

# Claimed By The Rival Alpha Chapter 7-10

**Selena**By morning, my arms already hurt. Apparently, cleaning castle kitchens involved far more scrubbing than I imagined.

I stood beside one of the massive wooden counters while wiping away spilled broth and flour from breakfast preparations. Around me, cooks barked instructions at one another while servants rushed in and out carrying trays.

The heat alone was unbearable.

"I swear she gets bigger every week," Marquee whispered beside me.

I nearly laughed knowing who she was referring to but I had to pretend by asking. "Who?"

"The headmistress."

I quickly lowered my head to hide my smile.

Marquee glanced around carefully before leaning closer. "She yelled at one poor servant for breathing too loudly yesterday."

"That's impossible."

"I witnessed it myself."

I snorted softly. The headmistress truly terrified everyone in the lower quarters. The woman stomped through hallways like a storm cloud, shouting at servants over the smallest mistakes.

No one disobeyed her. Ever.

"She wasn't always like this though," Marquee added quietly while scrubbing a pot. "At least that's what older servants say."

"What happened?"

Marquee's smile faded slightly. "She lost her mate and son."

My movements slowed.

"To rogues," she continued softly. "During a hunting trip years ago."

The humor disappeared from me instantly. "Oh."

"They say Alpha Kael personally brought their bodies home himself." Marquee sighed. "Afterward, he gave her permanent work inside the castle and made sure she was cared for."

I blinked slightly. "That was kind of him."

Marquee nodded. "The Alpha takes care of people loyal to him."

That surprised me more than it should have. Kael rarely appeared warm or soft. Everything about him screamed control, discipline, danger.

Yet beneath all that... perhaps there was more.

Before I could think further, another servant burst into the kitchen excitedly. "You all won't believe what happened!"

Everyone immediately looked toward her.

"What now?" one cook groaned.

The maid looked breathless with excitement. "The Alpha captured an entire feral horde!"

Several servants gasped loudly while I froze as something sharp had pulsed through the mate bond earlier that morning. Strong emotions. Intensity. I had felt it briefly before pushing it aside while working.

Now I understand why.

Marquee immediately grabbed the maid's arm. "What happened?"

The girl practically bounced with excitement. "There were hundreds of them near the northern border!"

"Hundreds?" someone repeated in horror.

"Yes! And Alpha Kael trapped them without sacrificing warriors!"

That caught my full attention immediately. "How?" I asked before I could stop myself.

The maid dramatically lowered her voice. "They say he created some impossible trap and captured them all alive."

Marquee shook her head with admiration. "I told you," she muttered toward me. "The Alpha is terrifyingly intelligent."

The maid nodded eagerly. "One merchant claimed Alpha Kael once dismantled an infamous rogue group using only five warriors."

"I heard that story too," another servant added quickly. "Those rogues terrorized trade roads for years before Blackbourne wiped them out."

The cooks began loudly discussing Kael's battle tactics while servants exchanged increasingly exaggerated stories about him.

Apparently, my mate was becoming some sort of legendary war strategist. Not that he would ever admit it himself.

Then suddenly—

"I heard the Nightbane pack caused the feral attack."

The statement instantly silenced me, making my head snapped toward the servant who spoke. "What do you mean?" I asked too quickly.

The servant shrugged. "That's what some warriors are saying."

Cold unease spread through me immediately.

Father was here? I wiped my hands quickly. "I need to leave for a moment."

The headmistress appeared seemingly from nowhere. "No."

I nearly jumped.

"You finish your work first," she snapped.

"It's urgent."

"So is this kitchen."

I clenched my jaw quietly. Minutes dragged painfully afterward while my thoughts spiraled endlessly.

Father came to Blackbourne? Did he know I was here? What happened at the border?

Then suddenly movement near the hallway caught my attention. Alpha Kael.

He walked beside Beta Bastien while discussing something quietly. Even from across the room, his presence immediately pulled at the mate bond and my chest tightened instinctively.

As though sensing my gaze, Kael looked toward the kitchen and our eyes locked.

Again, everything around me faded briefly as the bond pulsed warmly and intensely.

Then Marquee elbowed me sharply. "Stop staring at the Alpha like that," she whispered urgently.

I looked away immediately but determination had already settled inside me. I need answers right now.

A few moments later, while carrying a stack of metal bowls toward the washing station, I intentionally let one slip badly against my palm.

Pain shot through my hand instantly and I hissed sharply in pain as blood appeared immediately across the cut.

Marquee gasped. "Selena!"

The headmistress stormed over instantly. "What happened now?"

"I cut myself," I muttered.

She groaned dramatically. "Of course you did."

"It hurts badly," I added weakly.

She inspected the cut with annoyance. "You'll live."

"Can I rest a few minutes?"

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously before she sighed heavily. "Five minutes. Then return."

That was all I needed. The moment she walked away, I slipped out quickly.

Castle guards filled several hallways now, likely because of whatever happened earlier at the border. Still, I managed to avoid most of them by following servant corridors Marquee showed me the previous night.

My heart pounded harder the higher I climbed. Then— I collided directly into a solid chest as strong hands steadied me instantly before I could fall.

Alpha Kael.

His expression looked completely unsurprised. "You're terrible at sneaking," he said flatly.

I stepped back quickly. "You knew I was coming?"

"Perhaps." He said with a shrug of his shoulders.

I crossed my arms stubbornly. "Then answer my questions."

"Why would I want to do that?" He asked almost with a smirk.

Frustration immediately rose inside me. "What happened at the border?"

"Nothing concerning you."

"My father was there, wasn't he?"

Kael remained silent and that confirmed enough already.

"He came looking for me," I guessed aloud.

Still silence from him which made my stomach tightened.

"And he threatened you because Nightbane is stronger than Blackbourne."

That did it. Kael suddenly grabbed my arm and pinned me against the wall making heat explode instantly between us again.

Every single time he touched me, my entire body reacted embarrassingly fast.

His face lowered dangerously close to mine. "Do not test my patience," he warned darkly.

My breathing became uneven despite myself. "Then satisfy my curiosity," I whispered back.

For several tense seconds, he simply stared at me then suddenly he released me.

"Come." He grabbed my wrist and dragged me down the corridor toward his office. The moment we entered, he shut the door behind us.

"What happened?" I asked immediately.

Kael leaned against his desk with crossed arms. "Your father came searching for you."

My chest tightened.

"He demanded access into Blackbourne territory." His jaw hardened slightly. "And I refused."

I blinked.

"He left after threatening me."

"What kind of threat?"

Kael shrugged carelessly. "The usual Alpha nonsense."

But something told me he was downplaying it. I stepped closer slowly. "He'll sell me the moment he gets me back."

The words hurt to say aloud.

Kael's expression darkened slightly. "You are safe here."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I said so."

The confidence in his voice strangely eased part of my fear. Kael always sounded certain. Dangerously certain.

I studied him quietly for a moment before curiosity returned. "Did you truly capture hundreds of feral wolves without battle?"

He looked mildly annoyed now. "That story spread quickly."

"So it's true?"

"It wasn't my first time handling ferals."

That was not an answer but judging by his expression, it was the only one I would get.

Silence stretched briefly between us afterward then the question weighing on me finally slipped out. "What are we supposed to do about the mate bond?"

Kael immediately returned to reviewing papers on his desk and ignoring me completely.

My irritation rose instantly. "Why don't you want to claim me?"

He still kept shut and focused on the papers on his desk.

"You keep pretending it doesn't exist."

Still no response from him and anger flared hotter inside me now. "Are you always this frustrating?"

Kael still continued reading calmly and that did it. I reached forward and deliberately disrupted the organized parchments across his desk making the papers scattered everywhere.

His hand instantly caught my wrist. So fast that before I could react, he pulled me forward and pinned me against the desk instead and a sharp gasp escaped me.

His body pressed against mine while one hand trapped both my wrists above my head.

"Stop provoking me," he warned quietly.

My pulse raced wildly but instead of fear— it was excitement. Dangerous excitement.

Kael leaned closer slowly until his mouth hovered near my ear. "Tell me something, Selena."

The deep sound of his voice sent heat through my body immediately. "Do you truly want me to claim you?"

My breath caught instantly and suddenly, that dream from last night flashed violently through my mind.

His hands, his mouth and the way he touched me made every fiber in my body scream the same answer.

Yes.

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**Selena**

My entire body screamed yes but the moment the word nearly left my mouth, panic snapped through me and I pushed hard against Kael's chest but he barely moved.

His grip tightened slightly around my wrists while his dark eyes stayed fixed on mine.

"Answer me," he murmured.

The low sound of his voice sent another dangerous wave of heat through me.

"I—"No. I swallowed quickly and turned my face away.

Kael leaned closer instead."Do you want me to claim you, Selena?"

The question sounded heavier this time. It was more intimate, more dangerous and I refused to answer.

My heart hammered wildly while the mate bond pulsed between us like living fire. Every instinct inside me wanted to surrender to it completely.

But another part of me remained terrified. Not of him but of how much I wanted him already.

His gaze slowly dropped downward then suddenly narrowed."What happened to your hand?"

I blinked, realizing my injured palm still rested trapped between his larger hands. During all the chaos and tension, I had forgotten about the cut completely.

"It's nothing."

His expression hardened instantly. "It's bleeding."

"I'm fine."

Instead of releasing me, Kael immediately pulled my hand closer to inspect it properly.

The possessiveness in his expression caught me completely off guard. "Who did this?"

I stared at him. "It was an accident."

"How?"

"I cut myself while working."

His jaw tightened sharply. "You shouldn't be handling kitchen blades carelessly."

I almost laughed. "You were the one who threw me into servant work."

"And now you're injured." The irritation in his voice sounded strangely personal.

Before I could respond, Kael released my wrists and walked toward one of the cabinets inside the office. He returned moments later carrying cloth and medicine.

"You don't have to do that," I muttered.

"Sit." The command left little room for argument.

Reluctantly, I sat on the edge of his desk while he knelt slightly in front of me to clean the cut.

The closeness made my pulse race all over again. His fingers wrapped carefully around my hand while he cleaned the blood away with surprising gentleness.

"You're awfully protective for someone pretending not to care," I murmured quietly.

His eyes flicked toward me briefly. "I protect what belongs in my territory."

The words should not have affected me the way they did but they did.

The mate bond intensified painfully with every touch between us. Warmth spread through my chest while my wolf practically purred beneath my skin.

Kael clearly felt it too as I saw the tension in his shoulders, the restraint in every movement yet somehow, he still ignored it.

"How are you doing that?" I whispered.

"Doing what?"

"Pretending this bond means nothing."

His fingers paused briefly against my skin then continued wrapping the bandage. "It means something," he admitted quietly.

"Then why don't you want me?" The question slipped out more vulnerable than I intended it to be.

Kael finally looked directly at me, his expression remained unreadable. "I don't need distractions."

"Distractions from what?"

He stood immediately afterward, avoiding the question entirely, making frustration rise inside me again. "You keep saying things halfway."

"And you ask too many questions."

I crossed my arms stubbornly. "You're my mate. I deserve answers."

His eyes darkened slightly at the word mate. For one dangerous moment, I thought he might kiss me.

Instead, he stepped back. "You should return to work."

The dismissal hurt more than it should have. I slowly climbed off the desk. Then, just as I reached the door, Kael's voice stopped me. "One more thing."

I turned back. "No one can know about the mate bond."

My chest tightened instantly. "What?"

"Not the servants. No one." The coldness in his tone shattered something quietly inside me.

"You're ashamed of me?"

His jaw flexed slightly. "This has nothing to do with shame."

"Then what does it have to do with?"

"Just go." I stared at him but he offered nothing else. There's no comfort, and no explanation.

My wolf ached painfully as I left his office. He would not claim me but he would not reject me either and somehow, that felt even worse.

When I finally returned to the kitchen, Marquee immediately hurried toward me.

"I covered your duties," she whispered quickly before the headmistress noticed us talking.

Relief washed through me instantly. "Thank you."

"You owe me."

I smiled faintly for the first time that day.

The rest of the work passed painfully slowly afterward until evening finally arrived.

By the time Marquee and I returned to our shared chamber, exhaustion dragged heavily through my entire body.

And there, sitting on her bed quietly, was Sally crying. The moment she noticed us entering, she immediately wiped her tears and turned away.

"I'm fine," she muttered before either of us spoke.

Marquee exchanged a look with me but said nothing.

I slowly approached anyway. "What happened?"

"Nothing." Her voice sounded rough.

"You were crying."

"I said I'm fine." The sharpness in her tone made me step back slightly.

Then suddenly Sally stood and walked out of the room entirely. The silence she left behind felt heavy.

Marquee sighed softly. "Her sister was taken."

I froze. "What?"

"This year's royalties."

The words made my stomach twist instantly.

"She was among the women sent east."

Anger surged through me immediately and I sat slowly on my bed. "How old was she?"

"Nineteen." Marquee looked down quietly. "Sally hasn't been herself."

Neither of us spoke for a moment then eventually I whispered, "What do you think happens to them?"

Marquee's face paled slightly. "I don't know."

But I did or at least, I knew the stories. The horrifying tales every werewolf child grew up hearing about vampires.

Monsters without mercy. Creatures who toyed with life because they themselves no longer possessed it.

I imagined terrified girls dragged into dark castles far from home. Alone, powerless and possibly dead already.

Hatred burned hot inside my chest towards the vampires, towards every Alpha who allowed it and towards my father most of all.

"How can they keep letting this happen?" I muttered angrily.

Marquee looked toward me carefully. "Because everyone fears the vampires."

"That doesn't make it right."

"No," she admitted quietly. "It doesn't."

The rest of the day blurred together afterward as it was just cleaning, scrubbing and carrying endless buckets.

My arms felt ready to fall off by sunset. At one point, while dragging wet clothes across one of the castle hallways, I genuinely thought I might collapse.

Marquee laughed softly beside me. "Where exactly were you raised?"

I nearly answered honestly before catching myself. "A quiet place."

"That explains a lot."

I glared weakly at her. "I think my bones are dying."

"That's because you scrub like an elderly woman."

Before I could respond, one of the headmistress' enforcers stormed toward us.

"What is this?" he barked loudly. "You call this cleaning?"

I straightened immediately as the tall servant snatched the cloth from my hands aggressively.

"Look there!" he snapped, pointing dramatically toward a barely visible streak near the wall.  
"Completely filthy!"

"It's hardly noticeable," I muttered tiredly.

Wrong answer because his face twisted instantly. "Excuse me?"

"I said—"

"You servants grow lazier every season," he interrupted loudly enough for nearby workers to hear.  
"Worthless little—"

Anger flared instantly inside me. No one had ever spoken to me this way before. My wolf stirred aggressively beneath my skin as I stepped forward slightly. "You don't get to yell at me like—"

"Like what?" he sneered.

I was seconds away from exploding when another voice cut through the hallway sharply. "She cleaned the entire corridor herself."

It was Sally.

The enforcer turned toward her immediately. "And who asked you to speak?"

"You're making too much noise," Sally replied coldly. "If the hallway bothers you so much, clean it yourself."

The servant looked genuinely stunned then uncomfortable. Finally, after muttering curses under his breath, he stormed away.

Silence followed briefly then I looked toward Sally in surprise. "Thank you."

She shrugged carelessly. "He annoyed me by making too much noise. I didn't do it for you." With that, she walked away.

Still—She defended me and somehow, that mattered.

Night eventually settled over Blackbourne. I expected everyone to sleep immediately after work ended.

Instead, Marqee suddenly pulled out a plain white dress. "Get changed."

I blinked. "Why?"

"There's a memorial tonight."

"For what?"

Her expression softened sadly. "The Lost Sisters' Lament."

Something about the name alone made my chest tighten.

Marqee handed me the dress. "It's for the women sent to the vampires."

I changed quietly afterward.

When we finally reached the pack square, hundreds of wolves already gathered around a massive bonfire.

Every single person wore white. There were Mothers, Fathers, Brothers, and Sisters. The atmosphere felt painfully heavy. No laughter existed here tonight, only grief.

Soft music eventually began while voices slowly joined together in a mournful dirge.

The sound echoed through the square hauntingly beneath moonlight as several women openly cried.

One older man collapsed to his knees while clutching a piece of cloth against his chest.

Then someone began praying softly to the Moon Goddess. "Protect our daughters wherever they are..."

My throat tightened painfully. Standing there among grieving families, something inside me changed completely.

The sadness remained, the anger remained but beneath both emotions— Conviction began growing.

I stared into the fire while the mournful song continued around me and deep inside myself, I made a promise.

I was going to put an end to vampire oppression.

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Selena

It's been a week. I had survived an entire week in Blackbourne pack pretending to be someone else.

Some days, it almost felt believable. Other days, I feared everyone could somehow see through me.

The servants had slowly gotten used to my presence. Most of them were surprisingly kind despite my terrible cleaning skills and constant mistakes. They corrected me patiently whenever I mixed supplies or scrubbed things wrongly.

Others, however, seemed to enjoy making my life miserable, especially Thorin.

"I swear this girl has never held a cloth before," he mocked loudly while leaning against the kitchen counter.

The servants nearby snickered while I continued scrubbing the surface silently.

"Maybe she was raised by goats," his friend added.

More laughter followed, making my grip tightened around the wet rag.

Thorin irritated me beyond words. He constantly boasted about how he was supposedly born a Beta before "misfortune ruined his life." No one believed him. Not even Marqee.

"You smell too poor to be a Beta," one servant had once told him.

Unfortunately, that only made him more annoying. Now he stood behind me again while I cleaned the kitchen counters after supper preparations.

"You missed a spot," he said smugly.

"I didn't."

"You did."

"I didn't."

His friend leaned closer dramatically. "Careful, Thorin. She might attack you with the cloth."

The urge to slam his face into the counter nearly overwhelmed me. My wolf stirred aggressively beneath my skin.

It would have been so easy to end his life. One knife with one slash across his throat and I'm done.

The thought startled me slightly. Living among servants was apparently terrible for my patience.

I forced myself to breathe slowly instead. I could not expose myself by doing anything stupid. My safety depended entirely on keeping my identity hidden.

Even Kael's protection would become complicated if the castle discovered an Alpha princess worked among their servants.

Before Thorin could continue, two of the headmistress' enforcers entered the kitchen and instant silence followed.

Thorin immediately grabbed a bucket and pretended to work.

What a coward!

Marquee moved beside me moments later. "Ignore him," she whispered softly.

"I'm trying."

"He enjoys getting reactions."

"I noticed." I said and she offered me a sympathetic smile.

Marqee always tried making me feel better after incidents like this. But the truth was... Thorin did not truly matter to me.

Not compared to the thoughts constantly consuming my mind now. The thoughts of revolution, thoughts of freedom and resistance.

Ever since the Lost Sisters' Lament night, the idea refused to leave me alone. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became.

Someone had to fight back eventually. Why not me?

Father once told me stories about the creation of Nightbane pack when I was younger. Back then, our ancestors served another dominant pack as laborers and hunters.

Slaves in everything but name until the first Alpha of Nightbane rose against them. He created rebellion, awareness and conviction.

I remembered Father explaining it proudly. "If you want people to rise," he had once told me, "you must first make them believe they deserve better."

The memory hurts now because somehow, the same man who admired rebellion against oppression had willingly bowed to vampires.

But his lesson remained useful. If I wanted change—I needed people first.

That evening, after work finally ended, I quietly visited a few servant chambers downstairs.

Several younger maids immediately stiffened nervously when I entered. "Did you do it?" I asked softly.

One girl glanced anxiously toward the hallway before nodding. "We spread the word."

"And?"

Another servant bit her lip. "Most people laughed at us."

"Some told us to leave," another admitted quietly.

I nodded slowly as doubts were expected. Fear had ruled the werewolf realm too long already to the point that people do not believe anymore that vampires could be defeated.

"That's alright," I assured them. "Some will come."

The girls exchanged uncertain glances.

One finally whispered, "Do you really mean to fight vampires?"

"Yes."

The answer surprised even me with how certain it sounded.

They stared at me like I had lost my mind. Perhaps I had but I no longer cared.

Later, Marquee returned looking exhausted. The moment she entered our chamber, she pointed accusingly at me. "You're serious about this."

"Yes."

"You truly want to start a rebellion."

"Yes."

Marquee dropped onto her bed dramatically. "Selena, the vampires are monsters."

"So are rogues," I argued. "Yet wolves still fight them."

"That's different."

"How?"

"Because vampires always win."

I moved closer. "Only because everyone already believes they will."

She stared at me uncertainly. "You sound insane sometimes."

"My father used to tell me stories about rebellion," I murmured quietly. "Every powerful pack began because someone fought against something stronger."

Marquee shook her head slowly. "You really believe this can work?"

"I believe living like prey cannot continue forever."

Silence stretched briefly then finally I added softly, "Come to the meeting tonight."

She looked unconvinced.

"Just come," I urged. "Maybe then you'll understand."

Marqee sighed heavily. "Fine."

Relief washed through me instantly. At least I would not stand alone completely.

Later that afternoon, while carrying linens through the upper hallways, I spotted Beta Bastien speaking with several warriors near the stairwell.

But Kael was absent this time and a strange ache settled inside me at the realization.

It's been entirely five days and I have not seen him. It's quite ridiculous that worry quietly gnawed at me when I should have been relieved.

Where was he? Had he left the territory? Was he hurt? Busy? Ignoring me intentionally? Different thoughts kept running through my head.

I almost approached Beta Bastien to ask before stopping myself. That would look suspicious to every servant around.

And judging by Beta Bastien's sharp eyes, he probably won't give me a nice response so I kept walking instead.

Night eventually settled over Blackbourne. One by one, candles disappeared throughout servant quarters until silence slowly overtook the castle.

Then finally— "It's time," I whispered.

Marquee looked nervous immediately. "This is a terrible idea."

"Too late now."

We quietly slipped from our chamber and moved carefully through the dim hallways. Every small sound made my heart pound harder.

The old storeroom sat dangerously close to the headmistress' chamber, making it the last place anyone would expect secret gatherings. At least, that had been my logic.

As we approached, faint noises echoed through the corridor. It was voices and my heart leaped in joy instantly.

People really came. The thought of it made excitement surge through me.

I knew it. I knew wolves would listen if given the chance— Then another sound reached us. It was a moan.

Marquee froze beside me."What was that?"

The answer came quickly as we heard the skin smacking against skin echoed loudly from inside the storeroom followed by another breathless gasp.

I stared blankly hoping it's not what I'm thinking. "No..."

Marquee slowly pushed the door open.

And there, tangled together against old storage sacks in the corner of the room, was a half naked man and woman very aggressively proving they had absolutely no interest in revolution.

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**Selena**

The moment Marquee pushed the storeroom door open wider, the two servants inside gasped loudly.

The woman shrieked and scrambled to cover her chest with her dress while the man nearly tripped over himself trying to pull his trousers back up.

"What the hell?" he snapped breathlessly.

I stared at them in complete disbelief while Marquee looked horrified beside me. "You people are disgusting."

The woman pointed accusingly at us. "You can't just barge in on people!"

"This was supposed to be a meeting," I argued.

Both of them blinked at me. "A what?"

"A meeting," I repeated slowly. "I passed word around."

The man frowned while fastening his belt. "Nobody told me anything about a meeting."

The woman shook her head quickly. "Same here."

Confusion twisted inside me as I couldn't understand what's going on. "But I specifically asked people to spread the word."

"Well, clearly they failed," the man muttered.

Marquee pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration and I crossed my arms stubbornly. "Fine. Since you're already here, stay."

The pair exchanged confused looks. "Stay for what?" the woman asked cautiously.

I took a breath. "This meeting is about the vampires."

Instant discomfort crossed both their faces and the man immediately shook his head. "No."

"You haven't even heard what I want to say."

"I don't need to."

I stepped forward anyway. "For generations, wolves have allowed vampires to treat us however they want. They take our women every year and everyone just accepts it."

The woman shifted nervously. "You shouldn't talk about things like that."

"Why not?"

"Because it's dangerous," the man hissed.

"Living in fear is dangerous too." Neither of them looked convinced but I pushed harder.

"Think about it. Why should werewolves keep bowing to creatures we outnumber?"

The man barked out a humorless laugh. "Because those creatures can wipe out entire packs with just a blink of an eye."

"Only because nobody fights back properly."

The woman slowly backed toward the door. "You sound crazy."

"Maybe every revolutionary sounded crazy at first."

Marquee looked at me nervously. "Selena..."

But I kept going. "My people were not born to live under oppression," I said firmly. "And neither were yours."

The man sighed impatiently. "Look, servant girl, we came here to have fun not discuss suicide."

"It isn't suicide."

"It definitely sounds like it."

I clenched my jaw. "You really think this life is acceptable?"

The woman looked uncomfortable at every word. "What happened to those girls taken east is sad," she admitted quietly. "But what can anybody do about it?"

"Fight."

The man snorted. "Against vampires?"

"Yes."

He stared at me for a long moment before shaking his head slowly. "You've lost your mind."

Silence settled awkwardly afterward still, I remained hopeful that others would come. Hoping someone else would show up but more and more minutes passed and nobody came.

The excitement inside me slowly died as the storeroom remained painfully empty except for the four of us.

Finally, the woman sighed heavily. "We're leaving."

"Wait a little longer," I urged quickly.

"No." The man grabbed her hand immediately. "We want no part in this." Then they hurried out of the storeroom without another word.

The silence they left behind felt humiliating.

Marquee looked at me carefully. "We should go too."

I didn't answer immediately as my eyes remained fixed on the empty doorway. I truly thought people would come. At least a few or someone willing to listen.

Instead, I was left standing in an abandoned storeroom after interrupting two servants during sex. Wonderful!

"Selena," Marquee called gently. "A guard could catch us here."

"I know."

"You can try again another day."

I looked away bitterly. "It's normal," I muttered mostly to myself. "Movements don't happen instantly."

Marquee nodded quickly. "Exactly."

But somehow her constant consoling made me feel worse. Like she already pitied my failure.

Eventually, I sighed heavily and walked toward the door. That night, sleep barely came.

The following morning felt heavy from the moment I opened my eyes.

Marquee quietly dressed for work while humming softly to herself. I sat on my bed still thinking about the failed meeting.

Maybe I pushed too hard too quickly. Maybe fear truly ruled everyone more deeply than I thought.

The chamber door suddenly creaked open and Sally entered. She looked exhausted. Apparently, she had not slept in the room last night at all.

Without saying a word, she walked toward her bed and began getting ready for work.

I hesitated briefly before standing. "Sally."

She glanced toward me without interest. "What?"

"I wanted to thank you."

"For what?"

"For helping me yesterday with the enforcer."

Her expression remained unreadable. "He annoyed me."

"Still," I said softly. "You defended me."

She shrugged.

I awkwardly searched for something else to say then suddenly words slipped out before I could stop them. "I had a friend once."

That caught her attention slightly.

"She was supposed to be sent to the vampires."

Marqee quietly looked toward me.

"But she ran away," I continued carefully.

The words hurt more than expected because I wasn't truly talking about some imaginary friend. I was talking about myself.

About my best friend back home, I wondered every single night what she thought of me now.

Whether she believed I abandoned her or if she hated me for escaping alone.

"I wonder sometimes," I murmured softly, "if she thinks I forgot about her."

Sally's face remained cold. "That was stupid."

I blinked. "What?"

"Running away was stupid."

My chest tightened slightly at her words.

"She'll be hunted forever now," Sally continued flatly. "That's a miserable way to live."

The bluntness in her voice stung unexpectedly. Before I could answer, Sally grabbed her supplies and walked out.

Marquee sighed softly once the door shut. "She's hurting."

"I know."

But Sally's words echoed painfully in my head anyway. 'Hunted forever.' Maybe she was right.

The servant hallways buzzed strangely that morning as people kept whispering, some were staring or pointing subtly at me when they thought I wasn't looking.

I'm sure news about the failed secret meeting had clearly spread already as I noticed servants lowering their voices whenever I walked past.

Some looked amused while others looked nervous.

Attention meant awareness. Awareness could eventually become belief. I just needed time.

While organizing cleaning clothes later that morning, one of the headmistress' assistants approached me stiffly. "She wants you."

My stomach tightened immediately while Marquee looked worried.

I followed the assistant quietly toward the headmistress' office.

The woman sat silently behind her desk when I entered. She didn't speak, she simply kept staring at me.

The silence stretched unbearably long until my nerves prickled.

Finally, she folded her hands together. "Where are you from?"

I forced calmness into my expression. "A small pack near the edge of the realm."

"What pack?"

"Ashgrove." The lie came easily now.

"And your parents?"

"They were farmers."

"What happened to them?"

I lowered my gaze slightly. "Rogues killed them."

The headmistress studied me carefully for several seconds then she leaned back in her chair.

"I've been hearing interesting things about you."

My heartbeat quickened slightly. "What kind of things?"

"Daring things." I stayed silent as she continued watching me with those sharp unsettling eyes.

"I hope they're either untrue," she said calmly, "or simply jokes."

"They were jokes," I answered quickly.

The woman nodded once. "You should be careful."

Something about her tone unsettled me deeply.

"There are jokes," she continued slowly, "that can plant dangerous ideas inside people's minds."

A chill slid down my spine. "Yes, Headmistress."

"You may leave."

I quickly exited the office afterward. As I walked back through the hallways, I found myself wondering again why everyone feared that woman so much.

There was something deeply intimidating about her silence alone.

I had barely returned to the servant wing when a guard entered the hallway.

"The Alpha requests a maid to bring him water."

One of the senior maids immediately stepped forward. "I'll take—"

The guard ignored her and pointed directly at me.

"The Alpha specifically requested her."