dangled over Theo’s shoulder, but I knew when we got to my house, and then my bedroom.

Theo dropped me on the bed and shut and locked the door.

I gulped and chewed my lower lip nervously. However, he just sat there for a few moments quietly.

Theo sighed and I could see all the confidence drain out of him.

“You really had me worried,” he said. He sat on the edge of the bed.

“Well, how about I make it up to you?” I asked, smiling coyly.

Theo’s eyes brightened and he smirked. “What did you have in mind?”

I crawled to him on the bed and wrapped my arms around his waist. Tugging, I pulled him back on the pillows until he was lying down. I threw my leg over his hips and straddled him.

“I’ve got a few ideas,” I muttered. Leaning in, I captured his lips with mine, pressing my breasts against his chest.

Theo groaned and ran his hands up and down my sides. I ground my hips down against his groin, feeling his semi-erect member press against the sensitive nub between my legs. The only problem was there were too many layers of fabric between us!

He grabbed my hips and rolled his arousal against me. My legs trembled as pleasure shot through me.

I knotted my hands in Theo’s hair and brought my lips to his earlobe, nipping and sucking on the sensitive skin. He gasped and pulled me tighter against him.

“Forgive me yet?” I teased, pulling away and looking into his eyes.

Theo sniffed. “Not even close,” he growled.

“Then, I guess I need to keep trying.”

I slipped my hands under his shirt and pushed it over his head. Then I pulled my own shirt off.

Theo’s hands went to my breasts. He cupped the round, smooth globes and pressed his thumbs to my nipples, rubbing them gently until they tightened into little rose buds.

I gasped and tilted my head back, my core throbbing with heat and desire. Lightly, I pressed my fingertips to Theo’s chest and I caressed him with light, quick strokes, moving down to the waistline of his pants. I loosened his zipper.

Theo’s eyes grew darker, and he groaned, “Ciana!”

“Yes, Your Majesty...” I teased him.

He sat up and wrapped his strong, firm arms around me. Our naked stomachs pressed together. He pressed his face between my breasts and pinched my nipples.

I clenched my thighs around his hips and ground my privates against his hard, pulsing desire. Theo gave a pleased grunt and took one of my nipples into his mouth.

His tongue lavished the little bud with all his attention, circling slowly as he gently squeezed my breast in his hand. My core ached for him. Moaning, I grabbed his hair against my hands, which were turning to fists.

I lifted my hips enough to push Theo's pants down. He kicked them off and slid me out of my pants. He slid one hand between us, dipping his fingers between my legs. He stroked my sopping wet entrance.

"How dare you, Ciana Black! How could you..."

"How could I what?" I was proud of myself for still being able to keep the conversation going-barely.

"Torture me like this!" he grunted.

A shiver ran up my spine and I clung to him harder as he moved his lips to my other nipple, doing exactly what he'd done before.

My body was on fire, ready to explode from his touch.

Theo's fingers moved deeper into my folds, stroking, probing, searching, until he brushed against my swollen clit. I cried out as tingles coursed through me.

With a pop, he removed his mouth from my nipple and put all his attention on rubbing his fingers around me.

My legs shook and I moved my hips against his hand. I wanted more and more of his touch as pressure built between my legs.

"Theo... I'm... I'm going to... come," I panted, my arms locked around his neck.

"Come for me," Theo whispered. He latched his mouth onto my neck and started sucking in the same rhythm as his fingers moved on the most sensitive spot inside me.

I was completely undone. My legs quivered and I sobbed with pleasure as an orgasm ripped through me. Theo slowed his movements, letting me ride out each pleasurable wave against his hand.

He grabbed my hips and guided my hot, wet entrance to the head of his cock. I buried my face in the crook of his neck, my arms still tight around him.

Theo moaned as he pushed his way inside of me, my tight walls clenching around him.

"Fuck..." he growled.

He pulled me flush against him, our chests and hips pressed together.

"Relax," he ordered.

His strong grip on my hips guided me and without him telling me what to do, I used my knees to lift myself.

"I... I can't..." I murmured. My mind reeled with pleasure as his thick, hard arousal stroked the inside of me. His hands tightened on my hips and pulled me back to him, closing the space between us.

We repeated the motion, me riding him and him pulling me back down.

I lifted my head and met his eyes for a moment. Then his lips were on mine. I gasped against his mouth as he split me apart pleurably. My insides pulsed around him and he groaned against my lips.

Suddenly, Theo grabbed me and flipped me over. I hooked one leg around his hips and he held my thigh firmly. He thrust into me hard, the tip of his cock grazing a spot so deep inside it had never been touched.

Crying out in pleasure, I threw my head back on the pillows, my nails digging into his back. Theo smirked and kissed my neck, thrusting into me over and over again.

My legs shook uncontrollably and my moans bordered on screams. Again and again, his member dove into me, slamming into the same spot that held the most primitive and concentrated desire and pleasure within me.

I arched into him, rolling my hips to meet his thrusts. Each time he struck, I got closer and closer to a bottomless pit until...

"Theo!" I moaned his name, all other words failing me. My body went rigid for a moment as a flood of pleasure and ecstasy shot through me from head to toe. My entire body trembled and jerked.

"Ciana..." Theo gasped my name. "I'm gonna come, baby."

He moaned and I felt his cock tremble and quiver as he reached his own climax.

Still basking in the afterglow, Theo rested his head on my breasts. I moved my hands, realizing I'd scraped his back with my nails. We clung to each other, sweat sticking to our skin.

So, do you forgive me now?" I panted, giggling a little.

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Theo

I watched Ciana while she slept. Her breathing was even and her hair a little messy, but she looked absolutely stunning to me.

Knock. Knock.

Sighing, I reluctantly left Ciana in bed to answer the door before the knocking woke her up. She was sleeping so deeply and peacefully, I really didn't want to disturb her.

"Sherry, what are you doing here this early?" I arched an eyebrow at her when I opened the door.

"Good morning to you too!" Sherry smirked slyly, looking me up and down. I was only wearing a pair of sports shorts. "I'm not interrupting anything am I?"

I crossed my arms. "Is this urgent? If not..." I was about to close the door.

"Wait, wait, Alpha!" She swept away her teasing expression and put on a professional smile. "Yes, it's about Beta," Sherry said.

"Jake? He should be able to handle the rebellions." I frowned, "Is he alright? Did anything unexpected happen?"

If Jake somehow got hurt, that meant the rebels were a lot more difficult to handle and we thought

"Yes... well no..."

My heart sank a little, but before I said anything, Sherry went on, "He is okay, but he is losing it! He's been crying himself to sleep every night without you," Sherry said, giving me a dramatic gaze and burst into laughter.

I let out a sigh of relief. Alright, at least it wasn't some bad war news. Then I reached out to close the door again. "Jake can handle himself."

"Alpha, Alpha!" Sherry held the door so that I couldn't close it. "I know you're here for a little R and R, but he kept asking Greg when you will be back, and Greg kept bugging me about it..."

"Tell them to suck it up and deal with it on their own for right now."

"Please get back out there on the battlefields to help him. Otherwise..." She shrugged at me. "I might have to see my Beta throw in the towel and run home with his tail between his legs!"

I growled and shook my head. I very much doubted that Jake was crying or unable to handle the situation. But Sherry was right. I needed to focus on the rebellions and stabilizing the kingdom. I'd confirmed that Ciana and her pack were fine now, and that was the purpose of the trip.

"Alright, tell him I'll be there by dawn tomorrow." I sighed.

"You're the best king and alpha ever," Sherry said. She winked at me playfully and spun around, leaving just as quickly as she'd shown up.

I headed back upstairs to lay down next to Ciana. She moaned and rolled toward me, blinking herself awake.

"Oh, good morning." She smiled shyly. Her cheeks warmed to a rosy pink and I ran my thumb along the curve of her mouth.

"Good morning," I whispered as I leaned in and kissed her forehead. She lit up with a brighter smile.

"Is everything okay?" she asked when I pulled away.

"I came here to make sure that you were safe and you are. There's a messy kingdom out there that I have to get back to."

Ciana's eyes fell slightly. "I know you still have a lot to do. I wish you didn't have to leave, but I understand."

“Honestly, I don’t want to leave you.” I took her in my arms and held her close. “I wish we could stay here forever. Or, at least another day.’

“Wouldn’t that be something,’ she agreed, hugging me back.

I sighed, burying my face in her neck. She encircled me in her arms and I wished I never had to leave her again.

“The country needs its king right now,” Ciana agreed. She nuzzled her nose against my chest and placed a soft kiss there.

We couldn’t stay in bed too much longer, but we enjoyed our time together as much as possible until I had to get dressed and head back to Jake.

Leaving Ciana was painful. Like a wrench squeezing my heart. But we both knew there was still a lot to be done. I only hoped that once things were settled, we could focus on each other again.

Ciana

Once Theo was gone, I knew I didn’t have time to linger on the feeling of loneliness. I had to get back to work.

That afternoon, I met with Elder Murray and Frederic to help sort through everything we’d accomplished.

I showed up at Frederic’s house where Murray and some of the other pack members had requested we meet up. As soon as I entered the room, everyone stopped talking and stared at me.

“There she is. Our savior.” Frederic stood up and came over to kiss my cheek.

I shook my head, even though my cheeks burned hot suddenly. Getting praise and recognition from them was something I wanted but it still felt strange.

“You’re really showing the qualities of a true Luna Queen.” Murray winked at me.

“I don’t think any of us ever expected to see the cold-hearted, distant king show such a passionate display of affection in public,” Frederic added, chuckling.

I didn’t want my personal relationship to become the subject of a serious pack meeting, so I cleared my throat and switched the topic.

“Everyone, listen to me. Our pack might be out of the woods with Luther, but he has a lot of other followers out there. I don’t want to pretend that the rest of the kingdom is safe from his warped sense of justice.’

“But those are their decisions. We, Alvar pack, have pledged our allegiance to King Theo, but we don’t have any sayings in what other packs choose to do. Alvar is safe, that’s what matters,” Frederic said.

“No, I don’t think it is enough. If Luther continues to gain followers, Alvar could be vulnerable to attack if they make an army. We need to diffuse as many as possible,” I explained.

Murray and Frederic looked at each other.

“Even if we want to help, none of us are in a position to negotiate with other packs,” Murray pointed out.

“Why not? If Luther could have an ambassador, why couldn’t Theo?” I looked around the room and smiled confidently. “As an Alpha’s daughter, my opinion held some weight in other packs. I could help get others to see Luther’s true colors.”

“Well, Ciana, maybe you’re right. But how are you planning to convince the rest of Luther’s supporters?” Frederic asked encouragingly.

“Luther’s biggest argument is that Theo is as brutal and bloodthirsty as his father. As long as I can convince the alphas that Theo is different, Luther could start losing support very fast,” I explained.

Luther’s message was simple. He told people that he wouldn’t be as brutal and horrible as Sebastian. He also wanted to paint Theo as a murderous killer. The only problem was, Luther’s real motivation was revenge, not freeing the kingdom.

His mind and heart were twisted by hatred, he would start a war with Theo as soon as he gained enough support. He’d do anything to destroy the kingdom that took his family from him. He wasn’t capable of bringing peace.

“I’m going to go to Vaner pack first and talk to their Alpha. He and I have met before,” I told Murray and Frederic.

At this point, it was better to let them know where I would be, in case something went wrong. Given my track record, and Demarco’s state after thinking he lost Maggie, it would be complicated, to say the least.

Vaner Pack was very strong, though, and if they stopped supporting Luther, it would be a big loss for Shadow.

That same afternoon, I set off.

Murray and Frederic allowed me to take a small guard with me for safety. As great as it was to be out traveling again, it was significantly more boring than the last time I made that journey with Warren.

Well, until things went down south totally.

The moment we crossed into Vaner territory, Demarco was there. He glared at me with a cold, hardened face.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I’m just here to talk, Alpha Demarco, about what’s happening with the kingdom,” I said.

I liked having guards from my pack with me. They could testify to what they’d learned about Maggie and Luther. They could tell Demarco that his mate and wife was still alive. It would probably take more than

anyone's word. Fortunately, Maggie had given me all the ammunition I needed, even though she didn't know it.

"You're not welcome here! The last time you were here, Theo killed my wife. You supported him!" Demarco snapped, pointing an accusing finger at me. His eyes were bloodshot, face gaunt.

I doubted he'd had a good night's sleep since Maggie had faked her death.

"Guards, detain her immediately," Demarco demanded.

"Demarco, Maggie isn't dead!" I shouted as his guards moved in.

Demarco held his arm up and his guards froze. He glared at me, looking at me hard to see if I was lying or just saying something desperate to save myself.

"Please, Demarco, you have to believe me. My guards have seen her alive. She's working with Luther. She faked her own death because..."

"You're lying!" Demarco cut me off.

"I'm not."

"Miss Ciana is telling the truth, Alpha," one of my guards said.

"We all saw Lady Maggie alive and well. She put up a good fight in Pack Alvar," the other guard said.

Demarco stared at each of us for a long time. None of us wavered.

"Maggie has been lying to you for years. She never... she never loved you." I really didn't want to do this, but I had to tell him. Demarco should know the truth...

Demarco's eyes widened and he shook his head. He seemed willing to listen now, but I wasn't sure if he was going to believe me.

"No, she wasn't lying. I devoted everything to her," Demarco argued.

"But she wasn't devoted to you. She faked her own death to get away from you," I replied.

"She's my mate! Of course, she loved me!" Demarco roared, his eyes wild, voice desperate.

I sighed heavily and shook my head. "Listen to me... Maggie loves someone else. She suppressed her mate sense and mate bond so she could keep loving him."

Demarco scoffed and shook his head. "I don't need to listen to this. Guards, take her into custody. I will charge you for these lies and slander against my wife!"

"They aren't lies. Think back, Demarco, she was always sick and frail and you always had to take care of her, but she never reciprocated. She wasn't devoted to you. What kind of mate would fake her own death and then not come back to you to mend your broken heart?"

Demarco paused again. I could see the wheels turning in his head while he tried to make sense of what I was saying.

"She isn't in love with you. Maggie is working with Luther for her own gain," I added.

If he would just be open to believing me for a second, I could give him the proof that Maggie had lied to him.

“She did love me,” Demarco insisted.

“Maggie wanted to escape from you, did you know that!?” I asked harshly. “I have proof!”

Demarco’s face paled.