Fated: The Alpha's Unwanted Luna - Chapter 521: The corrupted wolf[1,251 words]

Nick, upon seeing Sebastian charged at him, sidestepped at the last second, letting Sebastian rush past him, then spun and struck from behind with his claws. Sebastian whipped around, but Nick’s claws were already coming down toward his chest.

For one brief, terrible moment, Sebastian was completely exposed.

Nick’s claws were only inches from tearing into him when another wolf came slamming in from the side.

Matt drove his jaws down onto Nick’s body, hurling him away with enough force to send him rolling across the snow and away from his friend.

"This is for my girl, Zoe!" Matt snarled, tasting the fucker’s blood in his mouth and relishing it.

Nick hit the ground hard, barely managing to lift his head before Sebastian was already on top of him. Sebastian lunged for his neck and sank his fangs deep into the side of it, biting down on a vital spot with enough force to tear through flesh.

Nick’s wolf cried out and tried to push Sebastian away, but this time, Sebastian drove him back against the ground, still biting down.

Nick fought to shove him off, his claws scraping across Sebastian’s chest, but Sebastian bit harder and ripped his head sideways with brutal, violent force.

A chunk of flesh tore away.

Nick let out a dog-like yelp and stumbled back, blood pouring down his neck and quickly staining the ground.

Sebastian stood over him, his mouth stained red, his eyes burning with such fury and all the pain raging inside him that the black streaks on his silver fur spread a little farther. For a moment, the corruption made his wolf cough and lose his focus, giving Nick the chance to move backward and away from him.

Nick slowly climbed back to his feet. He looked at Sebastian.

"You’re really turning rogue. What a pity..." Nick forced out, still moving backward and away as the two wolves advanced on him with murder in their eyes.

For the first time, the excitement drained out of Nick entirely. His plan had been to kill Sebastian in this fight one way or the other, since his men would have had no choice but to bow to him afterward if he'd succeeded, but his fucking Beta had ruined that plan for him yet again. He should have killed the fucker, Matt a long time ago when he had the chance!

Nick took a step backward. Then another, and something registered in him, and he glanced behind him. He realized, too late, that the fight had carried them far from the woods, all the way to a mountain cliff, where he had planned to head earlier to call for backup from his allies.

They were standing right at its edge now. Behind Nick, there was nothing but open air.

Far below, a powerful current of water rushed between jagged rocks before vanishing over the edge of another drop, the distant roar of a waterfall echoing up through the mountain.

Nick looked down for a moment, then turned back to face the two wolves.

Blood covered nearly every inch of him now. His shoulder still bled, his neck was torn wide open, and cuts across his face and side wept steadily.

Sebastian and Matt kept advancing.

Nick knew exactly what they wanted. Neither of them intended to let him walk away alive.

They wanted the satisfaction of being the ones to end him, to feel that closure for themselves, but that was something Nick would never allow them to have.

He glanced between them and let out a bitter laugh.

"You both want to kill me, don't you?"

Neither answered.

Nick looked back at the drop behind him.

"I'd rather kill myself than give either of you the satisfaction of doing it. Even in death, I won't give you peace. And if, by some fucking chance, I survive this..." His lips curled into a bloodied snarl. "If that water doesn't finish me, Sebastian, you'll pay tenfold for everything you did to me tonight."

Sebastian's growl rumbled deep through his chest as he kept closing the distance.

"And Vee..." Nick's expression softened for just a moment. "I'll always love Vee. Tell her that for me."

Sebastian's eyes flashed with possessive rage, but he knew exactly what the bastard was hoping for, some provocation to make him leap down after him, and Sebastian wasn't nearly that stupid to go down that cliff with him.

Nick took one final step back.

"Remember that." He said, and then threw himself over the edge, once he realized neither of them had taken the bait to come forward and go down with him.

Sebastian and Matt rushed forward.

They reached the cliff's edge just in time to watch Nick's body disappear down toward the churning water below.

A second later—

SPLASH!

His body struck the surface.

Sebastian stared down into the violent current, watching the water carry the blood away downstream.

Matt stood beside him, scanning the water below. They waited, though neither could say for how long, but Nick never resurfaced.

"Go check the waters for him!" Sebastian ordered his men in the distance, eyes still fixed on the current, unwilling to leave anything to chance with this one, since he'd just realized Nick carried power close enough to his own that dying from drowning alone seemed unlikely, unless his injuries finished the job first.

"I don't think he could've survived that, Seb. The mermaids are already searching for him too, and he went straight into open water." Matt muttered, but Sebastian didn't move from where he stood.

"I'm not taking chances. I want his body found." He said, and then his wolf turned his head aside and coughed again, drawing Matt's attention to his fur, which now looked as though black ink had been poured over it, spreading further with every passing minute.

"Your heart's being affected, man." Matt said, stating the obvious, only now beginning to grasp how deeply his sister's death had shaken him, enough to bring him to this.

Sebastian had always acted like he didn’t care, kept his distance from Zoe on purpose, if Matt was being honest with himself, mostly to keep her hidden from his enemies. But as a boy, Matt had seen firsthand just how much Sebastian had truly loved and looked after her, underneath all that distance.

"I’m sorry for your loss." Matt offered quietly, the two of them standing at the cliff’s edge, staring down into the fog-covered water below.

"What loss?" Sebastian said, his voice unnervingly natural, not even sparing Matt a glance. "There’s no loss. She’s dead. That’s simply how life works, it gives, and it takes, and eventually it takes every single one of us. I didn’t lose anything. I was only foolish enough to forget, until now, that everyone leaves eventually, no matter what, and a person should always keep that thought close." He finally turned to look at Matt. "Next time, don’t attach yourself to anyone. You’ll be better off for it."

Saying that, he turned and walked off in the direction the other wolves had gone to search for Nick’s body, and Matt stood there, watching him go, unsettled by what he’d just heard.

"You clearly need some help, man." Matt muttered after him, but whether the wolf heard it or not, he kept walking without looking back. Matt could only hope he’d find his way back to his wife soon, that her presence might be enough to pull him back from wherever he’d just gone.

Fated: The Alpha's Unwanted Luna - Chapter 522: The new season[1,229 words]

~°~

Losing someone can make the world feel like it has stopped, but it never truly does. Their life may have ended, but yours continues, and somehow, you have to learn to carry the love, the memories, and the pain with you as you keep moving forward.

Two months later.

Viola stood by the glass wall of her penthouse, quietly watching the first snow of the year drift down from the sky, daylight catching in her blue eyes as they moved with the movement of a snowflake.

The tiny white flakes fell slowly through the air, landing softly and settling into a thin layer of white, blanketing everything below High Tower. She’d seen snow plenty of times

before, but there was something different about the very first snowfall of the season, something that made the whole world outside look softer, quieter, almost like it had been handed a fresh beginning it didn't quite deserve yet.

She rested her palm against the cold glass, watching the snowflakes fall one after another, her other hand resting on her stomach, which had begun showing clearly through her dresses lately, her pregnancy now obvious to anyone who looked at her.

For a moment, she simply let herself admire how beautiful the snow was, until she noticed cars beginning to fill the parking grounds below the High Tower, and the reality settled back over her, reminding her exactly what today meant for the werewolves, and for the Kade family.

It was Zoe's memorial service, delayed for two full months after her death and unable to be pushed back any further once word had spread to relatives across Silver and beyond, including Sebastian's mother's side of the family, who lived in another pack far away from Silver.

Today had finally been set to honor her properly, even though plenty of people still couldn't quite sit right with the fact that there was no grave to visit, nowhere to actually stand and grieve her. Viola had had to give the excuse that her body was destroyed in a fire, for the werewolves would object to her being in the sea.

Viola watched the guests arriving from far-off places, all dressed in muted colors, filing slowly into the building, and the mere thought of having to greet them all already exhausted her since these days she tired so easily, wanting nothing more than to sleep through most of it.

She was almost five months along now, only days away from it, and werewolf pregnancies typically ran seven to eight months in total. Unlike before, when skipping meals had been easy enough, it had become nearly impossible now, the hunger impossible to ignore, though she hated how bloated it left her feeling afterward.

Still, this morning, Viola had decided to hold off on breakfast until after the service was over, and she smiled, the way she'd been forcing herself to smile more often lately.

"You're going to make me eat myself sick, little one. But you have to hold on a little longer this morning. I don't want to end up falling asleep. We've got guests to meet, and your father..." Her smile faltered, her hand curling slightly against her stomach, and she took a slow breath, pushing the feeling back down before it could take hold.

"I guess some people never fully recover from a loss like that, baby, but we'll be fine."

She turned away from the glass and made her way to the kitchen for water, as she had come down to drink water before getting distracted by the snowfall visible through her living room glass. But when she entered the kitchen, there was a steaming delicious

aroma of food lingering there, and her eyes fell on the kitchen island, where arrays of plates were arranged and covered, waiting for her to notice them.

She paused, frowning to herself as she stared at the spread laid out across the kitchen island. She hadn't requested breakfast, but out of curiosity, she began to open the lids, and as she did that, her eyes fell on a note attached to the soup bowl.

She picked up the note left beside it, written in her husband's handwriting, and it immediately became clear that he had cooked for her that morning before he must have left, even though he hadn't slept with her last night.

(Don't miss breakfast for any reason or listen to Laila's words about you being chubby. You are not fat. You need this food more than anything right now.)

She read it twice, wishing, not for the first time, that he could just say things like this to her out loud instead of leaving them written down, like he had grown into the habit of doing lately because they barely spent time together with his busy schedules after Zoe's death. Or should she say he looked absent-minded most of the time?

Sebastian hadn't been fully himself, not really, not since losing his sister, and he spent, if not all of his days and nights in his office working, then outside the pack hunting. When was the last time she had heard him say more than the words needed?

Last night, she'd caught him watching her check her own reflection in the mirror after Laila pointed out how chubby and rounded she had become and that pregnancy was unfair to women because it changed them too much and that Viola had become bigger.

Viola had been unhappy about the remark that had nonchalantly fallen out of the shewolf's mouth about her weight, as she had no filter and was used to saying words bluntly, but the words had hit her a little because she had grown so insecure about her body. She never thought Sebastian had heard the words the shewolf said because he hadn't been around.

She'd been checking herself in the mirror, clearly unhappy with how bloated she looked lately, but he hadn't said a word about it. He'd only grabbed his coat, muttered something about important work, and left. She hadn't even been sure he'd come back at all, not until she found this waiting for her.

So he had come back to cook and left the note, she thought, staring at the food hungrily.

Viola was still standing in front of the food when her penthouse door opened, and she turned to find Ivy, Tess, and Laila stepping inside, all of them dressed in matching muted gray.

Tess and her husband had gone back to their pack after all the chaos of what had led to Zoe's death, but they had come back yesterday for today's memorial service.

"Good morning, Luna Vee," Tess greeted with a smile, looking at her friend, who was standing before the plenty of breakfast set in front of her.

"Good morning, Vee," Laila said next, biting back a small smile when Viola glared at her, and she realized the Luna had taken her words about her chubbiness to heart yesterday, when all Laila had done was state the obvious, but not in an insulting way. "I hope the babies are kicking well this morning? You look good."

"The medicine after death isn't going to work, Laila. I can't wait to see you when you fall into my situation and get pregnant." Viola grumbled, licking honey syrup from her fingers and closing the food containers for later.

Fated: The Alpha's Unwanted Luna - Chapter 523: Giving time[1,194 words]

Laila laughed, walking into the kitchen with the rest of the women as she said, "Not in this lifetime, girl. This body is not going to carry any baby, not after I've seen the way yours kicked you yesterday. Tess, did you know I actually saw the foot against her skin? It was creepy as hell." Laila shuddered in horror at the memory, and Viola bit back a smile.

No matter how blunt Laila was and how she always spoke her words unfiltered, the shewolf had stood by her during all the times she missed Zoe's absence and was a moment away from falling into despair all the time as she couldn't figure things out, alongside Ivy. And in the past two months, Viola knew the shewolf well enough that she would no longer take offense at her words.

"Do you know women like you end up being the ones carrying a pregnancy every year?" Tess mused. "And I know of someone like you back home, and when she had her children, she spoiled them rotten and smiled at their bratty ways."

"That's not going to be me. Ivy, do you perhaps foresee the future with your powers? I need to know if I'll end up like that," Laila asked Viola's sister, who was a woman of few words and always smiling at their words rather than contributing to the discussion.

"I am not a seer. You should go to Elder Ysara for that, but you won't be able to see her with the pack filled with so many people today. Are you just waking up, Viola?" Ivy asked her sister, having grown accustomed by now to using the name everyone else called her by, rather than the one she'd known her whole life.

"I slept in even though I set the alarm," Viola said with a sigh, having a feeling Sebastian had turned off the alarm she'd set for 6:00 a.m., and she had ended up waking up at 8 instead. "You all are dressed up," she pointed out.

"We woke up earlier, but no big deal. You can take your time. You're the Luna, and people are bound to wait on you," Laila said with a smile, going to sit down on the couch in the living room along with Tess to give the sisters some time alone.

"The guests are already arriving," Ivy pointed out.

"I know, I saw them. Don't worry, it won't take me long to freshen up and get dressed," Viola said, tucking the note into the pocket of her pajama sweater, the way she kept nearly every note he wrote her with each meal he made.

If he didn't take such careful care of her meals and health, Viola might have started believing he no longer loved her at all or that she meant nothing to him, since lately she barely felt anything from him emotionally, as though he'd gone numb entirely, or simply gotten very good at hiding their shared emotions.

As she hurried toward the stairs to get ready, Ivy stopped her.

"How's his healing progressing? Any signs of the corruption returning?"

Viola paused, turning back to her sister, whom she'd brought weeks ago to sing her healing song over Sebastian while he showered, though neither of them had been able to confirm whether it had actually worked. Viola had promised to keep watching him closely instead.

"He hasn't coughed again since then, and outwardly he seems fine. The only way I'll know for certain if he's fully cured is if he shifts in front of me, but he hasn't, not once, since." She said, and Ivy nodded, understanding.

"How much longer do you plan on giving him?" Ivy asked, stepping closer to her sister, who met her with a smile, though Ivy could see plainly enough what lived behind it: a woman desperately wanting everything to just be fine already.

"As long as it takes, I suppose. Maybe until he's ready to talk about it, to actually open up. Right now he's too consumed with finding Nick's body, dead or alive, and—"

"Which has been going on for two months now. Not even the mermaids can find him. Just like I told you, Aunt Natasha says it's as though he vanished the second he hit the water. It's strange, something like that happening at all," Ivy remarked, taking her sister's hand. "Once the baby comes, I'm planning to go back to the sea. I hope you're not still taking Alex's advice, giving your husband endless time when you have so much of your own weighing on you already. Have you told him about the dream yet? The one you keep having, every night?"

Viola shook her head. "I don't want to burden him with anything more. He is already going through a lot emotionally—"

Ivy pulled her sister into a hug. "I don’t think he’d see it as a burden, silly. You two are partners. You’re supposed to lean on each other. You keep dreaming of his sister, telling you she’s waiting for you, and you need his help untangling this whole puzzle with Azmira and Vaelor. Go get ready, we’ll talk more after the memorial." Ivy stepped back, giving her sister a gentle push toward the stairs.

Viola wouldn’t have known how to cope if she didn’t have her sister here and her friends, and that was the problem. She had people lifting her spirits, but her husband had nobody besides him, not after Matt had—

"Stop looking at me like that, as if you are about to cry. Go get ready and don’t keep them waiting. You’re going to meet your husband’s grandmother today and his aunties," Ivy reminded her, and Viola’s eyes widened as she hurried away, knowing she was supposed to play the role of a good host to his other relatives she hadn’t met.

As Ivy watched her twin climb the stairs, her stomach heavy and rounded now, she couldn’t help but wish there were some way to actually help her sister through all of this, whatever destiny tying her to Azmira ultimately demanded of her.

She didn’t need to be told that Viola was growing desperate now, desperate to find some way to awaken that other part of herself without losing who she already was in the process, to give life to the lost ones, but embracing the Child of the Sea would mean giving this life up.

Their aunt had advised her, more than once, not to push herself too hard while pregnant, trying to figure out ways, and that perhaps once the baby came, they could dig into the history together properly.

But that was far easier said than done, especially with how much speculation already surrounded her sister’s marriage, since Sebastian had gone back to ruling his pack with an iron fist. All the softness that used to live in him now seemed reserved only for his mate, and everyone else was walking on the edge of a sword around him. Even his own brother was treading on that fragile line it seemed, Ivy thought, going to join the other she-wolves in the living room.

Fated: The Alpha's Unwanted Luna - Chapter 524: Come with me[1,231 words]

A few minutes later, Viola came downstairs dressed in a muted gray dress as well, matching everyone else, with a winter coat buttoned over it as she went to join the others waiting for her in the living room, and they all got up when they saw her.

Together, they made their way toward the hall, Viola having no idea where her husband had disappeared to since dawn, likely fleeing whatever today's weight had promised him, for people were bound to cry and reminisce.

She rested a hand against her stomach, against her babies, more accurately, since Gilbert had confirmed weeks ago that she was carrying more than one, and the weight was hard to carry and get used to. It hadn't come as a surprise that she would have twins, considering that both she and her husband were twins themselves.

Even before they reached the hall arranged for the memorial, Viola had begun to see unfamiliar faces around and feel eyes following her wherever she went.

"...She's the one who ended up locking our muchacho away. I haven't met her since their marriage because that boy apparently didn't value us enough to invite us to his ceremony," came the words from one of his aunties, standing at the side along with their mates.

"I heard he hasn't marked her yet because she got pregnant before it. I won't be surprised if it turns out she's the one who's kept him from coming to greet us. He hasn't even come around to say hi to us," scoffed another aunt, whom Viola couldn't help but secretly roll her eyes at for the fact that they could gossip in such a place, and that too while she passed right by them.

"Tsk, aunties," Laila muttered to Viola. "Ignore their words. They won't be here for long, though get ready to be talked about in front of you."

"They are not worth paying attention to," Viola sighed.

Sebastian probably hadn't invited them to his ceremony because of this, and though the words about her marking had gone around, it didn't bother her. With the death in the pack, such a ceremony couldn't have taken place. Furthermore, her pregnancy had grown to the point where the marking venom might reach her babies, something that made marking during an advanced pregnancy impossible, and thus, they hadn't even talked about it.

Viola wouldn't risk her babies' health just to please people and assure them that their curse was lifted.

The hall was already filled with guests, rows of chairs arranged neatly, and at the front stood a large framed photo of the deceased, her smiling face captured there forever and frozen in time.

Looking at Zoe now caused less pain than it once had, since Viola dreamed of her nearly every single night now and held onto the belief that once she finally uncovered what Azmira had wanted so badly, she might find a way to awaken every soul resting in the mermaid graves, Zoe included. But the images still gave her an ache in her heart.

They spread out once in the hall. Tess went to join her husband, Laila went to her parents, and Ivy went to sit where Alex had reserved a seat for her. Viola was soon pulled aside by an elder shewolf.

"Come sit with me, dear."

It was Sebastian's grandmother from his mother's side, who had made the trip, a woman Viola had never once met since she lived in another pack entirely, and she made Viola sit next to her.

"Hola, querida. I am Eleanora, your husband's grandmother. I know the brat wouldn't have introduced me to you or mentioned me," said the woman, her eyes on Zoe's frame, a bittersweet smile on her face. "He didn't, did he?" she asked, turning to Viola.

Viola shook her head. "No..."

Sebastian had never talked about his relatives or other family members living outside the pack, so Viola hadn't even known he had any living grandparents until she went through his family contact book at Alex's request to inform everyone about Zoe's death and invite them over.

Eleanora sighed. "That's more like him. That boy shut people out of his life like they meant nothing. I used to be his favorite grandma, and he used to be all over me when he was this small." She indicated with her hand. "When his mother would bring them for the weekend back then. But when my daughter died along with his father, that boy cut us off."

Viola couldn't help but think that was so like her husband, cutting people off to avoid being reminded of the dead, just like he had cut off his childhood friend and twin brother now. She couldn't help the sadness that settled in her heart at his coping mechanism.

"I wouldn't have known about my dear Zoe's death if not for you, dear. I am glad you reached out to all of us." Eleanora sniffed, wiping her nose with a handkerchief and gripping Viola's hand. "My poor granddaughter... that boy needs some lashing. He kept her away from us when he cut us off and raised her all by himself. How is he doing?"

Viola met the woman's teary eyes and felt like crying herself, but she held back, knowing it was her hormones. "He is fine."

Viola realized she liked his grandma more than his aunties, but the woman's words made her realize all the more how allowing Sebastian to be wasn't doing him any good and might be causing him more harm. Maybe Ivy was right. Her giving him so much time wasn't a good idea, because if she didn't talk to him about this, Sebastian would never open up, and maybe him not being open to her now was him growing distant from her too...

A month ago, Matt had resigned from being his head Beta and left Silver. He had traveled out of the werewolf world and gone to Mexico. If her husband continued like this, he would lose his family members completely.

Though months had passed, many still hadn't been able to let go of Zoe's death, its ripple effects reaching so many people that even now, tears and quiet grief filled the hall around her, creating a heaviness that left Viola feeling weighed down and wanting nothing more than to escape it.

Viola remained restless throughout the entire service, and the moment it ended, she was the first one out of the hall, slipping away before anyone could catch her for condolences, and without having the energy to deal with Sebastian's gossiping aunties.

She made her way back to her penthouse, heated up some food from breakfast, and ate alone before assigning omegas to settle the guests into their rooms and tell them she was not feeling well enough to eat a public meal with them.

By the time she'd finished, evening had fallen, and the entire grounds of Silver lay blanketed beneath fresh snow, the cold settling in even more as darkness spread across the pack. She turned up the heat in the building and went to pull the curtains over the glass walls, but paused.

Through the glass, Viola spotted her husband returning with his men from the hunt for Nick. She watched him speaking with someone below, and then, as though sensing her presence, he looked up toward her.

Fated: The Alpha's Unwanted Luna - Chapter 525: Don't have to pretend[1,158 words]

(Music Recommendation: Farewell Life Arn Anderson Remix.)

--

Viola couldn't tell if he could actually see her from this distance, but he stared anyway, their eyes locked together for a long moment, and she felt warmth settle inside her before he dismissed whoever he'd been speaking with and made his way inside, looking away from her.

Viola set down the hot cup of coffee she'd been holding and went to find him, knowing he wouldn't come to their penthouse yet, even though he was back early. Maybe she'd put this off for far too long already, giving him all this time and space when what he really needed was someone to make him face what he was feeling.

"It's time we talk some sense into your father, babies. He's hurting himself, punishing himself over something he never could have changed, no matter what he did," Viola murmured to her babies, or perhaps mostly to herself.

She grabbed her coat and stepped out buttoning up.

Sebastian hadn't gone back to their penthouse. He hadn't gone anywhere near the people still mourning downstairs either, unwilling to hear another word about how no one could seem to move past it and be reminded of things he didn't want to be reminded of.

People grieved in different ways, and Sebastian had stayed far away from Silver the whole of today, wanting to avoid them along with his relatives and his wife's guests who had filled the entire place. If it weren't for her alone, Sebastian knew he would have thrown everyone out, but for his wife, he was allowing a lot of things he normally wouldn't have tolerated.

She had not only invited his grandmother but also his aunties, his mother's sisters, whom he hadn't spoken to in a long time.

His wife found him out on the balcony, long after everyone else had already gone down to the big hall for dinner.

He stood with his elbows braced against the railing, a cigarette burning slowly between his fingers. The night wind carried most of the smoke away from him, though a faint trace of it still lingered in the air as he watched the snow continue to fall.

Viola stopped in the doorway, watching the smoke drift and curl around him, and her brows shot up.

"Since when do you smoke?" she asked quietly.

He glanced down at the cigarette, almost as if he'd forgotten it was even there in his hand, before turning to look at her over his shoulder.

"Since recently."

"You never used to smoke," Viola said, walking up to join him and coming to stand beside him on the terrace to watch the snow fall together.

He shrugged. "People change, honey. Pick up new habits along the way. And mind you, I tried smoking in my teenage years but quit because Alex doesn't smoke, and it would make our switch then complicated."

Viola turned toward him, studying his face and noticing how calm his expression stayed, the same calm he always carried around her specifically, even while everyone else described him as a ticking time bomb some people had started actively avoiding because one wouldn't know when he would snap now.

"So now you want to pick the habit back up, I see," Viola muttered, looking at the cigarette between his slender fingers.

"You don't like it?" He arched a brow at her, and she shook her head.

"It doesn't bother me, but it makes me wonder why all of a sudden you picked the habit back up."

The corner of his lips curled up as he took a drag from the cigarette and blew the smoke away from her direction.

"What are you implying by that, wife, hmm?"

Viola watched him, the smoke curling around him and making him seem more distant to her, like he wasn't her Sebastian and she pursed her lips.

"You don't have to pretend with me, Seb. I've given you plenty of time to come out and talk to me about it, but I think that might've been a mistake. I should have pushed us to talk about this sooner. I know you're hurting, and—"

He let out a quiet breath that came out almost like a laugh.

"I'm not hurting, amor. I'm perfectly fine, just stressed that Nick's body, dead or alive still hasn't turned up. What makes you think I'm hurting?" He glanced at her sideways.

"You lost a family member. That's bound to hurt somebody, unless they're completely heartless. I hurt too, Seb. Will you please talk to me?" she asked softly, studying his profile.

His face turned toward her almost instantly at her words, their eyes locking for a long moment as the wind howled softly somewhere behind them.

His jaw tightened, and for a second, Viola noticed something close to pain flicker across his face, but he looked away before she could hold onto it. The cigarette slipped from

between his fingers, and that same hand reached out to take hers instead, their fingers interlocking, his thumb moving slowly over the back of her hand.

Viola watched his profile and slowly moved closer until he pulled her back against his front, bringing their joined hands to rest over her stomach. Right at that moment, one of their babies kicked, and his hand jerked away from the spot as though startled. Viola would have smiled at that if the moment hadn't felt so heavy, if he'd been smiling too, but he remained serious.

This was the closest they'd come to holding each other intimately in months, and she let her back settle against his chest as he stared down at her stomach from behind her, as though only now realizing how much of its development he'd missed entirely.

But rather than returning his hand to her belly, he wrapped both arms around her instead, pulling her into a hug, his jaw settling against her shoulder.

"Have you eaten?" he asked quietly, and Viola realized, a beat too late, that he was steering the conversation away from his own feelings yet again.

"Not dinner yet. I was hoping we could eat together tonight. Everyone is having a public dinner, but I am not in for it. However, first, tell me what you're feeling. You're allowed to cry, you know. It's perfectly normal. Everyone cried today in that hall," she told him, feeling his breath fan warm against her neck, tickling her a little.

Sebastian looked back out into the snowy night, and when he finally spoke, his breath came out visible in the cold air.

"I don't feel like crying. It's like I've lost the ability to do it altogether, amor. I don't even know how anymore. You can't pour water from an empty cup."

"Don't you feel sad about losing her?" Viola asked, realizing he was referring to himself as the empty cup, as though there was simply nothing left inside him to pour out anymore.

Fated: The Alpha's Unwanted Luna - Chapter 526: Why does it hurt so much?[1,199 words]

(Music Recommendation: The Earth Prelude by Ludovico Einaudi.)

"Everyone dies," he said. "That's just life. It's a son of a bitch, but that's what it is, and we have to learn to live with it and not hold on to sadness that will never leave. You lose people. You feel bad and then you move on. What else is there to do?"

"You could admit that you're hurting," she said, wrapping her hand around the arm he had curled across her upper body. He might be able to deceive the world into believing he had grown numb and couldn't feel, but Viola knew her man so well that he couldn't make her believe it wasn't hurting him.

A bitter smile touched his lips. "Hurting and feeling sad doesn't bring her back," he said, then paused, as though searching for the words to finally give shape to everything he'd been carrying inside since her death.

"We aren't human. We're werewolves. We live longer, heal faster, survive things that would kill anyone else." His fingers tightened around her, and he found himself, strangely, taking real comfort in her closeness, a comfort he hadn't let himself feel in the two months that had kept him buried alive inside his own head. "But we're not immortal, mi amor. I lost Mom and Dad, and somehow, I should have known that wouldn't be the end of it. And now my little sister..."

Viola turned in his arms, wrapping hers around his narrow waist as best she could, the hug a little awkward now with her belly between them, but she let him hold her anyway, his nose pressing into her hair.

"None of it was your fault. Just like I told Matt and Gilbert, none of you are to blame for what happened to her, Seb. You shouldn't keep punishing yourself for it. Her death happened unexpectedly, and because none of us could stop it, we began to take the blame, but when you really look at it, you'll see that none of us are to blame."

"How do you do it?" Sebastian whispered, and something in him felt the wall around his heart begin to crumble all at once, as though she'd taken a wrecking ball straight through every brick he'd stacked up, breaking it down and leaving him open and unprotected by the wall. She was making him vulnerable, something he had been avoiding this whole time.

"Do what?" Viola asked against his chest.

"How do you handle everything so well, keep moving forward with life, when I feel completely stuck inside myself?" he asked, and Viola turned her ear against him, listening to his heartbeat throbbing against her ear.

"There's nothing special in the way I do it. I let myself grieve, accept it, welcome the memories, and keep them," she said. "But then, when I look at it from another angle... you raised her. It's going to hit you harder than it hits anyone else, and I'm not saying I don't feel her absence too. I feel it every single day. But you know what helps me?" She smiled, watching the snowflakes drift past them.

"No..." he mused, cupping the back of her head and drawing her closer, everything he'd locked away for months suddenly rushing back in tenfold, and he didn't know what to do with these emotions, for Sebastian Kade had never grieved death the way everyone else did. His throat felt achy and itchy, and he swallowed hard to clear it.

"Because part of me still carries the beliefs of the mermaids. That's why I chose to place her in the sea, and with that came a kind of peace, knowing she'll always still be there somewhere, waiting." She curled her fingers into a fistful of his coat, smiling faintly. "I like to think she's protected there."

Viola heard him sniff, and she began to pull back to look at his face, but he held her tightly so she wouldn't move. When she tried to wiggle out, he said, "Don't move. I want to hold you like this."

His voice was whispery and huskier than normal, which made Viola wonder if he was finally crying, but she didn't ask and instead tightened her arms around his waist.

"When I came back from Moonwillow years ago after my parents died," Sebastian said, his eyes going to the hazy night sky as he held his wife against his body, "Alex was waiting for me with little Zoe in his arms, she was just a little toddler then. I thought I could shut them out to focus on finding who killed our parents. But my little sister looked at me and smiled, holding her little chubby arms to me, and something in me knew I couldn't turn away from her.

"It was then I swore I wouldn't let any harm come to her as long as I lived, and she... she would be the remaining connection to our parents. Amor, how can I ever live with myself knowing I've lost her? I will wake up every day with the heaviness in my chest. It's going to kill me if I don't lock these feelings away..." His voice turned thicker.

Viola understood what was wrong at that. Her husband hadn't learned how to handle his own feelings and emotions like every other person, and though he might be physically strong, inside him was someone who was weak with emotions and afraid of them. She began to run her hand up and down his back in comfort.

"We learn to live with it, and with time it hurts less, but if you don't let it out, my love, you will burden yourself more and make it hurt more when you get exposed to the reality," Viola said softly, feeling him swallow convulsively.

"I don't know how to do that. This is the only way I know, but this time..." He whispered, "Even my way feels like it's not working to free me. Help me. I want to learn how to be normal."

He buried his nose in the crook of her neck, and Viola felt wetness against her skin.

"Help me..."

"You’re not abnormal, and there is no normal way to do it. But I need you to not shut anyone out of your life and try to live every day like everyone else," she said, and he nodded against her neck in a boyish way that made her heart tremble for him, for he had had such protective mechanisms since boyhood that his adulthood was finding it hard to cope with.

"Why does it have to hurt so much..." he groaned.

"Because it is meant to hurt. When we lose our loved ones, it is meant to hurt. It’s life, my love, but I will always be here for you, and you can always talk to me about it," Viola said tenderly.

She felt him nod again, and this time, she held him without words, standing on the terrace of his office while outside, the snowflakes kept falling down and settling over the blankets of white already covering the ground.

"I will always be here for you." She promised quietly.

Fated: The Alpha's Unwanted Luna - Chapter 527: Wife’s healing words[1,251 words]

~°~

Sometimes, healing doesn’t mean learning to live without the pain. It means finding the courage to feel it, to let yourself break when you need to, and to understand that even after losing someone you love, you’re still allowed to find your way back to life.

(Music Recommendation: The Earth Prelude by Ludovico Einaudi.)

--

Viola and Sebastian stood on the terrace, hugging and comforting each other until they both lost track of time. Sebastian’s red-rimmed silver eyes slowly turned toward the sky, where he silently searched for the stars but found none in the hazy winter night. He felt his heart prick a little as a smile slowly spread across his face, his arms tightening around his wife.

"I wonder if she got her wish..." Sebastian’s quiet voice reached his wife, who turned to follow his line of sight toward the sky, her eyes narrowing in confusion at his words until he continued.

"Zoe, when she was eight, dreamed of becoming a star until we forbade her from ever thinking like that. Matt and I..." His words suddenly trailed off at the thought of his friend, whom he had grown cold toward after his sister's death.

Sebastian closed his eyes, breathing in the sweet scent of her hair before asking, "He's gone, right?"

He was referring to his friend, whose resignation letter Sebastian had found on his desk weeks ago. Although head Betas rarely retired, since it was a position everyone wanted, Matt had left it behind. Sebastian had barely given the letter another look, nor had he been informed of Matt's whereabouts or even bothered to ask when he stopped seeing him around.

Viola nodded slowly. "He's left for Mexico and has no date of returning. I'm sorry you two grew apart like that..." she mused, still looking at the sky, though all she could see were snowflakes drifting through the dark night.

"In life, we lose friends and grow apart."

"I made us grow apart," Sebastian muttered quietly. "But maybe we both needed time apart to heal, or maybe something else will bring us together again. I don't know, but... I don't want to lose anyone again. I'll follow your lead in healing and trying to move on. And I want it to start tonight."

Sebastian wanted to heal with the belief that his sister was in the sea, but he wasn't the kind of man to cling to hope when he knew there was little chance of it being true, not unless he was willing to let his wife go, too. And he couldn't bear to lose anyone else. He wanted to start learning how to heal and move forward like everyone else instead of remaining stuck in one place.

Viola smiled against his chest, loving that he was finally opening up and being vulnerable with her after months of shutting her out. Slowly, she could finally feel the heaviness in his heart flowing into hers, and she felt the backs of her eyes sting as his sadness settled over her as though the feelings were entirely her own.

His pain was immense, and she was consumed by the tenfold sadness she knew he carried. Her stomach turned over as she felt the weight of it.

"You're hurting so much," she muttered softly, biting down on her lower lip.

"I am hurting..." he admitted. "And I don't want to hurt anymore. Can you tell me how to move on from here and not carry this feeling with me all the time?"

He dipped his head until his mouth was against her ear, his harsh breathing brushing against her skin.

Viola had no guidelines for something like this, but with his feelings transferring freely into hers, she knew it might take some time. Still, they would work through it together somehow.

"First, live every day like you used to. If you think of her, embrace the thought. If you feel like crying, my love, cry. If you want to reminisce, do it. Accept it, no matter how heavy it feels, and if you want to talk about her, I'll be there. Slowly, it will feel less heavy," she told him.

"Thank you," he whispered into her neck, kissing her there and threading his fingers through the strands of dark, silky hair that fell over her winter coat.

"Thank you," he added in a quieter, deeper voice that sent a warm trail down Viola's spine. She thought that somehow, they would come out of this stronger.

The couple stood for who knew how long on that terrace, wrapped in each other's embrace, until eventually, the cold became a little unbearable. Despite being werewolves, their human forms were still exposed to the elements, and Sebastian was the first to break the hug, knowing he shouldn't keep his wife out in such weather.

Without a word, he bent down and scooped his wife into his arms, carrying her back into the office and closing the sliding glass door behind him. Viola snuggled comfortably against him, and when he adjusted her in his arms, she peered up at him with flushed cheeks and pursed lips.

Sebastian, who was carrying her out of the office and heading back home, noticed her looking up at him. Her adorable cheeks were flushed, something he had only just noticed made her look even more adorable, with a certain glow that must have come with her pregnancy. Her large blue eyes were fixed on him, and he couldn't help asking,

"Something on your mind, honey?" He looked down at her as he stepped into their private elevator.

Viola bit the inside of her cheek.

"I can walk. You don't have to carry me and pretend I'm not heavy... I've grown chubby and fat," she whispered, almost self-consciously, expecting him to notice and put her down to walk back to their penthouse.

It had been two months since she'd last been held by him like this, and now that he was finally holding her again, she couldn't stop wondering whether he was noticing all the changes in her body. The way she'd become rounder, the way her clothes no longer fit properly, and how unattractive she sometimes felt when she looked at herself in the mirror.

Sebastian looked down at his wife, his eyes narrowing and his brows drawing together in a serious frown.

"Where is the fatness?" he asked.

He carried her effortlessly higher in his arms, as though to demonstrate just how little she weighed to him. All he could see when he looked at her was her beauty, and how she'd managed to bring him out of his darkest world with just a few words and the warmth of her embrace on the terrace.

Deep in Sebastian's heart, there was still a gaping hole left by his sister's absence, one he believed nothing could ever truly fill. But holding Viola now made him less aware of it, and he knew that, given time, if he learned from her, he might be able to accept his grief instead of allowing it make him block everyone out.

Yet, hearing the insecurities in her voice made him curse himself a little for not paying closer attention to how much she had been worrying about these little things that didn't matter to him and shouldn't matter to her either. She was damn sexy and beautiful to him, and to hell with whoever thought otherwise. Before the night ended, Sebastian would make sure to convince her of it.

Fated: The Alpha's Unwanted Luna - Chapter 528: Husband's Reassurance[1,195 words]

When the elevator reached their floor, Sebastian didn't say another word about the chubbiness she had complained about. He simply carried her into their living room and sat on the couch, bringing her down onto his lap before leaning back a little to admire her face, which was still colored a light pink against her milky-fair skin. Her long, spiky lashes lowered as though she were embarrassed, and her little nose turned an even deeper shade of pink the longer he stared at her.

"You've been listening to Laila's words a lot, I see. Is she the one telling you you're chubby?" he asked, narrowing his eyes as though, if she said yes, he would go straight to Laila and deal with her himself. He had already meant to do so when he overheard her telling his wife how rounded she looked that day.

Viola pursed her lips.

"She doesn’t have to say it. I see it in the mirror every day, and I feel like a bloated elephant every morning. I can’t even wash my legs or shave them properly. My normal clothes don’t even fit me anymore, and I have to wear boring gowns," she muttered softly, her fingers playing with the button of his shirt.

It amazed Viola how she could shoulder the responsibilities of an entire pack and act strong before everyone, yet whenever she was in her husband’s arms, she felt like a little rabbit in its cocoon, wanting nothing more than to be held and protected. But her changing body made her embarrassed, and she hated that she couldn’t simply forget about it. Suddenly, she felt stupid for bringing it up when he had just poured his heart out on the terrace. Her insecurities were nothing compared to what he had felt and lost.

Viola felt like slapping herself and quickly decided to put everything out of her mind.

"Just forget it. Let’s not talk about my body or anything. What would you like to eat? I noticed you barely eat lately, and you cook for me almost every morning. Your face looks thinner, Seb, and—"

She began to stand up from his lap, as though planning to go to the kitchen and prepare something quick for him, but Sebastian pulled her back down against him.

A small smile lifted the corner of his lips.

"No. Let’s talk about it. I want to talk about it. You said we should live our lives normally in order to move on, and that includes having normal conversations and spending time with my wife. I believe it should be considered part of the healing process, right?" he asked, tucking strands of hair behind her pink-tipped ear and running his fingers against it as she nodded at his words.

"I guess so, but we don’t have to talk about my body. Tell me about—"

"No, I want to talk about that."

Viola looked at him uncertainly, her fingers still resting against his shirt.

"There’s nothing to talk about. I’m getting fat, and—"

"Viola."

The way he said her name made her stop, and looked away in embarrassment, something she found herself doing subconsciously.

"Look at me, sweetheart."

She slowly lifted her eyes to his, and Sebastian cupped her face with one hand, his thumb brushing gently over her flushed cheek.

"Do you honestly believe that I could look at you and see anything other than the most beautiful woman I've ever laid my eyes on?"

Her lips parted, but no words came out of them, as she didn't know what to reply to that.

"Because if you do, then I've been doing a very poor job of being your husband."

"Seb..."

"No, let me finish." His other hand settled against her waist, drawing her a little closer to him. "You've been carrying my children for months. My babies. Two little lives growing inside you, and somehow, you've convinced yourself that the changes happening to your body are making you less beautiful?"

He shook his head, his expression turning almost offended by the very thought. She wasn't even as big as some of the pregnant she-wolves he had seen around the pack.

"Amor, if anything, you've become even more beautiful to me. Every time I look at you sleeping in our bed, I see the woman carrying my children, the woman who has given me her body and heart, the woman who somehow manages to love me even when I'm at my worst. Do you have any idea what that does to a man like me?"

Viola's cheeks grew warmer, and she tried to look away, but he gently guided her face back toward him again.

"No, honey. Don't hide that pretty face from me. I'm talking to you."

She swallowed, feeling her heart flutter in her chest as she suddenly felt like a high school girl being whispered sweet words by her boyfriend. Should they even be having this kind of conversation right now?

"You are such a sweet talker..." she grumbled.

"Because I am telling the truth." His mouth curved into a faint, possessive smile. "You could gain another fifty pounds, and I'd still want you sitting right here on my lap. You could grow so round that you couldn't even see your own feet, and I'd still look at you like I wanted to spend the rest of my life kissing every inch of you."

"Sebastian!" she gasped, her eyes widening.

"What?" He arched a brow innocently. "You think I'm lying?"

She rolled her eyes. "You're exaggerating."

"I’m your husband. Exaggerating about how beautiful my wife is should be the least of my crimes."

A reluctant smile tugged at her lips, but she still looked unconvinced, and Sebastian’s expression softened.

"Listen to me, baby. Your body isn’t betraying you. It’s doing something extraordinary. It’s making room for our children, nourishing them, protecting them, and carrying them every single day. And I won’t have you standing in front of a mirror and insulting the very body that’s bringing our babies into this world."

Viola’s eyes began to sting, as she suddenly felt emotional at his words that tug at her heartstrings.

"And when our babies are born?" she asked quietly. "What if I don’t go back to looking the way I used to?"

Sebastian stared at her for a moment, as though the question itself had offended him, but then his expression softened. He couldn’t blame her for carrying such a thought. He had witnessed and heard of cases where husbands found their wives less appealing after they had brought their children into the world, and he understood why she needed reassurance from him.

Wanting to be reminded that she was still beautiful in his eyes didn’t make her insecure or demanding, and reassuring the woman he loved was never something he would consider a burden. If anything, he wanted her to know without a doubt that the changes her body went through to bring their children into the world could never make him love or desire her any less.

"Then you’ll look like the woman who gave birth to our children."

"But—"

"And I’ll still be the man who wants you."

Fated: The Alpha's Unwanted Luna - Chapter 529: A Request[1,193 words]

Viola fell silent.

"Do you think I married you because of the size of your waist?" he continued, his voice dropping into that deep, intimate tone that always made her stomach flutter. "Do you think I chose you because you had a pretty face and a body that fit into certain dresses? Honey, I could have spent my entire life surrounded by beautiful women, and none of them would have been you."

His fingers slid beneath her chin, tilting her face up.

"I want you. Not some version of you that existed before we had responsibilities, before we had children, before life decided to put us through hell. I want the woman sitting on my lap right now. The woman with the swollen belly, the soft cheeks, the stubborn mouth, and those beautiful eyes that keep making me forget what I was supposed to say to put her mind at ease."

Viola let out a small, embarrassed laugh.

"My cheeks aren't swollen."

"Of course not. They're just becoming more tempting." He leaned over to nibble her cheeks, playfully biting at their softness and peppering them with kisses.

"Sebastian!" She giggled, pushing against his chest.

"And your belly?" He glanced down at it, then placed his palm over the curve of her stomach, which he hadn't touched in two months and had only looked at whenever he returned by dawn to find her sleeping.

There had been one night when he'd caught sight of the baby kicking and immediately grown worried, prompting him to contact Gilbert, who reassured him that it was perfectly normal.

He gently caressed her stomach now, his palm resting over the curve. "That's mine too, you know."

She immediately narrowed her eyes.

"Excuse me? My belly belongs to me."

He chuckled, the sound low and warm, and leaned forward to kiss her forehead.

"Your belly belongs to you. But the two little troublemakers growing inside it are mine, and I intend to spoil all three of you rotten." He promised, being firm with himself to keep to his words.

Viola laughed again, this time with more warmth, and he smiled at the sound.

"There she is," he murmured, brushing his nose against hers. "That's the smile I've been missing."

Her laughter faded into something more tender as she studied him. There was still sadness in his eyes, still a heaviness he couldn't simply smile away that she felt, but for the first time in months, he was looking at her as though he had all the time in the world to be with her, and if talking about her insecurities brought a smile to his face and made him forget things, so be it.

"You're really not bothered by it?" she asked, her voice smaller now. "By how much I've changed?"

Sebastian's smile disappeared, replaced by an expression so serious that she instinctively stopped fidgeting with his shirt.

"Viola, if you ever stand in front of that mirror again and feel like you're not beautiful enough for me, I want you to remember something."

He leaned closer, his lips brushing her ear as he spoke, his warm breath tickling her.

"I have spent months working myself to bones because I couldn't bear the thought of losing someone I loved. I've spent months shutting everyone out because I was terrified of feeling that pain again. And today, when you held me, I realized that the only person I wanted to come home to was you."

His arms tightened around her.

"So don't you dare think that a little weight, a growing belly, or a few changes to your body could ever make me want you any less. You are my wife. My mate. The mother of my children. And if the entire world suddenly went blind and stopped seeing your beauty, I'd spend every day reminding you that I still see it."

Viola's eyes filled completely, and she blinked quickly, trying to keep the tears from falling.

"You're going to make me cry."

"Then cry, sweetheart. I'll kiss those tears away too."

She gave a watery laugh and buried her face against his neck, wrapping her arms around him as tightly as her belly allowed.

Sebastian kissed her hair and held her close, one hand resting protectively over her stomach while the other rubbed her back gently, feeling at home in her arms and in her scent. Why hadn't he come home to her every time he felt empty?

"And for the record," he added after a moment, "I happen to like the fact that you're getting rounder."

Viola pulled back immediately.

"What?"

He grinned. "I said I like it."

"Why?" She pursed her lips.

"Because I know exactly why it's happening, and because every time I look at you, I'm reminded that we're going to have two little versions of ourselves running around this house soon."

"Two little versions of you? Goddess, help me, I can't even handle one of you yet." She said with a mock horror even when her stomach quivered with delight.

He laughed, genuinely laughed, and Viola stared at him, her heart swelling at the sound.

"Careful, wife. You're carrying two of my children. You should be nicer to their father."

"Then their father should stop being so ridiculous."

"Impossible. Their father is madly in love with their mother, and apparently, that's made him a little ridiculous." He nuzzled her neck.

He drew her closer and kissed her, slowly and tenderly, letting the kiss linger until she forgot what she'd been worrying about for a moment or what she wanted to say.

When he pulled away, he rested his forehead against hers.

"And one more thing, amor."

"Hmm?"

"Next time you feel unattractive, come and find me. Don't sit alone with those thoughts and let them convince you that you aren't wanted. I'll remind you as many times as you need, even if I have to spend the entire day telling you how beautiful you are."

Viola smiled, her fingers brushing his cheek.

"Even if I ask you a hundred times?"

"Especially if you ask me a hundred times."

"And if I become as big as a house?"

"I'll carry you around the house and remind you that you're my favorite place to be."

She giggled, hiding her face against his chest again, and Sebastian held her there, smiling into her hair.

For the first time in a long while, the heaviness in his heart hadn't disappeared, but it no longer felt as though it was the only thing he had left. He still missed Zoe. He still had grief he didn't know how to carry. But his wife was in his arms, their children were growing beneath her heart, and he was beginning to understand that allowing himself to love what remained didn't mean he was abandoning the people he'd lost.

And as Viola snuggled closer, he pressed another kiss to her forehead and made himself a quiet promise to be there for his family, no matter what he was going through. But there was one thing he needed to do first.

"Mi amor, can I make a request?" Sebastian asked after a few moments.

Fated: The Alpha's Unwanted Luna - Chapter 530: Rude Guests[1,103 words]

In another part of High Tower, the guests had finished dinner without either the Alpha or his Luna ever joining them at the table, something many of Sebastian's aunties found unforgivably rude, and couldn't resist commenting on the moment the meal wound down.

"We've traveled all the way from Steel Pack to be here and present, out of respect, and not once has that boy bothered to come greet us himself. He clearly has no manners at all, no one ever bothered instilling any in him." Remarked Sebastian's step aunt, who was his late mother's stepsister, dabbing her mouth with a napkin, and her sister echoed her with a scoffing "Humph."

"Of course, who exactly was supposed to instill manners in him? Isadora died when he and Alex were only ten, and a boy raised without a mother grows up mannerless, plain and simple. And that wife of his, she showed us no respect either, when she ought to be the one serving us tonight. Girls of this generation have no respect left for their husbands' families anymore, and—"

"Aunt Tabitha," Laila called out, smiling tightly from across the table, seated between Ivy and Tess. The three of them had been doing their best all evening to keep the guests

entertained, hoping to spare their friend the burden in her current condition, but clearly, there was no pleasing people like this.

The moment Sebastian's grandmother, Eleanor, had excused herself from the hall with Alex, the conversation had swiftly turned to insulting Viola, with plenty of shade thrown at Sebastian, and Laila, listening to these aunties complain endlessly, women who were currently enjoying every luxury Silver had to offer purely because of their connection to Sebastian, finally reached her limit.

"You seem to have a real problem with girls of this generation, so much so you've apparently forgotten the person you're discussing is your Supreme Luna, and she doesn't owe anyone here her constant attention. You didn't come here to see her in the first place, you came for a memorial, which you've now attended, and should—"

Laila's words cut off the moment her own mother, seated across the table beside the gossiping she-wolf, shot her a sharp warning glare, since apparently, no matter how modern the world had become, one still didn't talk back to one's elders in their culture. Laila, however, had never much cared for that particular rule, and she ignored her mother's look entirely, continuing to defend her friend against the gossipmongers.

"I'd suggest we all focus on the actual reason we're gathered here today, rather than gossiping about a pregnant woman who needs rest, and an atmosphere free of toxic guests. If everyone's finished their meals, feel free to retire to your rooms and let the omegas clear up." Laila instructed, and her words did nothing but draw every eye at the table straight toward her, attention she could have happily lived without. All twenty something guests seated around the table turned to look at her at once.

"Laila, is it?" One of the elder aunties asked, studying her with mild surprise, since everyone present already knew her as the smart, perfect she-wolf once believed, long ago, to be destined to marry the very boy they all considered so disrespectful now.

"Yes, that's me." Laila said, taking a sip of her wine and setting the glass down, even as she felt her mother's stare boring a hole clean through her.

"Agnes, your daughter really is something, talking to us like that." Sebastian's aunt Becky remarked, a longtime friend of Laila's mother, turning to address the woman directly. "We'd heard rumors about her, some time back, but none of us took them seriously. Seems they were true after all. You didn't raise this girl with a firm enough hand, clearly, and with an attitude like that, she'll never get anywhere in life."

Laila opened her mouth to respond to the woman directly, but her mother beat her to it. "Children of this generation, I tell you, Becky, but Laila isn't usually like this. Laila," Agnes turned to her daughter, whose eyes had already narrowed in open disapproval, still glaring at the Alpha's aunties everyone else at the table treated with such deference. "Apologize to your elder, dear."

Laila let out a short, humorless laugh at her mother before saying, "I'm not apologizing to anyone, because nothing I said was wrong. If anything, they're the ones who owe the Luna an apology, for badmouthing her behind her back all evening, when she's the reason they are welcomed into Silver again. If you'll excuse me." Laila pushed her chair back and, with one last glare at the table, walked away, entirely done entertaining any of this.

The moment she left, the two gossiping women turned to her mother in open disbelief. "Oh, my word, Agnes, you've clearly lost all control over that daughter of yours. You let her speak to you that way? My daughter would never dream of looking me in the eye like that, let alone humiliating me in public."

Laila's mother flushed with embarrassment as murmurs about her daughter's conduct rippled around the table, since in their world, above almost everything else, a mother's control over her children, and her children's respect for her, was meant to be absolute and unquestionable.

Almost as if on cue, almost everyone began talking about Laila's wild lifestyle and how she had been living her life, further humiliating Agnes as she listened to her daughter being called a bitch who opened her legs for every man.

"If you're not careful, your entire bloodline dies with that one. She's your only daughter, unmated at her age, speaking to her elders like that, you'll be stuck raising a single daughter for the rest of your days, because I promise you, men don't want women like that." Becky pressed, salting the wound of a mother who had raised her daughter to be independent, and was now, apparently, expected to regret it.

"Had she been a polite girl, it would have been wonderful to be tied to our family through marriage, especially since my son has come of age to find a mate. But unfortunately..." Becky trailed off, shaking her head in dismay, as she believed her son was a prize any she-wolf would be lucky to have, simply because he was related to Sebastian to some extent, and someone like Laila wasn't worthy of him.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll go make sure she apologizes properly." Agnes excused herself and went after her daughter, the whispers of the other guests trailing behind her the whole way.