

Claimed By The Rival Alpha c 61-67

Selena

The first thing that returned was my anger and the second was my instinct to fight.

I twisted violently beneath Alpha Kael's grip, trying to wrench myself free from the hand that still held me against the stone wall with my pulse hammering inside my ears.

"Let me go!" I screamed at the top of my lungs.

His expression tightened. "Selena... Can you stop!"

"I said let me go!" I shoved against his chest with everything I had but still, he didn't move.

Frustration surged through me as I struggled harder, kicking backward, twisting my shoulders, refusing to stop until he finally released me.

The sudden freedom threw me off balance then I stumbled forward, my knees striking the cold stone floor.

A violent cough tore through my throat as I struggled to steady my breathing. My chest rose and fell painfully as I laid crumpled up on the ground stark naked.

I didn't care that I was stark naked in front of him. Instead, I continue crying out loudly.

For several moments, I could hear nothing except my own ragged breaths as I managed to stop tearing up. I had needed to let out all emotions curled up in my chest.

Then warm fabric settled gently around my shoulders. It was my bathing linen that had fallen off my body earlier.

Alpha Kael had picked it up then carefully draped it around me, averting his gaze just enough to give me what little dignity remained.

"I'm sorry." His voice was low, quiet and sincere. Still, I wasn't ready to hear any of it.

I slapped his hand away almost immediately. "Don't touch me."

He didn't bulge at my slapping his hands away instead, he held on to me firmly making rage and frustration bubbled within me as he crouched before me on the ground.

Neither of us spoke while I clutched the linen tightly around myself and stared at the floor. The anger that had burned so brightly only moments ago began mixing with something far more painful. Hurt!

The kind that settled deep inside the chest and refused to leave.

Alpha Kael is still crouched in front of me, and hasn't taken his eyes away from me for even a second.

"I never meant to frighten you." He said in a calm tone different from the anger lacing his face earlier when he had slammed me against the cold stone wall.

I laughed bitterly. "You frightened me?" I finally looked up, glaring into his face.

"No, You humiliated me! That's what you're always good at!!!" I spat into his face.

His jaw tightened. "That wasn't my intention."

"But it happened and you try to act like the good person which you're not!."

Silence settled between us as he watched me carefully for a while before speaking again.

"I'm sorry." He repeated the words with more weight this time. "I regret losing my temper."

I swallowed hard. "You should regret it."

Another silence then he asked quietly, "Why did you refuse my summon?"

I stared at him in disbelief. "That's what you're asking me?"

"I need to know." He had the guts to say.

"You really don't know, huh?"

He frowned as I added. "I have nothing to say to a man who sees me as nothing more than a maid instead as his mate."

The words finally escaped. It was raw, painful and honest.

His expression changed immediately and whatever calm he had been forcing disappeared.
"Selena..."

"No." I shook my head quickly. "You don't get to interrupt me this time."

My voice trembled. "I know I'm working here as a maid... I accepted that! I scrub floors, wash dishes, clean windows and I've never complained."

I pressed a hand against my chest. "But you're my mate." The words broke something inside me. "You're supposed to see me differently."

"Not my uniform, not my duties but just Me!"

I looked away before the tears spilling into my eyes could become impossible to hide.

"I thought..." I laughed weakly. "I honestly thought what we had was becoming something special."

My throat tightened. "Then you looked at me exactly the way everyone else does."

The first tear escaped despite my efforts and I wiped it away angrily. "I hated that."

Alpha Kael remained silent for several moments as he kept looking around to make sure no one was watching.

All of that... him acting all cautious added more fuel to my fire.

Then he finally spoke. "It was a slip, Selena."

I didn't answer as I glared harder at him instead.

"I regretted saying it the moment the words left my mouth."

Still I remained quiet then he sighed and continued. "But you're not blameless either."

That made me snap my head toward him. "What do you mean by that?"

"You kept pushing us toward something we both agreed should never happen. An intimacy that we shouldn't have!" He uttered, looking frustrated.

"Oh wow... So now it's my fault?" I asked with a loud scoff.

"I'm saying we both crossed lines."

My anger flared again. "I crossed lines? Did I force you into every moment we've shared?"

His eyes widened slightly.

I didn't care to lower my voice, I didn't care where we were. "Did I force you every time you held me close, pinned me to a wall and made me climax? Did I force you when you went down on me and did the thing with your tongue?"

"Every time you ignored our agreement just as much as I did!!!"

His gaze darted toward the empty corridor before returning to me. "Selena, can you please keep your voice down."

"Why should I?" I asked with a smirk.

"Because someone might hear."

"I don't care!" I snapped more.

"I do." He stepped closer and before I knew what's happening, she slammed his lips on mine, shutting me up.

It worked because my body ignited with desire but I refrained from showing it.

Then he pulled back and began speaking again. "I care because I'm trying to protect you."

I folded my arms tightly across myself. "That's your answer to everything."

"I'm protecting you, I'm protecting the pack and I'm protecting our future."

"When do I get to decide what I want?" I asked, with a frown on my face

His face softened. "You do."

"No! You are always the one deciding for both of us."

He opened his mouth then closed it again. For the first time since we'd met... Alpha Kael looked genuinely unsure of what to say.

"I don't despise you," he finally said quietly. "I never have."

He met my eyes directly. "I don't regret the time we've spent together and I've also not regretted those intimate sessions we've had together."

His voice remained steady. "I regret only how reckless we've both become because bigger things are happening around us and I can't afford to lose sight of those dangers."

I hated hearing all of these still, he continued. "The upcoming ball changes everything. There will be nobles, Council officials, Guests from neighboring territories..."

His voice became grave. "And there may be people searching for you."

I frowned. "So?"

"So I need you hidden."

"No!" I snapped almost immediately.

His eyebrows drew together. "No?"

"I won't hide in a room when everyone is outside doing one thing or the other."

"You have to hide, Selena! You don't understand the danger."

"I understand it perfectly." I stepped closer. "If someone wants to find me, locking me inside a room won't stop them."

"Still, it reduces the risk." He argued.

I shook my head. "If they expect me to hide... Then the smartest thing I can do is act like I have nothing to hide."

He studied me silently. "I need you alive."

"And I need my freedom because my revolution group, they have something important to accomplish that night so they will need their leader. Which means, my presence there is paramount!"

For several long seconds we simply looked at each other as Alpha Kael went mute so I used that opportunity to lean forward and kissed his cheek.

It lasted only a heartbeat then I stood up from the ground ready to leave. "If we're careful," I said softly, "everything will be fine."

I had barely taken two steps before his fingers wrapped gently around my wrist.

The movement loosened the edge of my bathing linen just enough for me to instinctively clutch it tighter as my upper thighs were revealed.

His eyes dropped for the briefest instant before immediately returning to my face.

I caught him as heat rushed into my cheeks but I still secured the cloth firmly.

"I'm still angry with you and you're not seeing any more of my body until you've apologized enough."

One corner of his mouth twitched. "What exactly do I have to do to earn your forgiveness?"

I pretended to think very seriously. "Hmm... I'll think about it and let you know."

Leaving him standing there, I walked away before he could stop me again.

...

By the time I returned to the servants' quarters, I had almost convinced myself the conversation had settled something between us. Almost.

The door had barely closed behind me when Sally also followed in behind me and her expression was unusually serious. "Selena."

The way she said my name made my stomach tighten. "Yes?"

She crossed her hands slowly around her chests as she asked. "What are you to the Alpha?" She asked in a very bold tone.

Everything inside me froze but I quickly regained myself. "I don't know what you're talking about."

She walked toward me without breaking eye contact. "I saw him! I saw the Alpha." She stopped only a step away. "I saw him drag you down the deserted corridor near the bathing rooms."

I blinked in shock. For a heartbeat, I couldn't think then I forced a laugh. "You must have been seeing things because I wasn't dragged by anyone."

She folded her arms. "So you're calling me a liar now?"

"I never said that."

"Then tell me the truth because I know you're having a secret affair with the Alpha." She whispered menacingly.

The accusation struck like a hammer as countless thoughts raced through my mind.

If Sally told the others... If word spreads... If even one careless servant repeated it... Everything could collapse.

Before I could answer, the chamber door opened again and Marquee walked inside.

She looked from Sally to me then frowned before asking. "What's going on?"

Sally quickly turned toward her. "Oh, you'll never believe—"

I reacted instantly by grabbing Sally's wrist, and I pulled her outside the chamber.

She jerked her arm free. "What was that for?"

I took one slow breath then looked straight into her eyes. "I know you've been stealing spices from the kitchen."

Her expression faltered as I continued before she could recover. "And selling them outside the castle."

Every trace of confidence disappeared from her face as she froze and I need immediately that she has her heel on her head!

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Kael

The moment Selena's words settled in my mind, I realized she had been right.

Keeping her hidden behind walls and guards would only delay the inevitable. Those searching for her weren't fools. They would keep digging until they either found proof she was here or convinced themselves she was somewhere else.

If I wanted her safe, I had to give them no reason to keep searching. That was the only way.

As I strode through the corridor toward my study, my boots echoed against the polished stone floor while servants hurried out of my path.

Every passing noble and soldier lowered their heads respectfully, but I barely noticed them.

My mind remained fixed on the upcoming Ball.

Earlier that morning, I had already instructed the decorators to abandon the usual dark banners and crimson draperies that had long represented Blackborne. Instead, the fortress would be dressed in bright colors and warm lights.

An atmosphere that felt welcoming rather than intimidating.

Anyone walking into the fortress should think of celebration, not secrets.

Still... It wasn't enough.

The more I considered it, the more flaws I found in my own plans.

If influential Alphas attended and discovered Selena's scent... If rumors somehow reached the vampire territories... If one careless servant spoke too much... Everything could collapse.

"No," I muttered beneath my breath. I needed more. Far more.

I reached my study and pushed the heavy oak doors open before walking inside.

Maps covered one side of the room while stacks of reports occupied my desk. Rolls of architectural plans lay scattered across another table, each detailing the expansion of Blackborne defenses.

Before I could even sit down, another knock came. "Enter."

The door opened carefully and Beta Bastian stepped inside. His expression alone told me this wasn't another routine report.

"What is it?"

"My Alpha," he began carefully, "the patriarch of House Kavanagh has arrived."

I looked up as I asked. "William Kavanagh?"

"Yes."

"What does he want?"

"He insists he needs an urgent audience."

I leaned back slowly. "At this hour?"

Beta Bastian nodded. "He claims the matter cannot wait until morning."

My patience instantly faded. "I've been dealing with council meetings since dawn... I've reviewed troop reports."

"Yes."

"I've approved supply routes." He remained silent as I added. "I've spent the last hour reorganizing preparations for the Ball."

"I understand my Alpha."

I folded my hands together. "So tell me why I should entertain a noble who suddenly decides he cannot wait until tomorrow."

Beta Bastian hesitated. "It may concern the border lands... the farms"

My gaze narrowed in anger already knowing why he was there.

"What exactly is the issue?" I asked, tiredly.

"He refused to explain." Beta Bastian said.

Of course he had.

"He merely said it concerns the fertile lands under House Kavanagh." He added.

I sighed.

"And because House Kavanagh is one of the oldest families in Blackborne, you believe I should abandon everything tonight."

"I believe, My Alpha," Beta Bastian answered carefully, "that William Kavanagh carries considerable influence. Refusing him might worsen whatever grievance he has."

I rose from my chair then slowly, I walked toward the window overlooking the fortress courtyard.

Torches flickered below as some workers continued decorating despite the late hour. Preparations couldn't stop and neither could I.

"I am the Alpha." I started.

Beta Bastian lowered his head. "Yes, Alpha Kael. We do know this very well."

"If every noble demands an audience whenever he wishes... They'll stop respecting my authority."

I turned to face him. "If William wishes to see me, he can wait until I decide I am available."

Beta Bastian remained silent as I added. "Tell him exactly that."

"My Alpha..." he tried to say but I cut him off.

"No! Just go tell him that and stop trying to question everything!"

His shoulders stiffened. "As you command, my Alpha." He bowed before quietly leaving.

The study became silent once more. For several moments I simply stood there staring out across the pack.

The fortress had weathered wars, famines and betrayals so definitely, It would survive this as well.

Eventually I returned to my desk as a fresh stack of purchase contracts waited for my approval.

There were Timber, Stone, Steel reinforcements, Iron spike and Construction equipment. They were everything required for the new watchpits along the eastern borders.

One after another, I reviewed every figure, every supplier, every seal and every signature because carelessness was expensive, especially where security was involved.

I dipped my quill into ink before signing another contract then another and another.

Hours slipped by unnoticed and the outside darkness deepened until the fortress quieted.

Only the occasional footsteps of night patrols disturbed the silence.

I rubbed my temples before reaching for the final document. Instead of reading it immediately, another thought crept into my mind.

The thought of Selena. Specifically... it's the thought of her revolution.

A faint frown crossed my face.

She had spoken about it with surprising conviction earlier.

Until then, I had regarded her little organization as little more than an emotional effort by a handful of determined servants.

I hadn't expected her to dedicate so much of herself to it... Nor had I expected others to follow her yet they had.

Enough people believed in her cause that she spoke of it without hesitation.

"What exactly were they planning on the ball day?" The question lingered.

The Ball was approaching rapidly and Hundreds of influential guests would soon fill Blackborne.

Werewolves, Merchants, Noble families, Foreign delegates... Some who supported me and others who secretly wished for my failure.

If Selena's group intended to act during the celebration... Even with noble intentions... It could become disastrous.

The slightest disturbance could ignite panic and one frightened rumor of vampires invasion would become ten then ten would become a hundred.

By sunrise, every kingdom would be whispering that Blackborne had become the birthplace of a vampire rebellion.

That was something I simply could not allow. Not inside my own fortress and definitely not while hosting the largest gathering of allied packs in years.

I wasn't against what Selena hoped to accomplish. This was far from it.

I know she wanted justice, she wanted change and I respected both but revolutions required timing.

The ball was not the right time for them to do anything stupid!

Whatever she and her group intended... I would have to learn it before events slipped beyond anyone's control.

The final contract received my signature so I sealed the documents together before extinguishing the last candle on my desk.

Tomorrow would be another exhausting day.

...

Morning arrived with far less peace than I expected. Even before I had finished dressing, Beta Bastian entered without his usual composure. "My Alpha."

"What is it now?" I asked grumpily.

His expression hardened. "William Kavanagh had returned."

I fastened the cuffs of my tunic. "I expected as much."

"He did not wait outside... He forced his way through the entrance."

A dangerous silence settled between us. "He what?"

"He pushed past the guards." My jaw tightened as he continued. "They attempted to stop him, but he ignored every warning."

"And where is he now?" I asked with a barely refrained groan.

"In your throne room." Beta Bastien quickly said.

I grabbed my cloak as I said through gritted it. "He stormed into my fortress, and without an invitation, he stormed into my throne room!"

Without another word, I strode through the halls as guards scrambled aside as I approached.

Every step echoed with growing irritation. Blackborne had rules... No one, noble or otherwise, ignored them!!!

Least of all one of my own subjects!

The throne room doors swung open and William Kavanagh stood in the center.

He was every bit as imposing as I remembered. Tall enough to tower over most wolves, and very broad.

His expensive robes strained across his large frame while his gray beard trembled with restrained fury.

Several guards remained nearby, watching him cautiously. The instant he saw me, his expression darkened further.

I walked calmly toward my throne before taking my seat. No emotion crossed my face and there was no greeting either.

Finally I spoke. "You forced your way into my throne room."

William didn't bow, he didn't apologize and didn't even acknowledge my words.

Instead, he stepped forward. "Why are you planning to burn my fertile lands at the border?"

The accusation echoed throughout the chamber as several guards exchanged confused glances.

I stared at him. "What did you say?"

"You heard me." His voice grew louder. "My workers saw your surveyors, They marked the fields, They measured everything and they carried royal documents."

He pointed an accusing finger toward me. "You intend to destroy generations of farmland."

His voice became increasingly heated. "My family has cultivated those lands for decades and now you intend to reduce them to ash."

Each sentence came faster, louder and more disrespectful.

The guards shifted uneasily while Beta Bastian remained perfectly still beside my throne.

Inside me, irritation slowly transformed into anger as my fingers curled against the armrest while William continued ranting as though I wasn't even his Alpha.

Every accusation sharpened the tension in the room! Every disrespectful word chipped away at the patience I had fought to maintain.

My fists tightened against the throne... My anger rose as my patience thinned then I snapped my eyes at the older wolf.

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Selena

I had broken a promise and the thought had been haunting me for days.

Every time I passed anywhere near the dungeon wing, guilt tightened around my chest like invisible chains. Grengy was still down there because of me. Whether he had attacked me or not no longer mattered. I had promised him that I would get him out and I hadn't.

Work, training , the revolution, the preparations for the upcoming ball... Everything seemed to have stolen my attention from the one thing I had sworn to do.

But not today anymore.

During my short break, I wiped my damp hands on my apron and headed straight for Beta Bastian's study.

There was only one mission on my mind and that was to get Grengy released from that cold prison cell. He has suffered enough so I see no reason why he should still be there!

The castle corridors bustled with servants carrying polished goblets, folded draperies and baskets filled with flowers for the approaching ball. Everyone seemed busier than ever, yet I kept walking, weaving through the traffic until I reached the Beta's office.

The heavy oak door was shut and a castle guard stood outside with his spear planted firmly beside him.

I smiled politely. "Good afternoon."

He nodded once to my greeting before speaking. "The Beta isn't inside."

My heart sank but I pushed myself to ask again. "Do you know when he'll return?"

He shrugged. "I couldn't tell you."

I sighed quietly. I could either return to my duties and hope to find another opportunity... or simply wait!

Knowing my luck, if I left now something else would certainly occupy the rest of my day. I decided to go with what works perfectly with my schedule. "I'll wait."

The guard simply nodded again without saying a word.

I stepped aside and leaned lightly against the stone wall, folding my hands behind my back.

Minutes crawled by and I occupied myself by watching servants pass through the corridor.

Eventually another guard approached... He greeted the one standing beside the office before relaxing beside him and started a conversation which was impossible for me to not hear.

"You've been stationed here all morning?"

"I have."

"That's really tiring..."

"The whole castle's tiring these days." The two men chuckled softly.

I paid little attention until I heard a familiar name. "The Alpha." My ears instantly sharpened.

"What happened in the throne room earlier?" the first guard asked then added. "I heard someone nearly lost his head."

The second guard laughed. "Not his head but his pride certainly did."

My curiosity grew but I couldn't chip into their conversation so I simply listened.

"What happened?" The guard asked.

"It's one of the nobles."

"Which of them?"

"It's Nobleman William Kavanagh."

The first guard whistled. "He actually challenged the Alpha?"

"He practically stormed into the throne room." The guard said and I tried not to appear interested, but every word held my attention.

"They say he spoke over the Alpha repeatedly and the Alpha finally had enough of his disrespect."

"What did he do?" The first guard curiously asked.

"He ordered the guards to force the man onto his knees."

The first guard burst into laughter. "I wish I'd seen that."

"So do I..."

"He deserved it!" They both laughed again and I couldn't help smiling faintly.

That certainly sounded like Alpha Kael. He was calm... Patient... Until someone pushed him too far.

The first guard shook his head. "Sometimes those entitled nobles forget exactly who our Alpha is and they mistake kindness for weakness."

The second guard nodded. "Exactly."

There was a brief silence before the first guard asked another question. "So what exactly did William want?"

The second guard lowered his voice. "It's something about land! The border lands... though I didn't hear everything but apparently he wasn't happy."

I frowned thoughtfully. Border lands? Before I could think further, the conversation continued.

"I also heard another rumour."

"What rumor?"

"That the Alpha truly intends to burn the lands near the border in an attempt to fight the vampires ."

The second guard glanced around instinctively before answering. "It's true."

"So the rumours are real?" The first guard asked in surprise.

"They are but keep your voice down! We've already been warned because the Alpha doesn't want anyone discussing it until after the upcoming ball."

The reminder immediately made me step forward. "You both really should follow that instruction."

Both guards looked at me while I smiled politely. "If the Alpha gave an order, surely it's better to obey it."

The second of them snorted. "You sound frightened by his order."

"I simply think rules exist for a reason." I said.

He shrugged carelessly. "Our Alpha won't do anything."

I blinked. "What do you mean?"

"He lets too much slide... he always has." He said with a scoff.

The first guard frowned. "Be careful with your words."

"I'm only telling the truth." The second guard said and his confidence irritated me immediately.

"He shows mercy too often! He should be harsher but he obviously has become weak."

The word hit me like a slap. Weak? Alpha Kael? I stared at him as my fingers curled tightly against my skirt.

He continued talking as though he hadn't insulted the Alpha of the entire pack.

"He never lets us fight real battles! Everything is always waiting, planning, thinking... What kind of Alpha avoids direct confrontation?"

Heat rushed into my face. I opened my mouth, ready to defend Alpha Kael but before a single word escaped me...

Another voice interrupted. "Treason!!!"

The corridor fell silent as both guards spun around instantly.

Beta Bastian stood several steps away while his face was completely unreadable and obviously showed he had heard every single word they said.

Yet somehow... That made him even more intimidating.

The careless guard visibly paled. "Beta..."

Beta Bastian walked toward him slowly. "What you have just said..." His voice remained calm. "...amounts to treason against your Alpha."

Nobody dared speak.

Beta Bastian turned toward the first guard. "Bring him." He ordered.

The guard immediately grabbed his companion's arm. "Beta, I didn't mean—"

"Inside!" He snapped and the frightened guard stumbled forward as he was escorted into the Beta's study.

Without thinking, I followed behind and Beta Bastian didn't stop me as the office door shut heavily behind us.

Silence settled across the room while Beta Bastian stood behind his desk. "What is your name?"

The guard swallowed. "Harvey."

"What's your Rank?"

"Junior castle guard."

Beta Bastian picked up a parchment. "You publicly questioned the authority of your Alpha! You openly described him as weak and you encouraged disregard for his commands."

Harvey's breathing became uneven. "I spoke carelessly."

"You did!"

"I didn't intend—"

"Intent changes nothing." Beta Bastian cut him off, then dipped his quill into ink.

"From this moment forward..." His pen scratched steadily across the parchment. "...you are stripped of your rank."

Harvey's eyes widened as Beta Bastian continued. "...dismissed from your duties effective immediately."

The guard's shoulders slumped. "Please... my family depends on this position."

Beta Bastian finally looked at him. "Then you should have valued it before committing treason."

The dismissed guard slowly lowered his head before allowing himself to be escorted away.

The office became quiet once more as I stood there frozen. Part of me admired Beta Bastian's decisiveness while another part pitied the young guard.

Beta Bastian finally turned toward me. "What did you come here for, Selena?"

I cleared my throat. "I... actually came to ask for a favour."

"What favour?"

"It's about Grengy."

His expression changed immediately. "No."

I blinked in surprise, "You haven't even heard—"

"I know exactly what you're about to ask! He remains where the Alpha ordered him."

I stepped closer. "But he's there because of me and I've forgiven him."

"That still changes nothing!"

"It changes everything." I argued back.

Beta Bastian folded his arms. "He assaulted you."

"He regrets ever doing it and I believe him." I quickly said.

"The Alpha's decision remains." Beta Bastien wasn't giving it a thought.

I refused to give up as I continued. "If it weren't for my bond with the Alpha... Grengy would never have been imprisoned in the first place."

That made him pause as I pressed further. "The Alpha acted because of me and now I'm asking for mercy."

Beta Bastien remained silent while I continued carefully. "The Alpha is carrying an entire pack on his shoulders... He has countless responsibilities and to be honest... I wouldn't be surprised if he'd already forgotten Grengy was still imprisoned."

Beta Bastien stared at me for several long seconds then he sighed. "You have remarkable persistence."

A reluctant smile almost reached his lips before disappearing again and he reached for a fresh parchment.

"If I do this..." He began writing. "...any trouble Grengy causes afterward becomes your responsibility."

"I understand."

"If he harasses you again... you're taking full responsibility." He finished writing before stamping the order with his official seal.

"There." He held out the letter. "Present this to the dungeon captain."

My smile spread immediately. "Thank you."

He merely nodded as I bowed gratefully before hurrying from the office.

As I made my way toward the dungeon, I crossed paths with Sally who was carrying folded linens.

For the briefest moment... our eyes met then she immediately looked away and continued walking.

Ever since the previous night that I'd confronted her about stealing spices and secretly selling them outside the castle, she'd hardly spoken a word to me.

I'm sure she was embarrassed, ashamed or perhaps even afraid but I couldn't blame her.

Still, one question refused to leave my mind.

If she had been making coins from that illegal business all this time...

Why hadn't she offered even a small portion to the cause of our revolution?

Claimed By The Rival Alpha

Alpha Kael

Lord Hawthorne sat across from me with the same composed elegance he carried everywhere. His long fingers curled around an oddly shaped golden cup as he slowly sipped his mead, savoring it as though it was the finest drink ever brewed.

I watched him in silence but the scent alone told me it was mead. Most wolves preferred ale or wine.

Mead was a drink commonly found in the Ravenspire region, and Lord Hawthorne never seemed interested in following trends outside his homeland; neither did his wardrobe.

Even today, his dark green vest was stitched in unmistakable Velmorian fashion with intricate silver embroidery running along the edges. The cut was strange compared to the styles worn by the rest of the nobles in my court, but somehow it suited him.

Everything about Lord Hawthorne was... peculiar.

He collected odd artifacts from distant kingdoms, filled his estate with unusual inventions, and had once paid an absurd amount of money for the skeleton of an enormous sea beast because he found it "academically fascinating."

He was an intelligent man. Unfortunately, intelligent men could also be troublesome.

After another leisurely sip, he smiled. "I heard what happened yesterday with Lord Kavanagh."

His tone carried amusement rather than judgment.

I leaned back in my chair. "I merely reminded him of the hierarchy that most nobles seem determined to forget."

A chuckle escaped him. "Quite the reminder, from what I heard and I believe it was necessary."

"It probably was." I said with a straight face.

He rotated the golden cup between his fingers before lifting his eyes to mine. "My family certainly wouldn't dare forget their place."

There was a pause then he added. "But I do hope Your Alpha Majesty remembers ours."

There it was... The reminder that his house had supported Blackborne for generations. Their wealth had funded armies, repaired villages after disasters, and strengthened trade throughout the territory.

Influence! That was what he was reminding me of and I had no intention of dancing around the matter.

"What is it you came here for, Lord Hawthorne?"

His smile widened slightly. "Straight to business, huh?"

"I have quite a bit of it."

He nodded. "My family, alongside House Kavanagh, intends to begin construction on the border lands."

I folded my hands together. "For what purpose?"

"It's for a trade port."

My brows drew together. "A trade port?"

"Indeed." He sounded almost excited. "The location is ideal. Merchants from both the northern and eastern routes would benefit greatly."

I stared at him. "Who authorized such construction?"

His expression remained calm. "Our families were granted autonomy over those lands many decades ago."

I let out a slow sigh before speaking. "My grandfather granted that autonomy decades ago but the pack has undergone significant reforms since then."

"The agreement still exists." He stated.

Another sigh escaped me. Technically... he wasn't wrong. Old agreements could become burdens that later generations had to carry.

I rested an elbow on the armrest before speaking again, this time allowing my voice to soften. "Lord Hawthorne."

He looked at me attentively as I continued. "Your family has done much for Blackborne."

He inclined his head politely. "We've only done our duty."

"And I appreciate it." I said and that much was true. "Now, I am asking your house to do one more thing."

His curiosity deepened. "I'm listening."

"I want your family to relinquish the border lands." His brows rose but I still continued. "For the safety of the pack."

Silence lingered between us then finally, he asked, "What danger requires those lands to be protected?"

I glanced toward Beta Bastian who stood near one of the windows with his usual unreadable expression and through our mindlink, his voice entered my thoughts.

'Are you certain you want to tell him the reason?' Beta Bastian asked.

'Let's give it a try.' I said.

I turned back toward Lord Hawthorne. Rather than answer immediately, I leaned forward until only the table separated us.

Then I lowered my voice. "There is a possibility..." I glanced briefly around the room. "...of a vampire invasion."

His confident expression disappeared. "...A vampire invasion?"

"It remains only a possibility." I said again.

He frowned. "That seems unlikely" He slowly shook his head. "But our annual royalties have already been paid."

His confidence returned slightly as he added. "The vampires have always honored those arrangements."

I met his eyes. "My scouts also reported something else."

His smile faded again. "What?"

"Alpha William may somehow be involved in all of these." I said and the room fell completely silent.

Even the crackling fireplace seemed quieter. Like nearly everyone else, Lord Hawthorne knew the rumors.

The Alpha of Nightsbane had long been whispered to possess unusual ties to the vampires.

No one openly spoke of it! No one needed to but everyone sort of knew.

His fingers tightened around the golden cup. "You believe that?"

"I believe enough to prepare for it."

His face became thoughtful. "If that is true... then it changes everything." He nodded absentmindedly. "But how do the border lands help?"

Again I leaned closer. This time I deliberately lowered my voice until it was barely above a whisper.

"I would rather not discuss our plans openly." I slowly glanced toward the walls. "There may be ears listening."

I noticed Beta Bastian remained perfectly expressionless despite undoubtedly realizing what I was doing.

From Lord Hawthorne's perspective... It would appear I wasn't even willing to trust one of my own men and that was exactly the impression I wanted.

Lord Hawthorne followed my gaze before nodding almost immediately.

"I understand." His voice also dropped into a whisper. "One cannot be too careful."

"Precisely." I said with a nod.

He straightened in his chair. "If surrendering those lands protects Blackborne..." He stood. "...then House Hawthorne will not stand in the way."

A small smile touched my lips. "I appreciate that."

"I shall speak with Lord Kavanagh personally." His tone carried confidence. "I believe I can convince him to relinquish his family's portion as well."

"That would save me considerable effort." I nodded with appreciation.

I rose with him. "When this matter is resolved..." I paused. "...I will remember the loyalty your family has shown."

His eyes brightened. "You are too generous, Alpha."

"No." I offered him a respectful nod. "Blackborne rewards loyalty."

He bowed. "Then I shall take my leave."

A servant opened the doors for him as Lord Hawthorne disappeared into the hallway.

The instant the doors closed... Beta Bastian let out a quiet chuckle while I rubbed my temples. "Go ahead." I said knowing he has something to say.

"You manipulated him beautifully." He praised me. "And you're remarkably good at it."

I sighed. "I simply needed those lands."

"And now you'll have them."

"Hopefully... yeah!" We returned to the map spread across my desk.

Beta Bastian pointed toward the marked border. "The watchpits, We've delayed long enough so when should construction begin?"

"As soon as possible, we'll need to keep it discreet." I said.

I studied the map before speaking. "The workers can begin immediately. They'll continue until the night of the ball then they'll pause so attention stays focused on the celebration."

"And once the festivities are over... they resume immediately."

Beta Bastian nodded. "A sound plan."

Just then, the doors opened again and Lord Hawthorne stepped back inside, making both Beta Bastian and I blinked in surprise.

The noble cleared his throat. "My apologies, I forgot something crucial."

"What is it?" I asked.

A smile slowly spread across his face. "I couldn't help but notice..." He looked directly at me. "...that you're still without a mate."

I already knew where this was going as he added. "I happen to have a first daughter and I would be honored to introduce her to you during the ball."

I forced a polite smile. "That won't be necessary."

"That's Nonsense." He retorted back.

"I assure you... My schedule during the ball will be rather full."

"It'll only take a few moments to introduce you both." He said again. "You'll like her and she's certainly an exceptional young woman and the finest."

I almost sighed. "Even so..."

He refused to yield. "Please... It would make an old father very happy."

There were few enemies more relentless than a noble trying to arrange a marriage. "I'll... consider greeting her."

His smile widened triumphantly. "Excellent! I look forward to it."

Before I could object further, he bowed and finally departed as the doors shut behind him.

I released a long sigh while Beta Bastian laughed outright. "You handled Lord Kavanagh with terrifying authority but one determined father nearly defeated you."

I shot him a flat look. "I'd rather fight Kavanagh again."

We shared a brief laugh before returning to business. Another twenty minutes passed finalizing schedules for the construction.

When every detail had been settled, Beta Bastian rolled up the maps. "I'll inform the engineers and they will begin quietly with no unnecessary attention."

Once he left, the study became quiet again. I reached for the sealed letter resting on the edge of my desk.

Councilman Cedric's handwriting was unmistakable. I unfolded the parchment again and carefully read through his message concerning his upcoming visit.

His timing was unfortunate! With the border defenses, and the growing uncertainty surrounding Blackborne, a ball was the last thing I needed.

Still... Ignoring a councilman wasn't an option.

I folded the letter neatly as a knock echoed through the room. "Come in."

The door opened, Garrick entered with his usual relaxed stride before stopping in front of my desk.

"You asked me to look into something, Alpha." He folded his arms. "I spoke with quite a number of the warriors."

A grin appeared on his face. "They're unhappy because you don't let them do anything."

I couldn't help smiling as he continued. "They say you've made them inactive and dormant. They train, they patrol, they guard but they want more... they want battles because they want to fight."

A quiet chuckle escaped me. "Beta Bastian informed me yesterday that he dismissed a warrior for seeking exactly that."

Garrick laughed. "I heard but they're just young men who trained their entire lives but they finally became warriors and now they're protecting peaceful roads."

He shrugged as he continued. "They're acting like horny young boys desperate to prove themselves."

I laughed despite myself.

"So you shouldn't worry, unless they start causing trouble... but they simply want blood and they think that's what warriors are supposed to chase."

His words weren't entirely wrong. Peace was often harder for soldiers than war.

Finally, Garrick's expression became serious. "There's one more thing."

"What is it?"

"If Alpha William decides to attend the ball..." He watched me carefully. "...what's your plan Alpha?"

I remained silent for several moments then I looked toward the window overlooking Blackborne.

Whatever William intended... Whatever game he was playing...I would not be caught unprepared.

I turned back to Garrick. "Let him come, we'll be ready for him."

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"You promised." My voice came out firmer than I intended.

Grenzy barely spared me a glance. He continued pacing lazily around the tiny servants' chamber, one hand rubbing the back of his neck while the other rested inside the pocket of his worn trousers.

The room smelled faintly of wood polish and damp linen. Ash lounged on the lower bunk with one leg hanging over the side while Jett leaned against the wall with his arms folded, watching the exchange with obvious amusement.

I had come all the way here during my short break for one reason... To remind Grenzy about the revolution meeting that evening.

Instead, he had greeted me with a refusal before I had even finished explaining.

"I'm not coming," Grenzy said flatly.

I blinked. "What do you mean you're not coming?"

"I mean exactly what I said."

"But you promised me."

He shrugged. "I know..."

"You gave me your word."

"And I changed my mind." He said and for a moment I simply stared at him.

This was the same man I had fought to free from the dungeon.

The same man who had apologized for everything that had happened between us.

The same man who had thanked me repeatedly after walking out of those cold prison cells. Now he could not even spare an evening.

"Grengy..." I stepped closer. "You know why this group exists."

"Do I?" He suddenly asked.

Before I could answer, Ash laughed from the bunk. "There... He said he's not coming so you can go now."

Jett smirked. "I told you she wouldn't convince him."

I looked from one man to the other. "So both of you agree with him?"

Ash stretched lazily. "We're not attending either."

"Why?"

"What exactly are you trying to achieve with this group of yours?"

His question hung in the room and I answered honestly. "Come tonight and you'll find out what it's all about."

Ash burst into laughter. "No! We'll save ourselves the trouble."

Jett nodded. "Besides..." He tilted his head thoughtfully. "...what if we simply report your little meetings to the headmaid?"

A slow smile spread across his face. "Imagine how pleased she'd be."

Ash joined in. "You've been very lucky lately but maybe your luck has finally run out."

I folded my arms. "She won't believe you."

"Oh?" Jett arched an eyebrow. "And why not?"

"Because she has no proof."

Ash chuckled. "Proof? We'll happily provide it."

Their mockery slowly chipped away at my patience. I had come here hoping to gain three more supporters but instead I had become entertainment.

Something inside me snapped. "You both know better! You can laugh all you want, you can mock me, you can pretend none of this concerns you but deep down..."

I pointed at each of them. "...every one of you hates the vampires."

None of them answered.

"You've seen what they've done, you've heard the stories, you've watched daughters disappear, you've watched parents cry, you've watched families destroyed."

My voice rose with every sentence. "The only reason you're pretending none of it matters...is because you're afraid."

Ash's smile faded slightly while Jett's expression hardened but I still continued.

"You're afraid of the rulers, you're afraid of the nobles and you're afraid of the system that has spent years convincing us we're weaker than the vampires."

I took another step toward them. "But we're not! No one is born believing they're powerless. People are taught to believe it and the longer you keep believing it...the longer they'll continue doing whatever they want with us."

Grengy lowered his gaze, Ash looked away while Jett remained stubbornly silent.

I waited but no one spoke so eventually I exhaled. "I've said what I came to say."

I turned toward the door. "When you're ready to stop living in fear...you know where to find us."

Without another word, I left.

—

The abandoned storeroom looked much livelier than it had only a few weeks earlier.

Someone had already lit the lanterns and their warm glow danced across the cracked wooden walls.

We currently have Twenty-five servants. I counted them almost immediately.

More than ever before, a smile tugged at my lips because we were obviously growing steadily.

Sally stood near the center, speaking calmly while several servants tried talking over one another.

"One person at a time." Her voice remained surprisingly firm. "We'll all get a chance to speak."

The chatter gradually died down. Sally was handling this surprisingly well.

Then she noticed me enter but merely gave a small nod and I returned it but things were still awkward between us.

Ever since I had threatened to expose her secret business, an invisible wall had settled between us.

We still worked together. We still discussed the group but our friendship hadn't fully recovered.

I hoped it eventually would.

Sally stepped aside. "You can continue."

I moved to the front. "Thank you all for coming."

Several familiar faces smiled back, others looked exhausted after long shifts yet every one of them had still chosen to come and that alone meant something.

Before saying anything else, Niamh handed me a small pouch. "The contributions."

I opened it carefully as the Bronze coins clinked softly together.

One of the servants had already counted them. "Two hundred and thirteen bronze coins."

A small sigh escaped me. "Which gives us...just over two silver coins."

Disappointment flickered across several faces but I quickly shook my head.

"No, Don't look discouraged. You all earned these coins through hard work and despite struggling yourselves...you still chose to contribute and that means more to me than the amount itself."

Several servants smiled as I continued again. "We'll need more but we'll get there."

I tied the pouch securely. "Now, our attention remains on the upcoming ball."

The room immediately became attentive.

"Only three days remain." I unfolded another parchment. "I've spent the past several days gathering information."

Curious whispers filled the room.

"I've identified seven noble families." I raised the parchment. "Their children were taken by the vampires either this year or during the last few tribute selections."

Several servants exchanged uneasy looks.

"They've suffered the pain of losing a child, They've lost and if anyone among the nobility understands our anger...it should be them."

I slowly read each family name aloud as everyone listened carefully.

"I want every one of you to memorize them as we are not approaching anyone else."

One servant raised a hand. "What if they ignore us?"

"We are not approaching them directly."

Another servant frowned. "Then how?"

I smiled before speaking. "We observe them first."

The room became completely silent as I continued explaining the plan.

"We will watch them and eavesdrop on their conversation if necessary."

Only after that did I pull several folded slips of parchment from my satchel. "These... They'll receive one."

Confused expressions spread around the room.

"They'll find them tucked inside their cloaks or tunics."

"A note?"

"Yes."

"What will it say?"

"It won't reveal who we are but It'll simply offer hope and If they truly seek vengeance against the vampires...they'll follow the instructions."

One servant frowned. "But couldn't they simply bring guards and have us arrested?"

"I've already thought about that."

Several people leaned forward.

"The first location won't be where we're waiting, instead, it'll only contain another note."

Murmurs filled the room.

"The second location, there would also be another note and the third would be the same."

I couldn't help smiling. "They'll have to follow several different instructions before ever reaching Sally and me."

Realization slowly spread across their faces.

"If someone isn't genuinely interested...they'll give up on the way. If they come only to trap us...the effort won't be worth it."

"But someone carrying genuine hatred toward the vampires?" I folded my arms. "They'll keep going."

Silence lingered then someone clapped softly and soon several servants were nodding in admiration.

"That's brilliant."

"They'll never find us immediately."

"We'll know they're serious."

I laughed quietly. "I hope so."

An older maid lifted both hands. "May the Moon Goddess bless this plan."

"Amen," several voices answered together.

The atmosphere warmed immediately. For the first time that evening... Hope outweighed fear.

After repeating every instruction once more and making sure everyone understood their individual responsibilities, I dismissed the meeting.

Groups slowly dispersed into the darkness and eventually only Sally and I remained.

Neither of us spoke for several seconds then finally I broke the silence. "I don't want us fighting."

She looked at me. "I never wanted that either."

I sighed. "I don't intend to expose your business. All I only want is your complete support for the group."

Sally studied me quietly before giving a small nod. "You have my complete support and I believe in what we're building."

Relief settled over me. "Thank you."

She offered the faintest smile. "Let's make sure all this risk amounts to something."

We walked back toward the servants' quarters together before separating near the bathing wing.

Later that night, after washing away the day's exhaustion in the shared bathing room, I wrapped my linen securely around myself and began walking back toward my chamber.

The corridors were unusually quiet that only the distant crackle of torches accompanied my footsteps.

I rounded a corner but suddenly, a powerful hand clamped around me.

Before I could scream, I was yanked violently into the darkness by an unknown force.

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I knew it was someone carrying me even before my feet touched the ground.

The arms around me were steady, warm, and impossibly familiar.

My first instinct was to struggle and the second was to breathe.

There was only one person whose scent could calm my wolf even while my mind protested.

The cool night breeze brushed against my damp skin as he finally lowered me gently onto solid stone.

I steadied myself before looking around and discovered we were no longer inside the castle.

Moonlight spilled across an old stone platform that stretched toward the cliffside. Moss had claimed parts of the weathered battlements, while vines crept over the cracked walls. Beyond them lay miles of forest, glowing silver beneath an almost full moon.

The sight stole the irritation from my face for a brief moment as the moon seemed larger and closer here.

Its pale light bathed everything around us, making the valley below look almost enchanted.

My wolf stirred immediately but not with aggression rather with longing.

The nearly full moon awakened something primal inside me, filling me with an indescribable sense of peace.

For several moments, I simply stood there, taking it all in.

Only when Alpha Kael's deep voice broke the silence did I remember why I had been angry in the first place.

"Do you like the view?"

I folded my arms stubbornly. "You literally dragged me out here without asking for my consent!"

He stepped beside me, his expression softer than I had seen in days. "I know."

"Ohhh, you know?" I asked in a sarcastic tone.

"I was trying to make up for last time." He said in a calm voice.

I looked away before he could see the tiny crack forming in my resolve.

He waited patiently, then asked again. "Do you like it?"

I sighed, watched the moon again before finally replying. "...I do."

His smile appeared slowly. "It'll be even more full and beautiful in a few days."

I looked back toward the moon. "When is that?"

"Probably on the night of the ball." He said and the reminder settled over both of us.

The ball is indeed just three days away and everything seems to revolve around it now.

Servants, Nobles, Councilmen, Preparations and Hidden dangers.

For a while, neither of us spoke as the wind carried the scent of pine trees toward us.

Far below, I could hear water rushing somewhere through the valley then I felt him move as his arms slipped gently around my waist from behind.

He rested his chin lightly near my shoulder and the sudden closeness made my heart flutter despite every effort to remain upset and the fact that I was only clad in my bathing linen wrapped weakly around my body.

"So..." His voice came quietly beside my ear. "Am I forgiven?"

I fought the smile threatening my lips. "No."

"Not even a little?" He asked again.

"No." I said firmly:

"I brought you somewhere beautiful..."

"It's still a no."

"And I apologize sincerely..."

"No." I repeated again.

His quiet chuckle vibrated against my back. "I'll need to try harder then."

I lifted my chin. "Much harder than just bringing me to watch the moon! It will take more than the moon viewing to forgive you."

He laughed again. "I suspected as much."

Then suddenly, he buried his face into my neck, before asking "What about now? Am I forgiven?"

"No!" I managed to say as I gulped down nothing in particular.

He suddenly went further by moving his hands along my waist, sending different sensations all over my body but still, I wasn't ready to give in.

"Can you forgive me now?" He asked again.

"You're not forgiven." I vehemently denied it.

The more I kept saying no... he kept digging deeper into seducing me with those hands of his.

When his fingers fell over my sex mound over my linen, I moaned silently as he started to kiss my neck and shoulder while his fingers began to move down there on me.

I couldn't help the thrill that jolted through my body.

"If you continue to move slowly, you will never be forgiven." I sinisterly muttered to him when I couldn't take the torture anymore.

I guess my words prompted him to roll my linen above my waist and began playing with my core using his fingers.

"Mmmhhehhh..." I moaned loudly without realizing while I also began caressing his arms.

"Please... stop teasing me." I spilled out without a second thought. I didn't know I had literally started pleading for more.

Alpha Kael immediately buried his finger into me the moment those words left my mouth.

The moon showed over us as the silent wind carried away my moans. "Fuck... this feels so intense!!"

Then I swiftly turned around and planted a kiss on his lips while Alpha Kael kneaded my bare ass as we continued to make out.

Then I suddenly disengaged, stepped back and slowly pulled off my linen completely to reveal my fully bare skin.

"FUCK..."Alpha Kael murmured visibly delighted at my naked body while I relished his reaction.

We immediately claimed each other's lips again, more passionately this time while we were busy caressing and fondling ourselves.

I still wanted more... so I aimed for his chausses, but Alpha Kael instantly lifted me from the ground using my ass and made me sit on his shoulders then he buried his face into my core.

He rested my back against the wall and began to lap my juices with his tongue.

I was instantly thrown into a fit of mad pleasure. "Oh gawd... it feels so fucking good..." I moaned while straddling his head more into my core.

He suddenly pulled his head back as he spoke. "This is an old battlement a distance from the castle and it's abandoned so you can moan all you want."

Once he said those words, he returned to licking and lapping on my core while I shook passionately. "Mmmhh... oh yeah... I want more..."

Eventually after a while, "Ahhh! I'M GONNA CUM..!" I moaned loudly as I reached climax while my whole body kept vibrating violently.

After calming down after some seconds, he gently placed me on the ground and lay next to me while cuddling me on the old stone battlement.

My breathing had returned to normal as the wind cooled my flushed cheeks.

Somewhere above us, clouds drifted lazily across the face of the moon.

I raised my head slightly up to stare at him as I uttered. "You know..." A grin spread across my face. "I think you're definitely more than forgiven."

He laughed quietly while I nudged him lightly with my shoulder.

"I still have one question for you."

He looked slightly at me. "What question?"

"Why is this place abandoned?"

He glanced around the crumbling battlement before smiling to himself. "My grandfather built it."

"But why?"

He stretched one arm behind his head. "He was convinced half the noble families wanted to overthrow him."

I couldn't help laughing. "What?"

"He truly believed they would march straight to the castle one day so he built another fortress...right beside the first one."

I laughed harder. "You're joking, right?"

"I'm not. He ordered workers to construct this entire battlement because he believed enemies were hiding behind every smile."

I looked around again at the thick stone walls, the old watch paths and the forgotten towers.

"So this entire place was built because your grandfather was paranoid?" I couldn't help but ask while laughing.

Alpha Kael laughed along with me. "That's one way of putting it."

"I can't believe it."

"Neither could my father." We both laughed until our sides hurt and the sound echoed softly across the empty stone walls before disappearing into the night.

Eventually the laughter faded as comfortable silence returned once more.

I watched the stars overhead as there were so many tonight and without thinking, I snake my hand down his body to his crotch area but before I could touch it, he gently caught my wrist.

I frowned as I whispered. "Kael... why do you keep stopping me?"

He didn't answer and instead, he abruptly stood up while his expression had changed. "We should leave."

I stared at him, clearly pissed by his rejection while he avoided my eyes as frustration bubbled quietly inside me.

There he was again... Pulling away just when I felt we had finally broken through the invisible wall between us.

I couldn't understand him. Why couldn't he allow us to go fully intimate?

If he wanted distance, why bring me here?

If he wanted closeness, why always stop before either of us truly understood where we stood?

The questions swirled endlessly inside my head but neither of us spoke as I wrapped the linen securely around my body.

When I finished, Alpha Kael turned toward me. "Come here."

I stepped closer without complaint as he lifted me effortlessly into his arms.

The familiar rush of wind returned as he sped through the sleeping castle grounds with the speed only an Alpha possessed.

Trees blurred into streaks of shadow as the cold air whipped past us.

Within moments, the servants' quarters came into view and he slowed only after reaching the entrance.

Carefully, he set me back on my feet and I opened my mouth to say something but suddenly froze in shock.

Standing a short distance from the entrance was the headmaid.

She wasn't surprised, she wasn't angry as she simply stood there with her hands folded behind her back.

Her eyes shifted briefly from me to Alpha Kael and without saying a single word, she gave him one small nod.

Then she turned and walked away.

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One more day... Just one more day until the ball everyone in the castle seemed incapable of talking about.

If anyone had asked me weeks ago whether I wanted nobles, councilmen, and Alphas from neighboring packs crowding into Blackbourne Castle, I would've answered with an immediate no. Yet now, I found myself polishing decorations for the very event I dreaded.

Every servant looked ready to collapse, the kitchens never rested, and the laundresses barely sat.

The stable hands worked through the afternoon without complaint.

As for us maids.... We were doing the work of three people each.

There was no proper rotation anymore, no breaks, and no chance to even catch our breath.

By the time the afternoon sun began sinking, my legs felt like they belonged to someone else.

Marquee rubbed her aching shoulder.

"I swear," she muttered, "if Sera asks me to polish another silver tray, I'm throwing myself into the moat."

I laughed weakly. "You won't."

"I won't," she admitted. "But I'll think about it very seriously."

We shared a tired smile before quietly slipping away from the kitchen.

The servants were too busy rushing between tasks to notice us disappear.

We ducked into an empty storage room where someone had left two wooden stools beside a barrel.

Marquee shut the door gently. "I think we've earned this."

From beneath her apron she produced two wooden goblets filled with ale.

I stared at her. "You stole those."

"I borrowed them."

"Without asking." I pointed out.

"They'll never notice anyway." She says as she hands me one before tearing a chunk from a small loaf of bread.

I accepted both with more gratitude than pride. "I haven't eaten since sunrise," I admitted.

"Neither have I." Marquee added with a small chuckle.

We sat quietly, chewing our bread as though it were a royal feast.

The ale was warm while the bread was hard. Yet at that moment it tasted wonderful.

Every few seconds one of us peeked toward the cracked doorway to make sure no footsteps were approaching.

Marquee suddenly stopped chewing. "You know..."

"What?" I asked, still focusing on my bread.

"You do eat like a noblewoman." She said, taking me aback for a moment.

I blinked in fear that my cover had been blown. "What do you mean by that?"

She demonstrated dramatically by straightening her back. "You hold your bread with your fingertips."

"I do not." I quickly argued.

"You do." She replied as she mimicked me so perfectly that I burst into laughter.

"You even chew politely." She said softly.

"I can't help it because that's just how I am naturally." I said with a shrug.

"You really can't."

I sighed as the thought circulated my head. I've been living as a maid for months and apparently I still haven't forgotten some royal habits."

Marquee smirked and snapped me out of my thoughts. "I actually do like how you eat."

She laughed again as she added. "If anyone watched us now, they'd think you were pretending to be a servant."

"I am a servant." Before I could say more, the door burst open.

"Aah!" Both of us nearly dropped our goblets as a familiar head poked inside.

"What exactly do you two think you're doing?" Sera's sharp eyes swept across the room.

Marqee immediately hid the ale behind her back while I stood so quickly I nearly stumbled.

"We were just—"

"Eating?" Sera finished as she cut me off.

Neither of us answered as she folded her arms.

"The kitchens are overflowing with work and you're hiding." She scolded.

"We only came for five minutes."

She sighed dramatically. "You two never cease to amaze me."

I gave her my most innocent smile. "We were starving... You've worked us since dawn."

"Not me," she corrected. "It's the headmaid."

"Yes... we are aware."

"So complain to her." She said with a shrug.

"I'd rather stay alive." I quickly said.

That finally earned a small smile from Sera just then, instead of scolding us continuously, however, she simply held up an enormous loaf of fresh bread.

To my surprise, even she seemed exhausted as the corners of her eyes carried deep shadows

"The stress isn't easy at all. I need to eat too plus I won't judge the both of you." Sera said as she sat down beside us.

Marquee whispered under her breath. "I think she almost feels sorry for us."

"I heard that."

Marquee immediately straightened. "Sorry..."

For the first time all afternoon, laughter filled the tiny room. Even the Sera's lips twitched ever so slightly.

After another few moments, Sera leaned against the doorway. "I've never seen the castle this busy."

"You too?" I asked.

"I thought assistants had easier duties." I couldn't help but ask.

She laughed loudly. "Easier? I've barely sat down today."

"We're all suffering then."

"Exactly."

An idea suddenly came to me. "Sera..."

"Hm?"

"Will you and the headmaid be attending the ball tomorrow?"

She shrugged. "I don't know about her because she hasn't told me anything yet."

"What about you?" I asked.

"I've officially been dismissed for that day so I'm off work."

I blinked. "So you'll actually get to rest?"

A strange smile crossed her face. "Not exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll still be around but not working."

"So why stay behind?"

She hesitated before speaking, "I have... something to attend to at the ball."

Something in the way she answered caught my attention. She wasn't lying but she definitely has something underneath her sleeves.

Before I could ask another question— Voices suddenly echoed down the corridor.

"They're coming," Marquee whispered. We all immediately scattered as Sera slipped out first while Marquee hurried toward another exit.

I grabbed the remaining bread before following behind.

By evening, the main hall finally looked complete. Black and silver decorations stretched from pillar to pillar.

Hundreds of candles stood ready to be lit. Fresh flowers filled enormous stone vases. The entire room looked nothing like the gloomy hall every one had described Blackbourne balls to be.

As exhausted as I was... I couldn't deny it looked beautiful.

The headmaid finally dismissed us. "You'll report before sunrise tomorrow."

A chorus of tired acknowledgements answered her.

Marquee groaned beside me. "I'm going to sleep for an entire week after this ball."

"If they let you."

"They'd better." We laughed quietly before parting ways.

She headed toward our chamber while I had barely taken a few steps when Sera approached. "The headmaid wants to see you."

My heart skipped. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Just go." She offered no further explanation as she walked away.

I found the headmaid standing alone in one of the smaller workrooms.

She didn't look up immediately. Instead, she carefully folded a piece of linen before speaking. "Close the door."

I immediately obeyed as Silence settled between us.

Finally... She looked directly at me. "Tell me something."

"Yes headmaid?"

"How did the Moon Goddess decide to match you with Alpha Kael?"

Every muscle in my body froze. "...What?"

She studied my expression. "I asked a simple question."

"How..." My voice barely worked. "...how do you know?"

A quiet chuckle escaped her. "You'd be surprised how many things people believe are secrets."

She walked slowly toward me. "This castle talks... It always has and it always will."

I swallowed. "You aren't... angry?"

"Should I be?"

"I don't know."

She shook her head. "I have no intention of standing between mates."

Relief washed through me.

"But..." My heart tightened again as she looked toward the window. "Don't make the mistake of believing the bond alone guarantees a happy ending."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Too many young wolves think finding their mate means every hardship disappears." She smiled sadly. "It doesn't."

I searched her face carefully as the sadness there seemed far older than anything I had witnessed before.

Without thinking... I asked, "Is it because of your daughter?"

She became completely still. For several long seconds... She simply stared at me.

Then... Very slowly... She shook her head. "I made that same mistake years ago."

Her voice had grown quieter. "If I hadn't..." She looked down at her hands. "...I wouldn't be where I am today."

She offered nothing more and neither did I press further because some wounds didn't need questions.

As I turned toward the door, I paused. "I'm sorry..." She looked up as I added. "...about your daughter."

Her eyes softened only slightly. "Thank you."

I quietly left the room as the bathing room was unusually crowded that evening.

Steam filled the air as servants hurried to wash before collapsing into bed.

I had barely stepped inside when someone touched my arm.

I turned and discovered it's Niamh. She leaned close enough that no one else could hear. "Everything's ready."

In a whisper I asked. "What is?"

She glanced around carefully before whispering, "Everyone has been assigned specific nobles to watch tomorrow."

A smile slowly spread across my face. "Everything has been prepared?" I asked and she nodded.

"Every servant knows exactly which noble they're responsible for." She stated.

Excitement and nervousness tangled together inside me. Tomorrow... Everything we'd been planning for weeks would finally begin.

All we had to do now...was wait for the main night.