

Exchanging Vows: The Swapped Wife Is a Top Shaman

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Ivy's Point of View

Before Luna Helena could compose herself, a knock came at the door.

A servant entered and bowed. "Luna Helena, Young Madam. Alpha Alaric requests your presence in the main hall. Physician Aldric as well."

Luna Helena wiped her eyes quickly. "Did he say why?"

"No, my Luna. Only that it's urgent."

I helped Luna Helena to her feet. She looked fragile in that moment. Broken. Like a woman watching her son die inch by inch with no power to stop it.

If only she knew the truth.

But I couldn't tell her. Not yet. Not until I had proof.

We followed the servant through the estate, Aldric walking ahead of us with his bag of instruments. His posture was relaxed. Confident. The posture of a man who knew exactly what was about to happen.

My stomach churned with dread.

The main hall was already crowded when we arrived.

Alpha Alaric sat in his high-backed chair at the head of the room. His face was unreadable as always. A stone wall that gave nothing away.

But it was the others that made my heart sink.

Margot stood near the Alpha's right side, her eyes bright with barely concealed excitement. Vivienne was there too, positioned slightly behind her, wearing that same

calculating expression. Bastian stood with his arms crossed, looking smug. And Seraphina clung to his arm, her face arranged in false concern.

The elders of the Silvermoon Pack lined the walls. Gray-haired men and women who had served the pack for decades. They watched the proceedings with solemn expressions.

This was a trap.

I could feel it in my bones.

Luna Helena sensed it too. Her hand found mine and squeezed tight.

"Ah, there you are." Margot's voice rang out across the hall. "We've been waiting."

Alpha Alaric gestured for us to come forward. "Physician Aldric. I've called you here to give a full report on my son's condition."

Aldric bowed. "Of course, Alpha."

"Speak plainly. Leave nothing out."

Aldric straightened and cleared his throat. His voice carried easily through the silent hall.

"I have just completed my weekly examination of the heir. I regret to inform you that his condition has not improved. In fact, it appears to have worsened since my last visit."

Murmurs rippled through the elders.

"The damage to his brain is extensive," Aldric continued. "Far beyond what we initially assessed. Despite six months of treatment, there has been no sign of recovery. No response to stimuli. No improvement in brain function."

"And your prognosis?" Alpha Alaric's voice was flat.

Aldric paused. Let the silence stretch.

"The heir has days remaining. Perhaps a few weeks at most." He bowed his head. "I recommend that the Alpha and Luna begin making arrangements."

Luna Helena made a small sound of anguish beside me.

I wanted to scream. To expose Aldric for the fraud he was. To tell everyone that he had been deliberately sabotaging Dominic's recovery.

But I couldn't. Not without proof. Not without revealing myself.

So I stood there, silent, as my husband was pronounced dead before he'd even stopped breathing.

Margot stepped forward, her face arranged in an expression of false sympathy. "How tragic. Truly tragic." She turned to Alpha Alaric. "But we must think of the pack now. The Silvermoon Pack cannot remain without a proper heir."

Alpha Alaric's eyes narrowed. "What are you suggesting?"

"Only what everyone is already thinking." Margot spread her hands. "Dominic is dying. He will never wake up. The heir title cannot remain on a man who will soon be dead."

"Watch your tongue." Alpha Alaric's voice was cold.

Margot didn't flinch. "I mean no disrespect. I'm simply being practical. The pack needs stability. The pack needs certainty. And right now, we have neither."

Vivienne stepped forward to support her. "Lady Margot speaks wisely. We've consulted every renowned physician in the kingdom. Every shaman. Every healer. They all say the same thing. Dominic shows no signs of recovery."

"The succession must be addressed," Margot pressed. "Bastian is young, healthy, and capable. He's already proven himself as a leader. Why continue to delay the inevitable?"

The elders began nodding. Whispering among themselves.

"The lady has a point," one elder spoke up. "The heir title carries great weight. It cannot remain attached to someone who may die at any moment."

"It creates uncertainty," another agreed. "Other packs will see us as weak. Vulnerable."

"A succession ceremony should be performed," a third added. "For the good of the pack."

I watched Bastian's face. He was trying to look somber. Concerned. But I could see the triumph in his eyes. The barely contained glee.

This was what he had been waiting for. What they had all been waiting for.

Luna Helena's grip on my hand tightened painfully.

Alpha Alaric raised his hand. The hall fell silent.

"You speak of succession as if my son is already dead." His voice was quiet. Dangerous.
"He still breathes. His heart still beats."

"But for how long?" Margot's voice softened. "Alpha, I understand your pain. Truly I do. But we must face reality. Dominic will not wake up. Every physician has confirmed it. Every shaman has examined him. There is no hope."

"And what would you have me do? Strip my firstborn son of his birthright while he lies helpless in his bed?"

"I would have you do what's best for the pack." Margot met his gaze steadily. "Isn't that what an Alpha is supposed to do? Put the pack's needs above personal feelings?"

The hall went deathly quiet.

Alpha Alaric's jaw tightened. For a moment, I thought he might actually strike her.

But he didn't.

"The succession ceremony is a serious matter," he said finally. "It cannot be undertaken lightly."

"No one is suggesting we take it lightly," Vivienne said smoothly. "We're suggesting we take it seriously. Seriously enough to address it before disaster strikes."

"The other packs are watching," an elder added. "If Dominic dies without a named successor, there will be chaos. Challenges for leadership. Potential civil war."

"Better to handle the transition now," Margot said. "Peacefully. Orderly. With the full support of the council."

More nods from the elders. More murmurs of agreement.

I felt sick.

They had planned this. All of it. The physician's report. The gathering of elders. The arguments about pack stability. It was all orchestrated to corner Alpha Alaric into doing exactly what they wanted.

And it was working.

Alpha Alaric turned to look at Luna Helena.

Her face was pale. Devastated. She looked like a woman who had already lost everything.

"Helena." Alpha Alaric's voice softened slightly. "What say you?"

Luna Helena was silent for a long moment. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears.

Then she sighed. A heavy, defeated sound.

"You are the Alpha," she said quietly. "The decision is yours to make."

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Ivy's Point of View

The silence that followed Luna Helena's words was suffocating.

I could feel the tension in the air. The anticipation. Everyone waiting for Alpha Alaric to make his decision.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Seraphina move. Her elbow jabbed into Bastian's ribs. A sharp, urgent gesture.

'Say something,' her eyes screamed at him. 'Now.'

Bastian stepped forward immediately. He dropped to one knee before his father, head bowed in a show of humility that fooled no one.

"Father," he began. "I know this is a difficult time for our family. For our pack. And I know that no one can ever truly replace Dominic."

'Liar,' I thought. 'You've been waiting for this moment since the day he fell.'

"But I want you to know that I am ready." Bastian lifted his head, meeting Alpha Alaric's eyes. "I have spent years preparing for this. Studying pack law. Learning military strategy. Training alongside our warriors. I have dedicated myself to becoming worthy of leading the Silvermoon Pack."

He paused, letting his words sink in.

"If you choose to name me as heir, I swear to you, I will honor Dominic's legacy. I will protect this pack with my life. I will be the leader our people deserve."

Seraphina dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. Vivienne nodded approvingly. Margot's smile widened.

A perfect performance. Rehearsed down to the last word.

Alpha Alaric said nothing. His face remained unreadable. But I could see the conflict in his eyes. The weight of the decision pressing down on him.

"Physician Aldric," Alpha Alaric said finally. "I will ask you once more. Is there any possibility that my son will recover?"

Aldric shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry, Alpha. In my professional opinion, the chances of the heir regaining consciousness are almost nonexistent. The damage is simply too severe."

‘Because you’ve been making it worse,’ I wanted to scream. ‘Because you’ve been killing him slowly while pretending to heal him.’

But I stayed silent. Watched. Waited.

Margot seized the moment. "Alpha, please. You cannot keep waiting for a miracle that will never come." Her voice was soft. Sympathetic. The voice of a concerned family member. "I know how much you love Dominic. We all do. But you must think of the pack now."

"Bastian is also your son," Vivienne added gently. "He carries your blood. Your legacy. Passing the heir title to him is not a betrayal of Dominic. It's simply... practical."

"The pack needs stability," an elder spoke up. "The longer we delay, the more uncertain our position becomes."

"Other packs will see our hesitation as weakness," another agreed. "We cannot afford to appear vulnerable."

"A succession ceremony would reassure our allies," a third added. "And discourage our enemies."

One by one, they piled on. Each voice adding weight to the argument. Each word pushing Alpha Alaric closer to a decision he clearly didn't want to make.

I looked around the room.

Margot's face was alight with triumph. Vivienne's eyes gleamed with satisfaction. Bastian remained kneeling, the picture of humble devotion. Seraphina clutched her handkerchief, playing the role of concerned wife.

And Luna Helena stood beside me, broken and silent, watching her son's birthright being stripped away.

No one cares about Dominic.

The realization hit me like a blow to the chest.

Not the elders. Not the physician. Not Margot or Vivienne or Bastian.

To them, Dominic was already dead. A corpse that hadn't stopped breathing yet. An obstacle to be removed. A problem to be solved.

They didn't see him as a person. A son. A brother. A man who had sacrificed himself to protect the king.

They only saw the title. The power. The position they could claim once he was gone.

Something hot and bitter rose in my throat.

Before I could stop myself, I turned to Luna Helena and spoke.

"Luna Helena, may I ask a question?"

She looked at me, surprised. "What is it?"

"If the heir position is given to Bastian now..." I kept my voice low, meant only for her ears. "What happens if Dominic wakes up later?"

But the room had gone quiet at exactly the wrong moment.

My words carried. Echoed off the stone walls. Reached every ear in the hall.

Shit.

Everyone turned to stare at me.

Margot's face twisted with rage. "What did you just say?"

I straightened my spine. "I asked what would happen if Dominic wakes up after the succession ceremony."

"How dare you!" Margot's voice rose sharply. "This is a serious discussion among pack leaders and elders. What gives a Beta's daughter the right to speak?"

"I am Dominic's wife," I replied calmly. "I believe that gives me some right to be concerned about his future."

"His future?" Margot laughed bitterly. "He has no future! Weren't you listening? The physician just said he will never wake up!"

"The physician said it was unlikely. Not impossible."

"It's the same thing!"

"No, it isn't." I met her eyes steadily. "Unlikely means there's still a chance. Small, perhaps. But a chance nonetheless."

Margot sputtered with fury. "You insolent little—"

"I'm simply asking a logical question." I kept my voice even. Reasonable. "The succession ceremony is a serious matter. Once performed, it cannot be easily undone. So what happens if we transfer the title to Bastian, and then Dominic recovers? Would Bastian be expected to return the position? Would there be two heirs? Or would Dominic be cast aside entirely?"

The elders exchanged uncomfortable glances. It was clear none of them had considered this possibility.

Because none of them believed Dominic would ever wake up.

"This is ridiculous," Margot snapped. "You're wasting everyone's time with impossible scenarios."

"Nothing is impossible." I held her gaze. "Miracles happen. Unexpected recoveries occur. Shouldn't we at least have a plan in place, just in case?"

Margot opened her mouth to retort, but before she could speak, Seraphina grabbed my arm.

"Cousin." Seraphina's voice was sweet but her grip was painfully tight. "Perhaps we should let the elders handle this matter. It's not our place to interfere."

I looked at her. At the warning in her eyes. At the false smile plastered on her face.

"I'm not interfering," I said. "I'm asking a question that no one else seems willing to ask."

"And it's been asked." Seraphina's nails dug into my skin. "Now let it go. This is a decision for our elders and the Alpha to make. We're just wives. We should know our place."

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Ivy's Point of View

"Enough."

Alpha Alaric's voice cut through the tension like a blade.

Everyone fell silent.

"This matter will be decided at a later time." He rose from his chair, his expression hard. "For now, you are all dismissed."

Margot opened her mouth to protest, but one look from Alpha Alaric silenced her. Even she knew better than to push him when he used that tone.

The hall began to empty. Elders filed out in pairs, murmuring amongst themselves. Bastian helped Seraphina to her feet, shooting me a venomous glare as they passed. Margot swept out with Vivienne close behind, their heels clicking sharply against the stone floor.

I started to follow, but Alpha Alaric's voice stopped me.

"Ivy. Helena. Stay."

I exchanged a glance with Luna Helena. She looked as confused as I felt.

We waited until the hall was empty. Then Alpha Alaric gestured for us to follow him.

He led us through a series of corridors to a private study. It was smaller than I expected. Cozy, almost. Bookshelves lined the walls. A fire crackled in the hearth. Two comfortable chairs sat before a heavy oak desk.

Alpha Alaric closed the door behind us and turned to face Luna Helena.

"I'm sorry."

The words hung in the air.

Luna Helena blinked. "What?"

"I'm sorry." He took her hands in his, and for the first time, I saw something human in his eyes. Pain. Regret. Grief. "I have failed our son. I have brought in every physician, every healer, every shaman in the kingdom. And none of them can save him."

"Alaric..." Luna Helena's voice cracked.

"I want you to know that I haven't given up." His grip tightened on her hands. "I will continue to send the best physicians to treat him. I will spare no expense. No effort. But..." He paused. "We must also face reality."

Luna Helena lowered her head. Tears slipped down her cheeks.

"The pack cannot remain without an heir," Alpha Alaric continued quietly. "It creates instability. Uncertainty. Our enemies will see it as weakness. I must name a successor. For the good of our people."

"I understand." Luna Helena's voice was barely a whisper. "I hate it. But I understand."

"I know this is difficult for you. For both of us." Alpha Alaric released her hands and turned to look at me. "But my concern right now is also for Ivy."

I straightened. "For me?"

"You married into this family expecting to be the wife of the second son." His gaze was steady. Assessing. "Instead, you find yourself bound to my firstborn. A man who may never wake up."

I said nothing. Just waited.

"When Dominic passes..." Alpha Alaric's jaw tightened at the words. "You will be alone here. A young widow with no husband to protect her. No children to give her status. No family to support her."

The reality of my situation hit me all over again. He was right. Once Dominic died, I would be nothing. A footnote in the Silvermoon Pack's history. Easy to ignore. Easier to discard.

"I feel I owe you a debt," Alpha Alaric said. "You were caught up in a situation not of your making. The marriage swap. The scandal. None of it was your fault. And yet you have conducted yourself with dignity and grace."

I bowed my head. "Thank you, Alpha."

"Therefore, I have decided to assign you five of our most elite guards." He moved to his desk and picked up a scroll. "These warriors answer only to me. From this day forward, they will be yours to command. They will protect you, serve you, and ensure that no one in this pack dares to mistreat you."

Five elite guards. Personal warriors answering only to me.

It was more than I had hoped for. More than I had dared to ask.

"I don't know what to say." I kept my voice humble. Grateful. "This is too generous, Alpha."

"It's the least I can do." He set the scroll down. "You are my daughter-in-law. Regardless of what happens to Dominic, you are part of this family. I want you to feel safe here."

Luna Helena reached over and squeezed my hand. Her eyes were still wet, but there was warmth in them. Acceptance.

They had recognized me. Truly recognized me as one of their own.

A door had opened. And I intended to walk through it.

"Alpha," I said carefully. "May I speak freely?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Of course."

"It's about Dominic's treatment."

Both Alpha Alaric and Luna Helena looked at me with surprise.

"What about it?" Luna Helena asked.

I chose my words carefully. "I've noticed that the physician visits every week. Without fail. For six months straight."

"Yes," Alpha Alaric said slowly. "That is the treatment schedule Physician Aldric recommended."

"And in those six months, has there been any improvement?"

Silence.

"No," Luna Helena admitted. "None at all."

"I've read some medical texts," I continued. "Old ones, from the library in my father's house. They suggest that sometimes, constant treatment can be... counterproductive."

Alpha Alaric frowned. "What do you mean?"

"The body needs time to heal on its own. To rest. To recover." I met his eyes. "If we're constantly interfering with that process, constantly stimulating the damaged areas, we might actually be preventing recovery rather than encouraging it."

Luna Helena's brow furrowed. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"It's not common knowledge. But it makes sense, doesn't it?" I pressed on. "Dominic has been treated continuously since his injury. Every week, without fail. And nothing has changed. Nothing has improved."

Alpha Alaric was silent. I could see him thinking. Processing.

"What are you suggesting?" he asked finally.

"Perhaps we could pause the treatments. Just for a little while." I kept my voice reasonable. Non-threatening. "Give Dominic's body a chance to rest. To heal naturally. If there's no change after a month, we can resume the treatments."

Luna Helena looked at her husband. "She has a point, Alaric. We've tried everything else. Maybe doing nothing is worth trying too."

Alpha Alaric rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "The physician won't like it."

"With respect, Alpha, the physician hasn't produced any results either." I lowered my gaze. "I'm not suggesting we abandon Dominic. I'm simply suggesting we try a different approach."

The fire crackled in the silence.

Alpha Alaric exchanged a long look with Luna Helena. Some unspoken communication passed between them.

"Very well," Alpha Alaric said finally. "We will suspend the treatments for one month. See if there's any change."

Relief flooded through me. "Thank you, Alpha."

"Don't thank me yet." His expression was guarded. "If his condition worsens, we resume immediately."

"Of course."

Luna Helena studied my face. "You care about him. Don't you?"

The question caught me off guard. "He's my husband."

"That's not what I asked."

I thought about Dominic. Lying in that bed. Helpless. Surrounded by people who wanted him dead. Betrayed by a physician who was supposed to save him.

"Yes," I said quietly. "I care about him."

Luna Helena smiled. It was a sad smile. But genuine.

"Good," she said. "He needs someone in his corner."

'He has no idea how much,' I thought.

But I didn't say that out loud.

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Ivy's Point of View

Alpha Alaric summoned a servant and gave a brief order.

Minutes later, the study door opened and five warriors marched in.

They moved in perfect formation. Tall. Broad-shouldered. Dressed in black armor that gleamed in the firelight. Each one carried enough weapons to arm a small battalion.

And then they dropped to their knees before me.

All five of them. In unison. Heads bowed. Fists pressed to the floor.

I stumbled back a step. "What are you—"

"Young Madam," the one in front spoke. "We are yours to command."

I looked at Alpha Alaric, slightly panicked. "This really isn't necessary. Please, get up. All of you."

They didn't move. Just stayed there, kneeling, waiting.

"They won't rise until you accept them," Alpha Alaric said. There was a hint of amusement in his voice. "It's their way."

I cleared my throat. "I... I accept. Now please stand up."

They rose as one. Five pairs of eyes fixed on me with unwavering focus. It was slightly terrifying.

"These are the finest warriors in my personal guard," Alpha Alaric said. "They have served me loyally for over a decade. Now they serve you."

"Thank you," I managed. "I'll take good care of them."

Luna Helena smiled. "I think they'll be the ones taking care of you, dear."

I left the study with five elite warriors trailing behind me like shadows. The walk back to my residence felt surreal. Servants stopped and stared. Maids whispered to each other behind their hands.

When we arrived, Nell nearly dropped the tea tray she was carrying.

"Miss Ivy! Who are these... gentlemen?"

"My new guards." I gestured for the warriors to enter. "Alpha Alaric assigned them to me."

Nell's eyes went wide. "All five of them?"

"All five."

The guards stood at attention in the main hall, still as statues. Nell circled them like a curious bird, clearly fascinated.

I realized I didn't even know their names.

"What are you called?" I asked the one who had spoken earlier.

"Whatever you wish to call us, Young Madam."

"You don't have names?"

"We gave up our names when we joined the Alpha's personal guard. We are instruments. Tools. Names are unnecessary."

That was unsettling. And also impractical.

"I can't just call you 'hey you' all the time." I studied each of them in turn. "You'll be Ash. You're Stone. You're Blade. You're Wolf. And you..." I pointed at the last one, the youngest-looking of the group. "You're Shadow."

They bowed their heads in acceptance.

"Now that's settled, I need you all to rest well tonight." I sat down, suddenly exhausted. "Tomorrow is going to be a long day."

"What happens tomorrow, Young Madam?" Ash asked.

"The return banquet." I rubbed my temples. "It's a tradition in my pack. Three days after the wedding, the bride returns home to visit her family."

Nell made a face. "That means you'll see Miss Seraphina again."

"Unfortunately."

I could already picture it. Seraphina clinging to Bastian's arm, showing off their perfect relationship to all our relatives. Giggling about how happy she was. How lucky she was to have such a wonderful husband.

And then the pitying looks would turn to me. Poor Ivy. Married to a dying man. Such a tragedy.

My head started to throb.

"I'll bring two guards with me tomorrow," I decided. "Ash and Stone. The rest of you stay here and protect the residence."

"As you command, Young Madam."

At least I wouldn't face my family alone. A little show of strength might keep the worst of the vultures at bay.

That night, I slept poorly. Dreams of mocking faces and whispered insults plagued me until dawn.

Nell woke me while the sky was still gray.

"Miss Ivy, you need to get up. We're running late."

I groaned and dragged myself out of bed. "What time is it?"

"Almost sunrise." Nell was already pulling a dress from the wardrobe. "Miss Seraphina and Young Master Bastian left hours ago. If you don't hurry, your uncle will be furious."

Of course Seraphina had left early. She wanted to arrive first. Set the stage. Make sure everyone knew exactly how pathetic I was before I even walked through the door.

"Let him be furious," I muttered. But I got up anyway.

Nell dressed me in emerald green silk. Simple but elegant. She braided my hair and pinned it up with silver clasps. A touch of color on my lips. A light dusting of powder on my cheeks.

"You look beautiful, Miss Ivy." Nell stepped back to admire her work.

"I look tired."

"Beautiful and tired."

I almost smiled.

Ash and Stone were waiting outside when I emerged. They had changed into slightly less intimidating armor, though they still looked like they could kill a man with their bare hands.

Good. That was exactly the impression I wanted to make.

The carriage ride to the Crescent Moon Pack took several hours. I spent most of it staring out the window, trying to prepare myself for what was coming.

My family had never been kind to me. My uncle, Alpha Roland, tolerated me at best. My aunt openly despised me. And my cousins had followed Seraphina's lead in making my life miserable since childhood.

Going back there felt like walking into a den of wolves.

'Fitting,' I thought grimly. 'Since that's exactly what they are.'

When the carriage finally stopped, I took a deep breath and stepped out.

And immediately knew something was wrong.

The main gate of the pack home was closed. Completely shut. Not a single servant stood outside to greet arriving guests.

I stared at the heavy wooden doors, disbelief washing over me.

"Miss Ivy?" Nell appeared at my side. "Why is no one here?"

"I don't know."

But I had a suspicion.

"Go knock on the door," I told her.

Nell hurried forward and rapped her knuckles against the wood. The sound echoed hollowly.

No response.

She knocked again. Harder this time.

Still nothing.

I stood there in the morning sunlight, dressed in my finest clothes, with two elite warriors at my back. Waiting outside my own family's home like an unwanted beggar.

Seraphina.

This had her fingerprints all over it.

She had arrived early. Made sure I was left standing at the gate like a fool. Probably told the servants to ignore any knocking until she gave the order.

My hands clenched at my sides.

"Should we break down the door, Young Madam?" Ash asked calmly. Like it was a perfectly reasonable suggestion.

"Not yet." I forced myself to breathe. To stay calm. "Let's see how long they want to play this game."

Nell knocked a third time.

Silence.

I smiled. It was not a nice smile.

‘Fine, Seraphina. You want to humiliate me? Let’s see who ends up humiliated by the end of the day.’

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Ivy’s Point of View

Nell knocked again. Harder this time.

Finally, the sound of footsteps approached from the other side. The heavy doors creaked open, revealing a flustered-looking guard.

"Miss Ivy!" He bowed hastily. "My apologies. We closed the gates because you hadn’t arrived at the expected time. We thought perhaps you weren’t coming."

Lies. All lies.

Everyone knew it. Nell's jaw tightened. Ash and Stone exchanged a glance. Even the guard himself couldn't meet my eyes.

But I didn't argue. Didn't call him out. What would be the point?

"I'm here now," I said simply. "Let us through."

The guard stepped aside, and I walked into my childhood home with my head held high.

The main hall was packed.

Pack elders sat in their usual places, cups of tea in hand. Alpha Roland occupied the seat of honor, looking as stern and disapproving as I remembered. His wife, my aunt Camilla, sat beside him in layers of silk and jewels.

And there, front and center, were Seraphina and Bastian.

Seraphina wore a stunning red dress that probably cost more than my entire wardrobe. She was practically glued to Bastian's side, one hand resting possessively on his arm. They looked like the perfect couple. Happy. In love. Blessed by the goddess herself.

The room had been alive with chatter when I entered. Laughter and conversation filling every corner.

The moment they saw me, silence fell.

Every eye turned in my direction. Some curious. Some pitying. Most just uncomfortable.

I bowed respectfully. "Greetings to Alpha Roland, Luna Camilla, and honored elders. I apologize for my late arrival."

Alpha Roland nodded once. Barely. His eyes swept over me with thinly veiled disappointment.

But Luna Camilla rose from her seat with a warm smile. She crossed the room and took my hands in hers.

"Ivy, dear. Welcome home."

Her voice was sweet. Motherly. Completely fake.

"What happened on your wedding night was truly unfortunate," she continued. "A terrible accident. But what's done is done, yes? No use dwelling on the past." She squeezed my hands. "You and Seraphina are both married now. Both part of the Silvermoon Pack. You should support each other as family."

I said nothing.

"If there's anything you need, anything at all, just ask." Luna Camilla's smile widened. "We want you to be happy, Ivy. Whatever you desire, I will do my best to provide."

The words hung in the air. Generous. Magnanimous.

Too magnanimous.

I gently pulled my hands free from her grip. My own smile never wavered.

"That's very kind of you, Luna Camilla." I tilted my head. "May I confirm what you just said?"

She blinked. "Confirm?"

"You said you would provide whatever I desire. Is that correct?"

"Well, yes, within reason—"

"You said anything." I kept my voice pleasant. Friendly. "I just want to make sure I understood correctly. You're offering to give me whatever I ask for?"

Luna Camilla's smile stiffened slightly. But with all the elders watching, she couldn't exactly take back her words.

"Yes, dear. Whatever you need."

"Wonderful." I clasped my hands together. "Then I would like the Moonfire Pendant."

The room went dead silent.

Luna Camilla's face froze.

The Moonfire Pendant was legendary. An ancient artifact that had been in the Crescent Moon Pack for generations. A massive sapphire surrounded by diamonds, said to be blessed by the Moon Goddess herself. It was priceless. Irreplaceable. The crown jewel of Luna Camilla's personal collection.

And I had just asked for it in front of everyone.

"The... the Moonfire Pendant?" Luna Camilla's voice came out strangled.

"Yes." I smiled sweetly. "You said anything I desire. That's what I desire."

Her face twitched. Once. Twice. I could see the conflict raging behind her eyes. The pendant was worth more than most estates. Giving it away would be like cutting off her own hand.

But she had made her promise publicly. In front of the Alpha. In front of the elders. Taking it back now would make her look like a liar.

Seraphina's expression had gone from smug to horrified. "Mother, surely you don't have to—"

"Seraphina." Alpha Roland's voice cut through the room. "Your mother gave her word."

Luna Camilla's jaw clenched. For a moment, I thought she might refuse anyway.

Then she forced a smile onto her face.

"Of course, dear. If that's what you want." Each word sounded like it was being dragged from her throat. "I'll have a servant fetch it."

"Thank you, Luna Camilla." I bowed gracefully. "Your generosity is truly inspiring."

Her eye twitched again.

A servant was dispatched. Minutes later, a velvet box was placed in my hands. I opened it to reveal the Moonfire Pendant in all its glory. The sapphire caught the light and seemed to glow from within.

Beautiful. And now mine.

I tucked the box safely into my belongings and turned to face the room.

"Thank you all for welcoming me home." I bowed again. "I hope you'll excuse me now. I'd like to visit my parents before I return to the Silvermoon Pack."

Alpha Roland waved his hand dismissively. "Go."

I didn't need to be told twice.

I swept out of the hall with Nell and my guards close behind. I could feel Seraphina's glare burning into my back the entire way.

'That's for leaving me outside the gate,' I thought with satisfaction.

My parents' residence was on the far edge of the pack grounds. Small. Modest. Nothing like the grand buildings occupied by Alpha Roland's family.

But the moment I stepped through the door, I felt like I could breathe again.

"Ivy!"

My mother rushed toward me and pulled me into her arms. She was crying. Tears streaming down her weathered face as she held me tight.

"My baby. My poor baby."

"Mother, I'm fine—"

"You're not fine!" She pulled back to look at my face, her hands cupping my cheeks. "We heard what happened. That horrible wedding night. That snake Seraphina and her scheming. I wanted to go to you immediately, but your uncle forbade us from leaving the pack."

My father appeared behind her. His eyes were red-rimmed too, though he was trying to hide it.

"Are they treating you well?" he asked gruffly. "Do I need to go to the Silvermoon Pack and—"

"Father, no." I took his hand. "I'm alright. Really. Luna Helena has been kind to me. And Alpha Alaric has given me my own guards."

"Guards?" My mother looked at Ash and Stone, who stood at attention near the door. "Those are yours?"

"Five of them, actually. The other three are back at my residence."

My parents exchanged a shocked glance.

"The Alpha of the Silvermoon Pack gave you five elite guards?" My father's voice was disbelieving.

"He did."

Before either of them could respond, a blur of motion crashed into me from the side.

"Sister!"

My younger brother Finn wrapped his arms around my waist.

"Finn!"

"I missed you so much!" He said but didn't let go, grinning from ear to ear. "It's been so boring here without you. No one to talk to. No one to sneak extra desserts with. Father's been grumpy and Mother's been crying and Uncle won't let us go anywhere."

"I missed you too." I ruffled his hair affectionately.

He was fourteen now. Growing like a weed. Almost as tall as me already.

My mother ushered everyone inside. Tea was brought out. Snacks appeared. And slowly, the tension began to ease.

"Tell us everything," my mother said, settling into her chair. "What's it really like there? How is your... your husband?"

"Still unconscious." I wrapped my hands around my tea cup. "But I'm taking care of him."

My father's expression softened. "You're a good girl, Ivy. Better than that whole family deserves."

I thought about the Moonfire Pendant sitting in my bag. About the look on Luna Camilla's face when I asked for it.

"I'm learning to stand up for myself," I said quietly. "Finally."