

Claimed By The Rival Alpha c 11-20

Selena

I hated how nervous I felt because it was ridiculous. I carry trays every day now. Water, wine, food, clothes and yet somehow, carrying one to Alpha Kael felt entirely different.

The silver tray shook slightly in my hands as I followed the guard through the castle hallways.

"Where is he?" I asked quietly.

"The training grounds." That surprised me.

The guard led me outside through the back of the castle where sunlight immediately warmed my skin. The farther we walked, the louder the shouting and grunting sounds became.

The sharp clash of combat then the training grounds came into view.

A massive crowd of warriors surrounded the center arena while cheering loudly. Some sat atop wooden barriers while others stood with folded arms watching intensely.

All their attention focused on two men inside the arena. Alpha Kael and Beta Bastien.

The moment I saw Kael, my steps slowed. Oh Moon Goddess!

He was bare chested and sweat glistened across hard muscles beneath the bright sunlight while he moved around Beta Bastien with terrifying precision. Every strike looked calculated, controlled and brutal even during practice.

Beta Bastien wore partial combat gear, but Kael had nothing except dark training trousers hanging low on his hips and somehow that made him look even more dangerous or maybe unfairly attractive.

My wolf stirred immediately beneath my skin as the mate bond pulsed warmly making me swallow hard.

Kael dodged Bastien's punch effortlessly before countering with an elbow strike that would have broken another man's jaw.

The watching warriors erupted loudly.

"He's holding back," one muttered nearby.

"Obviously," another replied. "If the Alpha fought seriously, Beta Bastien would already be unconscious."

Beta Bastien attacked again, sweeping low while Kael blocked smoothly before twisting behind him and locking his arm sharply against his back.

That was when I realized they were not truly sparring to win. They were demonstrating tactics.

Several younger warriors watched closely while whispering among themselves.

"He killed four rogues alone last month."

"I heard it was six."

"No," another corrected. "Five. Near the southern trade roads."

I quietly moved closer while pretending to focus on balancing the tray.

"He's ruthless though," one warrior muttered. "Sometimes too ruthless."

"That ruthlessness is why Blackbourne still stands strong," another snapped back.

The first shrugged. "I'm just saying some of his methods are extreme."

I listened carefully as they continued their discussions.

"He scares even our allies."

"Good. Fear keeps enemies careful."

Another warrior suddenly laughed. "I wonder who'd win between him and Alpha William."

That caught my attention instantly and several warriors exchanged looks.

"Alpha William is older and more experienced."

"But Alpha Kael's brutal."

"Nightbane pack is still the strongest in the realm," someone argued.

"Because Alpha William knows politics."

"Because Alpha William bows to vampires," another muttered bitterly.

I stiffened slightly.

Then another warrior spoke carefully. "I heard Alpha William once fought three Alphas during a council dispute and still won."

"Alpha Kael would still give him trouble."

The debate continued while my eyes remained glued to Kael as his body moved beautifully and powerfully.

Every muscle shifted perfectly beneath his skin whenever he struck or dodged.

The sight alone felt distracting. Dangerously distracting.

Suddenly Beta Bastien lunged forward aggressively. Kael sidestepped, grabbed his arm and slammed him hard into the dirt.

The entire training ground instantly fell silent.

Beta Bastien groaned dramatically from the ground. "You enjoy embarrassing me."

"You leave yourself open too often," Alpha Kael replied calmly.

Then his eyes lifted directly toward me and my breath caught instantly while the mate bond flared sharply.

Alpha Kael began walking toward me while warriors quickly stepped aside for him. Sweat rolled slowly down his chest and disappeared beneath the waistband of his trousers.

Moon Goddess help me.

I became so distracted staring at him that I completely forgot about the tray in my hands.

It tilted dangerously and the wine jars slipped. But before they crashed, Alpha Kael caught the tray effortlessly with one hand.

Several nearby warriors chuckled quietly as heat flooded my cheeks instantly. "I'm sorry," I blurted quickly.

Alpha Kael ignored the apology completely as he grabbed one wine jar and drank deeply while several warriors resumed talking around us. Then he took a jug of water and poured it over his head.

I nearly stopped breathing as the water slid down his neck slowly across hard muscle and—

'Stop it immediately!' I mentally yelled at myself and looked away sharply.

Alpha Kael handed the empty jug back to me before turning toward the warriors.

"Again," he ordered and the warriors immediately straightened.

He began explaining combat positioning and attack timing while Beta Bastien demonstrated beside him. I should have left immediately after dropping the tray.

Instead, I stayed entirely because I apparently lacked self control.

I watched Alpha Kael move around the training grounds while speaking confidently to his warriors. Everyone listened carefully whenever he spoke.

Even the older warriors respected him deeply and annoyingly enough, the more I watched him, the more attractive he became.

My eyes drifted shamelessly over his chest again.

'What would those muscles feel like beneath my fingers? Hard? Definitely hard.' My stomach tightened unexpectedly.

Then another horrifying thought entered my head. If the rest of his body looked this— No!

I squeezed my eyes shut briefly. "What was wrong with me?"

When I opened them again, Alpha Kael had dismissed the warriors already And now he was staring directly at me again.

"Come with me," he said and I quickly followed him while trying not to think about his body anymore.

It did not work. Not even slightly.

Back inside the castle, Alpha Kael led me toward his office while Beta Bastien disappeared elsewhere.

The moment we entered, Alpha Kael finally grabbed a thin dark vest and pulled it over himself.

A small part of me felt disappointed.Pathetic even.

Alpha Kael moved toward his desk and opened a ledger.

"The markets you mentioned before," he said without looking at me. "What level of security should I expect?"

I blinked in disappointment. "That's why you called me here?"

His eyes lifted briefly. "Did you expect something else?"

Heat crawled up my neck immediately as I tried to comport myself. "No."

Alpha Kael waited for an answer, I sighed softly before answering. "I don't know the exact security details."

His expression darkened slightly. "You gave me the locations."

"Yes, because I studied reports and ledgers inside my father's castle."

"Then tell me the patrol structures."

"I never visited those markets myself."

Alpha Kael stared at me blankly. "You never visited them?"

"I was a princess."

The irritation on his face became immediate. "Then why mention them if you know nothing useful?"

"I know useful things," I argued quickly.

"Such as?"

"Their routes. Their trade importance. Their seasonal schedules."

Alpha Kael leaned back slowly. "Or I could simply send scouts and discover all that myself."

"Then why ask me?"

"Because asking you wastes less time."

I crossed my arms stubbornly. "Well, I'm sorry for not personally inspecting market security during my royal walks."

Alpha Kael looked deeply unimpressed. "What exactly did you do all day in Nightbane?"

I frowned before answering. "I trained."

"With weapons?" He asked, staring intently at me.

"Sometimes." I said with a shrug of my shoulders.

"What else?"

"I hunted occasionally."

"What else?"

I hesitated while Alpha Kael sighed heavily. "So essentially, you do nothing."

My eyes widened in anger then I snapped. "That's not true."

"You were just being sheltered." He said, making me clench my fist.

"I was educated."

"No, you were an over-pampered princess."

My anger flared instantly at his annoying words. "I was raised as an Alpha's daughter."

"Exactly." His voice sharpened slightly now. "You spent your life waiting to grow older and eventually marry some powerful mate."

"That's unfair." I snapped at him trying so hard to be calm.

"It's accurate."

"No, it isn't." I argued.

Alpha Kael stood slowly from his chair. "Then tell me one genuinely useful skill you possess."

I opened my mouth but nothing came out because horrifyingly enough— He was partially right and I hated that.

"I can fight," I muttered weakly.

Alpha Kael actually laughed and the sound irritated me immediately.

"You would die in real combat within minutes."

That did it. Anger exploded through me instantly and without thinking, I grabbed the nearest goblet from his desk and hurled it directly at him.

The office door suddenly opened at the exact same moment and Beta Bastien walked in.

Everything happened fast afterward as the Beta instantly reacted like I was an attacker. He crossed the room in seconds, grabbed me violently and slammed me face down against the desk.

Pain shot through my shoulder. "What the hell—"

"Don't move," Beta Bastien snarled.

"I wasn't attacking him!" I yelled but his grip tightened anyway.

Alpha Kael had calmly caught the thrown goblet before it hit the wall then he sighed. "Release her."

Beta Bastien blinked. "What?"

"I said release her." Reluctantly, Beta Bastien let me go.

I immediately straightened while glaring furiously at both men. "That was unnecessary."

"You threw something at the Alpha," Beta Bastien replied dryly.

"He insulted me first." Alpha Kael looked entirely unbothered by the chaos.

Beta Bastien glanced between us suspiciously before finally asking, "What exactly is happening here?"

"She's giving information about Nightbane," Alpha Kael answered simply and my irritation faded instantly.

Beta Bastien accepted the explanation surprisingly easily. "Then this is more important."

He reached inside his coat and handed Alpha Kael a sealed letter. "The Council sent this."

Alpha Kael opened it immediately while I watched then his expression hardened slightly as he read.

"What is it?" Beta Bastien asked.

Alpha Kael lowered the parchment slowly. "An urgent council meeting."

My stomach tightened as I already had a hunch of what it meant.

"Regarding what?" Beta Bastien pressed.

Alpha Kael's eyes briefly met mine as he answered.

"Regarding the disappearance of Alpha William's daughter."

I froze immediately.

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Kael

"The Council?" Selena asked immediately. "You're going?"

I folded the letter slowly and placed it on my desk without answering her. I could smell the fear rising in her scent already.

Beta Bastien stood quietly near the door, watching us both with crossed arms.

"Kael," Selena pressed again. "Are you going to attend the meeting?"

"The Council's summons cannot be ignored," I said calmly.

Her face tightened immediately. "So you are going."

"I said it cannot be ignored."

"That means yes." She said again.

I leaned back in my chair and studied her. She looked genuinely terrified now, and annoyingly enough, my wolf reacted violently to it. Wanting me to protect her.

The instinct clawed through me immediately. 'Claim her.' I ignored it ruthlessly.

"If my father tells them I'm here..." she began quietly.

"He won't." I cut in immediately.

Her brows furrowed. "How can you be sure?"

"Because he has no proof."

"I'm sure he suspects."

"Suspicion is not enough inside the Council chamber."

Selena looked unconvinced as she said again. "They'll believe him anyway. He controls half the Alphas there."

"That is exactly why you need to stop panicking and let me think." The sharpness in my tone silenced her briefly still, the fear remained.

"No one is sending you to the vampires," I said firmly. Her eyes searched mine and for one brief second, the room became dangerously quiet as the mate bond stirred warmly between us again.

I looked away first. "You should return to work," I muttered.

Selena did not move. "What if they force you to surrender me?"

"They won't."

"And if they do?"

I stood from my chair slowly. "They would have to come through me first."

Her breathing hitched softly that I instantly regretted saying it aloud.

My wolf practically purred in satisfaction. 'Mine.' I ignored it.

Selena stared at me for another second before finally turning toward the door while Beta Bastien stepped aside to let her pass.

Right before she exited, she paused. "You really think you can fool the Council?"

I smirked faintly. "If your father is a stubborn bastard, then I'll simply prove I'm worse."

Then she finally left and the moment the door shut behind her, Beta Bastien sighed heavily.

"This is becoming dangerous."

I grabbed the Council letter again. "It was already dangerous the moment she stepped into my territory."

"She's terrified."

"She should be."

Beta Bastien frowned slightly. "That's not what I meant."

I ignored the comment. The truth was that Selena's fear bothered me more than it should have. Far more.

My wolf hated the idea of her feeling unsafe inside my pack.

"She thinks the Council will hand her over," Beta Bastien continued.

"They can't."

"They can if Alpha William convinces enough Alphas."

I rubbed my jaw thoughtfully as Bastien was right.

Alpha William held too much influence within the Council chamber. Most Alphas respected him. Some feared him. Others simply followed wherever the Nightbane pack led.

And if William openly accused me of hiding Selena— Half the Council would believe him immediately.

"She cannot be exposed," Beta Bastien muttered.

"She won't."

"How exactly do you plan to prevent that?"

I remained silent for a moment then the answer came together naturally in my mind.

The answer was simple. If we wanted everyone to believe Selena was not inside the Blackbourne pack... Then we needed to behave exactly like people searching for her.

I looked toward Beta Bastien. "Prepare a small squad."

He blinked once. "For what?"

"For a mission."

"What kind of mission?"

I smirked faintly. "To search for Alpha William's missing daughter."

Beta Bastien stared at me blankly for two seconds before realization dawned in his eyes then he laughed. "You manipulative bastard."

"The Council expects me to exploit Alpha William's weakness."

"Because everyone knows you'd absolutely use his missing daughter against him."

"Exactly."

Beta Bastien shook his head with amusement. "If our warriors are seen searching nearby territories, rumors will spread naturally."

"And by the time the Council meeting begins," I continued, "everyone will already assume I'm hunting for Selena instead of hiding her."

Beta Bastien nodded slowly. "That might actually work."

"It will work."

He grinned slightly. "Sometimes I genuinely worry about the way your mind functions."

"That sounds like admiration." I said with a smirk.

"It isn't." He quickly objected. I ignored him and moved toward the large map stretched across my desk.

"Choose trustworthy warriors only," I instructed. "No idiots. No loose tongues."

Beta Bastien nodded once. "I'll handle it."

As he turned to leave, I stopped him again. "And make the mission visible."

He glanced back as understanding crossed his face immediately. "I definitely will."

Then he finally left the office and the room fell quiet afterward.

I returned my attention to the Nightbane market ledger Selena had given me.

There were several major trading points, supply routes, transport schedules but I still lacked one thing and that's the security details.

I could have sent scouts normally, but most of my trusted scouts were currently occupied with more important assignments beyond the borders.

I exhaled slowly before mindlinking one of my warriors and the response came instantly. "Alpha."

"Report to my office."

Minutes later, a young warrior entered and bowed respectfully. He was easily the finest tracker to emerge from this year's warriors academy.

He was fast,silent and smart enough to work alone.

"You summoned me, Alpha?"

I pointed toward the map."I need reconnaissance on these locations."

His eyes scanned the marked territories carefully. "Nightbane markets?"

"Yes."

He looked surprised but wisely hid most of it. "What exactly do you need?"

"Security rotations. Patrol structures. Entry weaknesses. Escape routes."

"Engage if discovered?"

"No." My voice sharpened immediately. "No engagement. No exposure. You are there to observe only."

He nodded firmly. "When do I leave?"

"You leave immediately." The warrior bowed once more before disappearing from the office and silence settled again afterward but unfortunately for me... My thoughts drifted toward Selena almost instantly.

I leaned back slowly in my chair and closed my eyes briefly. The image of her throwing that goblet at me earlier replayed inside my head.

The anger in her eyes, the fire and the defiance.

No one had dared raise their voice at me in years. Not any warriors, Not elders and not even rival Alphas.

Yet Selena had thrown a damn goblet at my head because I insulted her and somehow... I liked it.

My wolf certainly did. 'Mine,' it growled possessively. I ignored it and reached toward the shelf beside my desk instead.

Several old records sat there regarding Alpha William and Nightbane pack. I already knew most of the information inside them. I had studied Alpha William for years.

I studied his politics, his military structures, his alliances and his weaknesses. Still, I found myself opening the records again anyway.

Only this time... I searched for Selena within the pages and I found the record quickly.

Daughter born eighteen years ago, Mother deceased during childbirth.

I frowned slightly and for some reason, rereading it now felt different.

He definitely sold his mate. The realization hit unpleasantly.

Alpha William's mate had likely been sent to the vampires before her death and now he intended to send his daughter through the same fate.

My jaw tightened instantly as disgust curled through me and before I realized it, I was already leaving my office.

I walked through the castle hallways almost absentmindedly until I reached the servants' quarters. Then I saw her.

Selena sat outside with several maids while folding cleaned cloths beneath the evening light.

She laughed softly at something another girl said and the sound hit me strangely.

I stayed hidden nearby, simply watching and admiring her hair, her eyes and the stubborn little expressions she made whenever annoyed.

My wolf relaxed immediately at the sight of her.

Selena suddenly looked directly toward where I stood and our eyes locked instantly.

For a second, neither of us looked away then I forced myself to turn and leave first.

I headed straight toward my chamber afterward feeling frustrated and restless.

My wolf remained unbearably agitated beneath my skin.

I stripped quickly and entered the bathing room, sinking into the warm water with a low exhale.

But even there— Selena followed me. Not physically but in my thoughts.

I imagined her inside the tub with me naked. Her wet skin against mine, her legs wrapped around my waist while I—

My jaw clenched hard as I was so turned on it became genuinely irritating.

My hand nearly moved beneath the water to stroke my dick and help myself out but suddenly—

"Alpha..." A soft feminine voice drifted through the room.

I looked up immediately and saw Selena stood near the entrance completely naked.

My wolf surged violently as I rose from the tub instantly and began walking towards her.

Then suddenly— the illusion shattered and I discovered it was not Selena.

Rather, it was the same whore Bastien had brought me before.

She smiled slowly. "I saw you earlier in the hallway," she purred while stepping closer. "You looked tense and horny."

My wolf hissed angrily but I ignored it.

Maybe this would help. Maybe if I got rid of the desire physically, Selena would finally leave my head.

The woman stepped closer and slowly ran her fingers across my chest. "You need help relaxing, Alpha?"

Every instinct in me screamed no but I grabbed her waist anyway and allowed her to begin to caress me.

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Kael

The woman's hands moved slowly across my chest while I closed my eyes and tried to lose myself in the feeling.

"Trying..." That was the problem as nothing about it felt natural. Nothing about her felt right.

I leaned against the edge of the bathing tub while steam curled around us. Her fingers slid lower, deliberately seductive, practiced.

Usually, this would have worked. Usually, I would have taken what I needed and sent her away before sunrise but my wolf remained restless and agitated.

It hated this.

The woman pressed herself closer to me and whispered softly, "Relax, Alpha."

I exhaled slowly and shut my eyes tighter trying to focus and forget Selena and the stupid mate bond.

Trying hard to forget the way her scent lingered in my head every second of the day but the more I tried not to think about her... The worse it became.

Suddenly I remembered Selena glaring at me in my office earlier. Her fire, her defiance and the way her lips parted slightly whenever she got angry.

"Damn it!"

The woman kissed my neck and my wolf snarled violently inside me but I ignored it.

The woman's hands slid lower again caressing my dick and that was when my wolf partially surged forward.

My eyes snapped open instantly, glowing faintly as I grabbed her wrists harshly. "Don't touch me."

The words came out rougher than I intended.

The woman gasped in pain as her eyes widened in fear while my grip tightened unconsciously.
"Alpha—"

"Enough." My wolf growled through me angrily.

She whimpered softly when I finally released her then she stumbled backward and rushed out of the bathing room completely naked, tears shining in her eyes.

The door slammed shut behind her and silence filled the room afterward.

I stared at the wall for one long second then punched it hard enough to crack the stone.

"Damn you," I snarled but my wolf remained unmoved.

Mate...

"I know she's my mate." I snapped at my wolf.

Claim her!

"I'm not claiming William's daughter." I yelled again at my wolf.

The beast inside me growled louder. 'Mine.'

I dragged both hands down my face angrily. "What exactly is wrong with you?" I muttered to myself.

For years, my wolf and I had worked perfectly together. We've been focused, disciplined and controlled.

Now suddenly it behaved like a rabid creature every time Selena appeared.

He wants me to claim her, to protect her and to touch her.

I clenched my jaw tightly. "I need focus," I muttered harshly. "I have a pack to run, a Council to deal with and other plans that actually matter."

'Our mate matters.' The answer came instantly from my wolf.

I laughed bitterly. "She's Alpha William's daughter."

No response came immediately this time just a restless irritation because my wolf knew exactly why I refused.

Claiming Selena felt dangerously close to surrender, to weakness and to yielding something to William and I never yielded to anyone ever!

My breathing remained uneven as I leaned against the edge of the tub again as the silence stretched.

Then eventually— Defeat.

I shut my eyes slowly and imagined Selena again. The image came instantly.

Her hair loose around her shoulders, those sharp eyes glaring at me... the curve of her lips when she argued.

I exhaled shakily as my hand moved beneath the water and I started jerking off.

My wolf quieted immediately because now, at least, it imagined the right woman. Selena and only Selena.

By the time release finally hit me, guilt followed immediately afterward.

I hated myself for it. I hated how much power she already had over my mind, over my instincts and over my body.

I stood abruptly and washed myself quickly before leaving the bathing room.

Sleep did not come easily afterward and neither did peace.

—

Two days later, it was time for the Council meeting. I stood inside my chamber while two maids adjusted the dark traditional robes draped over my shoulders.

The clothing was formal. Heavy black fabric lined with silver threading representing Blackbourne pack.

I barely paid attention to them as my gaze remained fixed on the large painting hanging across the chamber wall instead.

Painting of my Father.

Even after all these years, his eyes in that painting still carried the same stern look I remembered growing up with.

Powerful, demanding and unbreakable look. I walked toward the portrait slowly after the maids finished dressing me.

For a moment, I simply stared at it quietly, then I spoke under my breath.

"Don't worry." My voice came out calmer than expected. "I'll make my presence mean something in that room today."

The old Alpha had spent his life trying to strengthen the Blackbourne pack. I had spent mine trying to make it untouchable and I was far from done.

One of the maids cleared her throat nervously behind me. "Alpha... your collar."

I adjusted it myself before dismissing them both. The moment they left, I reached for my dagger belt and fastened it around my waist then I headed out.

The castle hallways buzzed with movement already. Servants hurried around while warriors stationed themselves around the compound.

By the time I reached the stairs, Beta Bastien was already waiting for me.

"How many warriors are accompanying us?" he asked immediately.

"One."

He frowned. "Just One?"

"And the rider." I added.

"That's it?" He asked again in surprise.

I descended the stairs calmly. "This is a Council meeting, not a battlefield."

"Still," Beta Bastien argued while following me. "Nightbane warriors will definitely be there."

"And?"

He sighed heavily. "You enjoy provoking people far too much."

I smirked faintly without saying a word.

Beta Bastien mindlinked someone nearby before muttering instructions to arrange the carriage as we continued toward the castle exit together.

The massive compound stretched beautifully beneath the afternoon sunlight. The Stone walkways, training grounds, barracks... the generations of Blackbourne blood had built this place.

Seven generations before me and now it belonged to me. It's now mine to strengthen, mine to protect and mine to elevate beyond every other pack in the realm.

Just as I approached the waiting carriage, a familiar scent reached me. 'Selena.'

I looked sideways as she hurried toward us and she was looking anxious again.

Her eyes immediately found mine. "I heard about the meeting," she said quickly.

Of course servants had been gossiping already.

"You shouldn't believe every rumor you hear," I replied dryly.

"This one is obviously true."

I remained silent as Selena stepped closer. "Please."

My wolf stirred instantly at the desperation in her voice. "What now?"

"If you speak with my father..." she began hesitantly, "...try to get information from him."

I frowned slightly. "Information about what?"

She swallowed. "I need closure."

The words sounded painfully genuine. For a second, I almost softened. Almost.

Then irritation replaced it instead. She was giving me instructions now?

"As if I don't already have enough to worry about," I muttered coldly.

Her expression hardened immediately. "I'm serious."

"So am I." I snapped and walked past her toward the carriage.

Behind me, I mindlinked Beta Bastien privately to listen to what Selena wants.

He immediately slowed beside her while I continued walking.

The cool air outside cleared my head slightly. I paused briefly near the carriage and looked around the compound again.

Massive walls, orderly warriors and thriving structures. Everything here had taken years to build.

Years of discipline, years of sacrifice and I would not allow distractions to weaken it even if that distraction happened to be my mate.

Beta Bastien footsteps approached behind me. "What did she say?" I asked without turning.

"She wants you to question Alpha William about the vampire royalties." That caught my attention slightly and I finally looked at him.

"She thinks if he hasn't delivered the women yet, it means he's still delaying because of her disappearance."

Interesting.

Beta Bastien continued, "She believes learning whether he sent them already might reveal how desperate the vampires are becoming."

At first, I almost dismissed it entirely but as I stepped into the carriage, the thought settled deeper in my mind.

If Alpha William still had not delivered his yearly royalties... Then he was vulnerable and vulnerable men made mistakes.

The carriage doors shut as the rider began moving us forward. I leaned back thoughtfully as a dangerous, complicated but effective idea formed in my mind.

If Alpha William still possessed the women intended for the vampires... Then I could take them first.

Kidnap the entire batch while the vampires would blame him for the delay.

Alpha William would scramble trying to fix the disaster and while distracted— I could begin dismantling him piece by piece.

A slow smirk tugged at my mouth. It was risky but it could work beautifully.

I leaned forward slightly. "Faster," I ordered the rider.

Then I settled back again while mentally preparing myself for the Council meeting.

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Selena

I could barely focus on scrubbing the wooden counters in front of me as my thoughts had been trapped in the Council meeting since morning.

Every possible outcome kept replaying in my mind over and over again until I felt like screaming.

"What if Father discovered I was in Blackbourne? What if Alpha Kael decided to provoke him and revealed it himself?"

The man was unpredictable enough to do something reckless simply because his pride demanded it and worse— "What if they fought?"

I gritted my teeth as different thoughts kept replaying in my head and I dipped the cloth back into the bucket of water.

I hated the fact that I was worried about Alpha Kael. I truly hated it but no matter how much he irritated me, I still knew one thing.

My father was dangerous. Very dangerous.

People spoke of Alpha William's strength like legends around fires.

Even when I was little, I remembered seeing warriors tremble after training sessions with him. I remembered hearing stories of how he subdued rogue Alphas with his bare hands during border disputes years ago.

He had not become the most powerful Alpha in the realm by accident.

"Selena." I kept scrubbing absentmindedly.

"Selena." Still, I did not answer.

"Selena!!!" I nearly jumped when Marquee shouted directly beside my ear.

"What?" I snapped, almost annoyed that my thoughts were being interrupted.

She blinked at me. "You've been ignoring me for the past minute."

I sighed heavily seeing its Marquee and dropped the cloth inside the bucket. "Sorry. I was just busy with a lot of things."

Marquee narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "You've been acting strange all morning. What's really going on with you?"

"I'm fine." I said quickly.

"You're not." She said, sounding so sure of herself.

I avoided her gaze, stood up and went to grab some pile of plates.

The kitchen buzzed loudly around us with cooks shouting instructions and servants rushing about carrying trays and baskets.

Marquee lowered her voice as she said. "This is about the Alpha, isn't it?"

I almost dropped the plate in my hand. "What?" I asked in surprise.

"You heard me."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." I quickly said while avoiding her eyes.

She folded her arms. "You've looked distracted ever since the guards mentioned the Council meeting this morning."

I forced a shrug. "It's nothing."

Marquee stared at me for a long moment before sighing. "If it makes you feel better, nobody attacks each other inside the Council courtroom."

I looked at her immediately. "There's a rule?"

"Well... an unspoken one." She shrugged. "Council members and invited guests don't physically attack each other there."

Physically. The way she emphasized it made my stomach tighten.

"So they attack each other in other ways?" I asked.

Marquee snorted softly. "Constantly."

That sounded exactly like something Alpha Kael would thrive in. I exhaled slowly and returned to work.

For the next few minutes, silence stretched between us while we carried large bowls toward the washing area.

The metal basin in my hands felt unbearably heavy. Just as Marqee and I lowered it carefully onto the table, someone slammed into us from behind and water splashed everywhere instantly.

The freshly washed kitchen floor became soaked again while I stumbled backward.

"What the hell?" Marqee exclaimed.

The male servant who bumped into us merely laughed. "You two are clumsier than blind pups."

I recognized him immediately. It was the same irritating servant who always found ways to mock people weaker than him.

He looked at the mess proudly and said, "Now you'll have to clean all this again."

My jaw tightened. "You bumped into us on purpose."

"So?" He asked with a sly smirk.

Marquee quickly grabbed my wrist before I could step forward. "Leave it," she muttered under her breath.

But the idiot only laughed louder. "Maybe if you lazy omegas moved faster, then this wouldn't have happened."

Something inside me snapped as the servant turned and began walking away casually.

Marquee tightened her grip on my wrist. "Selena, don't."

But it was too late because I already grabbed the nearest large metal spoon from the counter and stormed after him.

"Selena!" Marquee whisper-yelled but I ignored her completely.

The servant had just entered one of the side corridors when I caught up with him.

He looked back lazily. "What now?"

I swung the spoon hard against his shoulder and the loud clang echoed through the corridor.

He screamed instantly. "What is wrong with you?!"

I hit him again and again.

"You think you can insult people whenever you want?" I shouted furiously.

The servant tried shielding himself while stumbling backward. "You crazy woman!"

"Say another word!" The spoon struck his arm this time.

He yelped painfully. By then, my anger had fully surged free.

For days I had swallowed frustration after frustration. I've soaked in fear, confusion, humiliation, exhaustion and now this fool has become the perfect target.

I raised the spoon to hit him again. "Selena, stop!"

Marquee rushed into the corridor and grabbed my arm, but I shook her off immediately.

The servant looked near tears as he screamed at me, "You're insane!"

I stepped toward him again— Then a door nearby suddenly opened and several older figures stepped out at once making everyone froze.

My chest rose and fell heavily while I held the spoon tightly with the servant whimpering dramatically behind me.

Among the people staring at me in shock was the headmistress and judging from her face— She was not pleased.

—

A few minutes later, I sat alone inside the headmistress' office. The room smelled strongly of herbs and old paper.

Everything inside looked painfully organized. There were shelves, ledgers and cloth bundles. Even the ink bottles were perfectly aligned.

I sat stiffly on the wooden chair while waiting for her return then my eyes landed on a framed painting resting near the shelf.

A younger version of the headmistress stood beside a smiling little girl. The resemblance between them was obvious.

The little girl is definitely her daughter.

I stared at the painting quietly as the child looked happy while the younger headmistress looked happy too and very different from the stern woman everyone feared now.

The office door suddenly opened and I immediately straightened.

The headmistress walked in slowly and closed the door behind her.

For several long seconds, she said absolutely nothing as she simply stared at me and somehow, that silence felt worse than yelling.

Finally, she spoke. "Do you enjoy causing problems?" Her voice was calm. It was way too calm for my liking.

"He started it," I muttered.

"That does not answer my question."

I folded my arms stubbornly. "He insulted us."

"So you beat him with kitchen equipment?"

"He deserved worse." I said almost with a scoff.

One of her brows lifted slightly but instead of shouting, she walked toward her desk and sat down carefully.

"Misconduct is not tolerated under my supervision," she said firmly while I remained silent.

"You are new here, Selena Savano," she continued. "Perhaps that is why you still behave recklessly."

I almost flinched at the fake name.

"You may think fighting solves disrespect," she said, "but inside this castle, actions have consequences."

I stared back at her defiantly. "What punishment?"

Her gaze sharpened slightly. "Your wages for this week are canceled."

That was all? Honestly, I expected something worse. Much worse but still, I almost felt relieved.

The headmistress watched my expression carefully. "You do not seem bothered."

I shrugged carelessly. "It could've been worse."

Something unreadable flickered briefly across her face then she dismissed me. "You may leave."

I stood immediately and walked out without another word.

The moment I stepped outside the office, I exhaled deeply. Strangely enough... I felt good.

The servant deserved every single hit. Father had always taught me never to allow people to walk over me and for once since arriving in Blackbourne, I actually felt like myself again.

When I returned to the servants' quarters later, Marquee rushed toward me immediately. "What happened?"

"They canceled my wages for the week."

Her face fell instantly. "Oh no."

I blinked at her reaction. "What?"

"That's bad."

"It's only one week."

Marquee stared at me like I had gone mad. "You really aren't from around here."

I frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"In Blackbourne's lower working class," she explained carefully, "missing even one week's wages means suffering."

My confidence faded slightly but still, I refused to look worried. "I'll survive."

Marquee sighed heavily but before she could respond, the chamber door opened and Sally walked in quietly carrying a small pouch in her hand.

I barely paid attention initially until I noticed her quickly dipping into her satchel. Then she grabbed another smaller satchel from beneath her bed.

Her movements became odd and suspiciously hurried afterward.

Without saying a word to either of us, Sally turned and slipped out of the room sneakily.

I narrowed my eyes in suspicion.

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Kael

My carriage rolled through the iron gates of the Council Estate just after midday.

The sprawling property sat at the center of the realm like a crown jewel, untouched by wars, rivalries, and the countless disputes that tore packs apart every year. Ancient stone walls surrounded the estate, while towering silverwood trees lined the roads leading toward the Great Council Court.

I stared out the carriage window with little admiration. I had never liked this place.

The Council talked... I acted. That was the difference between us.

The carriage slowed before the main courtyard. "Alpha," the rider called mainly to inform me that we've arrived.

I pushed the door open and stepped down. Immediately, dozens of eyes shifted toward me.

The guards, the servants, the messengers, the visitors... Every one of them were intently watching me.

I was used to being watched and stared at.

Some looked at me with respect, others with suspicion, a few with outright dislike and my reputation tended to provoke strong reactions.

I ignored them all and began walking. The stone beneath my boots echoed through the courtyard as whispers followed behind me.

"That's him." One of the watching men said.

"The Blackbourne Alpha." Another added.

"The one who cleared the rogue territories." Another said with a shaky voice.

"I heard he killed four rogues alone." Another added almost with admiration mixed with a bit of fear.

"I heard it was seven." Another said and they all gasped, making me scoff.

"Idiots!" People always added details by the time stories traveled across the realm, I was surprised they did not claim I fought dragons.

My wolf stirred proudly but I ignored him too. He is becoming way more proud and boastful than I am.

The entrance doors opened before I reached them and two guards bowed. "Welcome Alpha Kael."

I nodded once and entered. The familiar scent of old parchment, polished wood, and candle wax greeted me.

The Council Court had stood for centuries. Its hallways were filled with history, massive paintings decorated every wall, Legendary Alphas, Ancient warriors, Great rulers and Heroes of the werewolf realm.

Some deserved their place but others did not.

I climbed the grand staircase, my boots striking the polished stone.

One painting in particular caught my attention. An Alpha who had united three packs during a civil war centuries ago.

A great leader, A fearless man. The sort of Alpha I respected not the cowards who bent their necks whenever vampires demanded tribute.

My jaw tightened as the very thought irritated me which was why the next painting made my mood worse.

Alpha William's portrait hung among the honored Alphas. The painter had done an excellent job in his art work.

Alpha William's looked powerful, confident and noble but I knew better.

'Powerful?' I might certainly agree to that.

'But Noble?' Not a chance. I can't rate such a man as the part of nobles. He isn't worth such an amazing title.

I continued walking. If I stared any longer, I might have been tempted to throw something at the painting.

My wolf approved of that idea but I did not as I won't want to cause any troubles from my end.

I'm portraying myself as the most innocent at this council meeting and I don't want to ruin it for anything that has to do with Alpha Williams.

The meeting would begin soon enough but unfortunately as I rounded a corner leading toward the main chamber, a familiar voice called out.

"Alpha Kael." I stopped and turned around to find Councilman Cedric approaching me with a smile.

Unlike many councilmen, Cedric had once belonged to the Blackbourne Pack Years ago before he ascended to the Council.

The rules required every councilman to renounce allegiance to their pack upon appointment.

Officially, they served the entire realm. Unofficially? Most still carried old loyalties.

Councilman Cedric extended a hand. "It has been some time."

I shook it briefly. "Not long enough."

He laughed. "Still charming, I see."

"I did not come here to charm anyone." I said still not reciprocating his laughter. I'm not someone to start giggling at every possible word.

"I know Alpha Kael." Cedric sighed. "Though you arrived quite early."

"You say that like it is a crime." I almost scoffed but held it in.

"It isn't a crime, Alpha Kael. Just that the meeting is delayed and you would have to wait for a long while."

My annoyance surfaced immediately as I didn't plan on wasting much time here. "Why is the meeting being delayed?"

"One of the councilmen recently lost his mate."

I frowned as Cedric continued. "A smaller gathering is currently being held in remembrance. It may take some time."

I exhaled sharply. "Of course more delays, more ceremonies and more talking."

Councilman Cedric gestured down another hallway. "Come wait in the antechamber."

"I can stand." I gruffly said.

"You can also sit."

"I prefer standing." I argued as I didn't plan for such delays.

"Humor me." Councilman Cedric still tried harder.

I considered refusing, then decided it was not worth the argument. "Fine." I reluctantly agreed.

Cedric smiled victoriously that I immediately almost regretted agreeing.

We entered the antechamber together. The room was elegant with large windows overlooking the estate gardens, Several tables were arranged around the room. Food and drinks had already been prepared for arriving guests.

Cedric helped himself to wine but I did not and he noticed.

"You still refuse to drink before important meetings?" He asked with a slight smile.

"I prefer a clear mind."

"A single glass won't cloud your judgment."

"Then drink mine too." I said to him,

He chuckled. "You truly are impossible."

I sat opposite him and for several moments, neither of us spoke.

Cedric eventually broke the silence. "I suppose you know why today's meeting was called."

"I know Alpha William has been whining."

Cedric nearly choked on his wine. "Whining?"

"What would you call it?"

"A father searching for his daughter." Councilman Cedric says and I lean back.

There it was, the direction this conversation was headed.

Cedric swirled his wine thoughtfully. "I have seen the petitions."

I said nothing as he continued. "For nearly two weeks, Alpha William has pushed for a formal gathering."

Still, I remained silent while Cedric studied me. "You do not seem particularly concerned."

"Should I be?" I asked with a creased brow.

"The girl is missing."

I shrugged. "People go missing every now and there."

"Not daughters of powerful Alphas."

"Apparently they do." I went on to argue with him.

Cedric sighed. "You know, despite everything, I do feel sympathy for him."

I folded my arms. Of course he did.

"He lost his only heir." I remained expressionless as Cedric continued. "And not just any heir."

I looked at him as he lowered his voice. "One promised to the vampires."

My wolf growled but I ignored him.

Cedric leaned forward. "The implications are serious."

"I am aware." I said with a shrug of my shoulders.

"Are you?" His tone sharpened slightly. "If the vampires believe the agreement has been broken—"

"They always believe the agreement has been broken." I said and Cedric looked frustrated at my retaliations.

Cedric frowned and finally said. "This is different."

"Why is it?"

"Because the girl herself is involved."

I looked away while Cedric continued speaking. "The consequences will not stop with Nightbane."

I already knew that.

"The Council could be affected," he said and I still knew that.

"Trade routes." He mentioned and I knew that too.

"Border security, and Relations between packs."

I rubbed my forehead. "Have you finished?" I asked as I didn't want to hear anymore of it.

Cedric sighed. "No." He says and I couldn't help but feel so unfortunate to meet him.

"The vampires are dangerous." He went on to say.

I let out a short humorless sound. "Now that is the first intelligent thing you've said today."

His expression darkened. "You are mocking the situation?"

"I mock our response to it. We survive, we kneel, we endure, and we submit to them."

Cedric placed his wine down. "We do that to protect our people."

I leaned forward. "Do we?"

The room grew quiet as neither of us spoke for several moments.

Eventually Cedric changed the subject... Perhaps wisely. "You truly did not know?" He asked, staring intently at me.

I narrowed my eyes. "Know what?"

"That Alpha William's daughter was meant for the vampires."

I blinked then deliberately allowed surprise onto my face. "What?"

Cedric frowned. "You did not know?"

"Of course not."

He looked genuinely confused. "That is impossible."

"Why?" I asked slightly confused.

"Alpha William stated otherwise."

My jaw tightened knowing of course he had stated something to the council. "What exactly did he state?"

Cedric thought for a moment before saying. "He claimed you knew."

I laughed genuinely this time and the sound echoed through the room. "That old liar."

Cedric looked startled. "You deny it?"

"I do." I snapped.

"He specifically mentioned an encounter between the two of you."

"We did have an encounter." I said.

"And?"

"And he never mentioned his daughter being a vampire tribute."

Cedric stared at me while I met his gaze evenly. The truth required very little effort to tell.

Alpha William had never admitted it aloud and truly not to me.

Cedric slowly nodded. "Interesting."

"It is irritating." I said through gritted teeth.

"That as well." He added and took another drink.

Then he asked the question I had been expecting. "Have you been searching for the girl?"

I froze only slightly but Cedric noticed as his eyes sharpened for me to spill it. "Well?"

I looked at him but said nothing as my silence stretched for seconds while the old fox Cedric waited patiently.

Then— The door suddenly opened and heavy footsteps entered the room.

The familiar scent reached me before the voice did and I turned to find Alpha William walking in with about four of his men.

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Kael

The moment Alpha William walked into the antechamber, I felt my mood worsen.

Wonderful! Just when I thought my day could not become any more irritating.

The familiar scent reached me before the man himself did. He stepped into the room with four warriors behind him, carrying himself with that same confidence that had made lesser Alphas fear him and made me want to punch him in the throat.

For a few moments, neither of us spoke. We simply glared at each other and the room seemed to grow quieter around us.

Even Councilman Cedric, who never seemed capable of shutting his mouth for more than a minute, wisely remained silent.

Alpha William's gaze settled on me as mine settled on him.

The old bastard smiled first and called out, "Alpha Kael."

His voice was smooth and pleasant to others who didn't know him. But it's mainly a lie. Everything about that man was a lie.

I leaned back in my chair and reciprocated by calling out too, "Alpha William."

His smile widened slightly. "I must admit, I didn't think you'd attend."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh really?" I asked with a feign surprise.

He shrugged casually. "You've always possessed a rather rebellious spirit."

There it was... the first jab. The meeting had not even begun and he was already trying to paint me as some unruly Alpha incapable of respecting authority.

I smiled before saying, "Unlike you, I don't feel bigger than the Council."

The smile disappeared from his face for a fraction of a second.

Councilman Cedric immediately cleared his throat. "Gentlemen..."

Neither of us looked at him. Alpha William folded his hands behind his back. "That is an interesting accusation."

"Not an accusation." I said and rose from my chair. "It's a simple observation."

The room became noticeably tenser as his warriors straightened while my wolf stirred inside me.

Alpha William's expression hardened. "I find it amusing that you're questioning anyone's respect for the Council."

I folded my arms. "And I find it amusing that you've been lying to them."

Silence as his warriors looked between us while councilman Cedric froze.

Alpha William tilted his head slightly. "Explain what that means."

"You told the Council I knew your daughter was promised to the vampires."

His expression didn't change. Not even slightly. The old wolf had spent decades mastering his face.

"You did know."

"What implied that?" I asked with a creased brow.

Alpha William looked at me and said, "Even if I never directly told you about my daughter, you would've known eventually."

Fortunately for him before I could respond, a scribe chose that exact moment to enter the room.

The young man looked nervous and I couldn't blame him. Being trapped between two Alphas who wanted to tear each other's throats out was not an enviable position.

"The Council is ready to begin," he announced.

Finally!

Alpha William adjusted the sleeves of his robe while Councilman Cedric looked relieved.

I was relieved too because another five minutes and I might've forgotten where we were.

The three of us began walking toward the council chamber and the silence lasted only a few moments.

Then I asked the question that had been burning in my head ever since Selena told me the truth.

"What kind of Alpha allows his own daughter to be sold to those monsters?"

The corridor immediately fell silent and even Alpha William's warriors looked uncomfortable.

Alpha William didn't stop walking as he replied. "The kind of Alpha who has a pack to protect."

I stared at him as the answer disgusted me then I shook my head before saying. "Such a weak Alpha."

His footsteps stopped and the air seemed to freeze. Then slowly, he turned toward me that I could practically feel the anger rolling off him.

For a moment, I genuinely thought he might attack me. Part of me hoped he would.

Unfortunately, Alpha William still possessed enough self-control not to lose his mind in the middle of Council grounds. Such a Pity.

Without another word, he continued walking and I followed. Soon, we reached the Great Council Chamber and the massive doors stood open.

Inside, nine councilmen sat upon the elevated semicircle overlooking the hall and each of them were representing one region of the realm.

Years ago, before Cedric rose to the position, the representative of Vargwyn which is the same region where Nightbane and Blackborne packs are situated— had been a scholar from the Nightbane pack.

Replacing him had been one of the few political victories I'd genuinely enjoyed watching.

I took my seat without ceremony and unfortunately, Alpha William sat opposite me.

Councilman Cedric stood first. "This emergency gathering of the Realm Council is hereby called to order."

A few councilmen looked annoyed. One old Alpha from the northern territories sighed loudly.

"A family dispute should not be wasting the Realm Court's time."

Another nodded. "I agree. This matter should have remained within the Vargwyn Regional Court."

Alpha William immediately rose to his feet. "This is not a family dispute."

The room quieted as he continued. "My daughter was promised to the vampires from birth."

Even after hearing it before, my jaw still tightened. Every time those words were spoken, they sounded worse.

Alpha William continued. "She was not merely another yearly tribute."

His voice deepened. "She was the highest royalty scheduled to be sent this year."

Several councilmen exchanged uneasy looks as he proceeded. "If the vampires do not receive what they were promised, the consequences will not stop with Nightbane."

He swept his gaze across the room. "They will affect every pack represented here."

Nobody argued because everybody knew it was true. "Cowards!" I said underneath my breath while gritting my teeth in anger.

Alpha William continued speaking. "The night before transportation to the East, she disappeared. I have searched relentlessly."

A councilman snorted. "Apparently not hard enough."

A few chuckles followed as Alpha William's expression darkened.

Another councilman folded his arms. "You lost your own daughter?"

The mockery continued. "Perhaps your pack security isn't as impressive as we've been told."

Several men laughed while others glared at them.

One councilman slammed his hand on the table. "Enough." His voice echoed. "A missing daughter is not entertainment."

The room settled again as Alpha William inclined his head slightly then he continued explaining the circumstances of Selena's disappearance.

The more he talked, the more irritated I became. Not because he was worried because he wasn't.

Every word was about the consequences of what might happen to the packs.

Never once did he sound like a father. He sounded like a merchant who had misplaced valuable cargo.

Eventually I had enough so I rose from my seat and asked, "Why am I here?"

Silence fell immediately as the Nine councilmen looked toward me while Alpha William looked annoyed.

Then Councilman Cedric cleared his throat. "We believe you may know something regarding Selena's whereabouts."

I stared at him then laughed. "You dragged me across half the realm because of a suspicion?"

One councilman spoke up. "You are Alpha William's greatest rival."

Another nodded. "The most obvious suspect."

A third added, "You have every reason to exploit his weakness. You dislike him, you challenge him constantly so naturally you are the prime suspect."

I looked around the room then slowly stepped forward. "What if I'm his rival?"

Alpha William's eyes narrowed and I let the silence linger then shrugged before saying. "Fortunately for all of you, I don't have his daughter."

Several councilmen relaxed. Fools.

I continued. "But has it occurred to anyone that Alpha William possesses enemies beyond myself?"

Nobody answered as I proceeded. "Or are we pretending he is beloved by the entire realm?"

A few smirks appeared while Alpha William looked murderous.

I continued. "Perhaps someone kidnapped her, Perhaps she was taken by rogues." Then I delivered the thought I truly wanted spoken aloud.

"Or perhaps..." I looked directly at Alpha William. "...she discovered she was being sold to undead monsters and ran."

The chamber exploded. "Alpha Kael!"

"Mind your words!"

"That is inappropriate!"

Alpha William shot to his feet as his aura crashed across the room. "Watch yourself."

I met his gaze. "Or what?"

The tension became physical that Councilmen immediately began shouting over one another.

"Enough!"

"Sit down!"

"This is not a battlefield!"

Alpha William pointed at me. "You are crossing a dangerous line."

"No." I smiled coldly. "I merely spoke about the possibility nobody else wanted to acknowledge."

The room remained tense as Alpha William laughed. The sound was completely humorless. "You speak boldly for a man who has achieved so little."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"You criticize decisions you do not understand."

I almost rolled my eyes.

Alpha William spread his hands. "What exactly have you done to end vampire oppression?"

Several councilmen shifted uncomfortably as Alpha William continued. "You inherited a small lowborn pack."

My wolf growled but Alpha William wasn't finished. "You recently climbed into relevance and suddenly believe yourself qualified to lecture the realm."

The insult rolled off me then he delivered another. "If vampires were not constantly draining resources from the realm, I would have been the first to claim the Wolfsbane Mine years ago."

That caught my attention. Interesting. Very interesting.

I tilted my head. "Would you?"

Alpha William frowned as I stepped closer. "That almost sounds like you're protecting the vampire's interests."

Several councilmen gasped as Alpha William's face darkened instantly as he snapped. "What?"

"A secret arrangement perhaps?" I said with a small smirk playing on my lips.

The room erupted again. "Enough!"

"Stop this immediately!"

"Both of you!" Councilman Cedric looked like he wanted to die.

Alpha William's aura flared and mine answered. For several seconds neither of us moved.

Then Councilman Cedric practically shouted. "We are returning to the purpose of this meeting!"

The argument finally died as the discussion resumed. For the next hour they debated possibilities of what must have happened to Selena.

Eventually the council reached its conclusion that petitions would be sent throughout every region, search efforts would increase, rewards would be offered, scouts would be mobilized and a realm-wide search like what Alpha William wanted.

Then Councilman Cedric looked at me. "Alpha Kael."

I already disliked where this was going.

"As one of the most influential Alphas in Vargwyn..." There it was. "...will you assist in the search?"

I stared at him then at Alpha William. Then back at Councilman Cedric before saying "No!"

The room groaned as Councilman Cedric rubbed his forehead. "Alpha Kael, Please."

"No." I blatantly said again.

A few councilmen looked ready to throw something at me.

Finally Councilman Cedric sighed before saying again, "Can you at least promise cooperation?"

I considered refusing again then remembered appearances mattered. Sometimes.

"Fine." The word tasted terrible. "I'll help look for her."

The meeting ended shortly afterward as Councilmen began leaving.

I immediately headed toward the exit then noticed Alpha William gathering several councilmen together in one corner having a quiet, private and suspicious discussion.

I considered listening, then decided against it. If they were plotting something, I'd discover it eventually.

People always underestimated how much information reached Blackbourne.

I continued walking and was almost at the exit when Councilman Cedric appeared beside me.

"Alpha Kael." His tone was low and urgent.

I reluctantly stopped and asked "What now?"

Without answering, he slipped something into my hand. It was a folded parchment and nobody seemed to notice.

"Leave immediately," he muttered.

I narrowed my eyes as I asked. "Why?"

"Just go." He said and swiftly walked away.

I disliked mysteries, especially from councilmen. Still, I left.

Minutes later I was inside my carriage and the estate disappeared behind us as the rider guided the horses onto the main road.

Only then did I unfold the parchment and my eyes moved across the writing.

The message was short.

There was a possible conspiracy among several councilmen. Their plan was to gather a band of werewolves, possibly rogues, possibly hired mercenaries or possibly both to infiltrate Blackbourne and find Selena.

I read it again then slowly folded the parchment as a small smile appeared on my face.

Then I squeezed the parchment tightly in my fist while smiling way harder.

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Selena

I narrowed my eyes as I watched Sally disappear around the corner.

The corridor was dimly lit by lanterns hanging from the stone walls, making it easier for her to move unnoticed. If I had not been paying attention, I would have missed her entirely.

But I had been paying attention. Ever since I saw her sneaking away with that pouch earlier, something had felt off.

Marquee would probably tell me to mind my business but unfortunately, that had never been one of my strengths.

I carefully followed behind Sally, keeping enough distance so she would not hear my footsteps.

The castle was quieter than usual at that hour. Most servants had already returned to their quarters while the guards remained stationed at key points throughout the estate.

Sally moved too quickly like someone who had always done this before.

I turned another corner after her and then I froze as a figure stepped into my path. Actually, two figures.

The first one immediately made me groan internally as it was the same servant I had beaten with a metal spoon.

His bruises had faded slightly, but they were still visible. Then his face twisted into a grin.

It wasn't a pleasant grin. It was the kind that usually preceded bad decisions.

His friend stood beside him holding a short blade but neither of them looked interested in conversation.

"Well," the servant drawled. "Look who wandered into the wrong corridor."

I folded my arms and glared hard at him. "You still look ugly."

His grin vanished almost instantly while his friend snorted and that made me almost laugh.

The servant pointed at me angrily, "You think you're funny?"

"I think you're pathetic." I retorted back and his face darkened instantly.

"You humiliated me." he yelled into my face.

"You deserved it." I said with a small grin.

"You attacked me." he yelled again.

"You deserved that too." I said with a more widened grin.

His hand clenched and I noticed the weapon hanging from his belt. It was a hunting knife and it's not so special to frighten me.

Back in Nightbane, I had trained with warriors far deadlier than him. I might be dressed like a servant now, but I was still an Alpha even if nobody here knew it.

His friend stepped forward and said. "You should apologize."

I stared at him then burst out laughing that the servant immediately looked furious.

"I should make you apologize." The friend said and drew his blade.

My body instantly tensed...not with fear but with readiness to retaliate.

I could already picture the movements. Disarm him, break his wrist, put him on the ground and the second one would follow shortly after.

Unfortunately, revealing that much skill would attract questions. Questions I could not afford.

The servant smirked. "Not so brave now, are you?"

I tilted my head. "You know, for someone who talks this much, you certainly spend a lot of time losing."

His face turned red and I sighed dramatically. "Honestly, if I scream right now, who do you think they'll believe?"

His confidence faltered and I smiled. "Two idiots cornering a female servant."

The friend shifted uncomfortably as I pressed further. "Or perhaps I should scream that you're trying to assault me?"

The servant swore under his breath.

I wanted him to be angry because angry people made mistakes.

Just as he took another step— A familiar voice echoed through the corridor.

"That would be a very foolish mistake." All three of us turned to see Beta Bastien standing at the opposite end of the hallway.

His expression looked as pleasant as a thunderstorm while the servant immediately paled.

"So would disobeying pack laws." Neither servant spoke as Beta Bastien slowly approached.

His boots echoed against the stone floor as the closer he got, the more nervous they became.

Interesting. Apparently I was not the only one who found him terrifying.

The Beta stopped before us as his gaze moved to the servant. "Leave."

The order was simple, immediate and absolute that both servants practically fled.

Cowards!!!

Beta Bastien watched them disappear before turning toward me. His expression did not improve. In fact, it somehow became worse. "You."

I raised an eyebrow. "Me?"

"You attract trouble."

I gasped dramatically. "What a horrible thing to say."

His eyes twitched as I felt oddly proud of myself.

"Do you enjoy creating problems?" he asked.

"No."

"Then why are you constantly involved in them?"

I thought about it. "Should I say bad luck?" I asked like someone deep in thought.

He glared at me while I smiled but he did not reciprocate the smile..

Beta Bastien folded his arms. "If you want to remain in Blackbourne, keep a low profile."

My smile faded because that annoyed me. "Aren't you overstepping?"

His expression hardened. "What?"

"Isn't that the Alpha's decision to make?"

The silence that followed felt dangerous as I almost smiled again.

Beta Bastien looked genuinely irritated now. I was beginning to understand why he and Alpha Kael got along.

Both were equally grumpy although Beta Bastien had a few years on him which made it worse. For someone older, he behaved remarkably similar.

"If Alpha Kael wishes you gone," Beta Bastien said slowly, "you will be gone."

"Then I'll wait for him to tell me himself." His jaw tightened and I smirked, feeling victorious.

The Beta exhaled slowly... Probably counting to ten or imagining ways to throw me out of the castle.

Either was possible so I decided to switch topics. "When is Alpha Kael returning?"

He totally ignored me. I frowned then reasked again. "When is he coming back?"

Still no response from him.

"Did the Council meeting go badly? Did my father—"

"Return to your duties."he curtly snapped at me.

I sighed. "You're no fun."He walked away without another word.

Honestly, I was beginning to think smiling physically hurt him.

With Sally long gone and no chance of finding her now, I returned to my chamber.

The room was empty as Marqee was still working and Sally was nowhere to be found.

I sat on my bed and began arranging my washed clothes. For a while, everything felt normal.

Then I saw my father's cloak. It was the one I had taken when I fled.

My hands froze as the fabric was familiar beneath my fingers. Suddenly painful and vivid memories returned.

Training fields, hunting trips,long evenings spent listening to stories, my father teaching me pack history, correcting my sword stance, telling me about courage, strength and leadership.

Back then, I adored him. Back then, he had been my hero.

A lump formed in my throat as I hated that the memories still existed. I hated that part of me still wanted to believe the father I remembered was real.

My fingers tightened around the cloak as another thought surfaced. It was the thought of my mother whom I barely remembered.

Everything I knew came from paintings and stories. What had she sounded like? Did she laugh loudly? Was she strict? Did she like hunting? Did she sing?

The questions felt endless until a knock interrupted my thoughts and Marquee entered.

She immediately noticed my expression. "Are you okay?"

I quickly folded the cloak. "I'm Fine."

She sat beside me. "You don't look fine."

I hesitated then asked quietly, "What were you told about fated mates while growing up?"

Marquee blinked as the question surprised her. She thought for a moment. "Honestly?"

I nodded.

"Nothing."

I frowned at the word. "What do you mean by 'nothing'?"

She laughed and said, "My mother died when I was young."

Her laughter faded as she continued. "My father worked most of his life. He never talked about romance or mates."

She shrugged and continued. "Everything I know came from watching other people."

I looked down, already feeling bad for her. "And?"

Marqee smiled. "Some people expect too much."

"What do you mean?"

"They spend years imagining perfection." she said and unfortunately I immediately thought of Alpha Kael.

Marquee continued. "Others don't care at all."

"Like you?"

"Like me." She said and I laughed softly.

Then she nudged my shoulder and asked, "What about you?"

I hesitated, then lied. "My father told me good and bad stories."

"What do you remember most?" She asked, watching me with so much interest.

I looked away and said, "The loneliness. I always saw him alone."

Marquee sighed tapping on my back while I let out a small smile.

Hours later, the castle had gone silent as Midnight approached but Sleep refused to come.

I stared at the ceiling while thoughts raced endlessly. What happened at the Council? Did my father convince them? Did Alpha Kael expose me? Had anyone discovered I was here?

The thought made my stomach tighten. If they found me... the vampires would get me and I knew exactly what awaited me there.

There would be no freedom, no future and no escape.

A soft rustling sound interrupted my thoughts and I immediately sat up.

The chamber door opened slightly as a figure slipped inside and I discovered it's Sally.

I watched her carefully as she moved quietly toward her bed.

I climbed down from my bed to question her. "Where were you?"

She froze, then sighed. "Just go back to sleep."

"Where were you?" I wasn't ready to back out without an answer.

Her expression hardened. "It's none of your business."

I crossed my arms.

"Go to sleep." She snapped at me then I opened my mouth to argue— but the chamber door exploded inward making myself and Sally flinch backward.

Several masked and armed figures rushed into the room. One immediately grabbed Sally with a machete pressed against her throat.

Sally screamed but the man tightened his grip and snapped in a low tone. "Quiet!"

The room instantly fell silent as my heart began pounding.

The intruder's eyes swept across us. "Don't make a sound."

Then another figure stepped through the doorway. It's a familiar figure and I quickly discovered it's the servant I had beaten.

He looked at me and grinned devilishly.

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Selena

"Stop right there." My voice came out sharper than I expected.

Grengey only smiled but not a normal smile. It was the kind that made my skin crawl. The kind that told me he was enjoying every second of this.

The lantern hanging from the wall cast strange shadows across his bruised face, making him look even uglier than usual.

"You still don't know when to keep that mouth shut, do you, kid?" he asked and I took a step backward while my eyes darted around the room.

The Three men, one holding Sally with a knife pressed against her throat while the other two stood near the door and Grengey slowly advancing toward me.

Marquee suddenly stirred from her bed as she sat upright sleepily. "What is all this noise—"

The moment she saw the knife against Sally's throat, she gasped. "Oh Moon Goddess—"

"Quiet!" The man holding Sally snarled as his blade dug slightly into Sally's neck making her flinch.

Marquee immediately covered her mouth as the room fell silent while My heart hammered inside my chest.

I hated this. I hated feeling trapped. Most importantly, I hated the fact that they thought I was helpless.

Grengy pointed at me. "Get up, kid."

I folded my arms. "No." His smile widened.

The man holding Sally jerked the knife and a tiny drop of blood appeared on Sally's skin.

I shivered immediately.

"Move," Grengy said.

I clenched my jaw. "Or what?"

The knife pressed deeper as Sally squeezed her eyes shut. "Or your friend dies."

Damn it. I glanced toward Marquee and she looked terrified while Sally remained frozen.

The room suddenly felt too small and too suffocating. I slowly rose from the bed.

"There you go," Grengy mocked. "Was that so difficult?"

"What do you want?"

He laughed. "Revenge sounds like a good start."

Before anyone could stop me, I grabbed the wooden plank leaning against the wall beside my bed.

The movement was fast as I swung it directly toward Grengy's head.

His eyes widened as the plank sliced through empty air as he barely dodged. "Little bitch!"

He lunged forward at the same time the knife against Sally's throat pressed deeper.

Sally cried out. "Selena!"

I froze as that single moment was enough.

Two men grabbed me instantly as I kicked, elbowed and thrashed but they dragged me toward the door anyway.

"Let me go!"

"Keep moving, kid."

"I'll kill you myself if you touch them!" I threatened but they laughed.

The sound filled me with rage and the last thing I saw before being dragged outside was Marquee's terrified face then the door slammed shut behind me.

The servants' corridor was dark and empty. Only distant lanterns illuminated the winding staircase ahead.

Grenzy shoved me hard forward and I stumbled. "Walk."

"Go to hell." He shoved me again and this time harder that I nearly fell.

"You really should've stayed quiet after what happened in the kitchen." I rolled my eyes. "Oh no. The great Grengy got beaten by a spoon."

His face turned red as he grabbed my arm violently and I immediately twisted as years of combat training took over.

My foot slammed into his shin as he cursed and I elbowed his ribs then drove my shoulder into his chest.

The impact caught him completely off guard as Grengy's eyes widened, his grip loosened and I pushed him so hard that he lost balance.

For one beautiful moment his arms windmilled then he tumbled backward down the stairs.

I didn't wait as I ran fast to the top floor which belongs to Alpha's and Beta's.

If I could reach Beta Bastien's chambers or Kael's office, I'd be safe.

My feet pounded against the stone staircase as my lungs burned and behind me I heard shouting followed by furious footsteps. "Damn it!"

"I'll Catch you!" I ran faster as the upper floors came into view. I was almost there.

A powerful weight slammed into my back and I crashed onto the floor as pain exploded through my body.

It was Grengy and the bastard had recovered faster than I expected. He pinned me down with his face twisted with fury. "You little monster!"

Before I could move, he shoved something into my mouth. It's a wet and bitter cloth.

The second it touched my tongue, agony exploded through me. It had Wolfsbane in it.

My entire mouth ignited as my throat burned and my lungs screamed. I tried to spit it out as the pain spread instantly.

For a normal wolf, it would've been devastating but I wasn't a normal wolf. I was an Alpha and adrenaline was flooding my body.

I bit down hard on his hand and Grengy yelped, making his grip loosen.

I drove my knee upward as the impact sent him rolling away and I spat the cloth out immediately.

My throat felt like fire as breathing became torture. Still I got up and ran again.

Behind me I heard Grengy's shocked voice. "How are you still moving?!"

Because you're an idiot but I couldn't say it as my throat was dying but I thought it.

The corridor blurred around me as each breath hurt, each step felt heavier yet I forced myself forward.

I could see the corridor leading toward Beta Bastien's chambers. Just a little further but my legs suddenly gave out and I collapsed.

The stone floor rushed up to meet me as everything spun. I tried getting up but nothing happened as the wolfsbane had finally begun taking effect.

My limbs felt numb, heavy and useless as terror gripped me. For the first time that night, I was actually afraid.

Then I heard footsteps approaching followed by Grengy's laughter echoing through the corridor.

I forced my head up as his silhouette appeared and he smiled. "You should've stayed in bed, kid."

My vision blurred as he crouched beside me. "You know what I like most?"

I couldn't answer as my body wouldn't cooperate. He leaned closer. "Nobody is going to miss you." "No one will ever find you."

His grin widened. "You'll disappear completely."

Then suddenly we heard rapid footsteps coming from ahead.

He stood abruptly. "What the—"

A familiar voice rang through the corridor. It was cold, sharp and demanding. "What is going on here?"

Grenzy froze as I tried lifting my head and Everything was becoming darker, blurry and distant.

The last thing I heard was a loud smack then another as someone screamed. Then another body crashed into something and more shouting followed as darkness swallowed me whole.

The infirmary ceiling came into focus slowly. At first, I thought I was still dreaming as everything felt distant and muted.

Then the burning sensation in my throat reminded me exactly what had happened.

I groaned and immediately pushed myself upright and that was a Bad idea as the room spun violently.

I grabbed the edge of the bed before I could fall back down and found a cup of water sitting on the small table beside me.

Without thinking, I reached for it as my throat felt like sandpaper.

I emptied half the cup in one go as the relief was immediate though Not complete But enough to make breathing easier.

"Feeling better?" I nearly jumped as I raised my head and found Beta Bastien standing near the doorway with his arms crossed.

The man appeared everywhere like a particularly grumpy ghost.

I lowered the cup and said. "My throat still hurts."

"That's expected." He walked further into the room. "The amount of wolfsbane you inhaled would've kept most wolves unconscious for at least a day."

I frowned. "How long was I out?"

"Several hours." That barely surprised me.

Even Beta Bastien seemed mildly impressed. "For an Alpha female, your recovery is unusually fast."

I tried not to look too pleased with myself. "Thank you."

"That wasn't a compliment."

"It sounded like one." His eyes twitched.

I glanced around the infirmary as everything looked quiet and no wounded warriors, No healers. It was just us.

Then I remembered Grengy and the attack in the corridor.

I immediately looked back at Beta Bastien. "What happened?"

His expression hardened. "We'll discuss that later."

"No." I sat straighter. "What happened?"

Before he could answer, his eyes suddenly glazed over as he was obviously Mindlinking. Someone was speaking to him.

The change lasted only a few seconds then his expression shifted as the door burst open.

My heart immediately forgot how to function as Alpha Kael strode into the infirmary and the room suddenly felt smaller, warmer and more dangerous.

He looked irritated or more agitated. His dark eyes immediately found mine and for a brief second, something flashed across his face like relief then it vanished and was replaced by the usual cold mask.

Unfortunately, my stupid heart still noticed and I hated that.

Beta Bastien sighed dramatically. "I'll give you both privacy."

Finally, a sensible decision.

"No." Alpha Kael's response came instantly as Beta Bastien froze.

"Stay." The Beta stared at him as Alpha Kael stared back and neither of them moved.

Then Beta Bastien rolled his eyes. "One day I'm going to resign."

"No, you're not."

"Unfortunately."

I bit back a smile at the awkward silence that followed felt unbearable.

Alpha Kael remained standing as I remained sitting while Beta Bastien remained annoyed.

Someone had to speak and apparently that someone was me. "When did you return?"

Alpha Kael looked at me. "About an hour ago."

Only an hour? He had come here immediately? The thought warmed something inside me but I ignored it. "You came straight here?"

His jaw tightened. "I was informed there was a security issue."

Right of course. Not because he cared but because of a security issue.

I looked away and for some reason that stung more than I expected.

Alpha Kael continued. "You're in danger."

My head snapped up. "What?"

His expression remained serious. "Starting tonight, you'll have increased protection."

I blinked. "Increased protection?"

"Yes."

"Why?" His eyes briefly met Beta Bastien's and a silent conversation passed between them.

One I clearly wasn't included in. My frustration rose immediately. "What happened at the council meeting? Did my father say something? Did they discover I'm here?"

I still didn't get any response from them. I glared at both of them. "You both are terrible at answering questions."

Beta Bastien almost smiled while Alpha Kael ignored the remark completely. "Your movements will be monitored."

I folded my arms. "That sounds suspiciously like imprisonment."

"It's protection."

"Same thing."

"No."

"Yes."

"No." I sighed as talking to him was exhausting. Then another thought struck me. "What happened to Grengy?"

Beta Bastien answered this time. "He was detained."

"Detained?"

"He attempted to murder a member of the castle staff."

I felt a grim satisfaction as the idiot deserved it.

Alpha Kael's expression darkened. "He won't remain alive long enough to repeat the mistake."

The room went still as I stared at him. "You're going to execute him?"

"Yes." The answer came so casually that it startled me as if he were discussing the weather.

I sat upright. "That's unnecessary."

His eyes narrowed. "Unnecessary?"

"He failed in executing his plan."

"Yet he tried to harm you."

"But he didn't succeed."

"He attempted to murder you." Something dangerous flickered beneath his calm expression.

The possessiveness behind the words made my pulse quicken.

I hated that I noticed. I hated it even more that I liked it. "Still," I said carefully, "executing him seems extreme."

Alpha Kael looked ready to disagree. Thankfully Beta Bastien stepped in. "She has a point."

Both of us looked at him as the Beta sighed. "If Grengy suddenly loses his head after attacking an ordinary servant, people will ask questions."

Alpha Kael's expression remained unreadable as Bastien continued. "They'll start wondering why this particular servant matters so much."

The room grew very awkward immediately because all three of us knew exactly why.

Alpha Kael looked away first as I pretended not to notice but Beta Bastien definitely noticed and his expression screamed that he'd rather be anywhere else.

For several moments, nobody spoke then I cleared my throat or at least tried to because it still hurt.

I looked at Alpha Kael. "What exactly happened at the council?"

He looked back at me. For a second I thought he might actually answer.

Then— a sound interrupted him. Footsteps that were coming from somewhere above us.

All three of us froze as the infirmary sat on one of the lower levels of the castle.

The sounds came from the floor directly overhead. It wasn't the footstep of just one person. There were obviously many.

Alpha Kael immediately straightened as his entire body changed.

The relaxed posture disappeared as the Alpha emerged more dangerous, and alert.

Beta Bastien heard it too as his hand instantly moved toward the dagger at his waist.

The footsteps multiplied, noting something was very wrong.

My stomach tightened. "What is that?"

Neither man answered as both were listening and calculating.

Then Alpha Kael's expression hardened as if he had suddenly figured something out.

His eyes widened slightly. "Take cover!" Before I could react, he launched himself toward me.

Just as Alpha Kael yelled for us to take cover and jumped at me, the window on my right shattered.

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Kael

The window exploded inward as glass shattered across the infirmary like a storm of crystal knives.

My instincts took over before my mind could catch up as I lunged across the bed and threw myself over Selena.

A sharp sting ripped across my shoulder and back as fragments of glass buried themselves into my skin, but I barely felt it.

All I cared about was covering and protecting her.

Selena gasped beneath me. "Kael—" I immediately clamped a hand over her mouth making her eyes widened.

Not because I was hurting her. I just wanted her to understand that someone was here. Someone dangerous.

Across the room, Beta Bastien had already rolled behind a heavy shelf, his sword drawn out.

The room went too silent as my ears strained to listen to sounds .

I kept waiting, then I heard more fast and light footsteps moving across the roof above us.

I was very sure these were Assassins, not warriors or rogues.

My jaw tightened on remembering the councilman's warnings. Councilman Cedric had been right about them plotting an attack on my pack.

Through our mindlink, I said to Beta Bastien. "Take her somewhere safe."

Beta Bastien's voice came immediately through the mindlink. "Where do I take her?"

I didn't answer at first because the truth was I wasn't sure because the assassins had penetrated the castle and that should have been impossible.

I had doubled patrols. Increased guard rotations. Installed counter-watchers after the council warning and yet somehow they were here which meant nowhere obvious was safe.

Selena tried speaking again but I tightened my hand over her mouth and shook my head.

Her brows furrowed as I pointed toward the ceiling and toward the footsteps and Understanding flashed across her face.

Good! If the assassins were listening, hearing her voice would confirm everything. It would confirm that Alpha William's missing daughter was inside Blackbourne.

I couldn't let that happen.

"The backup armory," I finally mindlinked Beta Bastien.

"Take her to the Underground."

There was a pause then he asked. "You're sure?"

"Just get Moving! There's not much time." Beta Bastien nodded.

Without another word, he crossed the room and held on to Selena who immediately resisted. "No," she hissed the moment I released her mouth.

"Selena—"

"No! I'm not leaving you—"

"Go."

"I'm not helpless." She snapped into my face.

"I know you're not helpless!"

"Then stop treating me like I am." She said through gritted teeth that I almost smiled despite the situation.

She's such a stubborn woman who obviously doesn't like taking no for an answer but Unfortunately for her, Beta Bastien was stronger.

He grabbed her wrist as she struggled against him, kicked, argued and threatened him but none of it worked.

A moment later he was able to drag her toward the exit and her glare at me promised murder as they disappeared through the doorway.

Only then did I allow myself a breath. As long as she stayed underground, she should be safe.

The footsteps continued above and I closed my eyes and listened carefully. I tried to get the count of how many they were as they kept moving independently and searching.

They weren't heading toward a specific room. I could tell they were moving from chamber to chamber looking and hunting.

That meant they still hadn't found what they came for. Which meant Selena's location remained secret and safe for now.

I stepped into the hallway and chaos greeted me instantly. Servants ran in every direction, different maids were screaming while some guards were shouting out orders.

The entire floor looked moments away from descending into complete panic and the moment they saw me, Silence followed though not a complete silence.

Order returned as it always did. "Everyone stop!" My voice echoed through the corridor as immediately people froze to hear what I had to say.

"Some Guards should escort every servant and maid into the dungeons."

The captain nodded. "At once, Alpha Kael."

The dungeons weren't so pleasant but they were more secure there and it's better instead of being frightened to death here.

The evacuation began immediately then my gaze landed on one particular young dark haired maid who seems to be roughly Selena's age or close enough.

I pointed immediately at her. "You."

The girl froze. "Alpha... W-What did I do?"

"You did nothing." I beckoned her forward and she obeyed nervously.

I called for a nearby guard and he approached instantly. "Give her your cloak."

The guard, the maid and everyone else who heard what I had just said, blinked in surprise.

The captain frowned and called out to me. "Alpha?"

I ignored him as I had my own plan in mind.

The cloak settled over the girl's shoulders. From a distance... In poor lighting... She could pass as Selena though not perfectly but enough.

The captain finally approached. "Alpha, we need an attack plan."

"Yes We do." I said as he waited for me to continue but when I said nothing, he went on to ask.

"So what is the plan, Alpha Kael?"

"Nothing." I simply said and his eyes widened.

"Nothing?" He asked again to be sure he heard correctly.

"There's no plan yet."

"Alpha, assassins are inside the castle."

"I'm very well aware of that."

"Then why aren't we hunting them?"

"Because hunters become prey when they chase blindly."

The captain looked frustrated but I couldn't blame him because he couldn't hear what I heard. He couldn't see what I saw and couldn't count footsteps through walls.

I pointed at two guards. "You two."

They straightened. "Escort her to the Guest Wing."

The captain frowned harder. "What?"

"Stay close to the walls." I said as the guards exchanged confused looks. "And move slowly."

"Yes, Alpha."

The maid looked terrified but couldn't say a word. The escort began while the captain stared after them.

Then he stared at me and back at them. Finally he asked, "What exactly are you doing, Alpha Kael?"

I folded my arms. "Setting bait."

His expression stated he didn't understand what I meant but he just couldn't question me further.

A dangerous smile crossed my face because unlike most Alphas, I preferred winning before a battle began.

Hours later I sat inside my office waiting, Listening and Calculating.

Every few minutes a mindlink arrived from the guards. "We've reached the west corridor."

"Good."

Several minutes later— "We are approaching the staircase."

Then— "We are Crossing the gallery."

The captain kept pacing in my office while I remained seated with my father's dagger spinning in between my fingers.

The weapon was old, worn out but still beautiful. It was one of the few things I'd inherited from him.

I still remember the day he gave it to me. "Victory belongs to the Alpha who thinks," he'd said. "Not the one who swings first."

Those words had shaped my life. Now they echoed through my head again.

A new mindlink suddenly arrived, breaking my thoughts. "Alpha."

I straightened. "Report."

"We've reached the corridor leading to the Guest Wing."

My eyes narrowed as I asked. "Is there anything unusual?"

Silence then— "We can hear footsteps."

A smile touched my lips. "Good." I said and disconnected from the mindlink.

The bait had worked.

I stood and the captain immediately stopped pacing. "Well?" He eagerly asked.

"They took the bait."

His face lit up. "They followed the girl?"

"Yes."

I turned toward the captain. "Gather every available guard."

His posture straightened. "Immediately Alpha."

"And Use the hidden passage." His eyes widened because the secret route is the one built generations ago. The one that led directly behind the Guest Wing.

It was perfect for our plan. "Surround them."

The captain grinned. "And then?"

"Kill them." He nodded sharply and rushed out.

The office fell quiet again as I resumed spinning my dagger and above me hung my father's portrait.

I looked up at the portrait and said, "They're not getting her."

The painted man said nothing but somehow I felt he'd approve.

Minutes crawled past then finally—The captain's voice burst through the mindlink. "Contact!"

I stood instantly. "Report."

"The assassins attacked." The captain said.

My smile returned. "And?"

"We counter-attacked immediately." He said and I could still hear steel clashing faintly through the link with men shouting.

"Who has the advantage?" I asked and the captain sounded almost excited immediately .

"We have more advantages. It went exactly as planned."

I stopped before my father's portrait. "The victory was clean and efficient with no unnecessary losses or danger to Selena.

"How many assassins?" I asked through the mindlink again.

The answer should have been obvious because I had counted them myself. So before he could answer, I smiled and said. "Four."

There was a pause then the captain responded . "They are three, Alpha.

My smile vanished as the room suddenly felt colder and very slowly, I lowered the dagger.

I had heard four sets of footsteps, not three. Every instinct inside me roared awake and my wolf snarled.

The captain kept talking but I barely heard him because suddenly the entire battle looked different.

I suddenly realized the chase towards the Guest Wing was also a decoy for the assassins.

"Fuck!!!"

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Selena

"I don't want to stay here." My voice echoed through the underground armory.

Beta Bastien didn't even look impressed by my protest. "You don't have a choice."

The heavy metal door stood open behind him while several guards waited outside with weapons drawn.

"I am not a prisoner."

"No," Beta Bastien replied dryly. "You're the reason half the castle is currently losing sleep."

I folded my arms. "That isn't my fault."

"It rarely is, according to people who attract trouble."

I glared at him and he glared right back.

For a moment, neither of us spoke, then Beta Bastien sighed heavily. "Stay here." His tone softened slightly. "Just for now." With that he turned and walked away, shutting the big door behind him.

I hated that he sounded reasonable. I hated even more that Alpha Kael had agreed with this plan.

The assassins had somehow breached Blackbourne Castle. A castle that was supposed to be nearly impossible to infiltrate.

A castle protected by warriors, guards, patrols, scouts, walls, and enough security measures to make invading armies think twice. Yet assassins had gotten inside.

That thought alone made my stomach twist. How powerful were they? And more importantly... Who sent them?

My father? The Council? The vampires? Questions continued spinning inside my head. Questions nobody seemed willing to answer.

Silence followed as I was left alone here. I looked around and the place was ancient. Dust covered most of the shelves.

Old shields leaned against walls, broken spears sat abandoned in corners, the air smelled of rust and forgotten battles and It was very cold too.

I wrapped my arms around myself and began pacing back and forth. Anything to keep my thoughts occupied but it didn't work.

I kept thinking about Alpha Kael. About the way he'd thrown himself over me when the window exploded.

About the glass that had pierced his skin and about the look on his face.

That look hadn't been indifference. No matter how much he pretended, no matter how many walls he built, for one brief moment, he'd looked genuinely terrified.

Terrified for me. The memory made my chest feel warm and I immediately hated it.

Thirty minutes passed and maybe more. I could hear the sounds of chaos from above gradually fade.

There was no more crashing, no more shouting and no more alarms. Eventually, everything became too quiet, making me frown.

If the attack was over, why was I still down here?

It already crossed my mind to walk toward the door but before I could make a move, I heard footsteps noting someone was coming.

"Finally." Relief flooded through me.

"Beta Bastien?" I called as the footsteps continued towards the door.

"Beta Bastien, are the assassins caught?" There was still no response as the footsteps kept approaching.

A strange feeling settled inside my chest as the metal lock clicked and the huge doors slowly opened.

I smiled but then the smile vanished as the man standing outside wasn't Beta Bastien.

I had never seen him before and his face was hidden beneath a wrapped kaftan. His eyes through the kaftan were unfamiliar,dangerous and predatory.

My heart started beating fast as the stranger slowly removed the cloth covering his head then he smiled. "I finally found you."

I stepped backward as every instinct screamed at me to run.

"Who are you?" I asked with a shaky voice.

He ignored the question. "I'm here to save you and take you away from here."

My pulse quickened. "Take me where?" Again, he ignored me.

Instead, he walked forward and I immediately backed away. "I said stop."

His smile widened. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Funny." I grabbed an old spear leaning nearby.

"You look exactly like someone who wants to hurt me."

The assassin's expression hardened. "I wasn't given permission to return without you."

My grip tightened. "I wasn't given permission to go with you."

For a moment neither of us moved, then he lunged at me and I swung the spear but he dodged and his hand shot out as his strong fingers wrapped around my wrist.

I twisted violently but he pulled harder and pain shot through my arm.

I screamed. "Let me go!" He dragged me forward as I fought, kicked, scratched and bit him but he was much stronger.

My scream echoed through the armory as the assassin cursed.

Then suddenly, I heard a deep savage terrifying growl. The kind that belonged to a predator at the very top of the food chain.

The assassin froze and so did I as something moved too fast.

One second the assassin stood in front of me and the next, he was airborne with his body slammed into the wall with a sickening crack.

I stumbled backward with my eyes widened seeing Alpha Kael.

His wolf was partially visible. His Golden eyes blazed and his breathing sounded rough, dangerous and feral.

The assassin barely managed to stand before Alpha Kael hit him again and again.

A punch and another punch until blood sprayed and the assassin crashed into shelves then weapons fell around him.

Still Alpha Kael didn't stop while the assassin tried fighting back but It was useless.

Alpha Kael looked like murder itself. Every blow carried enough force to break bones. Every strike landed harder than the last.

The assassin screamed but Alpha Kael ignored him. The man's face became a bloody mess then Alpha Kael wrapped a hand around his throat lifting him slowly and effortlessly.

The assassin's feet left the ground and his eyes bulged. I immediately realized what was about to happen.

Alpha Kael was going to kill him. "Kael!"

He didn't react. "Alpha Kael!" I called again but still got no response.

The assassin choked as his face turned purple. "Kael!"

This time I grabbed his arm and his gaze snapped toward me. The fury inside those golden eyes nearly stole my breath.

For one frightening second I thought he'd forgotten who I was then recognition returned slowly and reluctantly.

I swallowed and quietly said, "please don't." His jaw clenched as the assassin continued struggling.

Alpha Kael stared at me then finally released him and the man collapsed to the floor coughing and gasping for air.

Footsteps thundered from the corridor and Beta Bastien burst inside accompanied by guards.

The moment he saw the scene, he stopped as his gaze shifted from the bleeding assassin to Alpha Kael then to me. "I assume this one is ours?"

Alpha Kael didn't answer as the guards immediately dragged the assassin away with the man groaning in pain as I watched them disappear.

Then Alpha Kael's large hand wrapped around my wrist. "Come."

That was all he said. It was just a command and somehow I found myself following him without saying anything.

We walked through several corridors in silence as The castle was slowly calming down and Guards moved everywhere.

Servants whispered nervously as everyone looked shaken.

Eventually we reached his chambers as the door closed behind us. The sudden quiet felt strange until my eyes fell to his hands and saw the assassin's blood covered them.

Without thinking, I reached for him. "Come with me."

For once he didn't argue as I led him toward the bathing room. Warm water filled a basin so I dipped a cloth inside then gently began cleaning the blood from his hands.

Neither of us spoke and the silence wasn't uncomfortable. The mate bond hummed between us.

Every touch felt amplified. Every brush of skin lingered longer than it should. I focused on cleaning because anything else felt dangerous.

After several minutes I glanced up and found his shirt was stained with blood too.

I cleared my throat. "Your clothes are ruined."

His eyes met mine and for one ridiculous second I hoped he'd remove them right there in front of me and heat rushed into my cheeks.

Alpha Kael didn't move and I immediately regretted the thought.

Then I awkwardly escaped the bathing room before my face betrayed me as I waited in his chamber while trying very hard not to think about him.

My gaze wandered around the room instead and I saw a large painting hung above the fireplace.

The man in it looked remarkably like Alpha Kael. They had the same eyes, same jaw and same stubborn expression.

"This must be his father." I studied the painting quietly then looked around for another portrait of his mother.

There wasn't one and that surprised me.

My attention shifted elsewhere to a dagger resting inside a display shelf. It was beautiful and the sheath was immaculate.

The hilt looked expensive, important and treasured. I carefully picked it up as the craftsmanship was extraordinary.

Suddenly, the bathroom door opened. I looked up and immediately forgot the dagger existed.

Alpha Kael had stepped out with his upper body completely bare and water still glistened across his skin.

My breath caught. 'Oh Moon Goddess.' The man was unfairly attractive. For several seconds neither of us spoke as the room seemed to shrink.

The mate bond tightened as it became more pulling, more yearning and more demanding.

My wolf practically purred as Alpha Kael stared at me and I stared right back with neither of us looking away.

Then a knock and the spell shattered instantly as Alpha Kael opened the door and Beta Bastien stood outside.

"We await your orders regarding the assassins."

Alpha Kael nodded, then he started dressing and without looking at me he said, "Go back to bed."

"No." I said and both males looked at me as I lifted my chin. "I want answers."

"You'll get them later."

"I heard those men..."

Alpha Kael fastened a button and cut me off. "That changes nothing."

"I should be present."

"You absolutely should not." Alpha Kael snapped.

I folded my arms. "They tried kidnapping me."

"And because of that, they cannot see your face." Alpha Kael added.

I opened my mouth to argue more but he stepped very close. Close enough for me to feel his warmth. Close enough to forget what argument I was making.

His eyes locked onto mine. "I don't like being disobeyed." My heart skipped as his voice lowered. "Especially not by my own mate."

The words wrapped around me possessively, dangerously and intoxicating.

Then his fingers brushed against my cheek. It was mainly a simple touch yet my entire body reacted.

His thumb stroked softly across my skin. "Go back to bed." His voice became quieter and gentler. "I'll tell you what happened with the assassins tomorrow."

And somehow... despite every argument ready on my tongue... despite every protest...I obeyed.

I turned around, opened the door and left his room.