

Claimed By The Rival Alpha c 51-60

Selena

"How did you do it?" Niamh's eyes were so wide they looked ready to fall out of her head.

She stood in the middle of our chamber with both hands on her hips, staring at me as though I'd suddenly become some legendary negotiator capable of bending impossible people to my will.

"Seriously," she insisted. "How did you convince the headmaid to return everyone's wages?"

I folded the blanket I'd just finished arranging before looking up at her. "I just... got lucky while speaking with her."

It wasn't exactly a lie. Luck had played a role. A very complicated, very frustrating, very Kael-shaped kind of luck.

Niamh frowned. "That's it?"

I nodded casually. "That's it." I said but she didn't look convinced and neither did Sally.

Unlike Niamh, Sally wasn't asking questions. She simply leaned against the wall with folded arms, silently studying me. The longer she looked, the more uncomfortable I became.

Ever since she'd caught me coming from Alpha Kael's chambers direction, she'd developed an annoying habit of watching every word I spoke.

I forced a smile.

"Anyway," I said, changing the subject before either of them could ask more questions, "I need you to inform everyone about a meeting this evening."

Niamh blinked before asking, "Evening? Not midnight?"

"No." I said and she looked genuinely confused.

"But midnight is safer."

"It'll be fine." I said encouragingly.

She scratched her cheek. "Is something changing?"

"Not really." I simply couldn't risk another midnight meeting anymore.

Between Alpha Kael's strange ability to somehow appear wherever I was and my newly arranged training schedule, the evening felt much safer or perhaps less dangerous.

Niamh eventually shrugged. "If you say so, I'll pass the message."

"Everyone," I reminded her and she nodded before leaving the chamber.

The door had barely closed when Sally straightened from the wall.

"I want to—" Then the door swung open again interrupting her as Marquee walked in.

She didn't greet either of us, she didn't even spare us a glance. She simply crossed the room, changed into fresh clothes and began arranging her bedding as though we didn't exist.

Silence swallowed the room then Sally sighed quietly while I looked at Marquee's back.

Ever since the revolution meetings had begun, she'd become increasingly distant. Every smile between us had disappeared.

Every conversation ended before it began. I missed my friend.

Unfortunately, I didn't know how to fix whatever had broken between us.

Sally looked from Marquee to me as neither of us spoke. Finally, I decided it wasn't the time to speak to her.

"I'll be back," I muttered as neither woman answered.

The castle corridors buzzed with servants carrying baskets, folded laundry and crates of vegetables.

Life continued despite the tension surrounding the possible vampire invasion.

I walked quietly, my thoughts occupied with the revolution.

"Well, if it isn't the Alpha's favourite headache." The mocking voice of Jett pulled me from my thoughts.

He stood beside a pillar with his arms crossed. Ash wasn't with him today.

Jett smirked and continued. "Still pretending you're going to save the werewolf race?"

I sighed. "I don't remember asking for your opinion."

"You never do." He turned to leave then I remembered.

"Wait." I quickly said and he stopped without turning.

I walked until I stood beside him. "The condition, You said you'd join my group if I got Grengy released, right?"

His grin returned. "So you remember."

"I do and I think I can accomplish it."

He laughed. "You?" he scoffed. "Do you even know who decides who leaves the dungeon?"

I folded my arms and went to the point again. "So getting Grengy out is still your condition?"

"It is."

"And if I succeed, you're joining right?" I asked to be sure I wasn't being played.

"I'll join." He reluctantly said.

"A promise?" I asked again.

"A promise." His grin widened. "I'd love to see how you pull that off."

I smiled back. "Watch me."

Without waiting for another response, I walked away while his chuckle followed me down the corridor.

The kitchens smelled of fresh bread and roasted meat as servants hurried everywhere.

No one paid much attention to me as I picked up a bowl of stew, a loaf of bread and a cup of water before leaving quickly.

The dungeon was colder than I remembered. The Stone walls trapped every sound. Moisture dripped steadily from somewhere in the darkness.

The guard stationed outside narrowed his eyes when he saw me. "What do you want?"

"I brought food for Grengy."

He studied me for a long moment before shrugging. "Don't stay long."

I thanked him and walked deeper inside. The familiar iron bars eventually appeared and Grengy sat on the floor with his back against the wall.

He looked... Different. His face had grown thinner, his beard had begun growing unevenly and dark circles rested beneath his eyes.

He looked exhausted.

He slowly lifted his head and the moment he recognized me, he immediately stood.

"No." His voice cracked. "Stay away from me."

I stopped several steps from the bars. "I brought food."

"I don't want it."

"I wasn't asking."

"I said no." His fear caught me completely off guard. It wasn't mere hatred, it wasn't anger but rather, it was fear.

Guilt squeezed painfully inside my chest. I quietly placed the tray beside the bars before lowering myself onto the cold stone floor.

For a while... Neither of us spoke then finally I sighed. "You know..." My voice echoed softly through the corridor. "I've never been the reason someone suffered before."

He remained silent as I continued. "I grew up surrounded by people who loved me."

My fingers traced invisible circles across the floor. "My father protected me."

"My teachers praised me, the people at home spoiled me." I laughed bitterly. "I suppose it made me entitled."

Grengy's eyes slowly shifted toward me while I continued: "When I first came here..." I smiled faintly. "I thought everyone would eventually like me."

Another bitter laugh escaped. "I was very wrong." He still said nothing. "So seeing you here..." I swallowed. "It hurts."

He looked away. "I never wanted to ruin anyone's life because my own life is already falling apart."

His gaze returned to me as I added. "I'm far away from home. I can't return because if I do..." I looked toward the ceiling. "I might end up somewhere I never want to be or worse, I might die."

The words sounded frighteningly true once spoken aloud. "So the last thing I wanted..." I whispered. "...was making enemies."

Grengey stared at me for several seconds then his shoulders slowly relaxed as he asked, "Where are you from?"

I hesitated. "A very far away village."

He frowned. "I've never heard you mention it."

"It doesn't matter."

He kept studying me then eventually he sighed. "I hated you, I blamed you but I shouldn't have."

I looked at him as he continued quietly. "I was angry and I convinced myself everything was your fault."

His voice grew lower. "When they threw me in here... I had nothing except my anger."

He laughed weakly. "But anger gets tiring. I had plenty of time to think." His eyes met mine. "I shouldn't have attacked you so I'm sorry."

The sincerity in his voice surprised me but I smiled regardless before saying, "I forgive you."

He stared for another moment before looking toward the food. "You really brought that for me?"

"I did." I said and slowly, he approached the bars. This time he accepted the tray and the moment he smelled the stew, his hands trembled.

"You should eat." I said and he didn't need another invitation.

Within seconds he tore into the bread, barely chewing before reaching for the stew.

He looked absolutely starved. I pretended not to notice the speed at which he ate.

Instead I smiled. "I'll get you out soon... I promise."

He paused. "What?" He asked in shock.

"I'll find a way." Before either of us could continue, we were cut short.

"Time's up!" The guard's voice echoed through the dungeon as he approached with heavy footsteps.

"You." He pointed toward me. "Out."

I stood immediately. "Can I ask you something first?"

He sighed dramatically. "What now?"

"I'd like to speak with the captain about Grengy's imprisonment."

The guard burst into laughter. "You? Why?"

"Because he's here because of me."

The guard folded his arms. "So?"

"I don't think he deserves to remain imprisoned." I stepped closer to him as I added. "He isn't a threat to me anymore so he should be freed."

The guard laughed even harder. "Who do you think you are?"

"I—" I started.

"No." He cut me off. "He may not be a threat to you anymore But what about everyone else?"

"He served this castle faithfully before,he worked hard, and he made just one mistake." I started counting them out.

The guard's expression remained unmoved as he said. "The captain decides."

"Can I at least speak with him, please?"

"No." He snapped.

I clenched my fists. "There has to be a way."

"There isn't." He pointed toward the exit. "Leave."

I glanced back once as Grengy had already returned to eating. At least he wasn't hungry anymore and that was one small victory.

As I climbed the dungeon stairs, determination settled firmly inside me. One refusal wouldn't stop me and neither would ten.

"I will keep trying somehow until Grengy is freed."

—

Later that evening, the sun had sunk and I and Sally were already getting ready to head to the storeroom for the meeting.

I had barely rounded what I'm doing when a castle guard stepped directly into the room.

For a split second I thought I'd done something wrong again. Instead, he bowed respectfully. "Selena... Tracker Kieren requests your presence."

My heart immediately sank upon realizing it was my new trainer.

I closed my eyes for a brief second, Alpha Kael's arrangement had officially begun.

And I already knew it was going to become another complication in an already impossible schedule.

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Selena

I sighed heavily as I stood outside the main armoury, shifting my weight from one aching foot to the other. "How long had I been waiting?"

The evening had already slipped well. Every passing minute meant less time in the kitchens, and less time in the kitchens meant fewer chances to impress the headmaid... and possibly fewer wages if anyone decided I had been neglecting my duties.

I blew out another breath.

"Excuse me," I finally said to one of the guards stationed outside the armoury. "Do you happen to know when Tracker Kieren intends to arrive?"

The guard glanced at me. "He'll come."

"That's not exactly reassuring." I said.

He shrugged. "Tracker Kieren isn't the sort to answer to anyone's clock."

I frowned. "My work shift has already started."

Before the guard could answer, the steady tap... tap... tap... of wood against stone echoed down the corridor as both of us turned.

Tracker Kieren rounded the corner, walking with the aid of a sturdy stick. White linen still wrapped parts of his torso and shoulder from injuries he had sustained weeks ago. His pace wasn't fast, but it was steady.

When he reached us, he looked me over from head to toe. "So you're the maid."

I bowed politely. "Yes."

"The one Alpha Kael ordered me to train."

"Yes." I said again.

He scratched his jaw thoughtfully. "I still don't understand why the Alpha wants a castle maid trained in combat."

He shook his head. "But I'm hardly in a position to question his orders."

He motioned toward the training field behind the armoury. "Come." He said and I followed him silently.

The training yard was almost empty at this hour. A few warriors practiced sword drills farther away while others repaired damaged shields.

Kieren stopped in the middle of the clearing. "We begin with questions."

I nodded for him to begin.

"Have you ever received combat training?"

My heart skipped because my Father had trained me since childhood. Swordsmanship, hand-to-hand combat and pack formations.

If I answered honestly, everything would fall apart so I lowered my eyes. "No."

"Hm... Ever held a weapon?"

"A kitchen knife." I said with a shrug.

He snorted. "That hardly counts." He continued. "Any injuries? Bad knees? Weak wrists? Trouble breathing? Fear of blood?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Afraid of heights?"

"No."

"Afraid of getting hit?"

I almost smiled. "If I were, I wouldn't be standing here."

That earned the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth. "Good answer."

He walked toward several wooden crates stacked near the armoury wall. "Lifting strength first."

He pointed at one of the heavier boxes. "Carry that across the yard."

I stared at it. It wasn't particularly heavy for an Alpha female but for a normal servant... It would be difficult.

I bent down, deliberately pretending to struggle before finally lifting it with both arms.

Every instinct screamed at me to carry it naturally. Instead, I staggered slightly as Kieren watched every movement.

When I reached the other side, I carefully lowered it, pretending to catch my breath.

He nodded. "Average."

Relief washed through me as it's a Good thing he hadn't noticed.

"Again." He said and this time he handed me an even larger crate.

I repeated the performance with just enough effort, never enough to expose who I truly was.

For nearly half an hour he tested my strength in different ways. Lifting sacks, dragging logs and carrying stones.

Every single task required careful acting. If I'm too weak, he would think I was hopeless. If I'm too strong, questions would begin.

By the end, he folded his arms. "You've got decent endurance and we'll improve it."

He led me toward the weapon racks. Rows of polished swords gleamed beneath the afternoon light.

There were Spears, Axes, Maces, Daggers, Wooden staffs and Training blades.

He picked up a sword. "Take it."

I accepted it and it felt wonderfully familiar. Almost like greeting an old friend.

'Don't grip it properly.' I inwardly warned myself as I deliberately held it awkwardly.

Kieren sighed. "No."

He adjusted my hands. "Like this."

"Sorry." I apologized.

He demonstrated a basic stance. "Copy me."

Again, I purposely looked clumsy though not too clumsy. Just inexperienced enough.

He corrected my feet, then my shoulders, then my elbows and then my grip again.

"Hm, You learn quickly." He said.

I forced an embarrassed smile. "I watch the warriors sometimes. I guess watching does help."

He handed me a spear next. "Try it."

I did with an axe, then a dagger and then another sword. Every weapon received the same verdict.

"No, not balanced. No, it's too stiff." Finally he tossed everything aside. "We'll forget weapons for now."

I blinked. "Why?"

"You don't have enough body control yet." He pointed toward the edge of the training ground.
"Run."

I obeyed as he screamed from behind, "Faster."

I increased my pace. "Again!!!"

I went lap after lap around the yard, past the armoury, past the barracks then back again.

By the tenth lap, sweat rolled down my temples. By the fifteenth, my breathing became heavier.

Then he handed me a thick bundle of chopped wood. "Carry this while running."

I stared at him. "You can't be serious."

"I am." He said with a small smirk.

I lifted the bundle and it wasn't that difficult but again, I had to pretend as I jogged slowly.

He frowned. "Faster."

"I'll drop them." I yelled out at him.

"Then don't." He said and I bit back a groan and continued.

The next exercise was worse. A large rock had been secured to a thick rope and he tied the rope around my waist.

"Pull." He ordered and my eyes widened.

"You're joking, right? Because I'm definitely going to die!"

"No, you won't."

"I really might." I said again but he simply stared as I sighed dramatically.

Then I leaned forward and began dragging the massive stone across the training yard.

Every step demanded careful restraint. I could pull it far more easily than I allowed myself.

Still...Even pretending became exhausting after a while as my muscles genuinely began to ache.

Hours passed as the warriors around us changed shifts.

At last he struck the ground with his stick. "Enough."

I nearly collapsed where I stood as my entire body throbbed. Even being born an Alpha couldn't erase the exhaustion of nonstop drills.

He studied me for another long moment. "You didn't quit."

"I sincerely considered it." I said, almost rolling my eyes.

"I know, but you didn't." He nodded once before adding. "Return tomorrow at the same time."

I managed a tired nod. "Thank you."

As I slowly left the training yard, every muscle protested as walking suddenly felt like another exercise.

Halfway back toward the servants' quarters, someone called my name. "Selena!"

I looked up. "Niamh."

She hurried toward me. "There you are! You missed the meeting."

My heart sank as I had completely forgotten about the meeting. "I'm sorry."

"We waited."

"I lost track of time." I managed to say;

She looked me over. "What happened to you?" She asked but I simply shrugged without saying a word.

She stared for another moment before shaking her head. "What do we do about the meeting?"

Despite every part of me screaming for sleep, I straightened. "Gather everyone again."

She blinked. "Again? They're already annoyed you stood them up." Niamh says.

"If they're truly committed to this cause, one delay won't send them running." I stated the fact.

She hesitated before nodding. "I'll tell them."

"Thank you." I said as she hurried away and I continued walking until another familiar face appeared. It was Sera.

The headmaid's assistant smiled warmly the moment she recognized me. "You don't look well."

I laughed weakly. "I feel worse."

"Too much work?" She asked.

"You could say that." I said with a small smile.

She looked genuinely concerned. "You should rest more."

"I wish I could." Instead of dwelling on myself, I gently shifted the conversation. "How is the headmaid?"

Sera sighed softly as I continued. "I can't imagine... I can't imagine the pain she carries every day."

I lowered my voice. "After losing her daughter...I hate what the vampires have done to our people."

"So do I." Sera said with a deep frown as she added. "I wish someone could stop them." Sera looked away toward one of the castle windows.

"So do I." I added.

After several seconds she spoke again. "I sometimes wish the Alphas were brave enough to stand together."

I froze. "What do you mean?"

"They're stronger than us." She shrugged sadly. "If they united, perhaps things would change."

Then bitterness entered her voice. "Instead..." She shook her head. "Alpha William had every opportunity."

The mention of my father made my heartbeat stumble.

"He could have inspired everyone." Her eyes hardened. "But he chose the opposite."

I forced myself to remain calm as I asked. "What makes you think that?"

She looked almost surprised. "Doesn't everyone know? It suits Alpha William well that his daughter disappeared."

My stomach tightened as she added. "I sincerely hope he never finds her."

Those words struck harder than I expected. She hates my father so much... It wasn't even a dislike.

For a brief moment I couldn't breathe. Was this truly how people saw my father? As someone whose own daughter was better off never returning?

Across the courtyard, I spotted two members of our group quietly heading toward the meeting place.

I couldn't stay here much longer so I forced a smile. "I should go."

Sera nodded before speaking again. "I hope someone eventually does what Alpha William never would."

She looked toward the distant mountains. "Someone willing to carry that burden."

I followed her gaze before adding. "I hope so too."

As I walked away, dizziness settled over me and from everything I had just heard, it worsened.

I had never truly considered the Alpha everyone else believed he had become.

And for the first time, it dawned on me that perhaps this was exactly how most people saw my father.

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Selena

Only about half of the group was present. The abandoned storeroom felt unusually empty as I looked around at the familiar faces.

The crude lantern hanging from the cracked beam above cast wavering shadows across the dusty floor, making the room seem even larger than it truly was.

Wooden crates lined the walls, and the stale scent of old grain mixed with damp timber lingered in the air. It was nothing like the excitement of our first gathering.

For a brief moment, disappointment threatened to settle inside me but I slowly pushed myself to my feet, intending to begin anyway.

The moment I stood, the soreness from today's training rushed through every part of my body. My legs trembled beneath me, my shoulders burned from carrying logs, and my back protested every movement. Even breathing deeply reminded me of the countless laps Kieren had made me run.

Niamh immediately reached for my arm. "Selena, You don't look well."

I looked at her before answering. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not." She said and before I could protest, she gently tugged me back onto the wooden crate I had been sitting on. "Sit."

"I can stand." I argued.

"You can barely stand." She said and a few members glanced at us with concern. "You look exhausted."

"But I'm still okay." I said again.

"We know," Niamh replied softly. "That doesn't mean you have to collapse while giving a speech."

She pulled a small leather flask from her pocket and uncorked it. "Drink."

"What is it?"

"Ale."

I wrinkled my nose. "You expect me to drink before a meeting?"

She rolled her eyes. "I expect you not to faint."

A few quiet chuckles spread through the room as I accepted the flask.

The ale was slightly warm and bitter, but after a few mouthfuls, warmth settled in my chest and eased some of the heaviness weighing down my limbs.

"There," Niamh said with satisfaction.

"You sound like an old healer." I said while rolling my eyes.

"I'd rather sound like one than watch our leader pass out."

That earned another round of laughter. I smiled despite myself before handing the flask back.
"Thank you."

She nodded, then I looked around. "Where's Sally?"

One of the women answered first. "The headmaid sent several maids to the market today."

Another nodded. "Sally went with them. She said she'd return before nightfall if she could."

I sighed. "I was hoping she'd be here."

I let them enjoy the brief moment before clearing my throat.

"Before anything else..." Everyone looked at me. "I want to confirm something."

Several nodded as I asked, "The headmaid returned your wages?"

Almost every head nodded immediately. "Yes."

"We got them."

"I thought she'd never change her mind."

"I checked twice before believing it."

One young servant grinned. "I even counted the coins three times."

Another woman leaned forward. "But... how?" She looked directly at me. "How did you convince the headmaid?"

The rest of them became equally curious. "Yes."

"What happened?"

"Did you beg her?"

"Did someone speak on our behalf?"

"So what did you do?" Dozens of questioning eyes settled on me.

I hesitated as there was no way I could tell them Alpha Kael had quietly lifted the punishment after granting me a favor. That secret would remain mine.

"I..." Before I could think of a believable answer, Ryuiji suddenly spoke.

"I think we're asking the wrong question." Everyone turned toward him as he folded his arms. "Selena didn't gather us here to celebrate a small victory."

Silence followed as He continued calmly. "Getting our wages back is good but that wasn't our goal."

He looked directly at me. "You called this meeting for something else."

Several members slowly nodded.

"So..." I straightened my posture despite the ache in my muscles. "I have a question."

Everyone became attentive as I asked. "How many prospects has each of you managed to speak with?"

The room became noticeably quieter when one young servant scratched the back of his neck. "I spoke with one, he said he'd think about it."

A woman beside him sighed. "I managed to talk to my cousin but she was too frightened."

Another servant spoke. "I convinced my roommate to listen."

Another voice came from the corner. "I spoke to two people, they both said fighting the vampires was impossible."

Someone else raised a hand. "I've been trying with one of the stable boys. He hasn't refused... But he hasn't accepted either."

Gradually everyone shared nearly identical answers. Some had conversations. Some had hopeful prospects but none had secured a new member.

The realization settled over us like heavy fog but finally I broke the silence. "I don't blame any of you. In fact..."

I smiled weakly. "I should probably blame myself first."

Confused looks met my words as I continued. "I haven't converted anyone either."

I looked around the room. "I can't ask more from you than I'm willing to do myself."

The room relaxed slightly then one older servant quietly spoke. "I think I know why they're being reluctant."

I turned toward him. "Why?"

He sighed. "People who haven't suffered under the vampires themselves don't truly understand."

Several people nodded immediately.

"They think we're exaggerating because they've never watched their loved ones disappear. They haven't watched their daughters being dragged away."

The room fell silent once more as their words lingered in the air and I slowly nodded.

"You're right." Everyone looked at me. "If people haven't witnessed the cruelty... They won't feel the urgency."

I lowered my gaze thoughtfully. How could we make people understand? How could we awaken those who had never experienced the pain firsthand?

The answer came to me so suddenly that I stood before realizing it.

"What we need..." I said slowly. "...is to move."

Blank expressions greeted me as I continued. "We need to move our operations beyond the castle."

The room stirred immediately. "Into Blackbourne City's streets."

Several people stared at me in shock. "The city?"

I nodded. "There are families there. Grieving mothers, fathers, people who have actually lost daughters, people who have suffered, people already carrying the anger we need and they're simply waiting for someone to bring justice."

One servant shook his head. "That's impossible."

Another agreed immediately. "We're castle servants... We can't simply leave whenever we want."

Someone else added, "The only time we're allowed outside is during recess and most of us work through recess because we need the extra coins."

Murmurs spread quickly. "They'll dock our wages."

"We'll starve."

"We have families."

"We can't just abandon our jobs."

I listened carefully as every objection was reasonable. Every fear was real.

Then I took a deep breath. "Some of us..." The words tasted heavy. "...may have to leave our jobs inside the castle for the sake of the cause."

The room froze as no one moved. The dreadful silence that followed was louder than any argument.

Faces filled with uncertainty stared back at me. I understood exactly what I had asked. For many of them, these castle jobs were the only thing standing between survival and starvation.

Asking them to walk away was asking them to gamble everything.

My heart tightened. "I know." My voice softened. "I know how much I'm asking. I know many of you don't have another source of income, I know your wages feed families."

"So..." I forced myself to smile. "We won't make that decision tonight. We'll find another way... we always have."

I looked around at each of them. "For now... Our focus remains the same. Bring more members, and keep speaking to people."

"The bigger we become...the stronger our options will be."

Slowly, heads began to nod again and the meeting concluded soon afterward.

By the time I returned to our chamber, my entire body felt like stone.

I washed quickly, changed into fresh clothes and had barely finished drying my hair when the door opened and Sally walked in carrying a basket.

She dropped it onto the table with an exhausted groan. "I swear those market trips get longer every week."

"Yet, you made it back." I said with a smirk.

She laughed then sat opposite me. "I tried slipping away from the other maids to meet with my friend but they kept counting us so I couldn't risk disappearing."

"It's alright." I said.

She frowned. "You sure?"

I nodded. "We'll have another chance."

I leaned back thoughtfully. "You know... If we could convince someone wealthy to join us...they could pay the shrine's rent."

She stared for a second before a grin spread across her face. "Now that's the first good financial idea I've heard all week and we wouldn't have to squeeze coins out of servants."

"Exactly." I said.

She tapped the table thoughtfully. "I'll keep my eyes open."

Before either of us could continue, the chamber door opened again as Marquee entered but she barely acknowledged either of us.

She walked straight past, as though we didn't exist while I watched her quietly.

This was enough. I couldn't keep pretending nothing was wrong.

I stood and crossed the room. "Marquee." She stopped without turning around to face me.

I took another step. "If you don't believe in what I'm doing... That's alright. You don't have to ignore me and you don't have to feel like you've betrayed me."

She turned at last then she let out a short and sharp laughter. "One thing I dislike about you, Selena..." She folded her arms. "...is your belief that everything is always about you."

I blinked in surprise. "What?"

She looked directly into my eyes. "Have you ever once tried asking why I don't want anything to do with your revolution?"

I frowned before speaking. "Then tell me what happened."

For several long seconds she simply stared then all at once, every emotion she'd been holding back burst free.

"I don't want what happened the last time..." Her voice broke into a scream. "...to happen again!"

The room fell silent as neither Sally nor I moved.

I opened my mouth to ask what she meant but Marquee didn't say another word as she burst out of the chamber.

Sally and I shared an astonished look.

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Kael

I stared at the report in my hand for what felt like the hundredth time.

The parchment crinkled beneath my grip.

Every line I read made the irritation simmering beneath my skin burn hotter.

"...Patrol Squad encountered two rogue groups near the eastern forest. Hostiles eliminated successfully..."

I scoffed. "What nonsense is this? Those mother fuckers had completely ignored my orders."

The room fell silent except for the crackling fireplace behind me.

I planted both hands on my desk and inhaled slowly, trying to keep my wolf from taking over my temper.

My instructions had been painfully simple. My jaw had become so tight that I could hear my own teeth grinding.

Scout the surrounding territories, watch for vampire movements, investigate unusual activities and report anything suspicious.

That was my instructions but Instead... They had abandoned their assignment to hunt rogues.

"Rogues!!! What has it got to do with my instruction to them?" A bitter laugh escaped me before I could even think of stopping it.

Did they truly think I would believe this? Months ago, I had personally led the campaign that wiped out every major rogue den surrounding Blackbourne.

The memories still lingered. Their bloods had soaked the earth. I had burned every one of their hideouts as their bodies littered the forest.

I had made certain every surviving rogue carried the same message.

They were never to return. Never step near Blackbourne again because fear was a better wall than stone.

Any rogue foolish enough to approach our borders after that massacre deserved death.

But they rarely did because they knew better. Which meant this report was either exaggerated... Or the patrol had deliberately ignored my orders.

Still, neither possibility pleased me. Without hesitation, I opened the mindlink. "Beta Bastian."

His voice answered almost instantly. "Alpha."

"What criteria did you use to select the patrol squad?" I immediately asked.

There was only a brief pause before he responded.

"The standard requirements, Alpha. Experienced warriors. Good trackers. Reliable fighters. The same criteria we've always used whenever an elite patrol is assembled."

Reliable? The word irritated me. "If they're so reliable, why can't they follow a direct order?"

Silence met my question. Even through the link, I could sense Beta Bastian choosing his words carefully.

"Perhaps they believed eliminating rogues would still benefit the pack."

"Belief wasn't part of my command." I snapped as my voice became colder. "I gave them one assignment! Just one simple instruction and they just couldn't follow it! They decided to do whatever was in their minds!"

Another pause from him before he finally responded. "I perfectly understand, Alpha. They didn't exactly follow instructions."

"Bring me their squad leader." I suddenly ordered.

"They haven't returned yet. They are still outside the western route."

"Recall every single one of them." The office seemed colder as my anger continued rising. "Immediately because I've got no time for bullshit!"

"Yes, Alpha." Beta Bastien said as the link closed.

I stared at the report for another second then I threw it across the room and the parchment struck the wall before falling onto the floor.

"Worthless! Completely worthless!!!" I leaned back heavily in my chair and rubbed my temple.

The room fell silent again as my eyes wandered across the shelves to see the maps, old scrolls, weapons, trophies collected from battles.

Then... they settled on the framed portrait of my father hanging behind the desk.

His expression remained exactly as I remembered. It was sharp, unyielding and demanding.

Even in paint, his eyes seemed capable of judging every decision I made.

For a long moment... I simply looked at him then the memory came so vivid it almost felt real.

...

I was younger. Much younger and perhaps fifteen. The excitement of that morning had been impossible to hide.

Some boys from one of the farming settlements had invited me on a hunting trip beyond the eastern woods.

Mother had smiled when I asked. "You should tell your father first." She said,

"I'll be back before he notices." I said giving her one of my sweetest faces.

She laughed softly. "He always notices."

I had ignored her warning and the hunt had been exhilarating.

We chased deer through thick forests, climbed rocky cliffs, and competed over who could shoot first.

For several glorious hours... I wasn't the Alpha heir. I was simply another boy.

By the time I returned... The sun had already begun setting and Father was waiting while standing exactly where the entrance opened into the manor courtyard.

His hands rested behind his back, his face showed nothing but somehow... That frightened me more than shouting ever could.

"Where were you?" His voice remained calm as he asked.

"I..." I stammered not knowing what to do.

"I asked where." He snapped.

"I went hunting." I managed to say.

"With whom?" He asked again.

"The village boys." I said with my eyes mainly on the ground.

He stepped closer. "I had lessons prepared for you today."

"I only wanted—" I started saying but the slap came before I finished speaking.

My head snapped sideways as pain exploded across my cheek. For several seconds... Everything became quiet.

Mother rushed forward immediately. "Enough!"

She grabbed Father's arm. "He's just a child."

Father shoved her away so forcefully she stumbled backward then my chest tightened as he snapped at her. "Stay out of this!"

Mother regained her balance, refusing to move. "He made one mistake."

Father ignored her completely as his eyes returned to me. They were cold, hard and disappointed.

"You wish to play with peasants while responsibilities pile before you?"

"I only wanted one day."

"One day becomes two." His voice hardened further. "Two becomes a habit!"

I lowered my gaze. "I thought—"

"That is precisely your problem." His words struck harder than the slap. "You think like a child."

Then came the sentence that buried itself deep inside me.

"If you cannot carry responsibility..." His stare pierced straight through me. "...then perhaps I raised the wrong son."

Mother gasped. "Don't say that."

Father walked away without another word leaving me standing there with my cheek burning and my heart shattered.

...

The memory disappeared as quickly as it had arrived.

I blinked as the office returned and the portrait remained exactly where it had always been.

I exhaled slowly. "No. That wasn't the kind of Alpha I intended to become. Discipline was necessary but cruelty wasn't."

I reopened the mindlink. "Beta Bastian."

He answered immediately. "Alpha?"

"Abort my previous order." I immediately said.

"Sir?" He asked, clearly confused.

"I no longer want the squad brought before me."

Another pause before he finally answered. "Understood, Alpha Kael."

"I have another assignment for you." I rose from my chair and walked toward the large map hanging beside the window.

My finger rested on the southern border, where the road leads directly toward Nightbane.

"The patrol squad is now reassigned to a different duty. They are border wardens now."

His surprise reached me instantly. "Border wardens?"

"Yes. They are to inspect every owned piece of land along the southern border."

I traced the line carefully as I continued speaking. "I want the names of every landowner, the boundaries, the acreage, every occupied property and if a structure exists... I want to know who owns it."

Beta Bastian remained silent while memorizing every instruction.

"They're not to engage anyone unnecessarily. They're not to chase rogues. They're not going to leave their assigned route. They will gather information only and after that, they wait for my next command."

"Yes, Alpha."

My voice dropped another degree. "And Bastian..."

"Yes, Alpha Kael?"

"Warn them not to go against my order again."

His tone became serious. "I will Alpha."

"If any of them disregards my orders again..." I allowed a moment of silence before finishing.
"...they will face oblivion."

The words echoed through the link. "Permanent oblivion."

"I'll make sure they understand." He said again before the connection ended.

I stood motionless for several moments. Outside my office window, clouds drifted slowly across the afternoon sky.

Eventually, I pushed myself away from the window as another responsibility demanded my attention.

Selena's training had just crossed my mind. Kieren would already have started preparing today's exercises.

If she was going to survive what lay ahead... Every lesson mattered.

Leaving the office behind, I walked through the stone corridors of the manor as servants stepped aside the moment they saw me, warriors saluted respectfully.

As I approached the wing leading toward Kieren's chamber, quiet voices drifted from one of the nearby rooms.

At first, I ignored them but the conversations between warriors were hardly unusual.

Then... A familiar word reached my ears and I stopped just outside the chamber.

The wooden door remained slightly open as their voices slipped through the narrow gap.

"Things have changed. The Alpha isn't the same anymore."

A second warrior snorted. "He's gone soft."

More laughter followed. "Would the old Alpha have tolerated all this?"

"No! He would've crushed anyone standing in his way."

Another voice joined them. "Our Alpha now keeps showing mercy."

Someone scoffed. "What a weak ass."

The word settled heavily inside the corridor then another followed. "He is now weak to be our Alpha."

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Selena

Evening finally arrived and by the time I finished scrubbing the last wooden table in the servants' dining hall, every muscle in my body ached.

The past two days had been relentless. Between my duties in the kitchens, organizing the revolution, worrying about Marquee, attending Kieren's brutal training sessions and trying to stay away from Alpha Kael whenever my heart refused to listen to my head, exhaustion had settled deep into my bones.

Still... I couldn't afford to slow down. Not when everything was finally beginning to move.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand before placing the cleaning cloth into a bucket.

Around me, the other servants were already talking among themselves as they wrapped up for the day.

"I thought we'd never finish."

"My feet are killing me."

"The harvest supplies doubled today's workload."

Someone laughed as another complained about the endless dishes.

Normally, I would have joined the conversation but today, my mind was somewhere else.

Sally had managed to get word to me during the afternoon that we have four new members.

A smile threatened to spread across my face. It wasn't much but it was progress as people were beginning to listen.

If four people could join in just a day, there would be more tomorrow.

By the following evening, we would hold another meeting. This time we would discuss gathering enough coins to secure the abandoned shrine.

One step at a time, that was how revolutions survived.

I untied my apron and folded it neatly. Just as I turned toward the exit, a familiar voice stopped me. "Selena."

I stiffened on knowing it's the Headmaid. For one terrifying moment, my stomach dropped.

Has someone discovered another meeting? Had one of the new recruits spoken carelessly?

Slowly, I turned around. The Headmaid stood several feet away, a rolled parchment tucked beneath one arm.

Her expression, as always, was unreadable.

"You called for me?" I asked carefully as she walked closer until she stood directly before me.

Without a word, she unfolded the parchment and my eyes moved across the neat columns of names.

The Headmaid lowered the parchment slightly. "For the past two days," she said evenly, "you have completed more assigned tasks than any other maid."

I blinked in surprise. "...What?"

"You heard me." She said and I stared at her, genuinely surprised.

"Out of everyone? Me?"

She looked no happier saying it than I was hearing it. "It doesn't please me," she admitted bluntly. "Considering the amount of trouble you've caused recently."

Despite myself, I laughed softly. "So... this is praise?"

She frowned. "Don't become arrogant."

"I'm trying not to." I said and stood up straight.

She rolled the parchment shut again. "Your work has been efficient."

I smiled. "Thank you."

The words felt strangely satisfying. Ever since arriving at Blackbourne, I had been trying to prove that I wasn't merely a spoiled Alpha's daughter pretending to work.

I'd stumbled, I had complained and I had made a lot of mistakes but somewhere along the way... I'd actually become good at it.

The realization warmed me.

As the Headmaid turned to leave, I spoke before I could stop myself. "You should give yourself a break too sometimes."

She paused slowly, very slowly... as she looked back at me and her brows lowered. "A break?"

"You're always working, I've never seen you rest and you barely eat with everyone else."

I shrugged before adding. "You don't have to carry everything yourself."

For several seconds, she simply stared at me then her eyes narrowed.

"Or..." Her voice carried obvious suspicion. "...are you merely hoping I'll relax enough for you to organize more of your clandestine gatherings?"

I sighed dramatically. "You really don't trust me."

"Should I?"

"...Probably not."

She snorted quietly. "I thought so."

Without another word, she walked away. I watched her disappear around the corridor before shaking my head.

Even after lifting the punishment on our group... She still hadn't forgiven me.

Fair enough! I couldn't exactly blame her. Still... today has gone better than expected.

My mood remained surprisingly light as I left the castle kitchens.

Outside, the evening breeze greeted me immediately. The air carried the scent of damp earth and pine.

Servants crossed the courtyard in every direction, eager to finish their duties before darkness settled completely.

As I walked toward the training grounds, Sally's earlier message replayed inside my mind.

Without money, the abandoned shrine remained only a dream. Without a permanent meeting place, our movement couldn't grow.

I was already planning who should speak first and who would welcome the newcomers.

How we would encourage everyone without demanding too much from people who barely earned enough to survive.

Lost in thought, I barely noticed I'd reached the training yard as metal clanged somewhere ahead and a loud grunt followed. Then... a thud!

Curiosity drew my eyes toward the sound and Kieren stood in the center of the yard or rather... he stood over someone.

A teenage boy, no older than fifteen, lay sprawled on the dusty ground, groaning as he struggled to catch his breath.

Kieren rested both hands on his walking stick. "You call that balance?" he barked.

The boy shakily pushed himself upright. "I... I almost had you."

"You almost embarrassed yourself." Kieren said and the surrounding warriors burst into laughter while the boy flushed crimson.

"Again." Kieren ordered, the teenager rushed forward while Kieren shifted only slightly.

It was one quick movement and the boy stumbled past him before landing flat on his back once more making dust rise into the air.

The warriors laughed even harder as Kieren pointed toward a nearby barrel.

"Enough! Go fetch me some goblets of ale."

The boy groaned and asked. "Now?"

"Unless you'd rather continue getting thrown around." He said and the teenager hurried away without another complaint.

Only then did Kieren notice me standing nearby. "Ah, you've finally arrived."

His sharp eyes swept over me briefly then he chuckled. "You looked worried."

"Is that how you treat all your students?" I glanced toward the retreating boy. "You were tossing him around like a sack of grain."

Kieren laughed loudly. "Don't worry, I could never treat the Alpha's chosen that way."

I tilted my head. "The Alpha's chosen? What exactly does that mean?"

He simply waved the question away. "It means the Alpha specifically assigned me to train you and that makes you different."

Different? The word lingered in my thoughts. Different how? Because Alpha Kael had chosen me? Or because Kieren knew something fishy?

Before I could ask another question, he struck his walking stick firmly against the ground. "Enough talking! Training begins."

I released a quiet sigh. Somehow... that sentence always sounded terrifying.

Kieren pointed toward a heavy set of metal armour resting on a wooden stand. "Wear it."

With considerable effort, I lifted the armour piece by piece as the breastplate alone felt unbearably heavy.

By the time everything was secured, I already felt exhausted.

Kieren nodded approvingly. "Good."

He pointed toward a wooden post planted far across the field. "You see that marker? Run to it and back?"

He lifted his walking stick. "I'll be timing you."

I inhaled deeply then started running but the armour dragged against every movement.

Each step felt heavier than the last and behind me... I kept hearing the 'Tap. Tap. Tap.'

Kieren struck the end of his stick against the ground steadily, counting the time it took me to reach the marker.

By the time I returned, breathing hard, he nodded once. "Again."

I stared at him in disbelief. "I just finished."

"You also just started." He pointed forward once more. "Again."

By the time I reached the post, my lungs were burning but Kieren nodded saying, "Again."

I stared at him in disbelief. "Again?"

He smiled. "Again."

The second run felt easier but the third was still easier. My wolf stirred beneath my skin as Strength flowed through my limbs.

Without thinking... I allowed it just a little bit but not enough to reveal myself.

Only enough to keep moving as each attempt became faster. Each return took fewer taps.

By the eighth run... The heavy armour barely bothered me anymore. By the tenth... I was almost enjoying myself.

When I crossed the line for the twelfth time, Kieren lowered his stick slowly. "Hmm."

He walked around me thoughtfully. "Interesting."

"What?" I asked with a creased brow.

"You improved too quickly."

"Yes, I'm a fast learner." I said while hoping he didn't notice anything suspicious.

"So I've noticed." His gaze lingered on me longer than before and it was almost suspiciously.

I forced myself to breathe heavily despite recovering much faster than any ordinary maid should.
"I've always been good at physical work."

"Mmm." He didn't sound convinced.

Thankfully, he changed the subject. "Strength alone won't keep you alive."

He motioned toward two waiting warriors. "Time for something practical."

The two men stepped forward. One broad and the other one lean. Both are much larger than me.

Kieren planted his stick into the dirt. "Imagine you're walking through the market, and you're alone. Then two men decide you're easy prey... What do you do?"

I didn't hesitate before saying, "I hit first."

"Show me." He said and the warriors charged towards me.

I darted toward the closest one as my fist drove straight into his stomach and he doubled over instantly.

Before I could turn, the second man slammed into me and I hit the ground hard.

"Dead," Kieren announced calmly.

I groaned in annoyance. "I wasn't dead."

"You were." He said and the warriors helped me up.

"Again." He said but this time I aimed higher. My fist connected with the first man's jaw.

I spun toward the second, His leg swept beneath mine and I crashed onto my back.

"Dead." Kieren said again.

I sighed dramatically. "I don't like this game."

Kieren smiled. "You shouldn't." He limped closer. "Listen carefully, When you're surrounded... Don't rush because people expect panic. So... don't attack first."

"Plant your feet, make them commit then when one attacks... you dodge and their own momentum becomes your weapon. While they're recovering, you strike and move immediately to the next."

His words settled in my mind as he raised his stick. "Again."

The warriors approached once more but this time... I waited.

At the first swing, I stepped aside as his body carried him forward and I struck his side before pivoting toward the second.

He lunged at me but I ducked beneath his arm using his own balance against him, I twisted sharply.

He stumbled as I reacted instinctively and a loud crack echoed across the yard.

The warrior screamed and everyone froze as my heart almost stopped.

I looked down and discovered his leg bent at an unnatural angle.

"Oh..." My voice barely came out. "I... I didn't..." I stuttered.

The injured warrior cried out again as several others rushed over immediately while Kieren knelt beside him.

The healer stationed nearby hurried over while other warriors carefully lifted the injured man while guilt crashed into me.

I'd forgotten. I forgot I wasn't an ordinary servant. Forgotten who I really was. Forgotten the strength of an Alpha female.

"I..." I gulped down nothing. I'm sorry." I said as nobody answered because everyone focused on the injured warrior.

My wolf, however Purred and the sensation startled me.

As though she approved. As though taking down an opponent felt natural. I hated that feeling so I forced it down immediately.

Trying to steady my breathing, I lifted my head as something kept tugging at my instincts that someone was watching me.

I turned slowly toward the castle, one of the upper windows stood slightly open and behind the curtains... stood a familiar figure.

Alpha Kael stood behind the blinds, watching everything in silence.

Even from that distance... I knew it was him behind the curtains.

Our eyes met and without thinking... I smiled openly at him.

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Selena

The injured warrior's scream lingered in my ears long after two healers carried him away toward the infirmary.

My heart pounded against my ribs. "I... I'm sorry," I murmured, staring after him.

Kieren rested both hands over the top of his walking stick before letting out a weary chuckle. "Don't look like someone just sentenced themselves to death."

I looked back at him anxiously. "I broke his leg."

"You did." His tone remained surprisingly calm. "But he'll live."

I still couldn't shake the guilt. "I didn't mean to use that much force."

"I know." He studied me for a moment before nodding toward the castle.

"The healers will set the bone before nightfall. He'll complain for weeks, milk the injury for sympathy, and be back annoying everyone before long."

I couldn't bring myself to smile at his joke. Still, I feigned a small smile.

Kieren tapped his stick lightly against the ground. "Training is over."

I blinked. "Already?"

"You've had enough for today."

"I can still continue for a while..."

"No." His answer came immediately. "Your muscles are already reaching their limit. Exhaustion teaches nothing except injury."

I sighed. "Very well."

As I turned to leave, my thoughts drifted back to the castle window and back to him.

I hadn't imagined it. I had not imagined Alpha Kael had been watching.

Even from that distance I knew those eyes and the way they quietly observed everything... The realization warmed me despite my aching body.

So instead of returning toward the servants' quarters like I should have... My feet carried me somewhere else. Toward the manor and towards him.

I slipped through one of the side entrances, greeting passing servants with casual smiles while trying not to draw attention to myself.

The main hall stretched before me as Guards patrolled at measured intervals.

I waited patiently behind one of the stone pillars until two of them walked past before quietly making my way toward the staircase.

One floor, then another and I was almost there. Just as I stepped onto the upper corridor... Voices echoed from above. It was male voices.

I froze as the footsteps descended the staircase and the two familiar figures came into view.

The voices turned out to be Beta Bastian and Captain Garrick's.

"Oh no..." I whispered under my breath as there wasn't a single place to hide because the hallway was painfully empty.

There were no curtains, no decorative armor, no alcoves... there was just nothing!

I cursed silently. "Think, Selena. Think!" I kept mumbling to myself.

Running would only attract attention and so would standing still.

So instead, I lowered my head, straightened my clothes, then simply began walking slowly and calmly towards them as though I belonged there.

"...the southern border remains our weakest approach," Captain Garrick was saying.

"It won't remain weak for long," Beta Bastian answered.

"I still don't understand why the Alpha intends to burn the border lands."

Burn them? My ears instantly sharpened.

Captain Garrick frowned. "We should be reinforcing them with warriors, not destroying them."

Beta Bastian smiled faintly. "You've served him long enough to know better."

"It still sounds reckless."

"Every strategy of his sounds reckless at first." Beta Bastian's voice held absolute confidence. "And every time... He proves us wrong because he always manages to turn old strategies into victory."

Captain Garrick sighed. "I hope you're right."

"I am." They walked past me without sparing me more than a brief glance.

I kept my eyes lowered until their footsteps disappeared entirely. Only then did I release the breath I'd been holding.

That had been close. Very close.

Without wasting another second, I hurried toward Alpha Kael's chambers.

The guards outside recognized me now as neither questioned why I was there.

One simply opened the door. "My thanks." I said and stepped inside.

The room was strangely quiet. "Alpha Kael?" I called out but got no answer.

The fireplace crackled softly. His desk overflowed with maps and documents.

An unfinished goblet of ale rested beside several rolled parchments but he wasn't there.

I frowned and called out again, "Alpha Kael?" I still got nothing.

I took another step farther into the room as the door clicked shut behind me.

Then suddenly, "I thought Kieren dismissed you." His voice came from directly behind me as I jumped in fright.

Spinning around so quickly that I nearly collided with him. "You frightened me."

He looked completely unfazed. "You shouldn't wander into empty rooms so carelessly."

"I wasn't expecting you to sneak up behind me." I said with a shrug of my shoulders.

"I wasn't sneaking." He said with his usual cold voice.

A tiny smile tugged at my lips. "No?" I folded my arms. "You absolutely were."

He ignored that. Instead his eyes swept over me carefully. "You need to stop relying on your Alpha strength. You nearly exposed yourself."

"I know...but I just got carried away."

His expression remained serious. "You won't always have the luxury of getting carried away because you could get caught."

For a moment neither of us spoke then I closed the distance between us. "So..." He raised an eyebrow at me as I continued speaking. "Was that the only reason you were watching me?"

His eyes settled on mine as the air suddenly felt warmer and my heartbeat became embarrassingly loud.

Slowly... He lifted one hand and my breath caught while my heart raced. Was he finally going to touch me romantically?

Instead... His fingers adjusted the collar of my garment. "You've twisted this."

I stared at him in dismay, "Oh."

Then he went on to brush a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "There."

Heat rushed into my cheeks. "Oh."

He suddenly stepped away as though nothing unusual had happened.

I followed him with my eyes while silently scolding myself internally. "Really, Selena? You expected something else?"

He walked back toward his desk and resumed arranging parchments.

Trying to regain my composure, I cleared my throat. "I overheard Beta Bastian and Captain Garrick, They were talking about you burning the border lands instead of deploying warriors in preparation. Why did you give out such instructions?"

He didn't even glance up as he responded to me. "War plans aren't your concern."

I frowned. "They are if the creatures attacking you are coming because of me."

That finally made him pause. "They're not coming because of you alone."

"They're still coming." I argued.

He leaned back slightly. "My subordinates complain every time I make a decision."

"They are questioning your plan." I said again.

"They question every plan I make."

I folded my arms stubbornly. "Maybe if you explained things to them—"

"I don't owe explanations every time someone doubts me and this was the reason I personally dismissed two warriors earlier today. Also, never for once as my plans failed!"

His calm confidence amazed me. He truly believed every decision he made.

"You've become so open in talking about official duties with me. I'm glad..." I said but I was still nervous.

So I added. "I think you'd worry them less if you explained the whole plan to them just to alleviate their worries."

Silence met my words as Alpha Kael had already returned to his paperwork.

I rolled my eyes dramatically. "You're ignoring me."

I got no response so I looked around the room... Then my eyes landed on the carved wooden hairbrush resting neatly beside a polished mirror.

A smile slowly spread across my face as I picked it up and sat abruptly on his lap.

He looked at me taken aback as he asked. "What are you doing?"

"I'm helping you to keep your hair neat because you're my mate and we deserve quality time together."

His mouth opened and closed again. He made a weak attempt to move me aside.

"Get up,"he ordered.

"No." I vehemently refused.

"This is highly inappropriate."

"I disagree." I smiled innocently. "I think it's very appropriate."

His hands rested awkwardly at his sides. "You've become very bold."

"You made me this way." I said and he reluctantly sighed in defeat.

I wasn't comfortable in the position I was in so I straddled him on the chair and carefully continued brushing through his dark silky black hair.

I focused on smoothing his dark hair while trying very hard not to acknowledge just how close we were.

However, I couldn't help the growing heat between us. With our position, all I needed to do was to relax my knees a little and I'd feel Alpha Kael's crotch with my ass.

Somehow, the thought was manifested immediately and I could feel a bulge between his legs.

I tried to remain focused while brushing his hair but it proved too difficult to do.

Slowly, I looked down as he looked up and our eyes met.

A single bead of sweat rolled down from his forehead and without thinking, I reached out using my fingertip to wipe it before it fell.

Then I proceeded to cup his face with my hands. His skin was warm beneath my palm... His eyes never left mine and neither did mine leave his.

As I looked into his eyes, I saw the same longing that had been growing inside me. I wanted him and I could tell he wanted me too.

The only question was... 'Would we be able to stop once we began?'

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Selena

How could I stay angry at an Alpha? No, scratch that! That wasn't even the right question anymore.

How could I stay angry at my mate? For the past two days, that question had followed me everywhere.

While I swept the castle corridors. While I scrubbed pots until my fingers ached. While I carried baskets through the kitchens.

Even while I lay awake at night, staring at the ceiling instead of sleeping.

Every single time, I arrived at the same conclusion. I had every right to be angry.

Yet somehow... My anger never stayed as hot as I wanted it to.

I sighed quietly as I dipped the cleaning cloth into a bucket of warm water before wringing it out.

The long kitchen counter stretched before me, covered with flour from the afternoon's baking. I began wiping it slowly, watching the white powder disappear beneath the damp cloth.

Around me, the kitchen bustled with its usual evening rhythm.

Pots clanged, wood crackled inside the ovens while someone laughed loudly near the pantry.

Two younger maids argued over whose turn it was to fetch water from the well.

Usually, I enjoyed the noise but today it barely reached me. Instead, my thoughts drifted back to Alpha Kael.

His face, his voice and his infuriating words. "I can't risk being seen with a maid."

The sentence stabbed at me all over again as I scrubbed harder.

Was that all I was to him? A maid? Even after everything we'd shared? Even after discovering we were mates?

I understood the danger. I truly did.

My father... his enemies and the spies crawling around Blackbourne.

I understood every reason he gave me but understanding something didn't stop it from hurting.

Because when he said those words... For one painful moment... It had felt like everyone else saw me exactly the way he did.

Just another servant and not Selena his mate. Just... A maid.

"You're going to wear a hole through that table." Sally's voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

I blinked. "What?"

She pointed at the exact same spot beneath my hand. "You've been scrubbing that place for almost two minutes."

I looked down and sure enough, the wood practically shone. "Oh."

She laughed. "I've never seen someone declare war on a kitchen counter before."

A reluctant smile tugged at my lips. "I wasn't paying attention."

"I noticed." She said and leaned against the opposite side of the counter, folding her arms. "You've been somewhere else all day."

"I've just been working."

"Oh yeah... You've been pretending to work." Sally said.

I scoffed. "When did you become so observant?"

"When I became friends with someone terrible at hiding her feelings."

"I hide them perfectly."

She raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

I opened my mouth but nothing came out.

She smiled knowingly. "Exactly my point."

I shook my head with a quiet chuckle and returned to wiping the counter as silence settled between us.

After a while, I spoke. "Sally." I called in almost a murmur tone.

"Hmm?"

"Do you have a mate?" I couldn't help but ask her.

She paused only for a heartbeat then she burst into laughter before answering. "Of course not."

"You've never found him?" I asked again.

"I hope I never do." She said with a shrug of her shoulders.

That answer surprised me enough to stop cleaning altogether. "You don't want one?"

She looked genuinely confused. "Why would I want one?"

"Because..." I searched for the right words. "...because mates are supposed to make life better."

"So they say." Sally said, rolling her eyes.

"They support each other, they're meant to share burdens and they protect one another." I smiled faintly before adding, "They're supposed to make each other stronger."

Sally dipped another cloth into a bucket before replying. "That's the story every pup grows up hearing."

"You don't believe it?" I asked bewildered.

"I believe it starts that way." She began wiping another section of the counter. "The bond is powerful... it pulls two people together whether they want it or not. You crave each other's presence, you miss each other and you think about each other constantly."

Heat crept into my cheeks as that part sounded painfully familiar.

"But then," she continued, "real life begins."

"What do you mean?"

"Responsibilities." She shrugged. "Dreams and different ambitions. One mate wants to travel and the other wants to stay. One wants power and the other wants peace."

"They begin relying on each other for everything and when those dreams clash..." She sighed. "So do the people."

I frowned. "I don't think that's how it's meant to be."

"No?" She asked and I shook my head firmly.

"The Moon Goddess wouldn't bind two people together just to make them miserable." I said.

Sally smiled gently. "You're an optimist."

"I just believe mates are supposed to encourage each other. If one dreams big, the other should help them. If one falls, the other should lift them."

"They shouldn't become chains instead, they should become strength."

Sally watched me quietly. "I hope you're right."

I hesitated before asking, "So... that's the only reason you don't want one?"

Her expression softened. "No."

She looked away. "I've seen what happens when one mate dies."

My smile faded. "The survivor doesn't simply move on... they carry that pain for years and sometimes forever."

The kitchen suddenly felt colder as a chill ran down my spine. I imagined losing Alpha Kael and the thought alone made my chest tighten.

I immediately pushed it away.

"No." I whispered. "The Moon Goddess wouldn't be so cruel."

Sally gave me a sad smile. "Maybe not but life can be."

Silence returned and the only sounds were knives chopping vegetables nearby and cooks shouting fresh orders across the kitchen.

Eventually Sally looked back at me. "Why are you suddenly asking all these questions?"

My heartbeat stumbled. "No reason."

"There is definitely a reason." She said while looking at me in a weird way.

"I was just curious." I said, making sure to avoid her eyes.

She narrowed her eyes and stopped what she was doing. "Selena, have you found your mate?"

Heat rushed straight to my face. "I..." I looked away far too quickly. "No."

The lie came out faster than I intended. "I haven't."

She studied me for another moment as I still refused to meet her eyes.

Thankfully, inspiration struck before she questioned me further. "I overheard something."

Her curiosity immediately replaced her suspicion. "What?"

"I heard the Alpha discussing preparations against the vampires."

Her expression became serious. "So the rumours are true?"

"I don't know but I think he's planning something unusual."

"Like what?" Sally asked again.

"I couldn't hear everything. I only know he believes there's a way to stop them before they even enter Blackbourne."

Sally frowned. "Do you really think they'll invade? Because I see no reason why they would come here."

I shrugged. "Vampires don't always need a reason. They're unpredictable."

She became quiet then, slowly... A smile spread across her face. "I've got an idea."

I blinked. "What idea?"

"What if we used the invasion rumours to strengthen the revolution?"

I stared at her as she leaned closer, lowering her voice. "If people become frightened... They'll start looking for protection so they'll listen and they'll finally understand why resisting matters."

I considered it carefully.

"Fear might bring them but fear won't keep them."

"So what will?"

I thought for several seconds before speaking. "We help them."

"How?" Sally asked.

"We give them things like weapons."

She blinked in surprise "Weapons?"

"Yes, simple ones like knives, Silver-tipped tools or anything that could help defend against vampires."

Her excitement dimmed almost immediately. "That still costs money."

I sighed. "There it is again... the same coin wall. No matter how many plans we make... we always return to coins."

Before either of us could continue, another maid hurried into the kitchen with flushed cheeks and bright eyes. "You'll never believe what I just heard!"

Several servants immediately gathered around her to get the full gist of what happened.

"What happened?"

"Tell us!" They all kept answering impatiently.

She grinned proudly. "The headmaid was speaking with one of the stewards... They're preparing the main hall for a grand ball."

Gasps spread throughout the room. "A ball?"

"So suddenly?"

"Who's coming?"

The maid puffed out her chest dramatically. "Councilman Cedric... the regional councilman of Vargwyn."

The kitchen exploded into excited chatter. Some of the younger maids immediately began whispering about noble guests.

Others worried about the amount of work the preparations would bring.

I barely heard them because Sally had already turned toward me as her eyes sparkled. "Selena."

"What now?" I asked slightly exhausted.

"This is our chance." Sally grinned.

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Think about it." She spoke quickly, excitement making her words tumble over one another. "A ball means nobles, wealthy merchants, council officials, pack leaders, people with influence, and people with money."

Understanding dawned on me as she continued.

"If we find just one person who believes in our cause... They could finance everything. The shrine, the meetings, the supplies and the weapons."

I slowly smiled. For the first time in days... the impossible suddenly felt possible.

I nodded in agreement. "We can't waste this opportunity."

"So?" Sally eagerly asked.

I lowered my voice as I looked toward Sally and spoke quietly enough that only she could hear.

"Prepare for a revolution group meeting tonight."

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Selena

I stood before the growing crowd inside the abandoned storeroom, drawing in a slow breath as I looked at every familiar face.

The room had changed over the past few weeks.

The first time I gathered people here, there had only been a handful of us. Now, eighteen servants stood shoulder to shoulder between old shelves and broken crates.

The stale smell of dust mixed with the faint scent of damp wood, while a single lantern hanging from a rusty hook painted long shadows over everyone's faces.

Some looked hopeful... Others looked tired but a few still looked uncertain but they had all come.

That alone reminded me that what we had started was becoming something bigger than I had ever imagined.

The room buzzed with arguments before I even spoke.

"We're wasting our time."

"No, this is the perfect opportunity."

"Opportunity for what? To get ourselves executed?"

"Nobles will never listen to servants."

"They don't have to know we're servants first." Voices overlapped until my head began to ache.

Sally stepped forward and clapped her hands sharply. "Enough."

The room gradually quieted as everyone looked toward me.

I folded my hands together, trying to organize my thoughts. "The headmaid has already confirmed preparations for the councilman's ball."

"So we finally have an opportunity to meet people we otherwise never could."

Before I could continue, one of the older woman folded her arms. "I still think it's foolish."

I turned toward her. "Why?"

She sighed. "Because nobles are part of the reason the tribute system still exists."

Several servants murmured in agreement.

"I worked in a noble household before coming here," the woman continued. "You all think the nobles simply obey the Alphas."

She laughed bitterly. "They don't. They influence them, they encourage the tribute system because it keeps their own families safe."

The room became quieter. "They're the ones who convince poor families to surrender daughters."

"They call it sacrifice... they call it duty but when it's time to choose whose child goes..." She shook her head. "They always find another family."

My stomach twisted as every word made my blood boil. How could anyone justify such cruelty?

How could people sleep peacefully knowing another family's daughter had been handed over simply because she was poor?

My fingers curled into fists. "I don't believe everyone supports it," I said firmly.

The woman looked at me as I continued. "I don't! I refuse to believe every noble enjoys living like this."

She sighed. "You still have hope."

"I do because even if a handful of them hate this system as much as we do..." I looked around the room. "...then they're worth finding."

Silence followed and Sally finally broke it. "What if we're both right?"

Everyone looked toward her. "What if some nobles support the tribute system while others secretly despise it?"

She stepped beside me. "We don't have to approach everyone."

Her eyes swept across the room. "We simply observe." Sally smiled slightly. "Watch them during the ball, listen then notice who seems uncomfortable whenever the tribute system is mentioned."

The idea spread through the room almost visibly and I felt excitement stir inside me. "You're right."

I nodded slowly. "But we'll go a step further."

Everyone focused on me again.

"We won't only identify them. We'll learn their movements and when they leave we will find out who they speak to... the kind of people they surround themselves with."

I walked slowly between the gathered servants. "If we know enough about them... We'll know the safest way to approach them later."

No one interrupted as I continued. "The purpose hasn't changed." I stopped walking. "We need money, we need somewhere permanent to meet, we need supplies and one generous supporter could change everything."

Ryuiji rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "So this ball becomes our scouting mission."

"Exactly." Niamh smiled. "That sounds much safer."

"It is," Sally agreed.

"We're gathering information first." The tension that had filled the room earlier eased considerably.

For nearly another hour, we discussed possibilities. Which servants would likely be assigned inside the main hall.

Who would serve drinks. Who would work in the kitchens. Who would clean guest chambers.

Every assignment meant another pair of eyes and another chance to observe.

By the time the discussion ended, everyone seemed far more optimistic.

I looked around the room one final time. "We'll meet again once we know more about the guest list."

A servant near the back raised his hand. "If the regional councilman is coming... Then several Alphas will probably attend."

Another servant nodded. "And wealthy merchants, Military commanders and Noble families."

I swallowed because It would be the largest gathering Blackbourne had hosted since I arrived. Which also meant the greatest opportunity.

"And the greatest danger," Sally added quietly.

I met her eyes. "I know."

Eventually everyone slipped away in small groups to avoid suspicion.

The storeroom slowly emptied until only Sally and I remained.

She folded her arms as she said. "So..."

I already knew that tone. "So, what?"

She smirked. "Now is probably the time you'll disappear to go see whoever you normally meet."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Oh, you're acting?" She raised an eyebrow. "You just mysteriously vanish every few nights."

Heat crept into my cheeks. "I have things to do."

"Mhm." She looked thoroughly unconvinced. "I also think those things you refer to, have been helping us through this revolution."

I groaned. "Sally..."

She laughed. "I'm not asking questions because I stopped doing that."

She nudged my shoulder. "I'm only saying whoever keeps helping us pull strings inside this castle, you should go meet up with them because we need them at this moment."

I avoided looking at her because she was right. "I'll... think about it."

Her smile widened. "I knew it."

I shook my head, unable to hide my own smile. Thankfully, she didn't press further.

Instead, we returned quietly to our chamber. By the time we reached it, exhaustion had settled deep into my muscles.

Everything seemed to demand pieces of me. I barely changed before collapsing onto my bed as sleep came quickly.

Morning arrived far too soon and the castle buzzed with unusual activity.

Preparations for the councilman's visit had officially begun. Servants hurried through corridors carrying bundles of linen while others polished silverware until it gleamed.

Kitchen workers hauled sacks of grain and barrels of ale toward the pantry.

Different orders echoed from every direction. "No dust on those shelves!"

"Those curtains need washing!"

"Hurry!" The headmaid's sharp voice seemed capable of reaching every corner of the castle.

Soon enough, assignments were distributed. "Selena."

I stepped forward. "You and Marquee." She glanced toward a nearby stack of buckets. " Wipe those windows."

I nodded immediately. "Yes, Headmaid."

Marquee joined me moments later carrying cloth and soap. For several minutes we worked without speaking.

The silence between us felt awkward.

I climbed onto the small wooden platform to reach the upper sections of one enormous window while Marquee worked beside me.

She stretched a little farther and her foot slipped.

"Marquee!" Without thinking, I reached out and caught her wrist.

She gasped. For one frightening second, her entire weight leaned away from the platform.

Then I pulled her back toward me. She stumbled against the wall, breathing hard.

"I've got you." I said and she looked at me with wide eyes.

For several moments neither of us spoke, then finally she let out a shaky laugh. "I almost broke my neck."

"You almost gave me a heart attack."

She smiled properly for the first time in days. "The soap is far too slippery."

I laughed softly. "It really is." I glanced at the bucket below us. "We never used soap like this back in... my village."

She chuckled. "We didn't either."

"What did you use?" I asked her.

"Sand and wood ash." She said with a small smile on her face.

I couldn't help laughing. "You're serious?"

"It worked." She shrugged. "My grandmother swore by it. I always complain but looking at this..." She wiggled one slippery boot. "...maybe she had a point."

I laughed again and the sound felt strangely refreshing.

Before long we were talking much more naturally. She told me stories about growing up among ordinary villagers.

About sharing tiny cottages with large families... About children inventing games with sticks because toys were luxuries.

About winters when several families slept together inside abandoned shrines simply because they couldn't afford enough firewood.

Some borrowed enormous sums from nobles and when they couldn't repay them... They worked for free for months and sometimes years.

Listening to her, my heart grew heavier. "I knew life wasn't easy," I admitted quietly. "But hearing it like this... It makes it feel different."

Marquee nodded. "Our pack is still better than many others." She dipped her cloth into the bucket again. "But poverty is still poverty."

I stared through the clean glass toward the village below. Rows of rooftops stretched across Blackbourne. Some families probably laughed together every evening while others wondered where tomorrow's meal would come from.

I thought of Alpha Kael, he truly cared about his people.

I believed that but perhaps even someone as capable as him couldn't see every struggle happening beneath his own roof.

"If only..." The words escaped before I could stop them.

Marquee glanced at me. "If only what?"

"If only the wealth sitting inside noble homes reached the people who actually needed it."

She looked away thoughtfully as I added, "Life would be kinder."

Silence settled between us again. After a while, I lowered my cloth. "Marquee... I'm sorry."

She frowned. "For what?"

"For pushing you." I took a careful breath. "I know something must have happened before... I don't know what but whatever it is... you don't have to carry it alone."

Her expression changed as she stared at the window instead of me.

"If my revolution frightens you... I understand but you can always tell me why."

Several long moments passed and I wondered if she would ignore me again.

Instead... A small smile appeared on her face as she began speaking. "It wasn't your fault." She looked at me. "My childhood friend..."

Her voice became quieter. "...was sold to the vampires last year. The worst part was..." Her eyes filled with old pain. "It was her own father who sold her to the noble family who used her as a replacement to save their daughter."

"So..." She swallowed. "They offered money and my friend's father accepted."

The words struck me like a blow.

My chest tightened painfully and the cloth slipped from my fingers into the bucket below.

For several seconds, I couldn't find a single thing to say. Only one thought echoed through my mind.

My hatred for the vampires had just grown even deeper!!!

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Kael

The parchment crumpled slightly beneath my grip. I hadn't realized how tightly I was holding it until the thick paper began to wrinkle between my fingers.

My eyes swept across the neat handwriting for what felt like the tenth time, hoping the words would somehow change but they didn't.

Councilman Cedric would be arriving in Blackbourne. He wasn't just arriving quietly, instead, he was expecting a formal reception and, more infuriatingly, a grand ball in his honor.

I lowered the parchment onto my desk and leaned both palms against the polished wood.

Just a one week's notice. One miserable week. Why? Why hadn't Councilman Cedric informed me weeks ago?

He knew better than anyone how Blackbourne functioned. He knew I disliked unnecessary ceremonies, lavish celebrations, and noble politics disguised as entertainment.

So why now? More importantly... Why was he coming at all?

I began pacing across my study, unable to remain still. My heavy boots echoed against the stone floor as one question chased another through my mind.

Why visit my pack? Why insist on hosting a ball here of all places?

Why now, when every waking hour of mine was occupied with strengthening our borders against a possible vampire invasion?

Nothing about the timing sat right with me. Absolutely nothing!!!

Beta Bastian stood nearby, quietly watching me pace. Unlike most people, he knew better than to interrupt while I was thinking.

Eventually he spoke. "At least the nobles will be pleased because they've been asking for a ball since the beginning of the year."

He folded his hands behind his back. "Some might even see this as an opportunity to strengthen alliances."

I let out a humorless laugh. "Strengthen alliances." The words tasted bitter. "You know perfectly well I have never cared for dancing, music or nobles trying to outdress one another."

A faint smile crossed his face. "I know, Alpha Kael."

"I'm not exactly what anyone would call a ball-loving Alpha." I said again.

"No." His smile widened slightly. "I don't believe anyone has ever mistaken you for one."

I sighed and rubbed my temple. "This isn't about whether I enjoy hosting a celebration... It's about the timing."

I walked toward the large map hanging on the wall.

Every marked road... Every forest... Every border... My attention had been consumed by preparations for war.

None of those things left room for entertaining half the region.

I stared at the southern border. Could Councilman Cedric's visit truly be innocent? Or... Was there another reason? Perhaps a far less pleasant reason.

I turned slowly to face him. "Beta Bastian."

"Yes Alpha?"

"What if this isn't simply a visit?" I couldn't help but ask.

He frowned. "What do you mean, Alpha?"

"What if someone sent him?"

His expression became thoughtful. "The High Council? I guess that wouldn't surprise me."

I resumed pacing. "The council has always disliked how independently Blackbourne operates. They tolerate me, they respect our strength but that doesn't mean they trust me."

Beta Bastian nodded slowly. "They've tried to influence your decisions before."

"They have and they failed woefully."

Silence settled between us then another possibility entered my thoughts. One that tightened every muscle in my body.

'Selena!' I stopped walking immediately.

The spy, the one who had stolen Alpha William's cloak... He had infiltrated my territory, found Selena and had taken the cloak then disappeared without attempting to capture her.

Why? At the time, none of it had made complete sense.

But now... my mind began connecting pieces that had never quite fit together.

"What if..." I murmured. "What if that spy wasn't working for Alpha William?"

His eyebrows drew together. "You've considered that before."

"I have but I've never found another explanation." I stared at the fireplace. "What if he served someone else entirely?"

"The High Council?" Beta Bastien asked.

"Perhaps... They have the resources, the influence and the reason."

Beta Bastian crossed his arms thoughtfully. "If they suspected Selena was here... They wouldn't necessarily act immediately."

"Instead, they'd wait, they'd gather proof and what better opportunity than a ball?"

A celebration where dozens of noble officials would be in attendance.

Servants rushing everywhere, guests wandering freely throughout the castle and there would be Hundreds of eyes watching.

If anyone wished to identify Selena... A ball would make their task infinitely easier.

Beta Bastian remained silent for several moments before finally speaking. "We still have to prepare for the ball. Councilman Cedric said he'll arrive in one week's time so the preparations need to begin immediately."

I knew he was right but still... Every instinct inside me resisted opening Blackbourne's gates to outsiders.

"I don't want them here! I barely trust half the nobles who'll attend and now they expect me to welcome all of them into my home."

He let out a quiet breath. "If the invitation had come from anyone else... I'd advise refusing but this is Councilman Cedric and refusing him won't simply offend councilman Cedric."

His tone became more serious. "It could offend the High Council."

I hated admitting it but he wasn't wrong. Politics had never interested me. Unfortunately... Ignoring politics didn't make them disappear.

Another thought entered Beta Bastian's mind. "We could hide Selena. We could keep her away from the celebrations."

I slowly shook my head. "It won't work."

His brow furrowed. "Why not?"

"Because if that spy found her once..." I met his eyes. "...there's nothing stopping whoever sent him from finding her again, especially during a ball!"

Everything would unravel.

"She'll be surrounded by people," I said quietly. "Every eye inside the castle will eventually turn toward the servants and if someone already knows what she's supposed to look like..."

I didn't finish the sentence. I didn't need to because Beta Bastian understood.

He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "If we cancel the event... It sends the wrong message."

I nodded reluctantly. "It does."

"Councilman Cedric may still be your friend but he's also a councilman now." Beta Bastian's voice remained respectful.

"Whether he wants to admit it or not... his first loyalty belongs to the High Council. Only after that... will he see the town he came from- Blackbourne."

I closed my eyes briefly because he was right again. That was the frustrating part because every argument he had presented made sense.

I simply disliked every single one of them.

After several moments of silence, I finally exhaled. "Very well, the preparations begin."

"I'll inform the headmaid immediately." Beta Bastien said.

I nodded once. "Tell her to begin assigning duties."

"Yes, Alpha." Beta Bastian bowed before leaving the study.

The heavy door closed quietly behind him and silence returned but my thoughts refused to settle.

Instead... they drifted toward only one person. Selena! How do I protect her from people I couldn't even identify? How do I hide someone who attracted attention simply by existing?

The memory of our last encounter surfaced uninvited. Her anger and the hurt in her eyes.

The way she stormed out after I had spoken without thinking. I knew I had wounded her though not intentionally but that hardly mattered.

I had seen disappointment in her expression and I hadn't forgotten it... neither had my wolf because he had remained restless ever since.

He wanted me to find her, to comfort her and to claim her. Every hour I delayed only worsened his frustration and mine as well.

I left the study without another destination in mind. My feet carried me through the familiar corridors almost automatically.

Servants hurried past carrying folded fabrics, others scrubbed polished floors as preparations for the ball had already begun spreading through the castle faster than gossip ever could.

Eventually... I found her. She stood among several maids in one of the outer courtyards.

Her sleeves were rolled to her elbows as she worked beside the others. She laughed softly at something another maid said and the sound reached me despite the distance.

I remained hidden beneath the stone archway simply watching. She looked tired... working hard had clearly taken its toll.

Yet...She still smiled, and she still encouraged the others around her.

A strand of hair escaped from behind her ear and without thinking, I imagined walking over, brushing it back into place, holding her face and pulling her into my arms.

My wolf stirred immediately and the thought of claiming her came so naturally it almost startled me.

Every moment I spent near her... every conversation, every accidental touch and every stolen glance... only made the restraint harder.

What exactly was I waiting for anymore? The consequences had always existed. They hadn't disappeared.

Would they ever? Or was I merely torturing both of us by pretending distance would somehow make this easier?

She looked up unexpectedly and for one dangerous moment, I thought she had spotted me but instead she returned to her work.

I released the breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

My restraint was wearing thinner with every passing day and soon... I feared it would no longer exist at all.

Suddenly, a sharp pain exploded behind my eyes. The force of the mindlink almost made me stagger.

"Alpha!" Captain Garrick's voice rang urgently through my mind.

"What is it?" I snapped due to the unappreciated interruption.

"The warriors at the southern border have encountered resistance from the landowners."

I frowned before speaking again. "Then you should handle it."

A brief hesitation followed before he spoke again. "It's more complicated than that."

My patience thinned instantly. "Explain."

"The lands in question were recently sold to the noble houses of Hawthorne and Kavanagh."

I closed my eyes for a brief moment because those two houses were among the oldest noble families in Blackbourne.

Families whose loyalty to the crown stretched back generations.

Families whose alliances had helped raise Blackbourne to the strength it enjoyed today.

I groaned inwardly.

Just when I thought this situation couldn't become any more complicated... it had.

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Selena

By the time the evening sun dipped low enough to paint streaks of orange through the high windows of the main hall, every muscle in my body screamed for rest.

I stretched my aching shoulders before reaching up once more, fastening another black ribbon around one of the carved stone pillars.

The silver ribbons already draped across the ceiling reflected the torchlight beautifully, softening the usually intimidating atmosphere of the great hall.

"This side is still crooked," the older maid who was paired to work with me said for what felt like the hundredth time that afternoon.

I sighed inwardly and adjusted the ribbon again. "There."

She tilted her head. "Hmm... better."

I smiled weakly. "I think my arms might fall off before this ball begins."

The woman laughed heartily. "You youngsters complain too much. I've been climbing ladders all day and I've been doing it for twenty years."

That instantly silenced me.

She chuckled at my expression before tying another silver bow.

"You know," she continued, "this doesn't look like Alpha Kael's usual style at all."

I glanced around and noticed that She wasn't wrong.

Black remained the dominant color, but silver ribbons, polished candle holders and lighter fabrics had been added everywhere. Instead of the gloomy atmosphere I had expected, the hall looked... welcoming and almost warm.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

She looked at me as though I should already know. "The decorations, they're different from what was usually done."

I frowned. "I thought everyone said the Alpha hardly ever hosts balls."

"He doesn't." She nodded. "Only two or three each year if absolutely necessary."

"Then how do you know they're different?"

"Oh, child." She laughed again. "I've worked in this castle since before the Alpha became Alpha."

"I've decorated every single one." She pointed toward the ceiling. "Normally everything is darker. Black drapes, Deep crimson banners, Hardly any silver and no bright candles."

"It always feels more like entering a battlefield than a celebration."

I looked around and she was still right. Today's decorations somehow softened the hall.

"Any idea why he changed it?" I asked.

She shrugged. "None but it surprised every servant assigned here today."

I thought quietly.

Nothing Alpha Kael did was ever random. Not after everything I had learned about him.

Every decision had a purpose. Every unusual action concealed another motive.

Which meant... This did too.

Whatever he was planning, it certainly wasn't simply decorating a ballroom.

The older maid continued talking while we worked.

Mostly stories on how previous balls had gone, how demanding certain noble ladies could be, which councilmen complained about food and which Alpha danced the most.

I only half listened as my thoughts kept returning to Alpha Kael.

To the strange border strategy. To the upcoming ball. To the mysterious change in decorations.

Something was happening...I simply couldn't see the whole picture yet.

When the final ribbon was tied, one of the supervisors clapped loudly. "That's enough for today."

Relief washed over me immediately. Around me, servants sighed with equal gratitude.

Some stretched aching backs while others sank onto nearby benches.

I carefully climbed down the ladder as my legs nearly gave way the moment both feet touched the floor.

"I don't think I can climb another ladder tomorrow," I muttered.

The older maid laughed. "You'll say that tonight but tomorrow morning you'll climb another ten."

She wasn't wrong and that thought alone exhausted me.

Instead of returning directly to our chambers, every servant was instructed to gather inside one of the smaller halls.

The room quickly filled and dozens of servants whispered among themselves while waiting.

I spotted Sally almost immediately as she waved at me. "There you are."

"You look terrible." She said, almost laughing at my look.

"I feel terrible." I said.

She laughed. "I wasn't assigned decoration duty."

"I noticed because you don't even look tired."

She smiled proudly. "I worked in the laundry today."

"That's very much easier." I said almost hoping that was what I was assigned to do.

Before I could answer, Marquee joined us.

Unlike me... She looked perfectly composed. Not a strand of hair out of place.

I narrowed my eyes as I asked. "How are you not exhausted?"

She blinked innocently. "That's because I'm experienced in it already."

Sally burst into laughter. "I told you."

"I swear Marquee never gets tired." I mumbled.

Marquee shrugged. "You learn shortcuts after enough years."

I shook my head. "Teach me."

"I will very soon." She smiled. "If you're lucky."

While we waited, I told them what the older maid had said. "Apparently the decorations are different this year... she said they usually aren't this bright."

Marquee nodded immediately. "She's right."

"You've noticed it too, right?"

"I have but I only worked one previous ball but this definitely isn't how they decorated before."

Sally folded her arms. "So... What does it mean?"

I looked toward the decorated doorway thoughtfully. "I don't know But with Kael..." I stopped myself before I exposed myself. "...with the Alpha, I doubt it's accidental."

None of us spoke after that. Moments later, Sera walked to the front.

The room quieted almost instantly as she smiled gently. "First... I'd like to thank every one of you because I know preparations have been exhausting but your hard work hasn't gone unnoticed."

Several servants smiled proudly.

"You're all being paid for your work," she continued warmly, "but appreciation should still be spoken."

I liked Sera. She never sounded superior and she spoke as though she genuinely respected the people beneath her.

She was just about to continue when another voice echoed through the hall. "Sera."

Every servant immediately straightened as the Headmaid descended from the raised platform slowly.

Sera stepped aside for her and the atmosphere changed instantly.

The warmth vanished and the room became tense enough to suffocate us.

The Headmaid surveyed every face as she spoke. "I'll keep this brief."

No one moved or could dare breathe too loudly.

"Of every instruction I have ever given any of you..." She paused. "...there has never been one more important than what I am about to say."

There was absolute silence.

"I have heard the rumors circulating throughout the castle." Her sharp eyes swept across us. "Rumors concerning vampires."

My heartbeat quickened. "And rumors concerning an invasion."

Nobody dared respond as she folded her hands behind her back. "Listen carefully, when the guests arrive for the ball, not one of you will mention vampires."

Her voice hardened further. "Not one of you will mention an invasion and if any guest attempts to question you... you will say nothing."

She stepped down from the platform then unexpectedly pointed toward one young servant. "You, come here."

He obeyed nervously as she positioned herself before him then suddenly changed her voice into an exaggerated noblewoman's tone.

"Oh my... I've heard such frightening stories. Tell me, what rumors have been spreading about vampires lately?"

The poor servant hesitated. "I...I don't know much about the vampire invasion—"

The slap echoed throughout the room as everyone flinched while the servant stumbled sideways, holding his cheek.

The Headmaid's expression remained cold. "That." She pointed directly at him. "Was your mistake!"

She looked at every servant individually. "You spoke the word 'Invasion.'" Her voice rang sharply. "You will not say that word, you will not say vampires, you will not confirm, you will not deny, you will not speculate and If anyone asks..."

"You report them immediately to the nearest guard." She paced slowly before us. "If another servant tries discussing such matters, you report them!"

"If a noble asks... you report them! If a merchant asks...you report them." She stopped. "Your mouths remain closed."

"Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Headmaid," we answered together.

"Louder!!!" She snapped fiercely.

"YES, HEADMAID!" We all echoed the words.

She nodded once. "Good."

She spent several more minutes repeating the importance of discretion before finally dismissing us.

As Sally and I walked back toward our chambers, she lowered her voice.

"Do you think we'll still be able to hold another revolution meeting before the ball?"

I considered her question carefully. "I think we should but it should be done carefully."

She frowned. "That rule complicates things more now."

"It does." I said, but deep down, I understood exactly why Alpha Kael had issued it.

The fewer rumors spreading... the less attention Blackbourne attracted and if attention remained away from the pack... the safer I remained.

The realization softened some of my lingering anger toward him but only slightly.

Sally eventually hurried ahead. "I'll see you in the room." She said and I simply nodded.

As I continued walking, a castle guard approached. "The Alpha requests your presence."

I stopped briefly. For two days... I had successfully avoided him because the memory of our last conversation still stung.

"No!!!" I immediately said without blinking.

The guard blinked in surprise. "Pardon?"

"I have no business with the Alpha." I said and without waiting for another response, I walked away straight toward our chambers.

I changed out of my work clothes, gathered a clean bathing linen and headed for the shared bathhouse on my wing.

Hot water eased the ache in my shoulders. For several precious minutes, I allowed myself to forget the ball, the revolution, Training, Alpha Kael and everything else.

By the time I finished bathing, I felt almost human again. I wrapped the linen securely around myself and stepped into the corridor.

Water still dripped from my damp hair onto my shoulders and the hallway was unusually quiet.

I had barely taken a few steps when an arm suddenly wrapped around me.

Before I could react, I was pulled into a deserted corner of the wing then my back struck against the hard wall.

A firm hand caught my throat... the sudden force loosened my bath linen and the fabric slipped from my body and pooled around my feet.

I was stark naked and dripping in front of my assailant!!! I froze and for one terrifying heartbeat, I couldn't even breathe.

Then my vision steadied as a familiar crimson eyes glowed in the darkness.

Alpha Kael! He towered over me, glaring down with red eyes.