

# The Alpha's Harem

## Chapter 7. In The Dark

13-16 minutes

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The man at the doorway did not look like he was from these lands. His eyes were dark and quietly observant, shaped longer and smoother than those common in Fenrişar, as though painted with a single, deliberate stroke. His smooth black hair was tied at the back of his head in a battle knot, a few strands falling to his shoulders. Tanned skin, a lattice of old scars across his forearms, he had his gaze down on the floor to show respect. No one dared to look at the Shahanshah's women unless they were allowed to. "A man?" Cerese's fingers crushed the sheet at her chest. "For— me?" Nihan clicked her tongue. "Not for that purpose, Luna Consort. Harem women can't have lovers. Even the thought of that could lead to your death. And his, for that matter. Anyone who knew— We'd better not discuss this, really." "Got it." Cerese's face burned. "Then why—" "His name is Haoran." Nihan stepped forward, picking up what looked like a dress from one of the chairs in the room. "He is your new guard. Your title demands one." Haoran dipped his head once, a warrior's greeting. His hand brushed over his eyes, mouth, and heart, then stretched into the air towards her. She read in one of her books that it was a traditional greeting here. "Well, that's a relief!" Cerese released a shaky laugh, wondering whether he'd been sent to spy on her. Though perhaps it truly was merely protocol, and her mind was running wild. Cerese studied him. The cords in his neck, the calm way he took in every corner of the room, a predator's focus. Chain at his belt, curved blades at his hips. He looked like he was from Myrrath or Jarrun. She treated a few warriors from these places after the war and knew that in most cases they were people of honour. "Well, Haoran, I hope you take good care of me then." She smiled at the man, even if he still did not dare to look at her. Nihan sighed. "He cannot answer. His tongue is gone." Cerese's gaze snapped to his mouth. The lips pressed together. No movement, no hint of forming words. A slow chill crawled across her shoulders. "The Mad Shah," she murmured. Nihan helped Cerese take off the robe and pulled the new dress over her head. "Those years died with him, yet their scars continue to walk our halls to this day." Haoran's jaw flexed; he still did not dare to look at her. Cerese rose to her feet, and Nihan secured the fastenings at the back of her gown, a gown of soft blue and gold with flowing sleeves, unadorned yet likely the most sumptuous thing Cerese had ever worn. She touched the fabric, looking at herself in

the tall mirror. "He expects me to wear this?" "He expects you to be seen in it." Haoran moved to the wall, keeping an eye on the doors and windows. Nihan clapped once. The door behind her swung wider as two lower maids slipped in with a low table. Trays clinked— different breads, sliced figs glistening with honey, quail eggs, and cheeses, a silver pot breathing out steam, pastries filled with nuts and syrup, and even some dishes she did not recognise, but they smelled divine. "Breakfast." Nihan nodded at the spread. "You need strength after three nights spent with the Shahanshah." One of the maids giggled, while the other could barely hold back a smile. "You are the luckiest woman in the harem," Nihan went on, and Cerese arched a brow at her. What was going on? The maids left, and she finally voiced her question. "What was that about?" Nihan was already pouring her a drink. "Well, clearly, we cannot announce that there was an assassin at the palace and that she almost succeeded in eliminating the Shah, so—" "So, you told everyone that I spent three nights with him?" Cerese's blood froze in her veins. This wasn't good. Far cry from her plan to lay low. "Is this even— legal?" "Whatever the Shah desires is what the Shah gets," Nihan replied. "Now, please, eat." Cerese looked over the table at the food. Just a moment ago, she was hungry, but now her stomach twisted and churned. Was this why she had been assigned a personal guard? The Shah took twelve consorts from twelve different kingdoms— an ancient tradition established after Fenrişar conquered the continent. It gave other nations the opportunity to join the royal dynasty, to see their bloodlines carried forward in potential heirs to the throne. The custom had been devised as a gesture of mutual respect, a way of acknowledging that whilst the High King of Fenrişar ruled supreme over all, the other kingdoms could still maintain their proximity to power. She looked at the table again, feeling slightly uncomfortable. Back at Netherys, she shared her meals with Elowen and their maid, Freya, and later helped her with the dishes, which always made their stepmother angry. She called it a lack of manners and used it as an excuse to not take them to important events, hoping it would help her daughter Elyssa to find a prospective marriage first. That memory alone made Cerese smile. "I would like you both to eat with me," she said, and Nihan's lips parted as she exchanged glances with Haoran. "Luna Consort, we can't—" "Not even if I order you?" Cerese grinned at them, propping up a cushion right next to her. "I think I need an introduction to the food, and this place as a whole. I don't think my experience was normal." Nihan gave up first, taking a seat on the opposite side of the low table. "Normal?" She huffed, breaking a flatbread and placing half on Cerese's plate, then moving a green dip closer to her. "I am afraid nothing about you has proven to be normal, my lady. You've made quite the entrance." Cerese glanced at Haoran and brushed the cushion right next to her, urging him to join them. "Nothing will happen to me in these rooms." She smiled. "So, please, help us with the meal. I am afraid it's too much for us two, and wasting food is the worst kind of crime. Haoran inclined his head once more and settled onto the cushions beside them, though he stayed indifferent to the food. Nihan, however, did not have such a problem, loading all of their plates and chatting

about the dishes. "They did not know what you like yet," she explained, gesturing at the spread. "So they prepared everything the Shahanshah prefers." Cerese sampled a honey-drenched fig. "Well, he has good taste." She chewed slowly, considering her next question. The kind that required honesty, not comfort. "So, how much trouble am I in with the other girls?" She looked between them. "On a scale of one to ten." Nihan's expression smoothed into something practised. "Hmm— About a five. They will adjust. You are new, that is all—" Haoran raised both hands, all ten fingers spread wide, looking her in the eyes for the first time. The man couldn't speak, yet he still expressed the truth. Cerese bit back a laugh despite the weight settling in her chest. "Right. I thought so. Thank you both." Nihan shot Haoran a glare, but the warrior simply shrugged and returned to his food, unbothered. Ten. A disaster, then. Her original plan— blend in, stay invisible, keep Elowen safe from afar— was already ash. Three nights with the Shahanshah, whether real or rumoured, had painted a target across her back in bold strokes. She would need a new approach. Something sharper. Something that did not rely on mercy she would never receive. \*\*\* They left the chamber soon after they finished the food, and Nihan led the trusted servants to begin cleaning. Haoran fell into place at her left shoulder, while the Serfina led the way at the front. The corridors of the inner palace opened before them— gold fretwork climbing the walls in delicate arabesque patterns, painted ceilings arching high overhead with scenes of celestial creatures running through star-strewn skies, carpets so thick and plush they swallowed footsteps whole. Incense clung to the air, sweet and cloying, curling through shafts of light that fell in precise angles through latticed windows. This place was so different from how it had looked that night when the Serasker first brought her in. They halted before the harem entrance. Cerese clenched her dress. Female laughter came from within, the scrape of a lute, a burst of an argument in a language she barely knew. Nihan pushed the doors wide, and every head turned to stare at them. Voices cut off mid-word. A girl froze with her hand halfway to her mouth, a stuffed date in her fingers. Several women on the cushions straightened. Eyes tracked the blue silk, the golden belt, then slid to the man at Cerese's shoulder, to his weapons, his watchful stillness. Silence greeted them. Not a single friendly face. Cerese moved into the hall. Silk panels drifted in a breeze that smelt of rosewater and burnt amber. Low couches lined the walls, scattered with pillows embroidered in gold thread. Women draped across them like jewels displayed on velvet; some pale as winter moons, some dark as polished ebony and all the shades between, true representatives of the whole continent. For a moment, Cerese believed that they would be able to just walk past them all into her room, where she could regroup and think of what to do. Unfortunately, a woman rose from a nest of crimson cushions. Elegantly tall, shoulders back, golden paint in intricate patterns all over her dark skin, very short hair and amber eyes filled with hatred. She looked like an ancient goddess, moving with feline grace to plant herself directly in Cerese's path. "Who do you think you are?" She demanded loudly. The room held its breath. "Nytherys trash." The

woman's lip curled. "Daring to wear all that like you belong here when you were taken simply out of pity from your gods' forsaken island. You stole my night with your dirty tricks, witch!" Cerese's throat tightened. All eyes were on her, displaying weakness was not an option. She forced her voice steady. "The choice was not mine." "Wasn't it?" Another voice cut in from the left. A woman with long black hair, whom she had seen before, unwound from a divan. Diamond chains were intricately woven into her dark locks. Her gown was sparkling with gems, but the style was too different from Fenrişar fashion. "No concubine or consort is allowed multiple nights with the Shahanshah until all twelve consorts have had theirs. Yet, here you are. Three nights in his chambers and a concubine thrown out for your sake." Murmurs rippled through the harem. Whispers grew louder. "I do not know anything about a thrown-out concubine." Cerese raised her chin high. "All I know is that the King was in a bad mood when he summoned me on the night I arrived here. I did my best to soothe him as any of us should, although I am not a specialist on the harem rules— yet— I know that we can't leave the Shahanshah unless he specifically orders us to. The High King told me to stay, and I did. That's all there is to it." "It was Melike's night!" Someone hissed. "The evening the Shahanshah designates for her belongs to her," Cerese amended. "Not one of us can alter his decision, unless you believe yourself entitled enough to do so, then of course— take it up with the King." She arched her brow, slowly moving her face from one woman to the next. No one dared to speak again. The woman with the short hair, whose name, apparently, was Melike, grasped her arm, baring teeth. "You will pay for this!" She threatened. Haoran's fingers wrapped around the hilt of the blade at his waist in response. "Moonlady," Nihan stepped between the two women, causing Melike to let Cerese go. "Please, don't risk your life for such a minor matter. You will get your night as soon as the Shah summons you. In the meantime, you should be aware that Cerese Sorensen of Nytherys was granted the title of Luna Consort this morning. Starting today, Haoran was assigned as her personal guard." A wave of gasps rippled through the room. Cerese caught a glare from the back of the hall. The woman she had seen earlier, with blonde hair and a golden eye-patch, turned on her heels and rushed upstairs. "That's unheard of!" Someone whimpered in the crowd. "Only Elidi has this kind of title, and she has lived here since she was a little girl." "Just three nights—" someone added. Cerese decided it was a good moment to escape. "Apologies, ladies," she smiled at them, "I am a little tired and require some rest. I really must leave you now." Without hesitation, she swept past Melike, her silk train billowing in her wake. Only when the doors closed behind her did she permit herself to exhale; the recognisable chamber that had housed Elowen, felt like a sanctuary. For now. Something, however, was different. Cerese's gaze fell on a row of intricately carved wooden chests lined against the wall, their brass hinges gleaming. "What are those?" Nihan crossed the room and lifted the lids of the chests one by one. Expensive fabric— gold thread brocade that caught the light like trapped fire, Samayard silk in shades of plum and emerald, scarves so fine they might have been woven from mist.

"Gifts," Nihan said simply. "From the Shahanshah. Your title comes with certain... expectations." Cerese peered inside another chest. Jewellery nested in velvet— sapphires strung on chains, bangles heavy with jade, earrings that dripped pearls— more wealth than her father's entire estate, in one box. Her fingers hovered over a necklace, not quite touching. "This is too much." "It's protocol," Nihan corrected. "The Shahanshah thanks you for the nights and rewards your new title." A knock rattled the door before Cerese could respond. A maid she'd never seen entered, head bowed, hands clasped. "Luna Consort," the girl murmured. "The High Luna Mother summons you." Cerese's stomach tightened. Nihan's expression shifted— something wary sliding behind her eyes. "When?" Cerese asked. "Immediately."