

## Chapter 18

Niklaus

The heat of the pyre dances across my cheeks, sounds of mourning echoing all around me. My brothers stand at my back while I hold our mother, who has collapsed in a heap, muttering curses in Greek.

My mother, our matriarch who was surely meant to be an Alpha, has kept this family in one piece after my father's assassination. I wasn't made an Alpha immediately, no that's not the way she runs things.

Nastassja Cirilo does not believe in nepotism of any kind; I had to earn my title with blood. It doesn't mean she loved us any less. She just comes from a long line of hybrid shifter warriors and witches.

After the farce of Kristina's funeral, I'm sure whoever is watching us realises my mother's not acting now. She's been a complete mess, blaming me for not keeping her children safe; and honestly, I stand with her on that.

Failure of an Alpha; failure of a protector.

She doesn't leave even as the guests do. She stays there, in my arms, and we watch the pyre die down and be reduced to ashes. It's just the two of us as she gets to her feet, and at this point, Ares and Laz are tending to the guests at the hotel.

"Niklaus," she says, not taking her eyes off the ashes. "Tell

me everything; don't you dare skip a thing."

I take a deep breath, fear and respect warring inside of me as I tell her absolutely everything. From when Verena arrived to what happened yesterday. Her expression is neutral as I reveal what I've been hiding, and I prepare myself for a lashing only she can give me.

"You should have come to me," she says after a moment of quiet. "This girl, she was the start of it all, yes?"

"Basically," I admit. "Without her information, Kristina would be dead."

"But Dimitrios would be alive. I'll take a strong, intelligent Beta over a spoiled daughter any day," she says in that scathing way only she can. I already know what she's going to say next, and a small part of me is hoping she won't say it. 1

"Bring me to her tomorrow." It's not a request.

I nod my head and crook my arm so she can slide hers into it, then we make our way to the hotel so people can offer their condolences.

Thereafter, I put tomorrow out of my head. Whatever my mother has planned for Verena isn't something I can stop, no matter how much that kitten has come to mean to me.

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I call Verena into my smaller boardroom the following day, and watch her as she walks in. The slight smile she wore on her face slips, giving way to confusion as she takes in the woman sitting at the head of the table.

My mother may be in her sixties, but she doesn't look like it. She always says it has to do with her witch bloodline, but we'll never tell her we suspect that she's hexing herself. 1

No, that will earn us a one-way ticket to her ire forever.

"Good afternoon, Verena," I say as she walks in. "Please, take a seat."

She nods and slips into a chair three seats down from my mother, the latter who looks on in amusement as Verena seems to squirm under her gaze. My mother leans forward, resting her chin on the top of her fingers, then she grins.

"Did you know your mother practises blood magic?"

Both Verena and I wear equal expressions of shock on our faces, my mother having answered a question she didn't know we were actually grappling with.

"N-no, that can't be," Verena says, wide eyed. "My mother is a homemaker—"

"Your mother comes from a long line of powerful Dark High Priestesses. You were due to take over, but instead of showing signs of witchcraft, your father's shifter side was more prominent," my mother explains, much to Verena's shock. "Your sister is due to take over now. She's been studying under your mother's tutelage." 1

Verena stares at my mother in disbelief, and I can feel both her shock and hurt from where I'm standing. She doesn't know what to say as a tear slips down her cheek; her eyes flickering from my mother to me.

"I'd wager she was the one who knew you would die while being married to Lucan, so she placed what you would call a cursed failsafe on you," my mother explains, as she gestures with her hands. "Your sister must have found out she did something and killed her in your past."

From here, it makes sense. Verena doesn't know any witches, as she explained, but that doesn't mean they didn't know her.

"No, you're wrong," Verena starts and shakes her head. "I know my mother was poisoned, but to say she did this to me? Had my Goddess curse me for her doing?! It's preposterous! She's not a witch!"

"Then I dare you to call her here so I can see for myself," my mother says, leaning back in her chair. "I come from a long line of witches, and will be able to tell."

Verena leans forward and hangs her head in her hands. Her shoulders shake slightly while she cries, and it takes everything in me to not walk over to her and offer her comfort. But I can't show weakness like that, especially not in front of my mother.

"You say my sister is taking over from her?" she asks as she wipes her tears away. "That would mean my sister is a powerful witch?"

My mother nods. "She wasn't in your past since she killed your mother and didn't complete her training. But now that she has, she's much stronger than before and with a heart filled with hate, who knows what she could do?"

Something seems to settle around Verena, something quite like resolve and she nods. "I can get my mother here. I need answers and to know why she sent me back to this point in time. I've lost everything because of her, it's only right that she answers me."

"Smart girl," my mother nods, then she looks up at me with a smirk. "I like her, she's not like your other conquests."

"She's not—"

"Silly child," my mother says in a reprimanding tone as she pats my hand, then she gets to her feet and walks over to Verena.

My heart is sitting in my throat when she leans over and whispers something in Verena's ear, the latter's eyes growing wide. They stay like that for a while, and I know my mother would strangle me if I had to listen to the conversation, so I don't.

She pulls away and Verena looks at her, then she nods and my mother smiles before she walks out of the conference room. The earlier tension between us now feels like it's stretched thin and as I walk over to Verena, she doesn't meet my eye.

I get on my haunches in front of her and place a hand on her knee. "Did my mother threaten you?"

She chuckles sadly and shakes her head. "I don't think your mother needs to threaten anyone to get her way," she says, and I wordlessly agree. "She just told me everything I

already knew and some things... I didn't."

I scoff. "My mother has a knack for that. She's the sole reason our family survived before I became Alpha."

"A matriarch if I've ever seen one," she says, and I watch her bottom lip tremble. "This is all a mess, I never should have come here."

"If you didn't come here, you would be reliving your past and dying again at your sister's hand," I say as I take her hand, then she finally looks at me. "Do you want to change your future, Verena? Or do you want to be a victim again?"


Her eyes flash and I can sense the first slivers of anger in her scent. "I will never be a victim again—"

"Good girl," I say, then I pull her to her feet and place my hands on her shoulders. "Whatever my mother has told you, I advise you to listen to her. She has never been wrong in her life, but don't tell her I told you that."

She chuckles, and a tear slips down her cheek. "I don't even know how I got here, Alpha Niklaus. It feels like I'm tearing your family and mine apart."

I shake my head. "My family has been through more than this, don't worry; death is just something we've come to accept as a Cirilo," I say as my heart clenches thinking about Mitri. "Now, you should probably run along and go about the rest of your day."

Verena looks like she wants to say something, but then she stops herself and offers me a nod instead. "I'll... let you

 +20 BONUS

know when my mother will be here," she says, then with that, she walks out of the conference room.

I fall into the seat my mother occupied and let out a long sigh. Within the fucking space of twenty-four hours, everything feels like it's gone to shit. I have to find out what my mother told Verena, but knowing my mother, she won't say a fucking thing.

Not only that, but Verena's own mother might be responsible for all this shit.

"Fuck," I breathe out, hanging my head in my hands. What else could go wrong?

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