

## Chapter 38 The Masquerade Ball

ELIANA.

The moment we pulled over was when the clock struck twelve. I stepped out, but not without my glittery black mask over my eyes and it was at that moment, that the wind breezed into me the reality of tonight.

I turned to Denver whose charcoal black mask fitted perfectly over the bridge of his nose and Ivan went with a grey color. We assembled amid the whole Pack, their hundred bodies the perfect camouflage.

"Are you ready to do this?" Ivan asked. I leaned forward because I could barely even hear him. "Are you ready to do this?!" He said louder. "I should be asking you that!" I replied him. From here, we were supposed to split. The plan was for Denver and I to stay together up until it was time for Jaxon to make his announcement before we took on him.

While Ivan was supposed to head up to the chamber to get my Dad when everyone else had come down. He was supposed to get him, take him to the car and drive him back to the cabin before bringing the car back. Denver and I ought to have been done by then.

"And what happens next? You just drive back home?" Ivan asked once we recounted the plan for the umpteenth time. "If Jaxon dares to stand in the way, make no mistake I won't waste a second to rip out his throat" Denver replied but Ivan shook his head.

"No, this is about Jaxon. You can't just challenge for Alpha and then disappear!" He explained. "I mean the people are going to be hit by a shockwave when they hear that Eliana is back alone..."

"He has a point" I muttered. Denver could see it too. But then suddenly, the people faced a different direction, heading to the left like a swarm of bees altogether. "What's going on?" Ivan was able to grasp someone's attention when Denver walked up to me.

"Don't worry, we'll figure it out. Let's just focus on this first" He assured and I nodded my head. "There's been a change of plans," Ivan summoned both our attentions back to him. "They're having the Ball south of the Pack House—"

"What does that mean?" Denver asked.

"It's a larger venue, closer to the woods. Probably more suitable for what Jaxon has planned..." "And the further everyone is away from here, the easier it is for him to kidnap my father" I put the pieces together. "That means whatever he's planning for tonight. It's happening soon" Denver added as we exchanged glares amongst ourselves.

"Hand me the key, everyone's already out of the chamber" Ivan collected the car keys from Denver. "I'll text you when I've got him. And if anything happens on your end too, you text me" Ivan looked at me and I nodded. "We must go now, the best way to get in is with the crowd."

Denver's hand fell into mine as he grasped me in the direction everyone was facing. But Ivan went the opposite way. I did dart one last look back at him and he nodded. "Stay safe" He mouthed and it hit me how Ivan was the bravest of all of us.

Not only was he risking his life for my father's, but he was the only one of the rest of them who dared to do something to stop Jaxon from taking over and that took a lot of courage.

"Come on," Denver's hand clenched tighter around mine as we walked all the way until we got to the south of the Pack house. Everyone whistled their way in and I couldn't breathe until we made it inside too.

The mystical air of tonight grazed against my soft skin. I let my gown fall finally as my eyes lifted to face the gilded chandeliers that cast a soft, warm glow over the hall. We were a lot but there was still so much space—not that much to set us apart because we clung to the corner.

It was much safer from that angle because the masks could only do so much. As soon as the doors closed, a loud bang reverberated through the entire room before the traditional drumming started. The air came alive with echoes and a fusion of a variety of scents.

Guests in elaborate masks and elegant colorful costumes gave the stint of mystery and enigma the night needed. The drumming waltzed into a blend of classical music as the masquerades serenaded the dance floor.

They kicked their feet around the center with their velvet capes sweeping past like midnight shadows and their silk gowns bearing the reflection of the night. The crowd's whispers filled the air with a few people chuckling.

I didn't know when a smile crawled to my lips. This was so much fun and I could only imagine how much better it was when I was a child. But I never came to one of these. Sienna never allowed me. But she'd take both Jaxon and Nora. All I would hear from the windows was the music.

It hit me like a storm at that moment just how many things I'd missed out on as a child. But my mind could only wander so far.

"Hey," Denver touched my arms, drawing me back to reality and when I looked at him, I followed his eyes to the center of the stage. "He's here" Both our eyes fall on Jaxon and his most proud bride in his right arm. The masquerades gave away as confetti hit the air.

It should still be my father they celebrated. Not him.

Because his mask barely covered his eyes alone, I could unfortunately see the grimace across his face and nothing riled me up more than that. I was spiteful, especially seeing Sienna behind him and knowing of his plan.

"Wait, I thought you said there were two," Denver muttered. "Jaxon and his sister?" He added and my lips parted. I pulled out my phone immediately because Nora was nowhere to be found. And if I were to take a guess, it would be that she was with my father.

"Shit!" I should've realized there was no way they'd leave him all by himself. So the Pack chambers weren't entirely empty. I knew I had to warn Ivan to be more careful which I did. I sent him a text but nothing. I tried calling, but still nothing.

"He isn't answering" A bolt of panic flashed across my eyes as I looked back at Denver. I'd be damned if that was the only complication that night—but it was the first.

"Welcome!" His grating voice rumbled the halls and twisted my gut. "To the Masquerade Ball this year," Jaxon paused for the music and applaud to die down. "As you've already seen from the grand entrance unlike anything you've witnessed before, tonight is going to be different from all the other Balls in the past" He croaked, clenching his hands around the mic and people started whispering to themselves.

"What was it?" "What was it?" Whether out of fear or genuine curiosity, or some filled with both, they looked up at Jaxon.

"But we'll have to wait for time. I assure you, it's not far off anymore" Jaxon concluded before dropping the mic and he waltzed down the stage. Denver jerked forward almost immediately.

"I must go back—"

"What?" I grasped his hands. "Jaxon is headed to the chamber now. I must get there before him and warn Ivan. We should've known it wasn't going to be easy for him to do it on his own" Denver hissed.

"I'm coming with you. If we're fast enough, we would make it back in time for his announcement —" "No" Denver said flatly. "You stay here. It's safer here, make sure you mix in with everyone else" He continued.

"No Denver, I'm not letting you do this by yourself. What happened to sticking together?" I questioned him but he squeezed my hands. "Well, I'm not letting you put your life in danger anymore. Just stay here, Eliana and don't make this harder than it already is" He whispered.

My shoulders crumbled.

"I'll be back," He placed a kiss on my forehead before leaving my hands. "I promise" He mouthed. And headed towards the door, it wasn't long until he disappeared. As the drumming started again, I could feel it in my pounding chest. Maybe this was a bad idea.

The anxiety set in as my hands went cold and I forced myself to breathe out my lips. Jaxon was gone as well, and Sienna was nowhere to be found. I pulled out my phone again to dial Ivan.

"Shit" It kept taking me straight to voicemail. And as if I wasn't already worried about him, I was now worried about Denver too. 'Please, don't let anything happen to them' I prayed to the goddess in my mind.

But most of all—my eyes darted to the bar—I needed a drink. At least to keep me from losing my mind.

"One velvet noir" I rested my arms on the table and the bartender's eyes gleamed through the holes in his mask. "With or without cream?" He asked. "Just," I shook my head, having vodka with cream was the least of my worries at that moment.

"Anything" I muttered.

He poured the glass in front of me and I downed it in a gulp. He poured another but just as I was about to take it, I felt a liquid pour over my dress. "Oh my God!" I exclaimed, the little drink that spilled on my hands stung, leaving a mark on my skin.

"I'm so sorry" The lady instantly reached to me. "I'm just very clumsy, now I feel so terrible" She whispered with an accent that wasn't native to Oakland. That was the first I noted but then again, maybe it really was an accident and this was just the spell of the continued bad day.

"It's okay" Seeing her moist eyes, I just shook my head. "I don't want to drag it on any further" I muttered. "That's really kind of you" The lady inched closer to me until she was just a few inches from my face.

"It's dangerous being that kind in today's world. You must be careful" She said flatly before brushing past my shoulders. I arched my brows but when I looked back, she had vanished into thin air.

What the fuck was that?

"Shit" I looked down at my wet dress and then to the mark on my skin which was burned by whatever was in the cup. "You've been marked!" A wistful voice suddenly breezed into my ears and I looked over my shoulder but no one was there.

"You've been marked!" The faint voice kept repeating that I was forced to clasp both my ears but I could still hear it. "Arrgh!" I was losing my mind. I arose from the bar, knocking over my drink as I just desperately wanted to get out of there. I lunged myself through the hundred gliding shoulders in my way as my world began to blur.

"You've been marked!"

"You've been marked!"

"Enough," I whispered, thrusting myself forward but my limbs suddenly felt heavy and sweat formed along the lines of my brows. There was a throbbing sensation in my head. I just needed some air but the door seemed miles away. I clawed and pushed myself even further.

But that was before I bumped into someone.

"Enough!" I had it up there with the voices in my head. "Are you okay?" A hand then rested upon my shoulders and when I turned around, I met the shock of my life.

"Well, I'll be damned" She gritted through her teeth as I straightened my back. My mask was lopsided from the running so no doubt she was able to recognize me. Her, on the other hand had a head of hair that was very distinguishable and eyes that glinted maliciously from a distance.

It felt like déjà vu suddenly. All those times she would tower above me and beat me without mercy. Now so many years later, here we were. Just us, her without her devil of a son, and me without Denver.

"I knew I scented you" Sienna muttered. "And if I was able to, then I'm sure my son would have too. What are you doing here, Eliana?" She asked. "I thought we were already clear the last time we stopped by."

I cleared my throat once the voices stopped. It was a lot better but it took even more to look my stepmother in the eyes at that moment. "Don't think for one second that can try to stop what's going to happen tonight" She gritted through her teeth.

"What part of it?" I asked and Sienna chuckled darkly.

"I know where you stand, Eliana. And I know you would die before you let my son become Alpha..." She paused. "Then you are correct" I looked her dead in the eyes as she walked closer.

"Then listen to me and listen to me good, if you don't stop whatever it is that you're planning to do, there's a seventy-five percent chance that tonight is when you will die" Sienna threatened to kill me. A chill went down my spine but I knew more than well to not show any weakness.

"I'm not eleven anymore and you don't have to be the woman my father married just to get over his grief anymore. Let's just put that behind us, because surely you won't be stupid enough to kill me in a hall full of people. Now, will you Sienna?" I inched closer to her with a perched brow.

Denver was right. I was safer here, and it was to an advantage.

"I thought so too," I responded to her silence. "Because just like me, I know you'd die before you let the whole world find out what kind of monsters you and your son are. But it all ends tonight. Everything" I said.

"Everybody will know everything." And as both of us stood face to face with each other, I never knew the day would come when I would read my stepmother for filth and I scented weakness on her.

If we play our cards right, then the battle might as well be won tonight.