

# The Alpha's Harem

## Chapter 8. Valide

15-19 minutes

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Cerese glanced at herself in the mirror— dark circles under her eyes, hair messy, nails stained by one of the herbs she crushed while preparing Orhan’s medicine. This wasn’t the look to meet with the High Luna Mother. She knew just a few details about the woman in question, but somehow she could feel that this meeting didn’t promise anything good. “Did she meet with other consorts?” She peered nervously at Nihan. “There was no need.” The Serfina shook her head. “You worry too much, Luna Cerese. You probably just made an impression.” They were back to when Nihan assured her that she wasn’t in trouble with other women, knowing this was a far cry from the truth. “Does she know about what really happened?” Hope stirred deep inside her. If the Luna Mother knew she saved the Shah’s life, then surely... Yet, Nihan only offered her an apologetic smile. “I don’t think so. The High King doesn’t like to bother her unless it’s necessary.” It was really necessary for her right now, but who was asking? The High Luna Mother was the most famous woman in all of the thirteen kingdoms. For... reasons. “She is not Orhan’s birth mother, right?” Cerese asked, desperately looking for the beauty supplies Elowen left behind. “No,” Nihan shook her head. “She is just five years older than the Shahanshah, but it’s best not to mention that. They are very close. When she entered the palace, we all thought that he would hate her because she took his mother’s place, but she was very unhappy to serve the previous Shah and then her own son was poisoned and died while still a baby... Orhan was just a Şehzade then, and he grieved the loss of his little brother—“ Cerese kept it to herself that she found it strange to know the Shahanshah, who killed all his brothers, could grieve the loss of one of them. Even if just an infant... “This brought them closer,” Nihan continued. “Without a son, Luna Nephurat had no standing in the palace, maybe she could lead a calm life, but unfortunately for her, she was always a beautiful woman. The Mad Shah liked her a lot, but—” “But what?” Cerese rifled through one of the chests until she found a simple golden pendant with multiple chains but no gemstones. This wasn’t the time for ostentation, but she wanted to appear as though she’d made some effort for the Valide Luna. “Yet her next child turned out to be a daughter, which made the Shah furious, so Orhan suggested she become his new official mother. Though unprecedented, the arrangement worked. With a son of sufficient age, she regained her

position and was even promoted to High Luna rank. Her family supported them both for years, and eventually all their efforts bore fruit when Orhan claimed the throne. Now, Nephurat holds the title of High Valide Luna or Luna Mother. That said, please understand that they care deeply for one another, and that she will always protect him and act in his best interests. He would do the same for her, so it's best to stay on her good side." "Easy to say," Cerese muttered. It might already be too late for that. \*\*\* This time, they proceeded beyond the second-floor gallery and its balconies, ascending the stairs to the uppermost level. The Valide Luna occupied the entire third floor. Servants and female guards stood in each corner, observing their every movement. Here, Nihan did not dare to utter a word until they stopped. "Luna Consort Cerese of Nytherys arrived at High Luna Mother's request," the Serfina announced. The grand doors with golden ornaments opened before them, and they stepped into chambers that dwarfed even those the Shahanshah occupied. The moment Cerese crossed the threshold, the room swallowed her whole. Gold caught the light first—layered, deliberate, unapologetic. It traced the arches overhead and framed the columns, edging every surface as though the very walls had been crowned. Blue mosaic tiles climbed the chamber walls in intricate patterns. Yet, what amazed Cerese the most, was the abundance of golden cages in the room. Some were suspended from the ceiling, others stood on gorgeous gilded stands, each housing exotic birds she had only seen in illustrated books and manuscripts—bright plumage of crimson and turquoise, emerald and sapphire. Some chirped softly whilst others preened in silence. Amongst the cages, on every available surface jade vases were overflowing with fresh flowers, their scent thick in the air. Wealth lived here. Power breathed in every corner. Cerese kept her gaze forward as they walked through the antechamber, barely daring to peer at the tapestries depicting leonid hunts covering the walls. Above, golden chains of a magnificent chandelier cascaded down like threads of sunlight, suspending dozens of filigree-caged lanterns that gleamed where the sun struck from latticed windows. Luna Mother Nephurat reclined on a divan that straddled the line between furniture and a throne. There was no mistaking her for anyone else. Real diamonds on golden chains were threaded through her long, dark hair, catching the sunrays with the slightest movement of her head. A heavy golden neck piece covered her entire neck and most of her chest, with even more diamonds and sapphires adorning it. Nephurat's light brown skin glowed against rich golden silk. Amber eyes—sharp, calculating—and fixed on Cerese, evaluating her with disdain she did not bother to hide. A young woman sat on cushions at the Luna Mother's feet, all silver and ice. Long white hair fell straight as rain down her back. Her dress matched—intricate embroidery winding across pale fabric like frost patterns on glass. Jewels clustered at her throat and wrists in cold perfection. Lavender eyes studied Cerese with detached amusement, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth that held no warmth whatsoever. Cerese's instincts screamed. "High Luna Mother." She bowed low, covering her eyes with trembling fingers, then her lips, then pressing her palm to her heart before extending it

towards Nopherat in the traditional gesture of respect. Silence stretched. "Come closer," Netherat said after a while. Cerese straightened, keeping her gaze appropriately lowered, and took just two little steps forward to be careful. The Luna Mother tilted her head, diamonds chiming softly. "I expected someone a little more... special." Heat crept up Cerese's neck. "Then again," the Valide continued, voice dry as desert sand, "my son was always impossible to predict. Sooner or later a man would want to taste something new. Even if just to know that what he already had was better all along." The white-haired woman's lips pressed together tighter. She was not enjoying this either, although Cerese would trade places with her if there was an option. "Still," Nopherat examined her nails—painted gold and filed to points. "You must possess some quality I cannot immediately discern. Three days keeping the Shahanshah occupied is rather impressive for a provincial girl with no training." The blonde woman turned away as if trying not to picture all that. "People of Nytherys are researchers," she offered coldly. "She must know some techniques to give a man pleasure. That's all there is." "Well, maybe she will share them with you one day, Elidi." Nopherat chuckled, gesturing for her servant to bring her a bowl of grapes. She tore away just one and played with it in her hands. "Tell us, Luna Consort," her tone was slightly mocking, "what kind of pleasure did you offer? We are all dying to know since your success is unprecedented." The maid with the grapes giggled. Judging by how bold such an action would be for anyone else, Cerese concluded that she was a Moon handmaiden, one of Valide's personal servants with a slightly elevated status. Someone Nopherat trusted enough to ignore such behaviour. Cerese's mouth went dry, knowing what they were thinking and what they were asking. She knew plenty about the subject thanks to all the books she read and the tales her healer friends told her, despite lacking real experience; however, sharing this kind of knowledge would be a wrong move, of which she was hyperaware. "I offered the Shahanshah just what he needed that day." She chose not to lie. "It was just mere luck—" Nopherat raised one jewelled hand, silencing her mid-sentence. "Unfortunately, your... success will have a price." The Luna Mother's voice dripped honey, yet was laced with poison. "You broke harem rules and deprived another consort of her rightful turn. Such violations cannot go unpunished." Cerese's pulse quickened. "I understand—" she whispered, casting her eyes down. "You will not walk the Moonlight Path for the next three months. One month for every night you took." The words landed like stones in still water. Three months. No summons from the Shah. No chance to maintain whatever fragile position she'd accidentally claimed by saving his life. This was a death sentence for a concubine. In three months, Orhan might well forget she even existed. Then again, nothing had happened between them in the first place—she'd spent those days crushing herbs and monitoring his fever, not warming his bed. Alright, she warmed his bed but... not like that. The corners of Elidi's lips turned upward, hearing her sentence. Cerese gave a light curtsy, keeping her face neutral through sheer force of will. "I will obey whatever the Luna Mother says in her wisdom and glory. May Asena, the she-wolf from the skies,

protect your path." Nepherat's smirk deepened, satisfaction gleaming in those sharp green eyes. "Good. At least you know your place. I was worried we would have a problem." "I am here to represent my people and serve the Velkhanor dynasty," Cerese replied, her fingers trembling so hard she had to clench the fabric of her dress. The Valide shifted on her divan, silk rustling. "Since my niece Princess Melike lost her scheduled night, you should reimburse her with some of your gifts. It's only fair compensation." Cerese breathed out. There was more than enough in those chests for ten consorts, let alone two. She wasn't particularly interested in the gems and gold, but she knew she would need them to bribe a couple of servants to stay safe in the harem. Luck wasn't on her side anymore, though. Did Melike have to be the niece of the Valide Luna? The fate was cruel indeed. She was making enemies in droves. That also explained why the girl dared to make such a big scene with someone outranking her. She felt safe enough for that with her aunt's protection. Making an enemy of a princess seemed even more dangerous than losing jewellery. "Of course, Luna Mother." "Wonderful." Nepherat examined her again, gaze travelling from Cerese's hastily arranged hair to her slippers. "Now then. Why did my son throw Tissa out of the harem?" The question hung in the perfumed air, deceptively casual. Cerese's throat constricted. "I—I do not know, Luna Mother." Nepherat stood in one fluid motion, chains of gold and gems swaying with her movements. Elidi sneered, lavender eyes glittering with malice. "You know," the Valide stepped closer, eyes narrowing, "I really dislike it when people lie to me." Ice slid down Cerese's spine. This wasn't her secret to tell, and if the Shahanshah wanted to share it with his Valide or, especially, his favourite, he would have done so himself. "You were there when it happened. You spent three days in my son's chambers, and he even cancelled the Dīvan meeting to be with you." Nepherat's voice dropped to a purr. "Now tell me the whole truth, or—" The doors burst open with enough force to rattle the crystal chandeliers. Orhan strode in, Jahn right behind him. The Shah's mismatched eyes— one black, one amber— found Nepherat immediately. "Or what?" His voice cut through the tension like a blade through silk. He wore the kaftan designated for royal appearances, meaning he had just come straight from one of them. The heavy midnight-blue fabric was embroidered with silver thread and trimmed with fur; a matching turban on his head was decorated with sapphires. For the first time ever, Cerese was happy to see him, although the healer in her noticed that he was still too pale to be considered fully recovered. Still, his expression promised consequences to the other women in the room. Nepherat's smile didn't falter, but something flickered in her gaze. Calculation. Reassessment. "My son." She opened her arms in welcome, though her posture remained rigid. "What perfect timing. I was just getting acquainted with your newest... acquisition." Orhan's attention never even shifted to Cerese, making her a little worried that he wasn't here to help her at all. The Shahanshah approached his stepmother, kissed her hand, and briefly pressed it to his forehead. "Tell me more." Jahn positioned himself near the door. The blonde woman stood, joining Nepherat with fluid grace. "My Shahanshah," she

greeted the man she spent many years with. Her very presence was getting warmer the moment he walked in. She peered at him through her lashes, frozen in her modest bow. Orhan nodded at her, but did not allow himself to be distracted. Nepherat smiled understandingly. "She should understand how the harem operates. Rules exist for a reason." "Indeed." Orhan moved further into the chamber, each step deliberate. "Which rules, specifically?" "When the Shahanshah, the High King of all Kings, claims his twelve consorts as was agreed in the Thirteenfold Treaty, each must receive at least one opportunity to walk the Moonlight path whilst the moon grows in size. It would not have caused such concern had she passed merely one or two nights in your company, but she occupied all three nights, and now only three more remain before the moon begins to wane." Nepherat walked to one of the birdcages and touched it, trying to get the bird's attention. "So, what rule did she break? Three whole nights are left, and Melike will be summoned for one of them instead," Orhan clasped his hands behind him, holding his head high. "Besides, do you really think that this tiny woman forced me to ravish her for three days straight? It was my decision to begin with!" Cerese's cheeks heated, lips parting in shock. Had he no shame? Elidi's glare was like a dagger, not the kind people swiftly put in each other's backs, hers promised slow excruciating torture leading to death inch by inch. "Son," Nepherat remained just as calm as before, "you are new to having wives and not just slave concubines. This is different. The punishment is good for her, as it prevents her from making the other women jealous. This will calm them down." "Fine," Orhan gritted his teeth. "Harem is your domain. You can punish her according to the laws, that's true. But let's be clear about one thing, I am the only one who will be deciding who walks into my rooms and a woman I gave a title to will not be harmed by anyone." Nepherat held his gaze, evaluating. Then, after a while, she nodded. "So be it. After the thirty nights—" "There will be no thirty nights. You control the harem, not me. She will come to my bedroom again this very night, and you will personally explain to Melike why she has to wait yet another day for her turn. Again." "Orhan!" Now even his icy favourite lost her composure. To Cerese's surprise, the Shahanshah ignored that. "Is it that important?" The Valide arched her brow, watching her stepson. "It's important to me that you both understand your roles," the High King replied. "Very well," Nepherat sighed. "But it's important you understand your role too. And hers." She pointed at Cerese, and a chill crept down the healer's spine. "As soon as she walks out of your room in the morning, she will have to do something we all missed." "Valide Luna—" Jahn dared to interject first, realising what was to follow. Cerese had a bad feeling about all this. "Serasker," Nepherat pivoted towards the man. "You know the rules better than anyone. The harem cannot be entered on a whim. Even women chosen by the Shahanshah have to obey the traditions, and Cerese was an exception in every instance, but we need to fix that as soon as possible. For everyone's safety." "She was already with me," Orhan seethed. "She is my woman like all the others." "Maybe," Nepherat

shrugged. "But we still have to ensure she is worthy. She needs to visit the Mirror Chamber."  
Nihan let out a loud gasp at the back, and Cerese knew she was screwed.