

Kings Breeder 471

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"No. You don't have proof because there is no proof. Guards, take her and throw her out!" Demarco demanded, snapping to his guards again.

They closed in on me. Sherry and Greg appeared at my sides, joining my guards to protect me. I had a feeling they were still close by even after Theo had left, but they'd stayed hidden until now.

Thinking fast, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the stone that Maggie had gone on and on about. I threw the stone at Demarco's feet.

"There's your proof! Maggie carved a prayer to the Moon Goddess into that stone. She wished for her matebond to you to fail," I said. "Maggie is still alive and working with Luther to recruit and expand the influence of the Shadow."

Demarco's body was trembling and he stared at the rock for a while. Eventually, he bent down and picked up the stone, rolling it around in his hands.

Then his eyes widened and he shook his head like he still didn't want to believe it, even though the proof was staring him right in the face.

"If you still don't believe me, why not join me and search for Maggie? That's what we're heading off to do," I said, motioning to my companions.

"You're insane. You are just trying to confuse me," Demarco said, shaking his head.

"You could also check her tomb. That should be enough to convince you she's still alive... if she isn't there anymore. What more proof would you need?" I countered.

Demarco stared at me, jaw dropped. Then his eyes turned bloodshot again and his nostrils flared.

"You dare come into my pack and ask me to desecrate my wife's grave!? You brought tragedy on my mate and now you want to insult her memory!? What right do you have to disrupt my grieving process? Maggie is gone!" he shouted. The blue veins on his forehead bulged as he screamed at me.

"Demarco, I didn't cause any of this, I only brought the information. You don't have to believe me. If you choose to cover your eyes from the truth, it's up to you." I shrugged like it didn't matter to me what he thought.

Demarco scoffed and tossed the rock on the ground.

"However," I looked him in the eye, "if you're wrong, and you keep supporting Luther, you'll not only suffer the loss of your mate, but also your pack!".

"You never knew anything about Maggie," Demarco argued. His voice was softer now, like he was running out of reasons to defend Maggie.

"If she was truly the kind soul like you said, do you think she'd want you to lose yourself to get revenge for her, risking the entire pack? Even if she did lie to you, would you lead your entire pack to destruction for someone that deceived you?" I asked, challenging Demarco even more.

“Stop... stop saying that! Maggie wasn’t lying. And I would exact revenge again and again on Theo for what he did to her,” Demarco declared.

Beside me, Sherry and Greg growled. I held an arm out to keep them tame. This wasn’t the time to be flying off the handles.

“You don’t have to stand with Theo, but if I were you, I wouldn’t stand with Luther either. I would stay neutral and protect your own pack.”

This time Demarco didn’t fight back. He just stared at the ground.

“Well, I think my work here is done. If you ever change your mind, you can get in touch with me,” I said, concluding my visit and turning around.

He scoffed but didn’t argue as I motioned to my guards and Greg and Sherry to leave.

“Ciana, are we really done here? I thought you wanted to persuade Demarco but he clearly doesn’t believe us,” Sherry whispered to me as we departed.

I sighed and shook my head. “It’s up to Demarco to figure out the truth for himself. If he really cares about Maggie, he’ll go investigate. We just planted the seed, the rest is up to him. There are other packs we have to go to.”

Sherry nodded.

For almost three months, Greg, Sherry, and my small guard traveled around the kingdom visiting the smaller packs. We visited twenty different packs and with all our eye witness testimonies, I was able to convince all twenty of them to support Theo instead of Luther.

My last stop was Brook’s pack, Elmorn pack. Theo had released all the women from his consort to return home so they could be ambassadors. She was waiting for us when we got there.

“Ciana, I feel like I haven’t seen you in forever!” Brook jumped on me to give me a hug when we showed up on her doorstep.

“I missed you.” I embraced her back tightly.

Sherry, Greg, and the guards all got settled in and Brook and I had a few moments to catch up alone.

“I know why you’re here. Don’t worry, though, I’ve already convinced my father to support Theo. He sees the wisdom in it. Plus, I’m his little girl and he would never deny me anything.” She smiled brightly at me.

“That’s good to hear. I’m a little burnt out on giving the same speeches over and over again,” I admitted with a light giggle. “Thank you for sticking by the crown.”

“Yeah... uh-huh.” Brook nodded, looking down the hallway.

“Brook, what’s wrong?” I asked, seeing how distracted she was.

“Oh... well... you know that Jake and I discovered we’re fated mates, right?”

I nodded. I received a message from Brook a couple of months ago, and I was ecstatic for her! “Yeah, I know. It is great news.”

Brook laughed nervously and shook her head. Her smile faded quickly and her face fell. “My father isn’t happy about it, not one bit.”

“Why?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

“I... I’m too embarrassed to say,” she said, her lower lip quivered and I thought she might cry. “Why don’t I just introduce you to my father, and you’ll understand.”

I followed Brook through the pack house to the study, where her father was sitting. He was reading a book but as soon as he saw us, he tossed the book aside and stood up, holding his arms out to Brook.

“Hello, my beautiful, beautiful daughter.” He gave her a bear hug and kissed the side of her head.

Brook gave me a bashful look and rolled her eyes.

“Daddy, this is Ciana. She’s the friend I told you about, from the palace,” Brook introduced.

“It is nice to meet you, Alpha Ellsworth,” I greeted, holding my hand out.

Alpha Ellsworth eyed my hand suspiciously. “Yes, you did tell me all about Ciana.”

His friendly nature seemed reserved for his daughter. Slowly, I pulled my hand away and rubbed it on my thigh.

“I understand you’re willing to stand with King Theo and I appreciate that. I’ve been working to lessen Luther’s popularity,” I explained.

“Yes, King Theo. Now, he is a great Alpha and leader. Why not look for a guy like that, my dear?” Ellsworth asked, chucking his daughter under the chin.

Brook glanced at me apologetically. “Daddy, Theo has his sights set on someone else. Besides, I told you, Jake is my fated mate.”

“Well, my daughter deserves the best of the best! Her mate must be an alpha! There are plenty of Alphas that choose to marry someone that isn’t their fated mate because they understand a good match when they see one,” Ellsworth said, squeezing Brook again.

“That’s because they never found their mates!” Brook protested. She looked at me like she could just die of embarrassment at any moment. “If you just gave him a chance, I think you’d really like Jake.”

Brook eyed me, like I could help out.

I wasn’t sure what to say or do in the situation. It seemed a lot more like a family matter than something I could help out with. I wanted Brook to be happy and follow her heart, but it wasn’t my place to interfere with what her father wanted for her. He was a loving father, I could tell, but he just had some... strong opinions.

My own heart ached for my parents. They'd always loved me and cared for me but they spent a lot of time traveling in the most recent years without me. Seeing Brook and her father made me a little jealous.

What would my dad say about my love life? Would he like Theo...?

I'd never thought of that before. I knew my parents would never care about status or wealth, they would want me to be with a man who would treat me right... So... they would have to love Theo, right?

"Jake's just a Beta. You deserve something far more than that. Like an Alpha of a strong pack, one that can bring you all the joy, freedom, and love that you deserve," Ellsworth said, kissing the top of Brook's head.

He still held her against him in a one-armed hug. Clearly, Alpha Ellsworth was very protective of his daughter and only thought she deserved the best of everything. He was a doting father, but I now understood why she was embarrassed by him.

"Besides, Jake serves the palace. That is so far from home and from me. You need an Alpha that is closer to home, one that won't take you far away," Ellsworth added.

"Daddy..." Brook sighed, rolling her eyes.

Ellsworth turned to me now. "See, nothing but the best for my girl. I spoil her but she never listens to me. You're her best friend, maybe you could help persuade her to see reason?"

I glanced at Brook and she gave an exasperated sigh. She shrugged and pulled away from him.

I could tell Alpha Ellsworth meant well though.

"I promise, Alpha, I will do what I can," I smiled at him and gave him an assuring nod.

"Thank you, thank you," he said. "Now, I've got to get back to my book. You two girls have fun."

He waved us out of his study and grabbed his book again. Brook and I linked arms and walked down the hall together.

We went to Brook's bedroom. I wasn't at all surprised to see that it was decorated with pink and purple, like a princess's bedroom. She sat on her pink, sparkly comforter and patted the bed beside her.

"It looks like a little girl lives here," I teased, "but the colors seemed to fit you well."

"I know. My dad still thinks I'm his little girl and he never wants me to grow up, fall in love, or move away," she said with another exasperated sigh.

"Brook, you're really lucky to have a loving, caring, devoted father like that," I said, covering her hand with mine.

Brook laughed, then her eyes filled with tears and she blinked them away. "I don't know if I should be happy or miserable. I love him and I know he wants what is best for me, but I love Jake, too. I don't want to hurt either of them."

Brook sighed and dropped her head into her hands. She gently rubbed her temples like she had a headache.

“Are you okay, Brook?”

“I have a headache. My dad thinks I will choose my mate over him. He wants me to be with someone that isn't my mate so that I'll always put my family first. He thinks being with my mate means I can't be his little girl anymore...”

She sighed again and shook her head.

It was a bit of a messy situation. Whatever Brook decided, she'd end up hurting one of them. Her father or her mate, the two most important males in her life. I wanted to help her.

We just had to get her father to see that she could love both without hurting either of them.

“Brook, I think I've got an idea.” I beamed at her.

Brook looked at me with big, hopeful eyes.

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Ellsworth invited me to breakfast the next morning. Brook wasn't there and I got the feeling that he wanted to talk to me alone. It was fine, Brook already knew the plan.

I sat down and grabbed myself a plate of pancakes. Alpha Ellsworth watched me dump syrup on them and poured me a glass of orange juice before he spoke.

“So, did you talk to Brook? She can be just as stubborn as me sometimes,” he said, laughing until his cheeks turned red.

“Brook and I talked and I've persuaded her that Jake isn't right for her. She's agreed to put you first,” I said, nodding as I reached for my orange juice.

“Huh.” Alpha Ellsworth stared at me a moment longer and then broke into a wide smile. “That seems... too easy based on how well I know my daughter.”

“If you really think it is too good to be true, I can show you. Brook told me what she was going to do today to break the matebond.” I replied politely as I slid my hand into my pocket and fingered the little blood bag I stored there.

In order for this to work, Brook and I were going to put on a little show.

“Really? She's that committed?” He stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“She should be heading to the Moon Goddess temple now. Want to come along?” I gulped down my pancakes and stood up, motioning for him to follow me.

Brook was committed alright, committed to getting her way. I felt a little guilty about tricking Ellsworth. He was a nice guy but Brook was my best friend.

“By the way, Alpha Ellsworth, those pancakes were phenomenal! Thank you!”

"I'm glad you liked them." He grinned, "Those are Brook's favorites too!"

Alpha Ellsworth followed me and I followed the trail that Brook had shown me to the pack Moon Goddess temple. We'd planned everything carefully, so I knew she'd be on her way.

I held a hand up and Brook's father paused. Pointing, I showed him that Brook was entering the temple.

"Let's get a little closer," I whispered.

Alpha Ellsworth nodded and we snuck into the temple.

Brook was already kneeling in front of the Moon Goddess statue. She had her hands clasped together and it looked like she was praying. We couldn't hear what she was saying, but suddenly tears streamed down her cheeks.

Brook groaned and doubled over in pain. She started heaving, leaning against the stone statue. Her face all scrunched up.

"Brook!" Alpha Ellsworth gasped.

Maids ran through the temple to Brook. They tried to hold her upright and see if she was okay.

'Lady Brook, what's wrong?' they urged.

"Someone get a healer!"

"Brook!" Alpha Ellsworth cried. He ran from our hiding place and bolted toward her.

The maids backed away and let their Alpha through. I walked over more slowly, grabbing the blood bag in my hand. This had to be timed right.

"F-father, you were r-right," Brook croaked, looking up at him with teary eyes.

I bit my lip to keep a straight face. She was a good actress and I wondered how she kept herself so composed. It was a little funny to see her being so dramatic, but I had to keep my cool, too. This had to be convincing.

Apparently, she loved Jake enough to make a fool of herself with her melodrama.

'Jake... he's a good man. I... I do... I-love him. But I... I have to m-make a better choice and listen to your advice,' Brook gasped, breathing so heavily she was almost hyperventilating.

'Brook, are you sure this is what you want? Jake will be so heartbroken...' I dropped down to my knees near her head and pulled it into my lap, stroking her hair.

"He might not survive on his own. And you... rejecting him could kill you..."

I glanced over to Alpha Ellsworth, hoping he would do or say something to help Brook out, like tell her it was okay to love Jake.

"Ahh..." Brook groaned and writhed in pain. She flicked her eyes to Ellsworth.

'Honey, what are you doing to yourself?' her father asked. He took her hand and pressed it to his cheek. "This isn't what I wanted."

"I... I've made m-my decision. A mate is important but... well, my parents are fated mates and they are happy. But... I could have a second chance m-mate. Someone good... someone better," Brook forced out.

Her eyes met mine for a moment and I saw the amusement in them. I realized that her streaming tears were from silent laughter because she wasn't really in pain.

"Okay, Brook, whatever you decide. You're my best friend and I support your decision, no matter what, okay?" I was proud that I kept my face dead serious and I ran my hand down her cheek and slid the little blood bag into her mouth.

She coughed and I saw her press it against the inside of her cheek. Slowly, she nodded and looked at her dad.

'O-okay, I'm ready," she said, nodding.

"Sweetheart..." Ellsworth gasped.

"Moon Goddess, I... I came hereto p-pray... I pray to re-je-ct m-my mate. And I hope that m-my second chance... my second chance mate will c-come to me," she said, her voice strained.

She arched her back and groaned. I realized that part of her dramatic act was to keep herself from laughing or breaking character. It was hard to laugh when she was fake moaning in pain.

"M-my second chance m-mate will be kind and... won't t-take me from my parents," she forced out.

"Ugh..." she groaned in pain again and writhed around.

"This is too much," Alpha Ellsworth said, shaking his head.

Brook bit down hard and she coughed. The fake blood pooled in her mouth, I could see it as she tried to talk again.

"Goddess... I Brook... reject..." she coughed again and spat some of the fake blood out. "Reject..."

"Stop, stop, stop!" Alpha Ellsworth snapped, grabbing Brook's shoulders. "My daughter, stop this. It is hurting you. I can't watch you do this to yourself."

"Then... go away. You don't need to watch," Brook sputtered. "This is for you..."

"No! I can't even bear to think of you going through this pain, just for me. Jake is your mate and that is what it is. Keep your matebond, go with him, just don't hurt yourself anymore!" Alpha Ellsworth shouted in desperation.

Brook swallowed hard, the fake blood-which was just tomato juice-went down with a big gulp.

Alpha Ellsworth grabbed her shoulders and lifted her up, hugging her to his chest.

"You're my daughter and I want what is best for you, even if it means you going to the palace without me." He patted her back.

"Daddy," Brook gasped, wrapping her arms around him. "Thank you! You know. I'll never stop being your little girl, no matter where I go or who I'm with."

Ellsworth chuckled and nodded. "I know that, sweetie. I know. You know you get your stubbornness from me."

Brook giggled a little and sighed as her father released her.

"I don't want to fight with you, darling. Especially not over a man. It is just... so hard to admit that I can't be the only man in your life," Alpha Ellsworth said. He sighed and ran his hands through Brook's hair, then he stood up and offered her his hand.

I smiled to myself, watching them hug again and reconcile. It was nice to see that when it came down to it, Ellsworth put Brook's happiness over what he thought was best for her. That's what a father was supposed to do.

He was able to see past his stubbornness to be the best father.

Ellsworth brought Brook back to the packhouse to recover. I didn't see them for the rest of the day until Brook popped by where I was staying and invited me to dinner with her and her father.

Brook and I sat together and Alpha Ellsworth took the head of the table. He had a glass of wine and watched the two of us together.

"I'm glad to see you're feeling better, darling," Ellsworth said, his voice was a little stiff, like he wasn't actually happy about it.

Brook reached over and took her dad's hand. "Daddy, I know this isn't what you wanted, but I promise, I'll come and visit all the time. Jake isn't going to hold me hostage at the palace."

Alpha Ellsworth smiled tightly and nodded. He squeezed Brook's hand but he still looked a little upset. I wasn't sure why. Was he mad that Brook had hurt herself to please him, or that his desires had led her to hurt herself?

"He really loves me, Jake does. Obviously, not as much as you, but he's a good man," Brook continued. "Besides, King Theo is reasonable, he will let Jake have time off so we can visit. And, Ciana is on our side."

She smiled warmly at her father. Alpha Ellsworth sighed and pulled his hand from hers. "You've grown up a lot, Brook. I know you have your own life but you're never going to stop being my baby girl, okay?"

"Okay, I get it. And I don't want to stop being your little girl." Brook said, still smiling warmly.

"Well, before I completely agree to all this, we need Jake to get his ass over here so I can meet him and determine just what kind of man he is," Ellsworth demanded.

"Oh, you'll love him," Brook said excitedly. She turned to me and we grinned at each other.

"Next time, girls, don't use tomato juice for fake blood," the Alpha said.

Brook and I both stopped smiling instantly and looked back at Ellsworth. I was expecting to see him glaring at us or giving us a stern look. He was smiling warmly, shaking his head and he tapped his nose.

"A wolf's nose knows," he teased, chuckling.

“Daddy, you knew!?” Brook asked, her jaw dropping.

Alpha Ellsworth grinned. “Honey, who am I?”

“What?” Brook asked. She looked at me again and I shrugged.

At least, her father wasn’t pissed. He’d known our ruse from the moment that Brook had broken the fake blood bag in her mouth. And yet, he’d still gone along with it and given Brook what she wanted.

“I’m your father,” Ellsworth clarified. “No one knows you better than I do. So, remember that when you bring this Jake fellow by for a visit.”

“Daddy!” Brook gasped, covering her mouth. “I’m sorry... I didn’t want to trick you, I just... I’m sorry.”

She stood up and came around the table to stand behind her father. She then put her hands on his shoulders, massaging them lightly. “I’m sorry, Daddy.”

“It’s okay, my darling. I understand. You wouldn’t go to such great lengths to try and fool me if this Jake didn’t mean a lot to you. Just remember, I will always know if you try to trick me.”

He patted her hand with his and she leaned in and kissed his cheek. This was the most adorable thing I’d seen in months and it warmed my heart. Brook was so lucky to have such a wonderful father.

“I love you so much, daddy! I love Jake too, and I just didn’t want to choose.”

“You don’t have to now,” Alpha Ellsworth assured.

A guard came into the dining room, breaking up the touching family moment. Ellsworth turned to face the guard, his warm smile fading as he became completely serious.

Brook sat down with me again and grinned. She lowered her voice. “Thank you for helping me.”

“I’m glad it all worked out,” I whispered back.

“Alpha, there’s news. There is a massive army on the move, heading straight for the palace,” the guard reported.

My heart stopped for a moment. “Luther. That has to be Luther. He’s attacking!?” I stood up quickly.

If Luther was making his move, I’d have to get back to the palace to be with Theo.

“We have good intel that Luther is leading the assault. He’s gathered all his forces together. Apparently, with a lot of his followers reverting back to supporting the crown, he’s worried he won’t have a large enough army, so he has to move now,” the guard continued.

“This is bad. I’ve got to get back to the palace,” I urged.

“Yes, of course,” Brook said, standing with me. We both headed out of the dining room but Alpha Ellsworth called us back.

“Miss Black, before you go, I have something for you.”

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“Come with me. I have something for you before you return to His Majesty. It might help,” Alpha Ellsworth said, motioning for me to follow him.

He led me to his office, where I’d first met him. I stood near the door while he rummaged through his desk drawers. For a few minutes, I thought he was just trying to get me alone to tell me how he really felt about the trick Brook and I had played.

“Ahh, here it is. I think this might help against Luther,” he handed me a photo from across his desk.

I examined the picture closely. There was a girl about four or five years old in the picture. She had pigtails tied with pink ribbons and was wearing a little sundress. Her face was bright with a big smile.

Beside her was a young boy, maybe about ten years old. He had a goofy grin and large feet. He looked lanky and awkward, like he hadn’t fully grown into himself, but he looked familiar.

“Who are they?”

“That’s Luther at age eight and his younger sister when she was only four. Anna, his sister, died tragically when she was eight and when Luther was twelve,’ he explained.

“That’s... truly awful. I don’t understand how this could help. Do you think Luther is sentimental?” I asked, turning the photo back toward Ellsworth.

“My wife’s sister worked in the Ortiz pack, before their demise. She took that picture. Unfortunately, when Luther lost his pack and loved ones, especially his sister, he went crazy with a need for revenge.”

“Luther... is also a victim,’ I whispered, placing my hand over my heart. “I knew he lost a lot when Sebastian destroyed his pack...’

“Unfortunately, that’s not the worst of it.”

“What do you mean?’ My heart tightened in my chest. What could possibly be worse than Sebastian murdering all of Luther’s family, including his eight-year-old sister.

“When Sebastian attacked the Ortiz pack, Luther was only twelve years old. He tried to stand up to Sebastian after most of the warriors were killed. Sebastian thought it was funny and made a deal with Luther. If he killed his eight-year-old sister, with his own hand, Sebastian would leave the rest of Ortiz alone,’ Ellsworth told me.

My jaw dropped and I stared at him. That was the cruelest thing I’d ever heard! I knew Sebastian was ruthless and cruel but I couldn’t think of something more horrid. He had made a murderous deal with a child, one that twelve-year-old Luther couldn’t possibly understand. And, true to form, he chose the meanest way to punish Luther.

“Luther, thinking of his pack, did what Sebastian ordered of him. The way he saw it, sacrificing his sister would save the pack. Well, we all know Sebastian isn’t known for keeping his word.” Alpha Ellsworth’s voice dropped into a deep, low whisper, almost like he was too afraid to speak the words aloud.

“Don’t tell me...” I gasped.

“That’s right. Sebastian didn’t keep his word and he wiped out the rest of the Ortiz pack. Of course, he left Luther alive to live with the horrible decision he was forced to make. Luther has been twisted ever since,* he sighed heavily.

No wonder Luther wanted revenge!

If I were him, I probably would also commit the rest of my life to hunting down the cruel king and his crown!

Theo

When Luther’s Shadow warriors were on the move, I had my scouts keep tabs on them. They were heading toward a valley near the palace. I wanted to cut them off before they got too close and caused any real damage.

My army assembled on the opposite side of the valley, waiting for Luther’s Shadow to come into view.

When they arrived, Luther stopped his troops and headed to the center of the valley. I held an arm up to my warriors and I joined Luther in the Valley.

“Are you ready to determine who is truly the right match for the throne?’ Luther asked, arching an eyebrow at me.

“I don’t want to fight today, Luther.”

I crossed my arms firmly and kept my hands tucked away so no one could use my power against me like my mother had tried to do.

“Why is that? Are you feeling a little down? I don’t see Ciana anywhere, did she finally come to her senses and abandon you, just like your siblings?’ he sneered, taunting me.

I gritted my teeth. It was a low blow. I knew that Ciana hadn’t abandoned me but Luther wasn’t wrong about Maggie and Warren.

“Like I said, no one could ever live with a hideous monster like you. You and your bloodline are all monsters and are all doomed. Today, the Goddess will finally bring justice to the world,” he boomed, holding his arms out to the sides and looking up at the sky.

Behind him, Luther’s troops whooped and cheered at his declaration.

I scoffed and shook my head. “Sebastian has paid for what he did. I am working with the royal court to make up for all the packs that suffered because of his cruelty. There is no need to oppose me.”

“Then why are you here with an army?’ Luther countered, snarling at me.

“I’m here to protect my people and you have no authority to judge me. You have no right to determine the fate of the throne, or my fate for that matter,’ I insisted, glaring at him.

Jake joined us in the valley with two of my subordinates, Axel and Silas. He glared at Luther and stood at my side.

"The troops are ready to attack. They are just waiting for your word," Jake reported.

Axel was worried. "Beta Jake, we are outnumbered. We can't win this fight."

"Luther might have higher numbers but our army is specially trained. They are the best trained warriors in the country. One of ours could fight five of theirs," Jake explained.

"Numbers still help," Axel muttered, shoving his toe into the dirt.

"Yes, they do. If we wait too much longer, more reinforcements could arrive and tip the scales in Luther's favor even more," Jake added.

I held my hand up to stop the discussion. "Let's wait."

Jake glanced at me and arched an eyebrow. He opened his mouth and then closed it, hesitating over whatever was on his mind.

"Spill it," I growled.

"I overheard Alpha Larry and Alpha Brad-"

"The Alphas of the western region?" I clarified, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," Jake nodded. "They are reconsidering whether to support the crown or Luther. Several packs seem to be soldiering on altering their support based on who is more likely to win. At the end of the war, they want to be on the side of the winner so they don't face retaliation."

"And they assume it will be Luther?" I pondered aloud.

"Based on the numbers, they are starting to. If more reinforcements arrive, our support will dwindle rapidly," he said.

"Still, hold off for now. People chose to support Luther because they think I am a bloodthirsty tyrant who will kill for no reason. If I make the first move, we'll be doing exactly what Luther wants," I explained. "It will confirm everyone's fears. Even if we win the battle, it would lose the war because those remaining would lose faith in the royal court."

"Faith in the royal court can be restored, as long as we win. But if we lose or do nothing, Luther will be sitting on that throne," Jake argued, pointing toward the palace.

"Perhaps. I'm not convinced this day will end in a battle. In fact, I want to avoid the war altogether. It doesn't matter who wins or loses, there will be thousands of casualties, and that is not what I want for the country."

"Spoken like a true king," Jake sighed. "As you wish, Your Majesty."

I patted him on the shoulder to show him how appreciative I was that he always had my back.

"What's the hold up over there?" Luther shouted to our group, "Plotting the fastest way to kill all your opposers?"

Growling, Jake rounded on him. "His Majesty is not going to kill anyone today!"

“Is that so? You have a huge army standing there because you’re not going to kill anyone?” he taunted, rolling his eyes.

“Your army approached the palace. This is a defense maneuver,” Jake explained. “I thought someone as intelligent and strategic as you would recognize a defensive position.”

Luther sneered and shook his head. “You’ve clearly got the advantage now. Why not attack me and end this? You know I’ll have reinforcements arriving soon, then you won’t stand a chance.”

“Luther,” I responded with a leveled tone, “your provocation is not going to work on me.”

Again, Luther snarled. He started taunting me with names but I tuned him out and returned to my camp. I wasn’t going to be goaded into attacking first. Luther was going to say whatever he thought would make me lose control and attack.

I wasn’t going to let him set the pace, no matter how many times he called me selfish and vicious. His words meant nothing unless I proved him right, and I wouldn’t.

A scout ran up to our small huddle, face red and completely winded. He clutched his side like he had a cramp. He sputtered a little before he was able to speak.

“Your Majesty, we spotted an army of fifty thousand troops approaching. It looks like another troop of multiple packs,” he reported.

“Who is leading this new army?” I asked.

“Alpha Demarco Cedar of Venar pack,” the scout said.

“Damn!” Jake hissed.

“Did you say Alpha Demarco!?” Luther shouted from behind us, laughing maniacally. Obviously, he also got a report from his own scout. “Those are my reinforcements. Theo, today is the end of your short rule!”

A ripple went through the Shadow and through my army at Luther’s announcement. Whoever was in my army that was wavering in their support would flee the moment they saw how large Demarco’s reinforcements were.

“Shit, this is bad. Demarco has long been Luther’s ally. We missed our window to attack,” Jake cursed under his breath.

Fifty thousand was a large reinforcement. Perhaps we could have scraped by before but now, the situation was dire. There was no winning with Demarco joining Luther.

Demarco’s troops lined the valley between my army and Luthers.

“Demarco, my friend. You’ve arrived just in time,” Luther laughed. He walked toward Demarco, arms outstretched like he was going to hug him.

Demarco held his hands up and stepped away from Luther. There was a clear wall around him. He wasn’t the same loyal Luther supporter that I’d seen the last time we met.

“I’m only here for answers about Maggie. I’m not going to fight for either side,” Demarco declared.

“What do you mean, my friend,” Luther frowned, “You’re betraying our alliance?! Have you forgotten everything I’ve done for you?”

Demarco kept his cool and replied mildly, “I’m not betraying you because while I’m not here to fight for you, I’m also not here to fight against you.”

Luther sneered, ‘That still doesn’t change the fact that you’re nothing but a traitor!’”

“Luther!” A clear, crisp female voice called out across the valley.

Luther immediately stopped shouting.

“I thought your mission was to bring peace and justice and you preached that everyone who joined you would be fighting of their free will. If that’s true, why are you here? Your army has surrounded the capitol and you’re threatening to attack the royal court, not the other way around!”

My heart fluttered and a smile tugged at my lips. That voice was sweet music to my ears.

Ciana came toward us, her face hard and confident as she glared at Luther, challenging his entire reason for opposing me.

“Also, why are you condemning Demarco? All he did was stay neutral... or did that really bother you just because he didn’t do exactly what you expected?”

I watched her stride toward us, her chin held high. There were light bags under her eyes, like she was exhausted from her travels, but as soon as she stood there, she attracted all the attention of the crowd.

She smiled confidently, not a bit afraid of facing Luther.

She was different somehow—more mature and confident, more incredible! She never ceased to amaze me with what she could accomplish when she put her mind to it.

Ciana turned to me and beamed. She dropped down on one knee and bowed her head to me in loyalty and submission.

“King Theo, I, Ciana Black of Alvar Pack, am here with the support and warriors of twenty allied packs. We are at your service.”

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I stared at my gorgeous love as she knelt before me. She was dressed in her battle gear ready for a fight. I had not laid eyes on her for months and it felt longer than eternity.

My wolf urged me to go by her side and envelop her in my arms but I knew that people were watching. I could also feel Luther’s stare burning a hole in the side of my skull.

Ciana looked up at me with a gleam in her eyes.

My goodness, I had missed this woman. Being away from her was torture I never wanted to go through again.

“Rise, Ciana Black of Alvar Pack,” I said in a steady voice.

It took all my strength not to close the distance between us and kiss her like my life depended on it. “Your loyalty and commitment to the throne are acknowledged. Let it be known to all packs from the west to the east, you have my favor and my protection.”

Ciana stood to her full height and nodded at me. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Her simple words had my insides twisting. Why was I giddy like a little school girl?

I then turned to look beyond the valley where Luther was. He held my gaze. I could see the hatred and anger behind his eyes.

From his expression, I could tell he wasn't ready to quit. I knew that look. I had seen it many times in the mirror when I looked into my own eyes. He was not going to yield and this battle was going to happen whether I wanted it to or not.

I raised my voice so that the entire valley could hear. “Luther, why don't you rethink your decision? I'm in no rush.”

After saying that, I nodded to Ciana and Jake and walked back toward my tent. I heard footsteps following me and I didn't need to turn around to know that it was Ciana.

We had much to catch up on.

Jake and the rest of the group wisely chose not to follow us into the tent. I took off my gloves and laid them on the map that sat on the long wooden table before turning to face the woman that had been in my dreams every night.

She was looking at me.

Her smile was warm and her eyes told me she had been longing for me too. Her blonde hair was in a ponytail and her battle armor fit her like a glove. It hugged every curve that existed on her body.

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I stared at her in awe. How I was so lucky that this stunning beauty belonged to me?

“Your Majesty,” she teased, mischief twinkling in her eyes. “Do I have something on my face?*

“Come here.”

A soft smile found its way to her lips and she moved toward me slowly. Once she was within arm's length, I grabbed her and pulled her into my hold. I buried my nose in the crook of her neck and breathed in her scent.

The intoxicating subtle sweetness of water lily.

“I missed you.” I kissed the sensitive spot in the hollow of her neck. “I missed you so fucking much.”

She tightened her hold on me, pulling me in closer to her chest. “I missed you too, Theo!”

I pulled away to claim her lips in mine. Her delightful breath was heavenly, her soft tongue was tastier than the sweetest honey.

She melted into me, moaning in my mouth.

I moved my hands to cup her face and deepened the kiss. Her skin was soft under mine, so tender and alluring.

I would forever be grateful that I could feel her with my own hands and I would forever enjoy the way my body felt electrified every time we touched.

When our lips parted, she was breathless and flushed. I most likely mirrored her features.

“Theo... I did it,” she smiled. “I helped bring them to your side.”

I sucked in her delicious scent greedily. “Yes, you did. Yet again, you’re always able to find new ways to amaze me.”

She grinned brightly, “I told you I wanted to help!”

I pulled her in again and squeezed her into my chest. I sighed, “You did help, greatly, but that doesn’t mean I like being apart from you.”

“I’m back now,” she murmured into my chest. “Do you think he will still fight?”

I nodded as I caressed her cheek. ‘Luther wants revenge and he has already gone this far. Now that he knows he won’t get more supporters, there’s no point for him to wait much longer. I figured he will launch an attack no later than the end of tomorrow.’

The temperature in her gaze dropped and her tone was firm. “Then we shall fight!”

I kissed her cheek. “Yes we shall, but It’s going to be dangerous though. I’ll have Sherry and Greg escort you back to the palace tonight. That way I know for sure you’re guarded. Stay safe, and wait for my good news.”

She pulled completely out of my arms. “No. I’m standing with you and fighting this fight.”

I already knew this would be her reaction, but I had to at least try.

“Ciana, listen to me. Battlefields are not what you think. It’s bloody, it’s cruel and no matter how good of a warrior you are, you can never guarantee what will happen there.

I just can’t bear the thought of you getting hurt.”

She shook her head, “Have I not proven to you that I can take care of myself? You need to let me help!”

“You’ve already helped greatly!” I softened my voice as much as I could and said in a tone that almost sounded like a plea, “Please, this time, let me protect you.”

She seemed to be surprised by what I said. Perhaps I’d never spoken to anyone using that tone before. It was foreign to myself... but it just felt right to say those words to the woman that was more important than my life.

She also softened her voice. “I just want to be with you, Theo... we’re a team, remember? And do you know how worried I would be, sitting in the huge, empty, cold palace, scaring myself to death imagining whatever might go wrong and I couldn’t be there for you?”

She looked up at me. Her gorgeous blue eyes were a little red and her thick, long eyelashes were slightly moist. She murmured, "Theo, I can't do that. You can't do that to me..."

Her words melted my heart and I knew I would do anything to prevent those tears from falling off her cheeks.

But I couldn't put her in danger. I let out a heavy breath and pulled her toward me. I gently kissed her smooth forehead, her soft eyelids, her cute button nose and finally moved down to her lips.

She responded to me sweetly.

My hand roamed down her back and got to the bottom of her shirt, quickly finding an entrance in to touch her bare skin. As I slowly twirled from her waist up, her back arched slightly, and her warm, soft and exquisite tongue lightly licked my lips.

All I wanted to do was peel her clothes off, throw her onto the small makeshift bed, and kiss every inch of her skin and savor every secret and sensitive spot of hers.

I wanted to part her slender and smooth legs, and feel her warm, wet inside wrap around my cock. As I thrust, I wanted her hands to insert into my hair and her sweet lips to moan my name.

I wanted to claim her body to my heart's content and fill her with my seeds so that we can be one again....

So I did what I wanted to do.

It was still a thrill and wonder to flatten the palm of my hand against her flesh and feel her respond to me in pleasure. I felt my desire for her fold in on itself and amplify as she let a delicious moan past her lips.

I inhaled her sweet, warm, and welcoming scent as I claimed those lips hungrily, allowing my hand to roam firmly over her tantalizing curves. I trailed sweet kisses over her body as I took her clothes off.

"You're so fucking beautiful!" I managed to say.

"Theo..." she moaned, 'I've missed you..."

I enjoyed the soft tenderness of her fingers on my body as she did the same for me. My heart skipped a beat to see her eyes darken with desire as she took in every inch of my body.

Once naked, I guided her to the makeshift bed, making sure she was relaxed and comfortable.

Kissing her deeply, I ran my hand between her thighs, feeling her heat intensify as my fingers edged closer to her wetness. A shiver ran over her body and she wrapped her arms around my neck, deepening the kiss.

When my touch landed on the tight bud of her womanhood she arched her back in response and then let her hands roam across my back and down my sides. It was my turn to shiver and I felt her smile against my lips.

I rubbed her gently and then with more urgency as her hand found its way to my hardness and gently stroked it until it was fully erect and in need of release. I leaned back and then lowered my head to her sweetness, licking and sucking as her hips moved in excited response.

I could hear her breath panting and feel her need to have me tighten every inch of her body. I lifted my head and placed her leg on my shoulder. I watched her face, a mixture of passion and expectation as I slowly pressed the tip of my cock to her entrance.

She was on fire for me. I used one thumb to rub her numb as I pressed my cock into her inch by inch. She grabbed a pillow to cover the squeals and moans she emitted along the way.

“Oh... Theo...” she moaned.

“You have no idea how much I’ve been dreaming about this moment!” I panted as I continued to thrust.

She was so good. She felt so fucking good that it was hard to maintain my control. Sliding in and out of her I was careful not to rush the experience. Her tightness clenched around me in a series of mind-blowing spasms as she exploded in her release.

I drew in my breath holding steady until she relaxed again. Then I turned her over onto her hands and knees, kissing the trail of her spine as I curled my torso against her back.

I entered her from behind, holding her tightly as she buried her face into the bedding, muffling each moan and gasp of pleasure.

“Theo... oh, Theo...” she cried out her moan.

I finally let loose pushing in and pulling out as I lost all of my senses, feeling her second orgasm spasm around me as I released my own into her.

I held her in that position momentarily as I fought to clear my mind and come back to my senses. I relaxed my hold and Ciana turned to lie down and hold me in her arms.

How I wish we could spend the rest of our night doing this together, but we couldn’t. We were at the frontline, and being able to feel her once like this was already a luxury.

I kissed her forehead and started putting on her shirt for her.

After we both got dressed, she pressed her palms on my chest and looked up at me. She didn’t forget about our disagreement. “I want to stay by your side and help, Theo.’

I let out a sigh and circled my arms around her. “I want you to be by my side too. I really do. If you have to stay, then fine, I won’t make you go to the palace.”

“Really?” “However, I have a condition.”

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Ciana “What is it?” I asked.

“I can’t have you on the battlefield. If you have to stay, then promise me to stay in the tent. I will have guards posted to keep you safe.” “Then how is that any different from me going back to the palace?”

Theo cupped my face and kissed me again. “We have done things your way, but now can you meet me halfway for this one? Please, for me?”

I stared at him for a few seconds, then suddenly pushed him away. “Theo, that’s not fair! You can’t... do that to me!”

He was confused, “Do what to you?”

My face was burning. “You... can’t be so handsome and sexy when we are negotiating something serious. I can’t think straight!”

He arched an eyebrow and smirked, “I take that as a compliment.”

I cleared my throat and took a couple of deep breaths. “I can’t promise you, because I need to do something to help you on the battlefield.” “Ciana, I appreciate it, but-” “Theo, let me finish, please. In the past few months, what have you been trying to do?” I asked him.

“Persuade the packs that I didn’t want war and I’m different from Sebastian.” “And you did that by avoiding bloodshed,” I added, “you don’t want unnecessary loss of lives, not just for our men, but also for Luther’s army. Ultimately, they’re your citizens as well. Am I right?”

His gaze deepened and he nodded.

“But once Luther launches the attack, you and I both know, it’s almost impossible to avoid large-scale casualties. Even if we win, we would still lose hundreds if not thousands of lives.”

He sighed, “I know.” “What if I told you that I may have a plan to avoid that?”

He lifted his gaze to meet mine again, waiting patiently for me to explain.

“The only way to minimize casualties is to take down Luther as soon as possible. Luther had a little sister named Anna, she was his pride and joy. They were inseparable. However, he was forced to kill her by Sebastian.”

Theo clenched his hands.

I let out a sigh. Even though Luther was our enemy, he didn’t deserve to suffer like that.

I said a prayer for little Anna before I continued.

“Although it sounds heartless, the little girl Anna is going to be the breakthrough point for us. We need someone to dress like her and distract Luther. Then we’ll have warriors around Luther, or even yourself, to deliver the final strike. Without a leader, the rebellion will dissolve quickly and we can end the war without too much bloodshed.”

He paused for a moment and nodded. “That’s a great idea. I’ll get it arranged.” “Wait! Theo, I meant, I’m good at disguising, and I learned a lot from Greg and Sherry-”

But before I could finish my words, Theo took my lips and made me swallow the words I was about to say next.

I pushed against his chest and broke our kiss. “Theo, I can do th-” He obviously didn’t want to hear me out, and stopped me again with his lips. The only sound I could make was ‘em” and “urn.”

Then I heard him grit his teeth, “Don’t even think about it!” “Theo stop, um...um...’

I tried to dodge his lips, but he wouldn’t let me. He was determined and refused to hear any of my proposals that were considered risky in his opinion.

Suddenly, a childish voice said from the front of the tent. “I’ll do it!”

Theo stilled for a moment, and I took the opportunity to pull apart from him and turned to look at our visitor.

“Alexander?” Both Theo and I said in unison.

“I heard what you said. I can pretend to be Anna.’

I stared at Prince Alexander. “Y-you can talk...?” “Of course, I can,’ Alexander said, frowning slightly and crossing his arms, and giving me a look like an adult. ‘I don’t remember telling you I couldn’t.”

“Okay, I’m sorry. I’ve just... urn, just never heard you speak,’ I stuttered a little. Both of us were surprised and found it adorable that he was trying to be like a big man, all professional and composed.

“When I don’t talk, people leave me alone. They don’t think I’m fun or threatening, so they don’t bother me. I just watch,” he explained. “So, can I do it?”

I bit my lip to hide my surprise. He was only ten years old, yet he seemed so mature and emotionally intelligent. I sighed inwardly. It appeared that no kids growing up in the palace seemed to be able to have a simple and happy childhood.

“No!” Theo said quickly. ‘I told Ciana that she couldn’t do it and the same goes for you. It is too risky.” “I agree, Alexander. This is seriously dangerous. You’re too young and you can’t shift yet. You’ll be too vulnerable,” I said, looping my arm through Theo’s. We were a united front against the young prince.

Alexander’s chivalry and selflessness were admirable but neither of us wanted to see him hurt or in danger. At least, Theo and I agreed on that.

“Why not?” little Alexander tilted his head and asked. “If Ciana’s plan works, we can save thousands of lives. I am also a descendant of Dark King Lycaon. These are my people, too.”

I crouched down so that I was at the same eye level as Alexander. He was a little smaller than an average ten-year-old boy, but I wanted to show that we were discussing this topic like three equal parties. A courageous young man like him didn’t deserve to be talked down to.

I countered, “That is incredibly mature and brave, but it isn’t that easy. Luther is dangerous. We’re not going to risk a young descendant of King Lycaon.” “But I want to fight for this country. It is my duty. I want to take this risk because I think saving thousands of lives is worth it,” Alexander stated, giving Theo and me a very serious look.

He frowned again, which slightly reminded me of Theo. He was incredibly mature and focused for someone so young. Part of me wanted to agree with him because he was so sure of himself and he truly understood the situation. That was a lot more than I could say about most kids his age.

“Another reason I should do this is because I am young.” He emphasized the word ‘is’, then he continued, “In this case, being young is an advantage. I can act like a child better than anyone because I am still a child.” “Theo...”

Theo held a hand up to keep me quiet.

“Exactly, you’re a child. I’m not going to put the youngest member of my family in danger. Alexander, you’re the only heir to the throne since Warren left us. You mean too much,” Theo insisted.

“So does Ciana. She means a lot to you too! Besides, she can’t shift, either. We have all the same strengths but I have one more than her, I’m the right age,” he pressed, nodding to me.

It was true. Alexander’s arguments were rational. If anyone could convince Luther that they were his sister, it would be someone that was a similar age and height to Anna when Luther had last seen her.

“Oh Goddess,’ I whispered. “You’re being too logical. I don’t think there is any argument to counter that.”

Alexander wasn’t acting out desperately or emotionally either. He was calm and collected the whole time. He’d considered all his options and he wanted to stand up for what was right and to serve his country.

I didn’t know what to say because I was half inclined to let Alexander do what he was asking to do at this point.

Theo was equally speechless beside me.

“Believe me, there isn’t,” Alexander said proudly, puffing up his chest.

However, Theo just shrugged and shook his head.

“No... we’re not negotiating here. If the choice is between sending Alexander into the wolf’s den or fighting, then we will fight. It is what Luther wants anyway.” Theo’s voice was firm and unyielding, putting his foot down.

I understood where he was coming from. I didn’t want to see Alexander get hurt or be put in harm’s way. But, none of us wanted thousands to die on this battlefield just because Luther wanted to fight for his revenge.

We all had an obligation to try and diffuse the situation as much as possible. If that meant killing Luther first and disbanding his loyalists, then Alexander’s help might actually be needed. Despite Theo’s protests.

“Theo, before you completely shut this idea down... I think we should talk about this. The three of us can put our heads together and brainstorm something,” I suggested. If we all got talking, we might be able to come up with something that still accomplished our goal without directly putting Alexander in harm’s way. He was a brilliant child, after all, Theo had the battle experience, and I knew Luther best.

I thought for a moment and started, "First of all, Alexander doesn't need to get too close to Luther. From a distance, as long as we can get Luther's attention, that'll be enough."

Theo shook his head. 'No. Still too dangerous.' "Uncle Theo, you were already fighting in battles when you were ten,' Alexander pointed out.

Theo sniffed and glared at him. "How do you know that?" "I watch and I listen, remember?" "That wasn't something to be proud of," Theo grumbled, probably thinking back to his unpleasant childhood and the cruel training his father put him under. I gave his hand a comforting squeeze.

Alexander continued to expertly argue his case, "Confronting Luther as his sister isn't nearly as dangerous as fighting dreadful and ruthless criminals. You put yourself at risk when you were young. This won't even be that bad. I'm not even confronting him directly, I'll just be a distraction in the distance." "I can be close behind Alexander to protect him if the need arises," I added as I decided to switch to Alexander's side. I could see the benefit in Alexander's assistance. Yes, there was a risk, and I'd never support an ordinary kid going to the battlefield.

However, Alexander was one of the Crimsons, a descendant of the Dark King Lycaon. He had a country to shoulder and that was his fate. There wasn't an easy way for him to grow up.

"Theo, to take down Luther, you would have to get close enough to him while he is distracted by us, which means you'll be able to keep an eye on us. Thus, you are our best protection."

Theo still didn't seem convinced.

"Please, Uncle Theo. This is the least I can do for our people," Alexander pleaded, tugging at his sleeve.

I glanced at Theo. His face was a mask and I wasn't sure if he was angry or not. I rubbed his arm to get his attention.

"Theo, I think we should trust Alexander. I trust him. So, you should too. He's not just an ordinary kid. He's a royal prince. A descendent of the most powerful bloodline in the world, just like you."

Theo snorted. He glared at me, then glared at Alexander.

I smiled hopefully and Alexander gave Theo a little pout.

Theo looked from me to Alexander and I could see the struggle behind his eyes. "Fine, you win!" he growled, shaking his head.

'Yes!' Alexander cheered.

Theo sighed helplessly, "I'll go get the troops ready. Meet you back here in one hour. Is that enough time for you both to get ready?" "For sure," I nodded, "I would need to borrow Sherry or Greg for ten minutes to do a quality check before we leave." "I'll let them know." Theo nodded and pulled away from me but Alexander stood in front of him, holding his arms out like a wall, stopping Theo.

"Wait,' the young prince said firmly, glancing at me quickly.

"What else, Alexander?" Theo asked, arching an eyebrow.

“You guys should finish it.” “Finish what?” “Your kiss. I interrupted your kissing before. You should probably finish that now before you go. I don’t mind,” he said, grinning slyly.

I gaped at the young boy and my eyes nearly bugged out of my head. My cheeks burned so hot I thought they’d set the tent on fire. If there’d been a shovel nearby, I would have dug a hole in the ground and disappeared into it forever.

Theo frowned for a moment. Then, he turned to me and grabbed me. Before I could protest, he pulled me against him and planted a wet, passionate kiss on my lips.

Any thoughts of struggle vanished and I kissed him back just for a moment until he pulled away.

Theo smirked at Alexander. “A very good point, Alex. You should talk more in the future.” With that, he left the tent.

My cheeks were scarlet and I couldn’t believe the two of them! Alexander was still grinning goofily at me as Theo left.

“Shall we start?” The cute little troublemaker tilted his head and asked me innocently, as if he wasn’t one of the culprits of my embarrassment.

“Alright, let’s work on your disguise,” I cleared my throat, motioning for Alexander to come closer to me. I pulled the picture Alpha Ellsworth gave me out of my pocket and studied the way Anna was dressed.

We had to get Alexander dressed up just like her.

Disguising as a different gender normally would take a little time, I’d done that myself. Luckily, it was much easier for kids.

“There are some spare clothes in this bag. Help me look for something like in this picture?” I asked, handing it over to Alexander.

While we searched through the clothing, Alexander became quiet again. I glanced at him from time to time, wondering what thoughts were going through his mind.

We found a few old outfits that we could throw together to make Alexander look like Anna in the picture. He stood still while I dressed him and fixed his hair.

Suddenly, Alexander said, “I wish you could stay with him forever.” “Pardon me?” “Uncle Theo was always alone. Before you came to the palace, other than exchanging brief words with Beta Jake for his work, I watched how he spent days or even months in dead silence. Then you arrived. I could tell he wasn’t lonely anymore. I’ve even seen him smile when he is by himself.” “Oh, well, I think a lot has changed in his life recently. There are quite a few things he has to be happy about,” I smiled.

“No,” Alexander shook his head. “It is because of you. Before you arrived, his entire wing, or even the whole palace, felt dark. He doesn’t know how many people are scared of him and how many people are affected by him.” “His moods change the weather, huh?” I joked.

“Yes. Only now, the palace is sunny... mostly. Will you promise me that you’ll always be there for him, so he’s never lonely again?” Alexander asked me with a serious look on his face.

My heart melted. I could always tell Theo loved me, but it was a pleasant surprise to know I made him happy even when I wasn't with him. I of course had intended to be with him for as long as I could.

"I promise I will always be there for him." I gave Alexander an assuring smile, lifting a hand, "Pinky promise."

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Theo

Ciana was just finishing up with Alexander's disguise when I returned.

"Tensions are high. The battle is going to start any moment/ I informed them.

"We are ready, aren't we?" Ciana looped an arm around Alexander.

"We are ready," Alexander agreed in a high pitched, girly voice.

I smirked and nodded. "Great. The two of you would have to get close to Luther so you can get his attention. I'll stick close to him, too."

"We'll see you there," Ciana said with a nod.

As I watched the two of them leave, my heart ached. Was I sending Ciana and Alexander off to get injured, or worse? I shook the worst possibility out of my head. Like Ciana said, they should be far away enough and I should trust them.

Quickly, I headed to the frontline where I could face Luther head-on and be nearby if I was needed. Troops on both sides were too tense and high-strung to hold themselves back.

As expected, Luther launched the attack shortly after my arrival.

"With me!" I ordered, motioning to my warriors. They fell in line behind me and moved in with a special maneuver that would give us the upper hand.

First, a wave of wolves attacked the Shadow warriors, then the second batch of my troops started fighting with the packs that supported Luther.

The joint attack pushed Luther's arm back and we gained ground quickly. I smirked at Luther as he shouted to his warriors not to be weak and not to give in.

"Jake, send word to Luther's followers that anyone who surrenders won't be charged with treason or face any retaliation from me," I ordered, nodding to Jake.

He relayed my message to several scouts and they dispersed into the crowd, delivering my message.

Suddenly, several of Luther's followers didn't look so sure they wanted to be there fighting anymore.

"NO!" Luther roared. "Don't listen to his lies! Theo is trying to trick all of you, don't fall for it! He will do anything for victory."

"It's scary losing control, isn't it?" I sneered at Luther.

“Theo is a Monster! He’ll tell whatever lie he has to to win. If you stop fighting, he’ll slaughter us all! I’ll prove to you the kind of man he is!” Luther shouted.

Luther snapped his fingers and several warriors muscled their way to the frontlines. They were holding hostages between them, bound and gagged. Warren was one of them. He was bruised and beaten and looked like he hadn’t slept for days.

I clenched my fists at my sides and ground my teeth together.

The second hostage was a woman in a white robe and a black mask. She was shivering and whimpering behind the mask. Ciana had told me who she was.

“If you don’t back off, Theo, I’m going to kill these two hostages. Now, keep fighting and prove that you don’t care about anyone but winning,” Luther challenged. “If you don’t back off, I’ll kill them instantly.”

Luther lifted his fingers, ready to snap them. His guards had knives at Warren’s and Maggie’s throats.

The warriors closest to Luther stopped fighting and stared at the woman in white.

“Is that Luther’s ambassador?”

“Why did he take her hostage?”

“Wasn’t she his most loyal supporter?”

I took a deep breath and unclenched my fists. Luther wasn’t doing himself any favors by forcing a fight when I was offering peace and by taking his own ambassador hostage. It was possible, his alliance would crumble all on its own.

I knew better than to think fanatics would change so easily.

Luther smirked and pulled the black mask off his ambassador. Apparently, her white robe and black mask outfit were how most of the allies saw her dressed.

When her face was revealed, I heard gasps from the crowd. “M-Maggie?”

Even though I had gotten the report from Sherry, Greg and Ciana that Maggie was still alive, my heart still hammered in my chest seeing her again with my own eyes.

Relief and pain both swelled in my chest. On one hand, the fact that she was alive and I really hadn’t killed her lifted a huge weight from my heart; but on the other hand, it

stung that she chose to betray us all.

Regardless of how I felt about Maggie, I knew I couldn’t watch the twins die in front of my eyes again. Immediately, I threw my arm up in the air. Jake let out a long howl and my warriors stopped fighting.

With the confusion, Luther’s warriors weren’t advancing even though we stopped fighting. They were starting to pay attention to Luther and me. I was worried that we’d given up the high ground with this little stall tactic.

“Maggie! Tell me this isn’t true!” Demarco’s anguished howl filled the valley. My eyes shot to him and I saw the look on his face. He was standing at the edge of the valley still, with his fifty thousand allies, staying neutral in the conflict.

His eyes were fixed on Maggie, the look on his face was beyond heartbroken, beyond hurt. He was completely devastated, completely destroyed.

Maggie’s lips parted and she glanced over to Demarco, however, in the end, she didn’t say anything. Instead, she turned her full attention to Luther.

“Urgh!” Maggie snarled. She struggled against the guards that held her but couldn’t get away from them.

Huffing and puffing she tried to kick Luther and then tried to bite one of the guards.

“How could you do this to me, Luther? I trusted you. I’ve been your greatest ally!” she wailed.

Luther sneered and shrugged. “You’ve been useful. Now, this is how you can be more useful.”

“You bastard!” Maggie shouted at her ex-ally, still trying to break free. “Fine! If you have something against me, deal with me. At least, let Warren go!”

Warren looked a lot worse off than Maggie. She was being restrained and she looked thin and weak, but she wasn’t bruised and bloody. Warren had taken a lot of beatings and he wasn’t looking so good.

“Maggie, shut your face!” A snooty, female voice hissed.

A woman appeared beside Luther and tucked herself under his arm. She looked up at him with wide, adoring eyes.

If memory served, she was Luther’s lover, Jennifer. Ciana told me about her on the way back from Ortiz pack to Alvar pack.

“Jennifer,” Maggie snarled.

“Who do you think you are, challenging Luther? He is your leader. You should be offering to sacrifice yourself for his cause,” she said, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

Luther kissed Jennifer on the side of the cheek and looked at Maggie. He laughed wildly and shook his head.

“Dear, dear Maggie. I’m building a just and peaceful world. That is certainly worth the sacrifice of two people. You are my most trusted ally and we’ve supported the same cause. Jennifer is right, this is an honor. You’re sacrificing yourself for a world without Sebastian’s heir. That’s what you wanted, right?” he asked, eyeing Maggie pointedly.

My focus was on Luther, Maggie and Warren. Most of the attacks had stopped, but a few of Luther’s fanatics were still launching attacks at my warriors.

Someone got a shot into my stomach.

I snarled and thrust my fist into the guy’s chest, pushing him to the ground.

“Stay down!” I snarled.

“Theo, we have to do something. We won’t regain the upper hand,” Jake told me, moving closer to my side.

“I’m thinking!” I hissed.

It was a lose-lose situation and Luther knew it! If I kept the attack going, Luther would kill Maggie and Warren. I’d get a bad reputation for sacrificing my own siblings to win a battle.

But if I held back now, Luther’s army would win and wipe us all out. Everyone I cared about could get killed while Luther enacted his revenge crusade.

“Fuck! Theo, we have to do something!” Jake urged again.

“Let me go!” Maggie snarled, struggling against her guards again. “I’m not going to be your sacrifice!”

“And here I thought you believed in our cause,” Luther said, shaking his head. “You should be willing to lay down your life, as should everyone, to see our vision realized.”

“I joined with you because I wanted to be part of the change, not dead,” Maggie shouted.

“You’re missing the greater picture,” Luther told her. “If you die today, you’ll be dying in front of Demarco and Theo. One who loved you dearly and gave up everything for you. The other who you gave up everything for... ironic, isn’t it?”

I had to intervene. I’d stopped my army from attacking. If I swooped in, I could free Maggie and Warren and stop Luther’s plan in his tracks. With a few steps, I moved toward the hostages.

“Stop right there!” Luther snarled. He leapt toward Maggie and held a knife to her throat. “I’ll kill her first if you move again.”

“No!” Warren said, his voice hoarse and rough like he hadn’t spoken in days.

“Alright, just... don’t hurt her,” I said, holding my hands up in surrender. I planted my feet firmly on the ground. “I’ll do what you ask.”

The entire battle had stopped at this point. All the shifters that had been trying to reignite the battle had given up and everyone was focused on Maggie, Luther, and what was unfolding with us.

“Y-you’re not mad at me?” Maggie asked. She immediately stopped struggling against the guards and met my eyes.

I nodded and gave her a soft look. She supported Luther, but there was a chance I could still win her over. If Maggie began to support me again, Demarco would too and Luther would be far outnumbered.

“I’m not mad. I’m just glad that you’re alive,” I admitted, holding my hands up.

“Why...why aren’t you...” Maggie sniffled and shook her head, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Stop it! Just stop!” Luther yelled, his voice desperate. “Why aren’t you fighting back?! Stop acting like you’re some kind of philanthropist! You don’t care about any of us or what has happened to us!”

“You don’t know anything about who or what I am,” I countered.

“Well, it doesn’t matter, does it? If any of your warriors attack or defend themselves, I will kill Warren and Maggie. You’re at our mercy now!” Luther smirked, poking the knife at Maggie’s neck.

Maggie flinched and met my eyes. “Fight back, Theo! We don’t need your pity. Don’t you know, you aren’t even related to us. We’re not family. Don’t lose because of us!”

Luther growled and pressed the tip of the knife to Maggie’s throat, drawing a prick of blood.

I tensed, willing myself not to move and risk her getting killed in front of me, again. I was upset about her betrayal, but I didn’t want her to die.

“Shut up, bitch! This isn’t your call.”

“Your target is me, Luther. Let them go. It doesn’t matter if they are my siblings or not. Even if they were citizens that I didn’t know, I wouldn’t give up on them or let them come to harm,” I insisted.

“That’s a good show,” Luther taunted, rolling his eyes.

I knew it wasn’t a show. The three of us grew up together. Blood related or not, we were family and they were my brother and sister.

“You have my word. Let them go,” I demanded again.

Luther laughed, throwing his head back and clutching his chest. He laughed so hard the knife practically slipped from his hand.

“You’re a hypocrite!” he cried. He pointed the knife at me. “You think anyone actually believes you? You’re just putting on a big show. It is all a game!”

“Luth? Brother, please, stop this,” a high-pitched, child’s voice spoke from behind Luther.

My heart thumped loudly against my chest.

Alexander and Ciana were here, right in the middle of the battlefield. If this plan didn’t work, I stood to lose the rest of my family!

Luther’s smile faded and his laughter stopped. He stood perfectly still, except for the knife that trembled in his hand. His entire body was rigid.

Anna?”

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My mind raced with the impossible decision I faced. Luther had put me between a rock and a hard place. Alexander was there as a distraction but how long would it last?

‘Theo?

I blinked, my eyes snapping to Warren. He was connecting with me through the mindlink.

Theo, you focus on Luther. I’ll get Maggie,’ he said.

'Y-you kept the mindlink... why?' I was too startled to say anything more intelligent to solve the crisis ahead of us than to ask the low priority question.

If Warren kept the mindlink, that meant he still saw me as the Alpha of the royal pack and the Alpha King. I thought he had betrayed us and turned his back against me for all time. Why had he remained in the royal pack? Didn't both he and his sister hate me?

Warren's mental voice took on a dry, humorless note. "I'm not a prince. My entire life has been a big joke. However, after everything, good or bad, you are the only one who has never lied to me. Anyway, we can talk about that later... right now, you need to kill Luther."

With a roar, Warren broke free from his guards. He jumped at the ones holding Maggie. However, the guards reacted quickly, and Warren missed his best chance to rescue Maggie.

Demarco blinked himself out of his shock and addressed his pack. "To the king! Fight for Warren and Maggie!"

His army shouted and snarled and readied for battle.

I respected that. Regardless of what Maggie did, Demarco still chose to save his mate.

Luther, on the other hand, was still staring at Alexander. Finally, when Demarco's army joined mine, he snapped out of his daze.

"You're not... you're not Anna! You're nothing but an imposter!" he shouted. "You little fiend! How dare you try and distract me?!"

"Give it up, Luther. We have a stronger force now. Your own allies are turning against you and we have greater numbers now," I shouted, motioning to the massive army that had assembled behind me.

"Never! Your father forced me to kill Anna, my eight-year-old sister. He forced me to kill her with my own hands, did you even know that? She was only eight, so small and innocent. She trusted me and I..."

"That was my father, not me," I reminded him. "Luther, it's all in the past now. Let's move forward."

"It doesn't matter! His tainted blood still runs in your veins! She didn't even know what was going to happen to her... I would have died instead of her, but Sebastian wouldn't let me. He promised my pack would be safe if I did that one thing..." Luther's eyes were wild with anger and hatred.

His voice carried over everyone gathered in the valley. I knew some might feel sorry for him but I also knew it would reveal his true motives for revenge, not peace. I let him tell the sad story because no one would ever believe his desire for peace now.

When Ciana proposed the plan, she kept it very simple and factual. I figured she didn't want me to feel too bad about my father's horrendous crime. Although, I knew what my father had made Luther do, hearing the truth from the very person himself made the truth a hundred times more horrendous and disturbing.

Luther's words settled uncomfortably in my stomach. These were some cruelties that even Sebastian hadn't wanted me to know about.

"I did what I had to in order to save my whole family. My plan was to leave the pack and live in exile for what I did... but in the end it didn't matter. Sebastian was a liar!" Luther shrieked, pointing at me like I was my father.

I'd always thought my father's interest in turning me into a killer was because of my power. It turned out, he was just a fucking savage and wicked psycho, who got joy watching children suffer from pain...

"I killed Anna for the greater good and you know what Sebastian did? He went back on his word and killed my entire pack! My entire family was gone! I wanted him to kill me too, but he just laughed and walked away. That day, I vowed I would destroy his entire legacy like he did my family!" Luther shouted.

"Luther, Sebastian didn't kill your entire family," Ciana's voice called out. She stood behind Alexander, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"You think this little imposter can fool me? Anna is dead!" Luther snapped, glaring at Ciana.

I readied to pounce if he even took one step closer to them.

"Not Anna. Your aunt Nita. Sebastian spared her and brought her to the palace.

Through her, you still have family. And Theo... he's your cousin. If you kill Theo, then you would really destroy the rest of your family! Is that what you really want?" she asked.

Cousin?

Ciana took me by surprise. This was the first time I'd heard it. However, for whatever reason she chose not to tell me earlier, I trusted her.

I'd never put the pieces together. My mother had been from Ortiz Pack, and I hadn't ever looked beyond that. She was the Ortiz pack Alpha's daughter, I just didn't expect that she had a nephew because she'd never mentioned anything about her side of the family.

"Luther, we can sort this out. You can have part of your family back if you just stop this attack," Ciana pleaded.

Luther glanced at me and I nodded.

Yes, I was shocked, but it didn't matter. I found out that my closest siblings, Maggie and Warren weren't blood related to me just a few months ago, and now I discovered that Luther, my greatest enemy, was blood related to me?

"That's impossible," Luther muttered, but his anger had died down considerably.

Suddenly, Luther laughed so hard that tears streaked down his cheeks. He doubled over and clutched his stomach, his face turning red.

"She's a traitor! What did she do... sell herself out for status and luxury? She's no better than Sebastian. Nita should've died 25 years ago! Instead, she stayed married to that hideous monster, betraying her pack, and birthing his grotesque bloodline!" Luther snarled, his eyes bloodshot and crazy.

"You have no idea what she went through!" Ciana argued.

“She deserves to die!” Luther snapped.

I saw the shock and fear in the eyes of everyone close to Luther. All his allies were starting to realize just how crazy he was and they didn’t want to support his insane vendetta. They realized they weren’t actually fighting for peace. Many of them began to back away from him.

Some of them even switched sides on the battlefield and joined my army, a safer place to be at that moment.

“Damn you! Damn all of you to hell! Anyone that abandons me will suffer the same fate as Theo. If the whole world abandons me, then I will destroy the entire world!” Luther

shouted and snarled, pointing at anyone close to him.

Luther reached into his pocket and pulled something out that I couldn’t see.

“Theo, stop him!” Warren shouted, “Kill him now. Don’t let him open it...”

“Open what?” I asked. I charged toward Luther realizing that he held something that could very likely destroy the world like he threatened.

Above us, the sky darkened as thick clouds rolled in and a dark, crimson glow enveloped the valley. It was like the whole valley was turning into the Moonlit Crystal.

Only the light of the silver moon showed through the dark clouds as they swirled around the perfectly round, silver sphere.

The moon seemed to tremble in the sky and in front of it, a red disk appeared, covering the silver moon completely in red. It was the Moonlit Crystal creating an illusion.

Luther’s lips moved furiously as he chanted a dark spell. “By the light of the full moon, bright and crimson on high, the shadow reunites with the light. From silver to red the world will dim. Open the gates releasing the darkness within!”

I leapt at Luther, ready to tear his throat out to stop the spell, but I couldn’t get close. It was like the magic cast a protective barrier around him. I ran at him from every direction but I could never get closer than six feet in any direction.

It was like he had an invisible, magical shield around him, wrapping him and his confidants in the circle.

“Shit!” Warren called on me, panicking. “Theo, he still has Maggie!”

“Fucking hell!” I muttered under my breath, but all my efforts to get closer to Luther turned out to be without avail.

The light from the two moons seemed to split the sky open. I stopped trying to attack Luther and stared at the crack in the cloud. Behind them, a misty, swirling darkness poured down from the opening. Like a floating mist, it descended directly toward the valley.

Fear ran through the gathered armies. It was so thick that I could almost taste it in my mouth and nose. Everyone’s bones trembled as the terrifying, all-consuming darkness approached.

I had no idea what that darkness was but I knew I had to stop it. It seemed like it would devour the entire world, starting with us in the valley. But I couldn't get anywhere near Luther. What was I supposed to do!?

The darkness inched closer and closer. My kingdom, my world was about to be devoured, yet other than watching our death float down to us, there was nothing I could do!

Two delicate hands grabbed mine and pulled my gloves off. The sudden movement snapped me out of my trance.

"What-"

Before I could put my gloves back on, one soft hand slipped into mine and held on tightly. Immediately, someone's life essence poured into me.

I stilled for a moment as a weak female voice called me, "Theo..."

"M-Maggie, what are you doing!?"

I tried to fling away her hands when I saw who was holding onto me. But I couldn't! At that moment, I felt a second life force getting sucked into me, too.

"Don't... let go," she begged, gripping her fingers tightly to mine.

"No! Maggie! You're killing yourself!*

Maggie shook her head. "No. I'm saving us all."

I realized she was still close enough to Luther to be inside his protective bubble. She had her other hand grabbing Luther's wrist and was using herself as a conduit. We made a chain and I was sucking Luther's life out through Maggie!

Luther grunted and figured out what was happening, his eyes filled with disbelief as blood faded fast from his face.

Maggie was weakening quickly.

"Maggie, let go," I said, trying to shake her hands off.

"No, Theo... hold me... I... I want to do this. Please... tell Demarco... tell him that I'm sorry I lied. This... this is my best ending. I... couldn't... be... happier..."

Her words trailed off as her life left her.

Her final emotions weren't fear or terror, which was what I was used to. It was something I'd never experienced from any other victims of my power before.

They were determination, relief, and a small bit of regret.

The life left her eyes but there was a faint smile on her face.

"Maggie!" I roared.

Her body fell to the ground and I dropped to my knees. Even at that moment, she was still clenching Luther's wrist tight.

"No!" Demarco cried, his voice turning to a miserable howl as he watched Maggie die, for a second time.

I wanted to release her but I could still feel Luther's life essence pouring into me. My vision blurred, but I had to keep contact until Luther was dead.

"What... what is this..." Luther turned to face me, and couldn't pull away from Maggie.

"You're not taking the world with you when you go!" I hissed at him.

"Why... did you..." Luther murmured to Maggie, his voice nothing more than a husky whisper as the rest of his life's essence drained out of him.

The crimson glow over the valley vanished and the terrifying darkness from the sky folded back into itself. The moon turned back to silver and everything began to return to normal.

I held Maggie's body in my arms and stared at her peaceful face.

In the end, she chose to sacrifice herself.

Not for a world without Sebastian's heirs, but a world for Sebastian's heirs.

"Was it really worth your life, Maggie?" I asked her gently, but this time, she really wouldn't be able to respond.

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Ciana

Worry tightened my heart.

What happened? I couldn't see from this distance but it couldn't be good. When I got to where Theo and Luther were, I noticed there was a huge space cleared around them like no one wanted to get close.

Theo had Maggie in his arms and was slowly lowering her to the ground.

"Theo, are you okay?" Then when I saw Maggie's lifeless pale face, I gasped, "MAGGIE!"

Theo was expressionless, brow slightly creased. He stared at Maggie for a moment longer and looked up to me. "She... sacrificed herself," he murmured distantly.

Luther was on his knees, wavering from side to side. Just before he crumpled into a heap, Jennifer ran out of the crowd and grabbed him. She wrapped her arms around him, tears in her eyes, and lowered him to the ground.

The air was still and quiet as all of Luther's allies realized he was dying. Then whispers swept through the crowd, but still no one moved away from where they were. Some people looked like they wanted to run and hide. Others dropped to the ground on their knees showing they were ready to surrender.

Soon, all of them were on their knees, waiting to be told what to do.

The battle seemed to have ended. For a moment, I was still processing the situation. Was everything over?

Suddenly, Demarco let out a long, low cry and pushed through the warriors. He was headed straight for Maggie and Theo. He shoved Theo out of the way and took Maggie into his arms.

“No! Why? Why! I just got you back. Why would you leave me again?” His wails turned into heart piercing howls that filled the air and drowned out the whispers.

With a heavy sigh, Theo rose to his feet and glanced at me, giving me a quick onceover. Probably to make sure I wasn't hurt.

I nodded at him, silently confirming that I was okay. I hadn't been in the thick of the fighting.

Warren stood by Demarco and Theo, his face was a stony mask. I couldn't tell what he was thinking or feeling, nor did I know what to say. His sister was dead before his eyes, again. Only this time, she wasn't coming back.

In Jennifer's arms, Luther gasped and shuddered.

I started, my eyes snapping to him. I thought he was dead, but it seemed like he had a little life left in him now.

“Fate is unfair...” he murmured in a quiet whisper, and when he tilted his head and saw me, he asked. “Ciana... what did I... do wrong?”

He gasped again and with one, last shuddering breath, he died. He went completely limp in Jennifer's arms, with his eyes open, staring at me.

I walked over to his body and crouched down, placing my hands over his still eyes and closed them.

“Fate is never fair. Our destiny is only determined by our choices. May you rest in peace...” I sighed. Even if I had intended to answer his question, he wasn't able to hear it now.

I should've been relieved that Luther was dead and wasn't going to cause any more problems. However, a part of me felt sorry for him. I wished he could have overcome his need for revenge, rediscovered his family, and moved on.

But he wasn't able to let go. If he was alive, he would not give up his goal to bury the entire world with his hatred.

My spine tingled when I thought of the darkness that had nearly devoured the entire valley. Had it been a terrifying illusion or had it been real? I wasn't sure I wanted the answer to that.

Jake appeared beside Theo and bowed his head quickly. “The remainder of Luther's allies have surrendered. They are pleading for the new king's mercy.”

Theo turned to Jake and began discussing the next steps. “Round up the Alphas of Luther's allies and take them to my tent...”

I tuned out Theo's instructions. Instead, my focus turned back on Warren. I was worried about him, after losing Maggie a second time, and for real this time. When he thought she died before, he had been very distraught and gone into a depressive state.

This was the second time he'd had to watch her die. I couldn't imagine how he would feel.

It was like being stabbed once in the heart, and after he went through all the pain and tears, someone told him it was just a nightmare. Yet, as soon as he woke up, it happened again, except, this time it was real.

What would Warren do, knowing she was really gone? There was no mistaking what had happened with Theo and Maggie. How was he going to react?

I wanted to go to him and comfort him but he was just standing there like a statue. The last time we'd been through this, he hadn't wanted my comfort. He'd pushed me away and blamed me for supporting Theo.

I half expected Warren to snap any second and become that angry, depressed, hateful person he was.

It didn't matter. Warren was my friend. He'd helped me countless times and despite his wanderings, he'd remained loyal to our friendship and his brother. If there was anything I could do to provide solace for him, I would, whether he wanted it or not.

Before I could go to him, Theo approached and nudged Warren's arm. He was being so careful not to touch anyone since his gloves had gone missing.

"I know there is nothing I can say. No words will ease your pain but I want you to know that Maggie... She sacrificed herself to save us. This was not a malicious act. The entire kingdom owes her a debt of gratitude, including me, and none of us will ever forget," Theo said.

I glanced at Maggie's peaceful face as if I could still see her elegant and graceful smile that she usually wore. It was no longer a permanent, fake mask that she used to deceive others anymore. This time, it was genuine and tranquil.

After years of being away and chasing a destiny that didn't belong to her, Maggie chose to give up her life for Theo and his people, his world. She restored her honor as a princess, as a royal, and as Theo's sister.

I looked at Theo, his gaze towards Maggie was calm but I couldn't quite read him. Did he know how Maggie had felt about him? I wasn't sure whether Greg had told him every small detail about what

Maggie said. At least for me, I hadn't found an appropriate chance to update Theo on Maggie's romantic life.

I wondered whether or not it was worth telling him sometime, so that he knew why she was willing to sacrifice herself for him. Or maybe I should just leave it alone as it would just add more unnecessary drama to the already chaotic family relationship.

I turned my attention to Warren, who shook his head and smiled kindly at Theo. It was a pleasant surprise.

“Maggie mindlinked me before she... went. She told me that this was her choice, how she chose to save the kingdom, and she was at peace with her decision,” Warren explained.

“I am still sorry, all the same. The world is a darker place without her,” Theo said, bowing his head.

Demarco still clung to her, crying and rocking her body. “She saved us all. She saved us all,” he chanted.

I wasn’t sure he’d be able to overcome her death a second time, especially since he never got his answers about her lies and suppressing their matebond. It probably didn’t matter to him anymore. All that mattered was he loved her and he could remember her as a loving mate.

The fact that she had sacrificed herself to save everyone might help Demarco find some peace and comfort in her demise, but I doubted it. Fortunately, he didn’t seem like he was going to turn around and declare war on Theo.

We stood around a moment longer while Jake organized Theo’s troops to help with the post-battle clean up. He was corralling all of Luther’s loyal followers to one tent where I suspected they’d swear new oaths of loyalty to Theo and the crown.

Warren didn’t want to leave Maggie’s side until the medics came to collect her. Theo and I waited with him. They would collect Luther, too, who wasn’t far from us.

When the clean up crew moved to Luther’s body Jennifer sobbed and wailed. She swatted at them, laying herself across his body like she could protect him.

“No! Leave him alone. Leave me with him,” Jennifer cried, holding onto him tighter.

“It’s over, Jennifer,” I said gently, moving to her side. “It is time to let him go.”

Instantly, she stopped sobbing and she raised her eyes to me. As soon as I met her pain-filled eyes, her gaze turned into fire, burning me with hatred and ferocity.

“This is your fault, you heartless bitch!”

She jumped to her feet and shifted, pouncing on me.

White hot pain seared my side as her claws raked me from shoulder to hip, tearing through skin and muscle.

I groaned and tried to shake her off but the pain blinded me. Jennifer snarled and snapped in my ear and then her teeth sank into my neck and shoulder. Warm liquid poured from my neck and soaked into my clothes, hot, wet, sticky, and rusty.

My knees gave out and I crashed to the ground, Jennifer still on my back. Searing pain burned through me and my blood covered my neck, arms, and hands and had soaked through my shirt. Through my blurry vision, all I could see was deep crimson all over the ground.

Blood continued to gush out and soon I felt like I was soaking in a small, sticky, metallic smelling pool. For a moment, I wondered how my body could even hold that much liquid.

Something heavy collided with Jennifer and she wasn't on top of me anymore. I fell backward to the ground and lifted my head enough to see Theo, in wolf form, tackling Jennifer.

She fought back fiercely for a moment and then Theo let her go, running back to my side.

Jennifer let out a mournful howl. She grabbed Luther's arm in her jaws and dragged his dead body away. No one else tried to stop her.

I could still feel hot blood pumping out of my neck. My mind was fuzzy and all my limbs went numb and tingly. I started to get cold.

"We need a stretcher, here, now!" Jake ordered, motioning to me. "The dead can wait. She's badly injured!"

Two medics with a stretcher came over. When they moved me, my whole world was spinning around in a million directions. I hoped I would pass out before they had to move me again!

Dottie was there too. I recognized her voice as she spoke to Jake and Theo but I couldn't see her from where I was on the stretcher. I wanted to tilt my neck and look at her but the gaping hole Jennifer had left ached and protested with sharp jabs of pain when I tried.

My entire body was weak and heavy like I was nothing but dead weight. I was exhausted, and even feeble breathing seemed hard.

My mind seemed to have detached from my body and I was floating over myself, looking down and seeing how pale and weak I looked.

The wounds didn't look as bad from the outside, but the blood loss was immense. Jennifer must have bit my artery. I should have been healing but it didn't look like I was.

Dottie's concerned face as she hovered over me confirmed for me that I was healing too slowly.

With how much blood I'd lost, I figured I should just be grateful I was alive... for the moment.

Theo shifted back to human form and he ran to my side. He grabbed my hand.

Suddenly, my mind rushed back into my body and I felt woozy and disoriented. Pain shot through me and the tingling in my limbs became unbearably painful.

I saw, clear as day, the look of horror on Theo's face.

Was this what it was like to have the life drained out of me?

I was half dead already but I could feel his hand like a hot iron in mine, and my life essence rushed to him involuntarily like dust being sucked by a vacuum.

Mentally, I panicked. Was I no longer immune to his ability? How was that possible? I was supposed to be special, fated to be with him! Why was this happening now?

Theo's mortified eyes widened further and he ripped his hand from mine. Thankfully, we'd only been in contact for a split second and he was still able to break away from me.

His eyes darkened with a look I'd never seen. I didn't think I would ever see the Dark King look terrified but in that moment, he was.

My heart thudded heavily in my chest and I wanted to say something but my mind was detaching from my body again. I could feel how slow my pulse was, how freezing my body was, and then the world went black.

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Warren

After Luther was dead, things settled down quickly. All of his former allies of Shadow vowed loyalty to King Theo and the battlefields were cleaned up so fast that it was almost like it never happened. Any concerns or doubts they'd had about Theo being like Sebastian were put to rest.

Minimal loss of lives. They did it. Theo and Ciana did it.

For those whose homes and packs were destroyed by Sebastian, Theo sent a lot of aid to their territories to help them rebuild their packs. They were also given the option of joining other packs if they felt there were no homes for them to return to.

Theo offered all the rebuilding and relocation assistance he could.

A lot of the ex-Shadow members, aka victims of Sebastian's deeds over the years, had to re-find their place in the world.

Just like me.

We'd held Maggie's funeral in the royal cemetery a couple of weeks ago. Theo had insisted, even though she wasn't blood related to the crown. I was grateful for the effort he put in, holding a grand funeral ceremony, worthy of a princess.

It had been a gray, solemn day, though, and my heart still ached with her absence.

I'd wanted to help Theo with the funeral arrangements, but he'd insisted on doing it all. so that I could have some time to mourn.

"Warren, leave this to me. This is the least I could do for Maggie. Also, it helps to take my mind off Ciana as well," he told me. He'd run himself ragged and there were a few days where I thought he might actually reach his breaking point with how much he had going on.

Standing before Maggie's grave, I leaned down to place a fresh rose on her gravestone.

"I miss you every day. I don't think that will ever go away," I muttered. I traced the letters of her name with the rose petals.

Theo had planted white flowers on the grave mound and they were just starting to bloom. I thought it was a very thoughtful gesture toward her.

“We have a lot of work to do to make the kingdom safe and stable again. It is work we wouldn’t even be able to do without your sacrifice, so, thank you,” I said. Sighing, I let the rose rest across her name. “I know I’ve been coming by every day, but things are going to get pretty busy now. I might not be by as often. Hopefully, you don’t resent me for that.”

I smiled and pressed my fingers to my lips, then placed them on the cold, gray stone. A last parting kiss for my beloved twin sister.

“At least, where you are, you can watch over me and Theo. Don’t be afraid to tell us when we are acting like idiots,” I said. I chuckled to myself.

“Prince Warren?” Someone called to me from across the cemetery.

Sighing heavily, I let my head fall back on my shoulders. I wasn’t even a prince anymore. Why did they keep calling me that?

I turned to see Beta Jake striding toward me. He looked very professional, all business.

“Prince Warren, the head of Internal Affairs, Alistair, has a meeting with you in ten minutes. There is also a budget waiting for your approval. Simon, the head of Treasury, would also like to go over how they plan to use that fund to rebuild the packs,” he explained.

“You know I’m not a prince anymore, right? I’m just a regular citizen. You can call me Warren,” I reminded him as we walked back to the palace.

“King Theo insists you are still his brother and he wishes you to keep your title. He says it is both an honor and a burden,” Jake replied politely.

I sighed and nodded. “Yes, it is at that.”

“He’s asked that you oversee the meetings with Alistair and Simon to make sure his wishes are carried out,” he told me.

I remembered I was struggling to find my place or figure out what my life would be like after Maggie’s death and after everything ended when Theo told me to remain his brother and stay to help out.

I accepted it with appreciation but didn’t expect that he also asked the court to keep my title, along with the responsibilities that came with it.

All I could say was that Theo’s job description for a prince was very different from Sebastian’s. I’d never been busier in my whole life. Well, after he put me through a 24/7

therapy called “working nonstop”, I no longer could spare even a few seconds to be sentimental.

“I’ll be right there,” I assured.

Simon and Alistair were waiting for me in Sebastian’s old office. Theo kept his own office and I was landed with the former, psychotic king’s.

Already, I’d had the thing gutted and redecorated. I didn’t want any reminders of Sebastian hanging around.

“What can I do for Internal Affairs?” I asked Alistair.

“We have some documents that need final approval. There are a few Alphas and Luther loyalists that have been reluctant to vow their loyalty. I’m asking for additional resources to investigate them and make sure they aren’t stirring up trouble now that one rebellion has been stopped,” Alistair said, placing the papers on my desk.

I scanned them quickly to make sure there was no mention of aggression, detainment, or otherwise using the power of the crown, or Theo’s name, to harm them or force them into compliance.

“Have your investigators send regular reports back on their findings and wait for further instructions after we review their reports,” I told him firmly.

“Yes, of course, Prince Warren,” Alistair agreed.

I signed the documents and handed them back. He left and Simon handed over the pack rebuilding budget.

It was a very thick packet of papers that took longer than I wanted to scan through.

“The budget seems sound,” I said with a nod. I put my signature at the end of it and handed it back.

“Thank you. Is there any chance for some leeway?” Simon asked.

“If you need additional funds, clear it with me or King Theo first”

“I will.”

Afterward, I stared at the hill of other paperwork I needed to ground through before the end of the day. After a sigh, I picked up the one from the top. I gotta start from somewhere, right?

15 hours later, I was finally able to put away the last file. Before Jake could squeeze in another meeting before midnight, I headed to Theo and Ciana’s room.

Since the day of the battle, Ciana had been unconscious. Whether it was because of the massive amounts of blood she lost, or that Theo’s power had sucked her life out, we didn’t know.

All that was clear was that she wasn’t waking up.

She hadn’t moved, hadn’t uttered a sound. Dottie was tending to her every day but she didn’t have any answers either.

When I got to the room, Dottie was leaning over Ciana, checking her pulse, while Theo was pacing against the wall.

He looked like he hadn’t slept in days, and he probably hadn’t. Between worrying over Ciana and trying to handle at least equal amounts of work as mine, if not more, it was a miracle he was still able to keep his eyes open and function like a person.

He hadn’t risked touching her since she’d passed out. Brook had been taking care of her primarily since Theo couldn’t. However, he hadn’t left her side and hovered over her.

Again, I couldn’t blame him.

“How is she?” I asked, moving to Ciana’s side. I sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand. Her skin felt so cold and clammy.

Dottie stared at us, eyes wide, as if she couldn’t believe what she found. My heart sank.

The last thing any of us wanted to hear was bad news about Ciana.

“Speak, Dottie!” Theo demanded. “Is everything okay? Is she okay?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. She is okay,” Dottie replied patiently, not offended by her king’s rushed tone, “Now that she’s recovered from the worst of it and her injuries are healing, I am confident that she is going to wake up. I’ve been monitoring her blood pressure, her pulse, and her blood cell counts. Everything is stabilizing.”

Both Theo and Brook let out a sigh of relief. Then Brook suggested, “Your Majesty, since Ciana’s situation is stable, why don’t you get some rest? You haven’t slept in three days.”

I glanced at Theo, who shook his head. “I’m fine.”

I noticed that he could barely look at Ciana. He was probably driving himself crazy with guilt over what had happened. It wasn’t his fault. How could he know that at that exact moment, Ciana would start being affected by his power?

I backed Brook up. “Come on, Theo. If you look all insane when she wakes up, you’re going to scare her. Besides, how do you plan to take care of her if you’re exhausted? It is better to sleep now while she is also sleeping.”

“Ciana’s body is recovering for sure,” Dottie also assured Theo, “And I agreed with Brook and Warren that you need some rest. Your Majes-“

“If that’s the case, why isn’t she awake, then?” Theo interrupted her. With minimal rest, Theo definitely wasn’t as composed as he usually was.

“Sometimes, the mind needs time to come back on its own. Rest assured, King Theo, Ciana will wake up. It is only a matter of time. And I-“

“Then why did you look so surprised earlier?”

Dottie let out a heavy sigh, and said in her soothing tone and well-paced speed again, “Your Majesty, I have been trying to tell you but you kept interrupting me and distracting me.”

This time none of us interrupted the conversation, and we waited for Dottie to continue.

She took her time and turned to Theo, looking him straight in the eye. She held his gaze and I could see how uncomfortable he was.

“What is it?” he asked, wouldn’t wait any longer.

Then a smile crept up Dottie’s face and she grinned warmly, a twinkle in her eye.

She revealed, “King Theo, you’re going to be a father. Miss Black is pregnant. Congratulations!”

Theo

Pregnant?

I stared at Dottie, who packed up and left after confirming the news again, leaving the rest of us still dumbfounded.

Had I heard her right?

Pregnant?

I glanced at Ciana, pale and unconscious on the bed. I couldn't help but think that I was the culprit who caused her misery, at least partially. What if I could never touch her again? What kind of future would we have? Ciana would never be safe with me again.

And a baby? A child would definitely not be safe with me! Would I even be able to hold my own child without putting him or her at risk?

I looked down at my hands, which were gloved, and wondered what having a child would mean.

If I couldn't touch her, would Ciana even want to be with me? I liked to think that our connection went beyond just physical and that we had real feelings for each other.

She was still a person and most people required physical closeness when they needed to be comforted or supported, when they were sad or upset. Would it be selfish of me to stay with her knowing that I'd never be able to fulfill that need?

Could we even be a family? I thought about any child I might have. If they inherited my power, they'd be condemned to the same lonely, terrifying existence I'd suffered. My father had the power, he'd passed it to me. There was no denying that it was in all of our blood.

Would Ciana resent me if our child had that power? She'd never be able to hug or hold her own child without worrying she'd get the life sucked out of her. And it would be my fault.

Ciana wasn't even awake yet and I was already considering all the reasons we couldn't be together anymore. The best way to handle this was to wait for her to recover. We could talk about what it all meant for us and our child.

As worried as I was about her and our future together, underneath it all, there was something else fluttering in my chest. It was the smallest sliver of hope, but I was almost overwhelmed by the happiness it brought.

I was going to be a father!

If it wasn't because of our undefined future and the fact that the woman of my life was still lying unconsciously next to me, I could totally bounce off the ground and scream to the world about the news!

When Sebastian was alive, I hated the idea of giving him what he wanted. Now that he was out of the picture, I was realizing for the first time that being a father could be so joyful yet terrifying at the same time!

Then the dark cloud of our uncertain future re-entered my mind.

I stuffed my hand in my pocket and there was the smooth, metal ring I'd been carrying around. My plan was to propose to Ciana once Luther was defeated. I would ask her to be my queen.

Now, it felt like it was weighing a million pounds and I didn't even know whether I had the courage to touch it.

Despite the fact that she was pregnant with my child, if I couldn't be what she needed, if I couldn't touch her or protect her from myself, was it the right thing to propose to her?

Suddenly, movement on the bed caught my eye.

Ciana's finger wiggled. She let out a deep sigh and muttered, "Water..."

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Warren immediately jumped up and grabbed a water glass from the table next to the bed. He put the glass to her lips and she drank.

I wanted to sit beside her and hold her hand but I wasn't sure I should touch her, even with gloves on. Would she blame me for what happened?

Ciana grunted and turned away from the water. Warren set it aside again.

She blinked several times and then opened her big, beautiful eyes. She sat up and her eyes immediately landed on me.

Forgetting my worries, I grabbed her in a fierce hug and kissed her passionately on the lips. Seeing her awake and alive was so overwhelming.

"Wh-" Ciana squirmed away from me and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "What the hell are you doing!?"

"Ciana!"

"Who are you?" she snarled at me. "Why are you kissing me!?"

"I..."

I glanced at Warren. He was as confused as me.

Was she playing some kind of joke? It was definitely not the right time for that.

When I looked back at Ciana, her eyes were wide with fear and genuine confusion. She clutched the bedsheets to her chest. She looked at all of us like she'd never seen us before and held one arm out like she was trying to keep us away.

I noticed how heavily she was breathing and I took a step back, holding my hands up. I didn't want her to freak out and have a panic attack.

"It's okay," I stepped back and lowered my voice to say to Brook, who was standing near the far side of the room. "Brook, maybe you should take this..."

She looked surprised as well.

Brook had helped care for Ciana when she was unconscious and I was really glad she'd decided to come back to the palace with Ciana after her short visit home.

Brook nodded and slowly approached the bed with a gentle smile. "Ciana, my name is

Brook. Do you remember me? We are really good friends."

Ciana's eyes followed Brook. She still looked confused but she relaxed when the rest of us backed up and Brook sat on the edge of her bed.

"Who are all of you?" Ciana asked more calmly. She looked at each of us with wide eyes, lingering on me the longest with a slight scowl.

"I'm Brook Ellsworth," Brook repeated. "That's Prince Warren and Beta Jake. You know us all very well."

"I do?" Ciana asked, looking at Brook.

"Yes, very much so," Brook assured gently.

Ciana didn't look entirely convinced, but she relaxed into the pillows. Every now and then, she shot me a quick, dirty look. That didn't bode well.

She didn't look at anyone else like that. Probably because I'd kissed her and she... she didn't know who we were.

And I'd been worried about whether to propose to her when she first woke up...

"Do you know who you are?" Brook asked.

"I'm Ciana Black, daughter of Alpha Soren Black of Pack Alvar," she said firmly. "Why am I here?"

My heart sank suddenly. She remembered who she was, she just didn't remember anything about her life from the palace. It was like she'd lost a year of memories.

Brook quickly explained to Ciana why she had come to the palace in the first place. She didn't delve into the details of all of our relationships, just maintained we were good friends.

"I don't... I need to get home," Ciana insisted suddenly. She tried to push the covers away and stand up.

Gently, Brook took Ciana's hands and kept her seated on the bed. "Ciana, that isn't a good idea. You're recovering from a major injury and your parents are still traveling."

"But I..."

"Please, stay here for now. At least, until you are fully recovered," Jake suggested. He moved up behind Brook and put an affectionate hand on her shoulder. When did he enter the room?

I noticed how Ciana's eyes warmed when she saw the gesture. It was almost a spark of recognition.

"If you leave, your family and pack will be incredibly worried about you. Once you're fully healed, they can come to get you here," Warren added.

Ciana looked from Warren to Jake to Brook. Her lips tugged up in an awkward smile, but I noticed how it faded when she looked at me again.

"I do feel kind of weak. I'll stay until I'm better... just keep the kissing creep away." She glared at me.

Jake chuckled and Warren cleared his throat.

"Ciana, that 'kissing creep' is Dark Prince Theo... rather, Dark King Theo," Brook said, giggling.

"Wh-what!?" she cried, her face paling. She held the blankets against her again like a suit of armor. Ciana shook her head and glanced at me, then shook her head again.

"It seems like you've lost only a little of your memory. One thing that happened in that time was Theo becoming king. You and the king are actually quite close," Brook added.

"Jake, Warren, a word?" I asked, nodding to the door.

"We'll be okay here. I'll fill Ciana in on some things she's missed," Brook said, smiling at us quickly.

I couldn't say anything but I hoped she wouldn't tell Ciana she was pregnant with my child. Ciana seemed to have enough issues with me. It would completely freak her out.

I felt I could trust Brook's judgment on what to tell her.

"What's going on?" I asked Jake and Warren when we got outside the room.

"She is suffering from partial memory loss. Fortunately, it only seems like she lost a specific chunk of time, not random bits and pieces," Warren said.

I wanted to tell him that was unfortunate enough for me! Ciana didn't remember our relationship at all! What was worse, she remembered me as a bloodthirsty prince and was very mistrustful of me.

"Why is this happening?" I asked sharply. Frustration swelled in my chest.

"Maybe it was when you sucked the life out of her," Jake suggested.

I grunted, glaring at him, even though he was only answering my question.

Warren tried to help my Beta out. "Theo, don't stare at Jake like that. I know it was an accident, but I agree with Jake, that's the only logical reason."

"You're right," I said with a sigh. "We should get back in there."

We went back in and Brook was telling Ciana a little about their recent trip to see her father.

I could read the look in Ciana's eyes and she did not look like she was ready to believe everything she was being told.

There was still that look of mistrust in her eyes when she looked at me.

Anger flared in my chest but what could I do about it? Getting in her face and getting upset would only push her away more. I needed to remind her of our relationship and rebuild it slowly, so that she trusted me again.

“And you’re Prince Warren?” Ciana asked, looking at Warren. “You look... never mind.”

Warren nodded and smiled warmly.

I saw the look of recognition in Ciana’s eyes and I remember how she told me when she first met Warren, she thought he was the boy in the woods she’d encountered. It was like she was reliving that experience all over again.

I glared at Warren, wishing he would just leave the room so that she wasn’t looking at him with googly eyes.

“Beta Jake... and Brook is your mate?” she asked.

Brook’s cheeks turned bright red and she covered her face.

“That’s right,” Jake said, smiling tenderly and putting his hand on Brook’s shoulder again. “Did you remember that?”

“No,” Ciana laughed, shaking her head. “But I see the way you two look at each other.”

“Well, hopefully you do remember soon. Because you’ve been a good friend to us both during this,” Jake said, winking at her.

Ciana smiled again and I could see how at ease she was with all of them.

I clenched my fists and stormed out of the room. As much as I didn’t want to be mad, I couldn’t help it.

Warren couldn’t help what was happening. It was just a replay of what we’d already been through with Ciana confusing the two of us. I couldn’t just jump in and say “remember that boy you found in the woods, that was me.”

She wouldn’t believe it right now, anyway.

Sighing, I rubbed the back of my neck and headed down the hall.

Behind me, the door opened and closed again. Hurried footsteps caught up to me.

“Alpha, what is wrong? Why did you leave? I thought you would be in there with Ciana, reminding her of your relationship for the rest of the night,” Jake said, keeping pace with me.

I snorted. “I think between you and Warren, she has all the male company she needs.”

“Uh... Alpha, Warren and I still have two high priority issues we need to look at. I’ll grab him and leave you alone with Ciana within 30 seconds.”

Sighing, I stopped walking and dragged my hand down my face. “Just stop, please. You’re not helping.”

“Sorry, Alpha. I know this is hard on you. It isn’t like Warren and I are trying to steal her attention. She’s pretty freaked out. I apologize.”

“No, it’s not your fault at all. Just that... I want her to remember me! I want her to...” I shrugged and glanced longingly down the hall at my bedroom.

To love me. Yes, I was selfish, but I couldn’t help it.

"It'll be okay," Jake said comfortingly.

"Right. She'll get her memory back just so I can suck it out of her again," I scoffed at myself sarcastically.

Jake managed to look positive. "You know, this might not be as bad as you think."

"Jake, please, just give me a minute." I'd never thought Jake was this wordy. All I needed was a little time so I could walk in there again with a happier face.

"Just hear me out. Maybe this is an opportunity. Like, the Moon Goddess giving the two of you a gift. Like she's giving you the chance to make the best first impression."

I tossed my head back and pointed out flatly. "I think kissing her when she didn't know who I was blew the whole 'first impression' thing, don't you think?"

Jake chuckled and shook his head. "Well, it beats the last time she met you for the first time."

"Yeah?" I asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Yeah! Don't you remember? You killed seven women right in front of her," Jake said, chuckling.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and nodded. "I remember." Despite myself, the corners of my lips tugged up in a smile.

"I'm glad you can see the humor in it, now," Jake said. "If she ever gets really annoyed with the kiss, remind her that it could be worse..."

"Yeah, I might just do that," I chuckled darkly. What else could I do in this situation?

"Well, now that we've gotten past all that, I wanted to let you know that the decryptors have been able to interpret more on the scroll. I was coming to tell you when Ciana woke up," Jake reported, going from smiling to serious in an instant.

It successfully distracted my attention from Ciana temporarily.

Jake meant the scroll that Warren took from Sebastian's vault, the royal pack's sacred artifact. Warren had returned it once Luther was defeated.

According to my brother, after Luther got the scroll, he figured out ways to open some sort of "portals" that connected different realms. We didn't know what it meant, but based on the vibe of the darkness in the sky when Luther was doing it, the world he was leading us to or summoning to us couldn't be anything good.

I'd immediately sent the scroll to Dottie and the elders to begin decrypting it.

It was slow going. The scroll was written in an ancient language. Not only that, but it was encoded in an ancient language.

I didn't push them for updates as there were millions of other higher, more urgent priorities that could immediately improve the overall stability and economy of the country, but now, it was more important than ever to translate the scroll.

Forget about the freaking portals. I needed to understand my power and I needed to know how to restore Ciana's memory.

What have you learned?" I asked.