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Rhys

She had become a lot more attractive. She'd put on a little flesh, and there was color on her skin. Her hair blew in the wind, and I itched to run my hands through it.

Dawn had always been a sight for sore eyes. But now she was goddamn breathtaking. And it only took two weeks for this transformation to occur. She'd somehow worked her way into the heart of my pack and was everyone's sweetheart.

The most surprising thing was seeing her work in my mother's lab. Lex told me of it, and I was so pissed that I rushed down to rip her out of it.

Yet, I stopped short at the sight of her smiling and humming in an unfamiliar but beautiful tone. I stood transfixed. I didn't know what she was working on, but this was the most relaxed I'd ever seen her.

She drifted around happily like some sort of fairy. I finally understood why my father insisted that the walls of the Alchemy lab be transparent. He could stand and watch her work for hours while forgetting to do his own work.

I'd found it unnecessary. The council had complained, but both of them laughed it off.

I turned around and shut my eyes. Why on earth did it have to be this female out of all the females in the world? Why did I want to protect her?

It would have been easier if Marcus had picked another female for his little games. Because no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't ignore Dawn. She was avoiding me like I instructed her to, yet I couldn't stop myself from secretly seeking her out.

I'd become a stalker in my own pack.

A new Alpha has been crowned in Creekside. Karen's voice rang in my head. A council meeting is being set up.

My heart rate sped up. The time of reckoning had finally arrived. The whole world was about to be turned upside down. I knew what was about to happen, but I wished that the Crest of the Alpha Prime would magically be bestowed on the new Alpha of Creekside and save us the stress.

Without looking back, I walked away. Because I knew that if I made the mistake of gazing at her again, I wouldn't be able to leave. I decided I was going to pretend like I didn't know that the Lab was in use.

The air in the Council Chamber crackled with nervous energy. The chamber echoed with thousands of voices. Each one a needle pricking at my already frayed patience.

Bartholomew, that silver-haired weasel with a nose for gossip, kept on instigating rubbish.

Kaden and I exchanged a glance. He looked worn out from their speeches. I couldn't wait for the three months to expire so I could rid myself of the greedy fools that sat before me.

They argued about the New Alpha of Creekside. He was supposedly Devon's favorite. Yet there was something sketchy about his ascension.

I didn't know him, but I didn't like him. He seemed to clamor for power that wasn't his. He was my first suspect for Devon's death.

"Alpha Rhys," Bartholomew called out, "your absence at the coronation sends a terrible message. Surely such a momentous occasion—"

"Bartholomew," I rumbled, voice vibrating the heavy oak table, "would you have me congratulate a pup who stole the leadership through trickery?"

A collective gasp rippled through the room. Kaden sent me a warning glance. I ignored it. These fools needed reminding of who held the real power. Plus, no one knew the Late Alpha Prime like I did. I learned about the politics in his pack more than the people in the same pack.

"Besides," I continued, my gaze sweeping over the other nervous faces, "someone needed to ensure the pack wasn't ripped apart while you played diplomats. Look what happened the last time I left."

Shame flickered in their eyes before they masked it with renewed chatter.

"But, your absence will make you a target if the new Alpha becomes the Alpha Prime." Elder Elara pointed out. "So it's concerning."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the chamber. She wasn't wrong. She was bestowed with the gift of wisdom. But it was more than that. If he became Alpha Prime, it would mean that I didn't honor him.

"And even if he isn't Alpha Prime, we would become suspects,"

Bartholomew added.

I clenched my jaw. Politics. Always with the veiled barbs. Another truth. Other Alphas would think I was hiding it at Golden Crest or had gotten a headstart on searching for it.

"Creekside pack holds no ceremony that compels my attendance, Elara. Besides, they should understand that I'm still immersed in my nuptials or honeymoon. Thanks to you guys." I gritted out.

The room was silent again.

"We should have sent a representative." Someone added.

"Is that important right now?" Kaden hissed. "Why can't we let him focus on what's important!"

Murmurs arose again. But I ignored them and focused on the coronation of Alpha Alex of Creekside.

Every coronation involved all the Alphas whether present or absent. I could feel him joining us, slowly gathering the power of his new pack members until he became one with them, and then finally, the one more powerful than them.

His wolf wasn't the strongest, nor fastest or the most powerful in Creekside. However, to become one of us, he'd have to be elevated above all of them by drawing their strength. The Alpha's power was pulled from his pack.

The ceremony was completed. He was now the Alpha of Creekside. Now, it was time to unveil the Crest. The Crest of the Alpha Prime would be present somewhere on his chest. But if he had truly become the Alpha Prime, no one would be able to approach him. His dominance alone would rattle me, and I wasn't even present. The people around would flee the premises if he was Alpha Prime.

I waited for it to manifest. A breath caught in my throat. Nothing happened. He was no Prime.

"What is the outcome, Alpha? Is it him?" Lex asked, his eyes flashing nervously.

Silence descended. The question hung heavy in the air. Marcus, who'd been silent, cleared his throat and smirked.

The old croon seemed to know what I knew. And I wasn't ready to break the news.

"No," he said, triumphantly. "The new Alpha is currently trying to make excuses. He's no Prime."

Murmurs arose.

"And how'd you find out?" Bartholomew countered. "You aren't there."

Marcus shrugged and gestured to me. "Am I wrong?"

"No," I spat out. "He's a spineless and greedy pup who snuck his way into his position. He's no Prime."

Dread swept through over the Chamber. I felt it too. It was like a cold fist clenching in my gut. My wolf and gut disliked the new Alpha of Creekside, but a greater part of me wished he was the Alpha Prime.

The chatter in the chamber increased until it was frantic. No one was safe, and they knew it. I could bet that some Alpha's were already scheming to take us down. Searching for the Crest was the perfect excuse.

Plans for defense were thrown around like scraps of meat, each one revealing the council's limited understanding of the coming conflict. I let them vent, allowing myself to smirk at their banter. Golden Crest had enjoyed peace for too long. We were about to witness back-to-back and worthless attacks for a long time.

Finally, I slammed my fist on the table, silencing them. "Enough of this whimpering," I growled. "We don't fight scared. We fight like wolves – cunning, brutal, and with an iron will. We'll crush this upstart like we always do."

"We prepare for war. Kaden, you will lead training drills at dawn. Lex, organize patrols at the borders. Council," I paused, my gaze sweeping over them, "fear is a luxury ours to bury. No outsider will be allowed in our territory, and we answer to no tyrant or faux allies."

A fire, hot and fierce, ignited in my gut. All this was unwanted, yet inevitable. I had another mission; find out who caused Devon his early death.

"So we're not in the race for the Crest?" Marcus asked.

"No!" I growled. "We want nothing to do with it!"

"Speak for yourself," My uncle taunted, "Besides, I think we should search for it, even if it's a decoy. That's the best way to get them off our backs. If we remain here and continue playing defense, we'll draw everyone's attention."

I hated that he was right.

"Fine," I grumbled, "Tomorrow, I'll start an expedition to the temples of Black Moon Pack."

"Nope. You're still immersed in nuptials, remember?" Marcus inserted. "I'll go."

I narrowed my eyes at him. He had something up his sleeves. And something about it spooked me.

"Beautiful," Elara agreed.

Even Bartholomew was nodding in agreement.

I cracked my brain for a reason to stop my uncle and found none.

"It's a good idea," I finally agreed.

The gleam of triumph in his eyes was unmistakable. It made me wonder what I'd signed myself up for. The last time I let him out of my sight, he returned with a whole wife.

"I leave first thing tomorrow," He grinned.

"Let's call it a day," I growled, getting to my feet and storming out of the chamber.

"Alpha," Kaden's voice stopped me in my tracks.

I grunted. Not ready for any advice. The most important was guarding my border and keeping those rotten Alphas away from it. I needed a plan, a solid one that kept them away.

"Is something wrong?" He asked.

Marcus. I growled into the mind-link. Keep an eye on him. He's restless. He's up to something.

"Noted," He said out loud.

A flash of blonde hair caught my eyes, causing me to freeze.

"Why are you here?" I barked, struggling to keep my eyes off Dawn.

Princess rolled, "My father called for me."

I grunted and moved out of the way for them.

Princess raised a brow, "Who took the Creekside throne?"

I couldn't help but notice Dawn looking a bit apprehensive. She was fidgety.

"Someone named Alex," I mentioned, watching her.

Dawn, who had been avoiding my gaze all night, let out a sharp gasp, her hand flying to her throat, eyes wide with fear.

"What's wrong?" Princess asked.

"Are you alright?" she pressed.

Dawn shook her head, a choked sob escaping her lips. Her pain, raw and visceral, slammed into me like a physical blow. I felt it clawing at my insides.

I told myself to ignore her, but my hands ached to hold her.

"Dawn?" Princess asked, holding her. "Is something wrong?"

Tears welled up in her eyes. She shook her head, but the pain emanated.

I growled and began pacing about. Something about her reaction was familiar, but I couldn't remember it in particular.

"What is the problem!" I growled

She whimpered and tried stepping away. She tussled with Princess until she was able to slip off and she ran away.

Kaden and Dawn ran after her. I itched to go but just couldn't.

And in that moment, a horrifying truth slammed into me. Alex. The name echoed in my mind until it was clear. It was a stupid coincidence, but I was certain that he was the foolish wolf who rejected her for her sister.

The fear in her eyes wasn't because of what was about to happen. It was fear of him. My blood ran cold. The issue with Creekside just took a horrifyingly personal turn. To me, Alex wasn't just a power-hungry fool, and he was a monster who had hurt Dawn, the woman who, despite all my everything, stirred something fierce and unwanted in my chest.

My anger grew until it became a raging inferno. Why hadn't he died in the fire? I regretted not taking his life that night. I should have rid the world of vermin. I paced around until I realized something even more alarming.

Was it just fear that I saw in her eyes or something else?

Did she feel something for him? Is that why she was so hurt?

Jealousy began to worm its way up my belly. She wasn't mine, but I didn't want her thinking about any other man. I hated the idea, and I hated him more.

"Calm your horses." Marcus' voice resounded beside me.

I jolted. "What the fuck are you doing there?"

"Was waiting on my daughter." He said, unfazed. "You chased her away."

"I didn't chase anyone." I croaked.

My mind was still on Dawn. Her pain still bothered me. It was like a million blows to my chest.

"Such a pity. He was her mate." Marcus muses.

My chest feels constricted.

"She's definitely not over it. I don't blame her. It's not like she's getting any affection or attention from here." He continued.

I knew he was taunting me, and I was falling for it. I clenched and unclenched my jaw. I furled and unfurled my fists.

"Why the fuck will she still feel anything? Isn't there a connection severed? She belongs to Golden Crest now." I seethed.

Marcus chuckled, "Such an unlucky woman. You're not even claiming her. How is she supposed to get over him? Besides, a mate bond transcends all bonds."

I swallowed, my throat was grainy. It took a lot to stop me from screaming that she was mine and nobody else's.

But that would be a lie because I was still telling myself that I didn't want her. Those emotions were confusing. I wanted to be the one with her, holding her until she forgot that fool. Yet I wanted her as far away from me as possible.

I needed time away. Maybe that'll cure me of whatever this is.