

THE ALPHA KING CALL BOY

Chapter 116 You Will Be Alpha King



I knew Fiona was busy at work. But it couldn't hurt to give her a little more encouragement. Send one more text that would be waiting for the next time she had a break and checked her phone.

I wrote: The pics don't have to be sexy. I just want to see your pretty face. Missing it. X

There was no traffic on the way back to the palace. It was only heading into the city that always took forever. I sailed on the highway in the fast lane and made great time.

I took everything into my office and got it filed away neatly – my court summons and the other case-related papers Brandon had given me, as well as the

accounting paperwork copies. My filing systems were immaculate, organized and labeled and locked securely.

Then I changed again. I ditched the suit and was back in light sweats.

I ate an apple on the walk to the weight room, remembering that I wasn't going to see Fiona for dinner this evening. I'd eat with Kayden instead and take the opportunity to spend some time debriefing about our work with the pack today.

In the store room behind the gym I found a big length of heavy rope. I coiled it across my chest for ease of carrying and went back out into the courtyard, heading west across the training field.

Third person

It was late afternoon, but Lucas had only been awake for a few hours. And he'd moved through them very slowly, battling a hangover with the help of a couple benzos that perked him up just enough to bathe and dress before he collapsed into the recliner out on his balcony.

He lit up a pre-roll and took his phone out, checking to see if his friend had gotten back to him yet about a private club event he was trying to go to tonight.

Out of nowhere, his mother slammed his bedroom door open and came storming in.

Lucas snuffed out the joint in a gold ashtray atop a table at his side, and placed it carefully in the little cradle on the rim to save it for later. The party was over for now. His mother, always a terrible buzzkill, seemed to have something especially urgent on the mind right now.

“What do you want?” he asked as she made her way to the balcony.

Scarlet eyed her son reprovably, making a point of looking over every inch of him and glaring at the smoldering joint in the ashtray as well. “You are a mess, Lucas.”

“Thanks. You stomp in here just to tell me that?”

“Actually, yes.” She gave Lucas one of her signature smiles. Scarlet’s big, condescending smile could send a chill right down your spine. Her shiny red lips pulled taut around a mouthful of perfectly white, sharp and even teeth, and her dark eyes glimmered with an air of haughty derision.

“What do you want?” he asked again.

“So impatient,” she snapped back. “Impetuous child. As if you were very busy here?”

She held her hands out, looking around at the scene. The smoldering blunt. Lucas in his already wrinkled suit. The mess of his gigantic bedroom behind them, where sweaty bedsheets were balled up on the floor next to his half-stripped bed.

“Very busy,” he mumbled, looking at his phone again. Still no notifications.

“Lucas, this behavior has to stop,” Scarlet said, finally getting to her point. “I’m done letting this slide.”

“Why?” he asked lazily.

“Because you are going to be King,” she said through gritted teeth. “And while I certainly will not expect you to do all the heavy lifting that job requires, you need to

at least look the part. This... this is unacceptable.”

Lucas chuckled. “Me, Alpha King. Would you let that go already? It’s never going to happen.”

“It is.” She stepped close to Lucas, blocking the sunlight that had been warming him, casting him in the shade of her shadow instead. “I am working on it now, son. That is why I am pressing you now. It’s time. I am taking them both out. Soon.” Her jaw twitched.

Now, Lucas guffawed. “Sure,” he said. “And I’ll take a mermaid for my Luna Queen.”

Scarlet glowered at her son, fire crackling behind her eyes.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said flatly. “I thought we were saying things that are never going to fucking happen.”

“You know, women don’t look fondly upon men who speak crudely to their mothers,” Scarlet replied coolly. “You should watch that.”

Lucas felt a little sting of shame. His mother had gone right to his sore spot: his inability to maintain a relationship with any woman, ever. Beyond, of course, the anonymous, trashy omegas he hooked up with in nightclub bathrooms and the professionals that he regularly paid for company.

His shame didn’t last long, though. He was high enough already that it simply floated away.

“There is no werewolf alive who can take Alexander,” he said, in a tone you’d use to explain a simple concept to a child. “He’s undefeatable.”

He resisted the temptation to touch the bridge of his

nose self-consciously while he talked about his brother. It had been broken in several places when he'd beaten the shit out of Lucas a few months ago.

Lucas had wanted to get plastic surgery to correct the damage to his face after that fight, but his mother talked him out of it, insisting that the rough shape his nose healed into naturally made him look tougher and more handsome. But he still grimaced at the sight of it every time he looked into a mirror.

“That’s a stupid rumor,” Scarlet snapped.

“No. It’s the fucking truth.”

“You watch your tone with me, son.”

“Oh my god.” Lucas wrung his face in his hands. “You are so out of your league. You want to kill the two most powerful Alphas on the planet? How?!” He

slapped the back of one hand into the palm of the other. “You don’t have the power to do that. Alexander and the King both? Fucking forget it.”

Lucas was not wrong about one thing, Scarlet thought to herself. There was no other Alpha wolf on the planet that stood a chance against Alexander in a physical fight: that was probably true. Her stepson was a formidable foe, one she hadn’t been able to defeat... so far.

But there was a good chance, Scarlet believed, that a vampire could do the job.

An even better chance if it was Alexander alone against a whole nest of vampires.

“Tell me how you expect to do this, Mother.” Lucas was starting to sound bored. “If you won’t tell me how you’re going to make it happen, why should I take you

seriously?”

“Don’t worry about the how,” she said. “That’s for Mommy to take care of.”

Lucas rolled his eyes. “Whatever.” He reached into the front pocket of his shirt, pulled out a small, flat, disposable vape pen, and took a big drag.

His mother stormed over and snatched it out of his mouth.

“Fuck!” A thick white ribbon of smoke snaked out of Lucas’s throat and up into Scarlet’s face. “Give that back!”

She threw the little device off the balcony.

“Nice,” he said. “Thanks for that.”

Scarlet waved a stern finger in her son's face. "Shape up, Lucas," she hissed. "Your time is coming soon, I promise you. And you had better be ready when it does."

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Chapter 117 Vice Grip



Alexander

The sun was just starting to set when I reached the pit. The men down at the bottom of it looked truly miserable.

They were hot, thirsty, tired, hungry. Covered in dirt

and dried mud. I could see marks on the walls of the trench that told me they'd done their best to try to scramble up and out during the hours I'd been keeping them down there.

When they looked up and saw that it was me peering down at them, the men bowed their heads and fell to their knees.

“Your punishment is complete,” I told them. “I’ll pull you up one at a time.”

I unspooled the rope from around my body and lowered it down. Once there was enough slack to reach the guys, I got a vice grip with the remaining portion that I was holding, looping it around my waist, then my forearm, before I told them to send someone up and braced myself to pull.

When all seven men were out of the pit and kneeling

on the hillside before me, I finally addressed them as a group.

“Do I need to remind you,” I asked them calmly, “that failure to perform on the battlefield means your own death or the death of your fellow soldiers?”

“Sir, no, sir!” they shouted in unison.

“Another failure to meet my standards will result in removal from the pack. Consider today your one and only official warning. The seven of you are on notice. Are we clear?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“And one last thing,” I added. “You are going to tell me what happened in the city. I want every detail. We’re not leaving this spot until I know exactly what went down while I was away.”

There was a pause. But then one man spoke, his head still hung low, eyes on the earth. A second spoke up after him, sharing more details about the night in question. Then a third man joined the conversation.

That left four men still silent.

I demanded they lift their heads and look at me. Eye contact was enough to get the rest of them talking. To remind them how serious I was about all this.

And so I finally got the full story, told in scattered pieces by seven men who'd witnessed the altercation from seven different points of view.

Neither of the two soldiers who supposedly instigated the brawl were here with us on the hillside.

I would get to them soon enough.

Third person

Scarlet hadn't heard back from Donovan yet. Waiting for him in radio silence, with no idea when he would summon her or where he would demand to meet when he did... it was keeping her very anxious indeed.

She was not ready for the meeting yet. She had nothing to offer the vampires yet, though she had sure acted like she did. Her old "friend" Donovan was not going to be happy if she showed up empty handed when he was ready to discuss terms. Especially after all of her big talk.

She left Lucas in his room and tried to put the troublesome boy out of her mind for now. How to deal with her lazy, poorly tempered son, how to convince

him to make something of himself... that had always been a puzzle. One she'd put off solving for a long time.

But she had to look at it now. Now that she'd pulled that ripcord and set into motion a chain of events that, well, simply could not be stopped... Lucas had a critical role in this story she was writing. He was going to have to play it out whether he wanted to or not.

Scarlet's husband, the Alpha King, was in the city for the day. Preparing to sit in judgment for her very own trial. That gave her the run of the palace for now.

Well, most of the palace, anyway. Alexander still kept the West Wing off limits to anyone but his own soldiers, his nuisance of a Luna, and himself. But Scarlet did have some access to that side of the palace, now... limited visual access, at least.

Her stepson had left town for a few days recently, and foolishly left his territory unguarded in his absence. Scarlet supposed he'd been holding faith in the King Pack to conduct themselves more professionally. But the entire pack had left the palace grounds together one evening, and didn't return until near sunrise the next morning.

The Queen took good advantage of that opportunity.

She had tiny, discreet surveillance cameras installed all over the West Wing while it was empty. All over the courtyard where Alexander and his pack trained. All over the hallways where he and his pregnant girlfriend resided.

Her biggest problem with this plan was actually finding the time to scrub through all the footage to look for anything that might be useful.

She took her laptop with her into a sitting room, closed and locked the door behind her, and got settled in to chip away at this task for a few minutes. The live video feed opened first and Scarlet caught a glimpse of activity in the courtyard. To get a better view of what was going on there, she minimized the other camera feeds and full-screened the one that was facing directly out across the field where Alexander and his men often exercised.

And there was the big man himself, trooping across the field with a giant length of rope slung over his bare chest and a small pack of dirt-covered men trailing behind him. They were walking from the far end of the field near the forest and coming toward the palace.

As the group gained on the camera, the others' faces came into view. Scarlet did a double-take, then zoomed in on one of the muddy, bedraggled pack warriors following behind her stepson.

Yep. That was one of her spies.

Her heartrate spiked.

It looked like Alexander was returning from administering some sort of punishment upon this small group of soldiers. The men looked broken, beaten down and exhausted.

She would have to get in touch with her spy soon. See what this was about. Hopefully it was something entirely unrelated to their arrangement.

As Scarlet watched on, following Alexander's movements on the surveillance cameras, her pulse only thrummed faster and faster.

She told herself it was because she loathed Alexander. Was enraged at the mere sight of him.

But that was not true. The truth was that she was afraid of him. Very afraid.

Yes, she feared his father, the Alpha King, too. And that was a man who had put his hands on Scarlet many times already. He had caused her pain for pleasure, and worse pain for punishment, too. But he always held back at least a little... showed his Luna slivers of mercy.

Her husband did this because some sins from his own past were tangled up with hers... because of their long history together and all they had been through. And also because he still desired her. In fact, he seemed to want her even more during periods of time like this when they were fighting intensely.

Alexander, on the other hand...

He was even stronger than his father. And a more accomplished killer. And, most importantly, he despised Scarlet. He had no reason to show her any mercy, if he ever got his hands on her. And that was even without knowing the worst of what she had done to him.

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Chapter 118 Eyes Wide Open



Fiona

I couldn't believe it was almost ten o'clock when I looked at my watch.

“I’ve kept you here way too late,” I told the three colleagues who had been working with me all afternoon and evening. We were nearly finished with the proposal I’d promised to have ready for our client by morning. I could come in early to wrap it up myself from this point. “This is as far as we’re getting tonight. Everybody go home. We’ll pick it up tomorrow.”

They were relieved and hurried away. I saw all three of them headed for the elevator within minutes, having gathered their belongings rapidly, while I was still organizing my notes in the conference room.

I was simply not capable of moving that fast right now. Once I’d done my own, much slower-paced end of day routine and was in the elevator myself, I finally opened up my phone for the first time in several hours, and saw I had an unread text from Alexander.

I smirked as I read it. He was still begging me to send

him selfies. I would have done it if I hadn't been a total mess from my crazy long workday.

I wrote him a reply while riding down the second elevator to the lobby, saying I was finally headed to the car and would be back soon. I also apologized, a little sarcastically, for not having time to take the pictures he requested.

He replied: No problem. You can do it tomorrow. ;)

And then added: Can't wait to see you... I've got those couple things ready you said you wanted.

I kept my eyes wide open and keenly focused as I hurried through the palace halls on my way from the car to our bedroom. It was only about a two minute walk. But it was late on a dark, new moon's night, and the big marble hallways were only dimly lit with a pale, ambient glow coming from sconces high up on the

walls.

The brief era of my being able to move through this space lackadaisically had come to an end, it felt like. I was jumpy now, turning my head to look around every corner as I passed intersections into other corridors. Looking out for Iris, I guess. Or any other surprises.

My nerves settled down as soon as I caught sight of Alexander. I let our bedroom door fall closed behind me and felt safer immediately.

He had glanced at me with a smile on his face, but it slipped away as he studied mine.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asked, concerned.

“I’m fine.” These two words came out as an involuntary reflex. “Well, tired,” I added. “Very tired. Why, do I look terrible?”

“No, no.” He took my purse and briefcase away from me, set them on the floor and then swept me into a full-body hug. His heat was palpable, radiating into me.

My arms slipped around his waist. He kissed the top of my head and left his mouth lingering there.

“You look beautiful, as always,” he lied. “You look very pale, though.” Alexander reeled back, then, and used one finger to tip my chin upward. “Did you eat enough today?” he asked sternly.

“Probably not.” I hesitated, not wanting to start him worrying, but then confessed the rest. “I was pretty sick in the morning, actually. I threw up a few times. I think I was just fatigued.”

“I’m so sorry.” He said this in a way that made it

sound like he felt fully responsible for the problem.

I nodded. “I need to sit down for a minute,” I told him gently.

“Of course.” He unwrapped his arms from around my body. He almost stepped away, but then came to kneel before me instead, indicating he wanted to remove my shoes. “I, uh... actually drew you a bath, if you’re interested in heading right in there.”

“Oh. That’s nice. Yes, I’d like that very much.”

He grinned, looking proud of himself. “Good,” he said, finishing up his work on removing my shoes and putting them away tidily by the door.

I got settled in and took care of some necessities while Alexander fetched me a glass of ice water. I was undressed and underwater and uttering a relaxed

“ahh” when he brought it to me in the bathroom a few minutes later.

“Thanks for this,” I told him. “Don’t let me stay in here too long, though. It’s too relaxing. I’ll fall asleep.”

“I could keep you awake,” he said suggestively.

Alexander was standing a few feet away, unbuttoning his snowy white shirt. He took it off and hung it on a hook on the door. Then he walked over and crouched down, coming to kneel beside the tub.

“I think that would also put me right to sleep right now,” I told him regretfully.

He chuckled. “Fine,” he said. He grabbed a loofah sponge and started covering it with fragrant soap, brought it to my chest and began to pass it very gently over my skin, soaping me up. I let my eyes close

while he moved the soft sponge all over my body, starting at my neck and chest and moving downwards.

He made it successfully all the way to my feet without incident. “You’re sweet,” I whispered tiredly as he deemed his job complete and wrung out and hung up the loofah.

“You want help getting out?” he asked.

I did. He wrapped me in a fluffy white towel and made easy work of removing me from the big clawfoot tub, which might not have been so simple on my own in the clumsy, exhausted state I was in.

I slipped into soft purple nightgown while Alexander dimmed the lights in our room and carved me up a slice of cake. He said yes when I asked if I could eat it in bed. That’s where I met him a minute later.

“So what’s going on at work? Everything okay?” he asked, once we were settled in, relaxing on top of the covers with little dishes of rich, delicious, heavily frosted chocolate cake.

I licked my fork clean after taking a bite. I could not have explained why, but that rich chocolate was a healing elixir for me in that moment. It was satisfying a very deep craving. There was something next-level, almost spiritual about how good the taste and the heavy dose of sugar was making me feel.

“This is so good,” I said dreamily, not realizing for a couple seconds that Alexander had just asked me a question. “Oh. Work. We’ve got a big problem with the development project. It’s a total nightmare, honestly.”

Alexander smiled amusedly at my first remark. The second one, the answer to his question, made his

eyebrows shoot upward interestedly. “What happened?”

I licked frosting off my lips. “Can we talk about it tomorrow, maybe?” I asked gently. “I’m sorry, I want to tell you all about it, but I’m just so tired.”

“Of course. I’m sure everything will be fine. I’m sure it’s nothing you can’t handle.”

Talking about what I could or couldn’t handle reminded me of something else. “Will you do me a favor?” I asked.

“Anything. What do you need?”

I sighed. “A refill on that medication I got from the palace doctor a while back.”

Alexander’s eyes changed as he found my meaning.

He looked sad to realize that he alone was not enough to keep me well.

“Just to have on hand for emergencies,” I added, attempting to soothe his injured pride. “With my responsibilities at work, all the time I spend in the car back and forth, and everything... it’s just not always practical for us to have as much contact as my body would like...”

“I’ll call the doctor and have her drop off the medication,” he said quickly. Then he leaned in and kissed me on the forehead. His lips were sticky.

“Hey,” I whined. “You got frosting on me.”

He covered his mouth, laughing. “I’m sorry.” He went and got a cloth napkin, wetted it in the sink and brought it back. I snatched it from him and wiped my forehead.

“I forgive you,” I told him playfully. I handed him my now empty dish, along with the napkin. He put everything away and then rejoined me in bed.

A fresh wave of fatigue suddenly swooped over me as Alexander scooted his body close to mine and touched me with his warm hands.

“I am so sleepy,” I told him, burying my face into the crook of his neck. I was about to add, “but I should get up and brush my teeth.”

He replied before I could make my tired mouth form more words. “Go to sleep, then,” he said, and he began to stroke my hair gently.

I must have passed right out the instant I received that permission, because that’s the last thing I remember before my alarm went off in the morning.

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Chapter 119 A Risky Little Game



I snoozed my alarm and told Alexander I absolutely had to get up when it went off again in seven minutes.

He smiled sleepily and grabbed my wrist, dragged me close to his warm body, and then pulled the covers back up around my shoulders. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the shiver of comfort that slid down the length of my body.

“I’m sorry,” I said into his chest. “I told you I’d schedule more time for us to be together this morning,

but with everything that happened yesterday...”

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart.” His voice was deep and raspy with sleep. He tried to clear his throat before he continued, but it didn’t help. “I’ll make some coffee though. And make you some breakfast. You need something in your stomach other than chocolate.”

It occurred to me that Alexander had never called me “sweetheart” before. He was more lovey-dovey than usual when he was in this kind of half-awake state in the early mornings, though. I tried to forget he’d said it before the nervous feeling in my chest, which had fluttered to life at the sound of that tender pet name, could gain any momentum.

I got dressed and ready much more quickly than usual to make time for that promised breakfast. I was starving. I definitely hadn’t taken in sufficient calories

the prior day.

Alexander poured me another perfect cup of that sweet, spicy, creamy coffee he'd impressed me with the day before. And, when I was ready for work and sat down at the table, he presented me with dishes of cinnamon oatmeal and fresh cut fruit as well. It was perfect, just what I needed to bring my energy up and get me ready for my day. Or as ready as I could be, still running on so little sleep for so many days in a row at this point.

While we ate, I gave Alexander the short version of the story about what was going on at work. The industry problems, the closures, and the impact on our project. He listened, nodding, and if he wanted to ask for details, he refrained. I appreciated this, took it as a gesture of respect for both my time and my competence as his employee. His silence told me that he trusted me to handle the situation.

He hugged me goodbye at the door before I headed off to the car. And then did another out-of-the-ordinary thing.

He brought his face very close to mine and looked me deep in the eye. Our lips were an inch apart. And then, slowly, like he was being conspicuously careful, he planted a kiss on my cheek. Or rather, the place right beside my mouth, sort of between my lips and my cheek.

He was playing a risky little game.

We had made a deal a long time ago not to kiss on the mouth. It was too intimate for me. I still didn't like the thought of letting things get to that place with me and Alexander, not while I was still unsure about his intentions for our relationship in the long term.

My lips were the only part of me that I kept off limits from him. He kissed me everywhere else, all the time. My neck he liked very much. My forehead and the top of my head he had a habit of kissing sweetly when he was trying to be tender.

But this slow kiss on the cheek that brought our lips so very close together, flirting with the boundaries of our agreement... it was not something Alexander usually played around with.

I found that I liked it.

There was a package outside on our doorstep, a small box that rattled when I picked it up. I read the label on the front: it was my medication.

Perfect. I slipped it into my purse while I walked to the car, feeling relieved to have that on hand now.

I was skimming news headlines on my phone during the drive into the city when I received a text from Nina. She sent a video.

Nina: Check this out. My new routine on the aerial hoop, my new obsession!

In the video, Nina was in the middle of a big, mirror-walled room—clearly a dance studio. Her hair was down and long, a pale blonde color that made her olive skin look darker by contrast, and crimped in tiny waves. She was wearing a cropped black long-sleeved shirt with the tightest, tiniest gym shorts that ever existed, and white thigh-high socks with two black horizontal stripes at the top.

She started out on the floor, holding a big hoop that was hanging from the ceiling by a rope. Some slow, bass-heavy music started, and Nina began to dance.

She touched the hoop and spun it, sending it moving fast in a spiral. She moved her body in some impressive, slinky choreography all around the hoop as it moved. It barely missed making contact with her as she curled and turned underneath it in perfect timing. Then she stopped the hoop suddenly; it soared a couple feet up into the air. Nina sat down into it as it rose and rode it up into the air, holding it at the edges like she was on swing.

A tiny movement of her shoulder sent the hoop spinning again, more slowly this time. It turned and rose, and once it stopped its ascent, she suddenly grasped the very bottom of the ring and inverted her body, going upside down with her legs in a perfect split.

The routine only got crazier from there. I felt like I was watching a circus performance. One that would have a slack-jawed stadium crowd on their feet.

I texted: What the hell, Nina? I didn't know you were an acrobat!

Nina: Hehe. I just learned the hoop a few weeks ago. It's addictive. So fun.

Me: Impressive, too. That was crazy to watch!

Nina: What are you gonna do. I am kind of awesome. Wish you could come watch one of my shows!

I had never in my life been a fan of crowded nightclubs packed with go-go dancers and strobe lights and sweaty, alcohol-fueled men desperate to feed me tequila shots. And in my current condition – pregnant, insanely busy with work, exhausted all the time – that environment sounded extra awful.

Me: I know. I'm sorry. You know it's just not my

scene.

Nina: I get it. I just miss you though. Been a while since we hit the diner. When are you gonna have time for me soon?

I had been enjoying getting together with Nina in the mornings. We always had fun when we met up for indulgent, greasy breakfasts together. And I had learned that when I didn't carve out time for her, it had a negative impact on my life. Laughing with Nina was good for my soul.

But I wanted to start devoting my early mornings to extra moments with Alexander, instead... it felt really good to start my day with him.

I asked my friend what she thought about coming to the palace this weekend, and if she'd mind hanging out with me and Alexander together. Seemed like a

way to split the difference: time with my Alpha, which my body needed, simultaneous with Nina time, which I needed for the maintenance of my sanity. Of course she and I wouldn't be able to speak as freely with him around, but it would have to do.

Nina agreed to my plan happily. I loved her for being so easygoing.

Then Alexander started texting me too, just as my car rolled up to the front of the colossal glass skyscraper that was Crescent Ventures headquarters.

It read: Don't forget to send me a pic today.

I replied: I'll see what I can do.

Alexander: Will you do it if I send you one of me, first?

My cheeks flushed as I started imagining what kind of

photo he was thinking of sending me.

I wrote back: I suppose you could try that and see...

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Chapter 120 Vampires



Alexander

I was texting Fiona with a dumb smirk on my face when I heard sounds of movement approaching our bedroom door and snapped right to attention.

I was already opening the door by the time the man reached the doorstep. He had just raised his hand to

knock and froze when he saw me. It was a palace servant, one I didn't recognize.

"Oh!" I had startled the small man. He lowered his fist awkwardly. "Alpha Alexander. The Alpha King has requested a meeting with you, Sir." He inclined his head reverently.

"A meeting? When?"

"At your earliest convenience, Sir. He would prefer to see you right away, if at all possible." The servant handed me a sealed envelope, stepped back, nodded his head again and then scurried away.

I watched him go. Then dipped back inside, locked the door behind me, and opened the letter.

My father had written me a note with his own hand, so that I would know this request was truly coming from

him. He asked me to meet him in his study.

I suited up quickly and walked fast to the other end of the palace.

The servant who had been at my door was just leaving my father's study as I approached. I startled him for a second time. His eyes had been down, focused on the tray full of empty coffee cups he was carrying, and he almost walked right into me as he turned out of the doorway. I ducked out of his way at the last second. "Oh!" he cried again.

I had been assuming that my father wanted to speak to me about my summons to testify at Scarlet's embezzlement trial. But as soon as I entered his study, I got the feeling something else was going on.

He looked up at me, stone-faced, as I entered.

“Good morning, Father,” I said with all the respect I could muster. “It has been a while since we last spoke.”

He gave a single, slow nod to acknowledge this. His lips curled down into a kind of emotionless frown.

“What is it?” I asked. Suddenly it was clear that things had changed since that last time we’d interacted months ago, when my smug and arrogant father had lashed me bloody for offending his wife in public. A different version of that man was standing in front of me now.

“Something’s happened,” he said. His baritone voice sounded grave.

“Vampires.” The word was on my lips like a reflex. I came out as a statement, not a question.

He nodded again. “Sightings in the southern villages. No attacks yet. No disappearances. But... they’re back. I know it.”

A kind of switch flipped inside me, activating my military mind. There were no emotions in that part of my brain. Only fast thinking, calm composure, and an urgent compulsion to start planning.

“What do you need from me?” I asked.

My father began to pace the room. His steps looked heavy and tired. I got the sense that he had been up all night.

Finally he brought his large body to a stop in front of a picture window that overlooked the forest. He gazed out at the view. Then, without turning toward me, he said, “I need you to tell me what to do.”

He couldn't bring himself to look me in the eye while he admitted this.

My mind was still turning on the news about the vampire sightings as I changed into sweats and jogged outside to meet Kayden for our usual pre-training workout.

Nearly every day we ran a rough path into the woods and back, just the two of us. It gave us time to warm up as well as talk before we turned our attention to the pack for the rest of the morning.

I always had something to talk to my Beta about. He was my sounding board. My confidant. My therapist on occasion, if I'm being honest. And always helpful for talking through a strategic issue. He asked good questions and pushed me to see things from different perspectives.

Running outside was the perfect time for thinking, too. Something about the journey out and back, and the simple, instinctive movements required from the body satiated my wolf. I always felt calmer and more centered after a run.

Kayden was quiet for a while after I caught him up on all the details that my father had just shared with me.

“How many sightings have there been?” he finally asked.

“Only two that have been reported to my father.”

“Both in the same village?”

“Mm-hm.”

He went quiet again as we entered into thicker woods and had to separate from each other. We’d been

running side by side; now he fell behind me.

The trees grew closer together deeper into the forest. This was the part of the run that put agility to the test. I used my forearms like machetes, snapping small branches and other foliage out of the way as we charged forward through the overgrowth that crossed and attempted to block our path.

Kayden and I slowed and turned in unison when at last we reached the rock formation that we used as a mile marker, and started the second half of the run back toward the palace.

“Has he deployed any units?” Kayden asked, picking right up with the conversation we’d paused several minutes earlier.

“No. He hasn’t taken any action yet. Wanted to know what I thought, first.”

“What’d you tell him?”

“I told him I’d sleep on it. Give him my recommendations in the morning.”

We reached a place where a fallen log blocked the path, and leapt over it simultaneously.

“We should meet up tonight,” Kayden said between breaths. He was starting to get slightly winded. “Think Fiona will be working late again? We could talk about it over dinner. If she’s gonna be busy anyway.”

“Maybe. I’ll check in with her and see.”

Kayden was mixing up a couple of protein shakes in the little health bar behind the weight room while I chugged some water and checked my phone outside. The crisp morning air felt amazing, cooling me rapidly

with every passing breeze that skimmed my sweat-drenched skin.

I opened my thread with Fiona and felt my face drifting into a smile while I reread our last couple texts. I still owed her a picture. For now, though, I just asked how her day was going, and if she had an idea yet about when she was going to make it home tonight.

I suppose I had been expecting to see a text or missed call from Iris when I looked at my phone, too. But there was no word from her since we last spoke in person yesterday morning.

She was sure leaving me alone now, just as I had requested. But I discovered that I felt worried about her now after not hearing from her. I hoped that she was okay.

That woman was a real mess. I'd been—reasonably, I still felt—very frustrated with her crazy behavior. But the fact was, she really needed help. And I had promised I would take care of her.

It was still early, the last few minutes of deep blue dark before the sun would make its appearance in the sky. But Iris was an early riser. I texted her to see if she wanted to have a bite to eat with me and Kayden in a few hours, after we finished pack training.

She was up. She replied right away.

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