

Exchanging Vows: The Swapped Wife Is a Top Shaman

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Exchanging Vows: The Swapped Wife Is a Top Shaman

Ivy's Point of View

I woke with the sunrise.

For a moment, I just lay there, staring at the ceiling. Dominic's steady breathing filled the silence beside me. Warm sunlight crept through the curtains, painting golden stripes across the bed.

Another day. Another step forward.

I dressed quickly and made my way to Luna Helena's residence. The morning air was crisp and fresh, carrying the scent of blooming flowers from the gardens.

Luna Helena was already awake when I arrived. She sat in her private sitting room, a cup of tea steaming in her hands. She looked tired. The worry lines around her eyes seemed deeper than before.

"Ivy." She smiled when she saw me. "Come, sit. Have some tea with me."

I settled into the chair across from her. A servant poured me a cup without being asked.

"How was your trip home yesterday?" Luna Helena asked. "I heard you returned quite late."

"It was... eventful."

"Oh?" She raised an eyebrow. "Tell me."

So I did.

I told her about the locked gates. About being forced to wait outside like an unwanted beggar. About Seraphina's smug face and Luna Camilla's false generosity.

I told her about the Moonfire Pendant.

Luna Helena nearly choked on her tea. "You asked for the Moonfire Pendant? That's one of the most valuable heirlooms in the Crescent Moon Pack!"

"She offered me anything I wanted." I shrugged. "I simply took her at her word."

"You clever girl." Luna Helena laughed. It was a genuine laugh, the first I had heard from her in days. "I wish I could have seen Camilla's face."

"It was quite satisfying."

Then I told her about the lunch. About Alpha Roland ordering my father to pour wine. About the shattered cup and the screaming.

Luna Helena's expression darkened. "That's disgraceful. Edwin is his brother. His Beta. To humiliate him like that in front of guests..."

"My uncle has never treated my father with respect." I set down my teacup. "Which is why I did something about it."

I explained the confrontation. The threat. The leverage I held over Seraphina. How I had forced Alpha Roland to grant my father permission to take the kingdom examination.

When I finished, Luna Helena was staring at me with wide eyes.

"You threatened an Alpha in his own hall?"

"I did what was necessary."

"Ivy..." She shook her head slowly. "You continue to surprise me. Every time I think I understand you, you reveal another layer."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No." She reached over and squeezed my hand. "It's refreshing. This pack needs more people willing to stand up for what's right."

I squeezed back. "Actually, I wanted to ask for your help with something."

"Anything."

"My father will be taking the examination in three months. And my brother will be eligible next year." I met her eyes. "Do you know any professors who might be willing to tutor them? Someone reputable. Someone who could give them a real chance at success."

Luna Helena thought for a moment. Her brow furrowed in concentration.

"There are several scholars I could recommend. Most of them owe favors to the Silvermoon Pack." She paused. "But the best one... the one who could truly make a difference... is Professor Aldwin."

"Professor Aldwin?"

"He's a legend in academic circles. Taught at the royal academy for forty years. Three of his former students now serve on the king's council." Luna Helena sighed. "But I'm afraid he won't be able to help."

"Why not?"

"He's ill." Her expression turned sad. "Very ill. He's been bedridden for months now. Even the best physicians in the kingdom can't figure out what's wrong with him."

My interest sharpened. "What kind of illness?"

"It's strange." Luna Helena shook her head. "His body is wasting away, but there's no infection. No disease. No injury. He simply grows weaker every day. His mind is still sharp, but his body refuses to cooperate."

"Have they checked for poison?"

"Multiple times. Nothing. The physicians are completely baffled." She sipped her tea. "Some say it's simply old age catching up to him. He's nearly eighty years old. But his family insists he was perfectly healthy six months ago."

Six months. Sudden onset. No physical cause.

The symptoms clicked into place in my mind.

I had read about this in one of the ancient shaman texts. A condition called Spirit Wasting. It occurred when the connection between a person's soul and body began to deteriorate. The spiritual threads that bound them together would fray and weaken, causing the body to slowly shut down.

Regular physicians couldn't detect it because they only examined the physical body. They couldn't see the spiritual damage underneath.

But a shaman could.

And a shaman could fix it.

The treatment was delicate. It required channeling spiritual energy into the patient to strengthen the weakened threads. Essentially re-weaving the connection between soul and body. It was exhausting work, and it required multiple sessions over several weeks.

But it was possible.

I kept my face neutral. Showing too much interest would raise questions I couldn't answer.

"That's unfortunate," I said carefully. "Perhaps you could recommend some other professors then? Ones who are currently able to teach?"

"Of course." Luna Helena nodded. "I'll speak with Alpha Alaric when he returns this evening. I'm sure we can find suitable tutors for your father and brother."

"Thank you, Luna Helena. I appreciate your help."

"It's the least I can do." She patted my hand. "You're family now. And family helps each other."

I stayed for a little while longer, making small talk about household matters. But my mind was elsewhere. Spinning with possibilities.

Professor Aldwin. A legendary scholar with connections to the royal court. If I could heal him...

No. I couldn't think about that yet. It was too risky. Too exposed.

But the idea had taken root. And it refused to leave.

Eventually, I excused myself and returned to my residence.

Nell was waiting for me in the main hall, a ledger in her hands.

"Young Madam, welcome back. Is there anything you need?"

"Actually, yes." I sat down at the small desk by the window. "I want you to give me a full accounting of my assets."

Nell blinked. "Your assets?"

"Everything I own. The dowry I brought from the Crescent Moon Pack. The items Luna Helena gave me after the wedding. The Moonfire Pendant." I gestured for her to sit. "I need to know exactly what resources I have at my disposal."

"Of course, Young Madam." Nell opened the ledger and began flipping through pages. "Give me a moment to gather everything."

She hurried off to collect the relevant documents.

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Ivy's Point of View

Nell returned with a stack of documents and spread them across the desk.

"I've compiled everything, Young Madam." She pointed to the first page. "These are the properties you inherited from your mother's side. Three shops in Crescent Moon Pack territory."

I scanned the locations. Two were in smaller districts. Nothing special. But the third was on the main trading street of the pack's central market.

"And these are from the Silvermoon Pack." Nell flipped to another page. "Luna Helena arranged for you to receive three additional shops as part of your marriage settlement."

I studied the addresses. Again, two were unremarkable. But one caught my attention. It was located near the healer's district. Prime location for selling medicinal supplies.

"Most of them are currently rented out to various merchants," Nell continued. "The rental income is deposited into your account monthly."

"What about the one on Healer's Row?" I tapped the address. "Is that one rented?"

Nell checked her notes. "Yes, Young Madam. To an herbalist. The lease expires in two months."

Two months. That was cutting it close, but workable.

"Send Ash to inspect the property," I ordered. "I want to know its condition. And find out if the current tenant would be willing to end the lease early. Offer compensation if necessary."

Nell looked curious but didn't question me. "Yes, Young Madam. Right away."

She hurried off to deliver the instructions.

I leaned back in my chair, my mind already racing ahead. If I could reclaim that shop, I could use it as a base for my activities. A place to prepare medicines and treatments away from prying eyes. Somewhere no one would think to look for a shaman hiding in plain sight.

The plan was coming together.

Seraphina's Point of View

I couldn't believe my luck.

Luna Helena had stopped Dominic's treatments. Just like that. No more weekly visits from Physician Aldric. No more pretending to hope for a recovery that would never come.

This was wonderful news.

Without treatment, Dominic would deteriorate faster. His body would give out within weeks instead of months. And then Bastian would finally be named heir.

Everything we had worked for was falling into place.

I practically ran to Lady Margot's residence to share the news.

"Lady Margot!" I burst through the door without knocking. "You won't believe what I just heard!"

Margot and Vivienne were seated in the parlor, sipping tea. They both looked up at my entrance.

"What is it, child?" Margot set down her cup. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Better than a ghost." I was grinning so hard my cheeks hurt. "Luna Helena has stopped Dominic's treatments. No more physicians. No more healing sessions. They've given up on him completely!"

I expected smiles. Congratulations. Maybe even a toast to celebrate.

Instead, Margot's face went white.

Then red.

Then purple with rage.

"WHAT?!"

I stumbled back, startled by her reaction. "I... I thought you would be pleased..."

"Pleased?" Margot shot to her feet, her teacup shattering on the floor. "Who authorized this? Who told them to stop the treatments?"

"I don't know. Luna Helena decided—"

"That foolish woman!" Margot was pacing now, her hands clenched into fists. "Does she have any idea what she's done?"

I looked at Vivienne, hoping for an explanation. But Bastian's mother looked equally alarmed.

"We need to fix this," Vivienne said, rising from her seat. "Immediately."

I didn't understand. For months, they had been wishing for Dominic's death. Praying for it. Scheming to hasten it. Why would they be angry that his treatments had stopped?

"Lady Margot," I ventured carefully. "Isn't this what we wanted? Without treatment, Dominic will die faster—"

"You stupid girl!" Margot whirled on me. "You don't understand anything, do you?"

I flinched at her tone.

But before I could ask more questions, Margot was already storming toward the door.

"Come," she snapped. "We're going to see Luna Helena right now."

Ivy's Point of View

I was reviewing the shop documents when Nell burst back into the room.

"Young Madam! There's trouble at Luna Helena's residence!"

I was on my feet instantly. "What kind of trouble?"

"Lady Margot stormed in with Vivienne and Miss Seraphina. They're screaming at Luna Helena about something. The servants are saying it's chaos."

I didn't wait for more details. I grabbed my shawl and hurried toward Luna Helena's residence, my guards falling into step behind me.

I could hear the shouting before I even reached the door.

"How dare you make this decision without consulting anyone!" Margot's shrill voice pierced through the walls. "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

I pushed through the entrance and found exactly what I expected.

Margot stood in the center of the room, her face contorted with fury. Vivienne flanked her on one side, Seraphina on the other. Luna Helena sat in her chair, looking bewildered and increasingly angry.

"I don't understand why you're so upset," Luna Helena said coldly. "Just days ago, you were demanding that we accept Dominic's fate. You said he was as good as dead. You pushed for Bastian to be named heir immediately."

"That's different!"

"How? Explain it to me, Margot. Because from where I'm sitting, it seems like you should be celebrating."

Margot sputtered but couldn't form a coherent response.

The commotion had drawn Alpha Alaric from his study. He appeared in the doorway, his expression thunderous.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Margot spun to face him. "Alpha! Why have you stopped Dominic's treatments? This is outrageous!"

Alpha Alaric's eyes narrowed. "My decisions regarding my son are none of your concern."

"But the physicians—"

"Have done nothing but fail for six months." His voice was ice. "I see no reason to continue wasting resources on treatments that don't work."

"You can't just give up!" Margot's voice had taken on a desperate edge. "You have to keep trying! The treatments must continue!"

"Why?" Alpha Alaric stepped closer, his presence filling the room. "Why are you so invested in my son's medical care, Margot? A week ago, you couldn't wait for him to die."

Margot opened her mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

Nothing came out.

The tension in the room was suffocating.

That's when Margot's eyes landed on me.

Standing in the doorway. Watching the chaos unfold.

Her expression twisted with sudden recognition. Sudden rage.

"You!" She pointed at me like I was a criminal. "This is your doing, isn't it? You manipulated them! You convinced Luna Helena to stop the treatments!"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Liar!" Margot snapped her fingers at one of her maids. "Teach this insolent girl a lesson! Show her what happens when she interferes in matters above her station!"

The maid hesitated for only a second. Then she lunged toward me, hand raised to strike.

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Ivy's Point of View

The maid froze mid-step.

Her eyes darted to Luna Helena. Then to Alpha Alaric. Then back to me.

I could see the calculation happening behind her eyes. The fear slowly overtaking the obedience.

Margot was powerful. But she wasn't the Alpha. She wasn't the Luna. And I was still the wife of the heir. The future Luna of the Silvermoon Pack.

Striking me would be an act of war.

The maid's legs buckled. She dropped to her knees, trembling.

"Forgive me, Young Madam." Her voice shook. "I cannot... I cannot do this."

Margot's face went crimson with humiliation. Her own servant had defied her. In front of everyone. In front of the Alpha himself.

"You worthless—"

"Enough, Margot."

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

Margot fell silent instantly.

"I have tolerated your interference out of respect for your position in this family." Alpha Alaric stepped forward, his presence filling every corner of the room. "But you have overstepped. Again and again. My decisions regarding my son are not subject to your approval."

"Alpha, I was only trying to—"

"You were trying to control things that are not yours to control." His eyes were cold. Hard. The eyes of a man who had reached the end of his patience. "This is my pack. My family. My son. And I will decide what happens to him. Not you."

Margot's mouth opened and closed like a fish gasping for air.

For once, she had nothing to say.

"Leave," Alpha Alaric commanded. "Now."

Margot drew herself up, trying to salvage what remained of her dignity. Her face was still flushed with anger. Her hands still trembled with suppressed rage.

But she knew better than to push further.

"As you wish, Alpha." Her voice was stiff. Barely polite.

She turned and swept toward the door, her maids scrambling to follow. Her silk skirts swished against the floor with each furious step.

Vivienne moved to follow, but paused at the threshold.

"Luna Helena." Her voice was soft. Almost pleasant. But there was venom beneath the sweetness. "A word of advice, if I may."

Luna Helena's expression didn't change. "Speak."

"You should teach your daughter-in-law to mind her place." Vivienne's eyes slid toward me. Cold. Calculating. "Lady Margot's daughter is the King's most favored consort. The woman who warms His Majesty's bed every night."

The implication hung in the air.

"Offending Lady Margot is the same as offending the royal family." Vivienne smiled. It didn't reach her eyes. "I would hate to see the Silvermoon Pack suffer because of one girl's... imprudence."

With that, she glided out the door after Margot.

Seraphina lingered for a moment, shooting me a look of pure hatred. Then she too disappeared.

The room fell silent.

Luna Helena let out a long breath. Her hand found mine and squeezed tight.

"Don't listen to them," she said firmly. "Vivienne loves to make threats she can't keep. The royal consort may be Margot's daughter, but she has no real power. She's just another woman in the King's harem."

I nodded slowly, processing the information.

Margot's daughter was a royal consort. That made her technically related to Dominic and Bastian by marriage. Their aunt, in a sense.

I had heard rumors back in the Crescent Moon Pack about a woman from the Silvermoon Pack who had caught the King's eye. I never realized it was Margot's daughter. Never connected the dots.

No wonder Margot acted like she owned the place. She had connections to the throne itself.

"Still," I said carefully, "it might be wise not to antagonize her too much."

"Antagonize her?" Luna Helena laughed bitterly. "That woman has been antagonizing us for years. She's been waiting for Dominic to die since the moment he was born. A legitimate heir threatens everything she's built."

"What do you mean?"

Luna Helena hesitated. Then she sighed.

"It's complicated. Old history. Suffice to say, Margot has never forgiven Alaric's father for choosing my mother-in-law over her. She's spent decades trying to undermine our branch of the family." Her grip on my hand tightened. "But that's not your burden to carry. You have enough to worry about."

I wanted to ask more. To understand the tangled web of alliances and resentments that seemed to define this family.

But Luna Helena's expression had shifted. Something else had occurred to her.

"Ivy." Her voice turned serious. "There's something I need to remind you about."

"What is it?"

"The bond-breaking ceremony." She looked at me with concern. "It's in three days."

The words hit me like a bucket of cold water.

Three days.

In three days, I would be strapped down with wolfsbane-soaked silver while priests chanted ancient words to sever my blood bond with Bastian.

I had been so focused on everything else. My father's examination. Professor Aldwin's illness. The shop properties. Dominic's treatment.

I had almost forgotten about the ceremony that might kill me.

"You need to prepare yourself," Luna Helena continued. "Rest as much as possible. Eat well. Build up your strength."

"I know." My voice came out smaller than I intended.

Luna Helena must have seen the fear in my eyes. She pulled me into a gentle embrace.

"I won't lie to you," she murmured. "The ceremony is painful. Extremely painful. I've seen strong warriors reduced to screaming during the process."

My stomach turned.

"But you're stronger than you look, Ivy. You've survived things that would have broken most people." She pulled back and cupped my face in her hands. "You will survive this too."

"And if I don't?"

The question slipped out before I could stop it.

Luna Helena's expression flickered with something painful. But she quickly composed herself.

"You will." Her voice was firm. Certain. "And the moment the ceremony ends, I'm taking you to the healing springs in the Northern Forest. The waters there have restorative properties. They'll help your body recover."

I nodded, trying to draw comfort from her confidence.

Three days.

I had three days to prepare for the most painful experience of my life.

"Thank you, Luna Helena." I managed a weak smile. "For everything."

"You're my daughter now." She squeezed my hands one last time. "I protect what's mine."

I left her residence and walked slowly back to my own. The afternoon sun was warm on my face, but I felt cold inside.

The bond-breaking ceremony.

I had witnessed one before, back in the Crescent Moon Pack. A warrior who had been forcibly mated to a woman from an enemy pack during a raid. When the war ended, they had to sever the bond.

I still remembered his screams. The way his body convulsed against the silver restraints. The smell of burning flesh where the wolfsbane touched his skin.

He had survived. Barely. But he was never the same afterward.

And now it was my turn.

I entered my residence and found Nell waiting with tea.

"Young Madam, you look pale. Is everything alright?"

"Fine." I sat down heavily. "Just tired."

But I wasn't fine. And we both knew it.

Three days until the ceremony.

Three months until Dominic could be healed.

And a lifetime of enemies waiting for me to fail.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

'One challenge at a time,' I told myself. 'Survive the ceremony first. Then worry about everything else.'

It wasn't much of a comfort.

But it was all I had.

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Ivy's Point of View

I returned to my room exhausted.

Nell placed a tray of food before me, but I barely touched it. My mind was too busy racing through possibilities. Calculating risks. Planning for survival.

The bond-breaking ceremony was in three days.

I couldn't just sit here and wait for it to happen. Couldn't leave my fate in the hands of priests who didn't care whether I lived or died.

I was a shaman. A top shaman. And I would use every tool at my disposal to survive.

"Nell," I said suddenly. "I need you to fetch some things for me."

She looked up, surprised. "What do you need, Young Madam?"

"Moonroot powder. Silverleaf extract. Dried nightbloom petals." I ticked the items off on my fingers. "And if you can find it, a vial of spirit water from the temple."

Nell's brow furrowed. "Those are... unusual requests."

"They're for medicinal purposes." I kept my voice casual. "I want to prepare some tonics to help me recover after the ceremony."

It wasn't entirely a lie. The ingredients would help with recovery. But their real purpose was something else entirely.

Moonroot powder, when ingested before a spiritual trauma, created a protective barrier around the soul. It wouldn't prevent the pain of the bond-breaking, but it would keep my spirit from shattering under the pressure.

Silverleaf extract strengthened the connection between body and mind. During the ceremony, when the priests tried to tear the blood bond apart, my consciousness might

try to flee from the agony. The silverleaf would anchor me in place. Keep me from losing myself.

Dried nightbloom petals enhanced spiritual resilience. They would help my body absorb and process the shock of the severed bond.

And spirit water was the key ingredient that bound everything together. It would carry the other components through my system, activating their properties at the exact right moment.

None of these preparations would eliminate the pain. Nothing could do that. But they would give me an edge. A better chance of walking away from the ceremony intact.

"I'll find them, Young Madam." Nell gathered her things. "It might take some time."

"You have three days."

She nodded and hurried out.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in quiet meditation. Conserving my energy. Strengthening my spiritual reserves. Every ounce of power I could store now would be crucial during the ceremony.

By the time Nell knocked again, the room had grown dark. Evening had fallen without me noticing.

"Young Madam, I've brought dinner." She entered with a large tray laden with dishes. "Luna Helena sent this herself. She said you must eat everything."

I looked at the spread before me. It was far more elaborate than my usual meals.

"What is all this?"

"Luna Helena prepared the menu specifically for you." Nell began uncovering the dishes one by one. "This is ginseng and red date soup. It strengthens the blood and improves circulation. Very important for withstanding physical trauma."

The soup was rich and fragrant. I could smell the sweetness of the dates mingling with the earthy ginseng.

"This is braised lamb with wolfberry." Nell pointed to the next dish. "Lamb warms the body and builds core strength. The wolfberry supports kidney function, which helps with pain tolerance."

She continued down the line.

"Steamed fish with ginger and scallion. The fish provides light protein that's easy to digest, while the ginger promotes blood flow and reduces inflammation."

"Lotus seed and lily bulb congee. This calms the spirit and promotes peaceful sleep. Luna Helena said rest is just as important as nutrition."

"And finally, honey-glazed walnuts. These nourish the brain and strengthen the will. You'll need mental fortitude for the ceremony."

I stared at the array of carefully prepared dishes. Each one chosen for a specific purpose. Each one designed to prepare my body for the ordeal ahead.

Luna Helena had put real thought into this. Real care.

My throat tightened unexpectedly.

"Please thank Luna Helena for me," I said quietly. "This is... more than I expected."

"She cares about you, Young Madam." Nell smiled. "We all do."

I ate slowly, savoring each dish. The food was delicious, and I could feel the nourishing warmth spreading through my body with every bite.

I was halfway through the lotus seed congee when I felt it.

A movement.

Slight. Almost imperceptible. Like a twitch of fingers or a shift of breath.

I looked up sharply at the bed.

Dominic lay there as always. Still. Silent. Unchanged.

But I could have sworn I saw something.

"Nell." My voice came out strained. "Did you see that?"

She looked at the bed, then back at me. "See what, Young Madam?"

"Dominic. I thought I saw him move."

Nell studied Dominic's motionless form for a long moment. Then she shook her head gently.

"I didn't see anything, Young Madam. Perhaps you're overtired. The stress of the upcoming ceremony..."

"Maybe." I set down my spoon, still staring at Dominic. "Maybe you're right."

But I wasn't so sure.

I had stopped his harmful treatments just days ago. Was it possible his body was already beginning to respond? To heal on its own without the physician sabotaging his recovery?

I made a mental note to increase the frequency of my spiritual assessments. If Dominic was showing signs of improvement, I needed to know.

But that would have to wait until after the ceremony.

'Survive first,' I reminded myself. 'Then worry about everything else.'

The next three days passed in a blur of preparation.

Nell found all the ingredients I needed. I spent my nights grinding, mixing, and infusing them with carefully channeled spiritual energy. By the morning of the ceremony, I had prepared a small vial of pale blue liquid.

My secret weapon.

I drank it an hour before the priests arrived. It tasted like river water and starlight. Cool and strange on my tongue.

The ceremony was held in the Temple of the Moon Goddess.

It was an ancient structure at the heart of the Silvermoon Pack territory. White marble walls. Soaring ceilings. Massive windows that let in streams of silver moonlight. The full moon hung heavy in the sky, its light flooding the temple like liquid mercury.

I was led to the center of the main chamber. A stone altar waited for me there. Cold. Flat. Covered in runes that glowed faintly in the moonlight.

Luna Helena stood nearby, her face pale with worry. Alpha Alaric was there too, his expression unreadable. And in the corner, watching with barely concealed satisfaction, were Bastian and Seraphina.

They wanted to see me suffer.

I wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

The High Priest approached. He was an ancient man with a long white beard and eyes that seemed to see through flesh and bone.

"Lie down," he commanded.

I obeyed. The stone was ice cold against my back.

Acolytes moved forward with silver chains. The metal had been soaked in wolfsbane. I could smell the poison before it even touched my skin.

They bound my wrists first. The silver burned instantly. Then my ankles. My waist. My throat.

Every point of contact was agony. Fire spreading through my veins. I bit my lip so hard I tasted blood.

And the ceremony hadn't even begun.

"We gather under the full moon to sever what was wrongly joined," the High Priest intoned. "To break the bond of blood and release these souls from their chains."

He raised his hands. The runes on the altar began to glow brighter.

"Let the sacred words be spoken. Let the bond be torn asunder."

The chanting began.

Low at first. A rhythmic drone that seemed to vibrate through the stone beneath me. Then louder. More insistent. The words were in the old tongue, harsh and guttural.

I felt the bond respond.

It was like a thread inside my chest. A connection I had never noticed before, linking me to Bastian somewhere across the room.

The chanting grew faster. More intense.

And the thread began to burn.

I gasped. The pain was unlike anything I had ever experienced. Not the sharp sting of a wound or the dull ache of a bruise. This was deeper. More fundamental. Like someone was reaching inside my soul and tearing out pieces.

The wolfsbane chains flared with heat. My skin sizzled where they touched. The smell of burning flesh filled my nostrils.

I screamed.

I couldn't help it. The sound ripped from my throat before I could stop it.

But I didn't break. The moonroot powder held my soul together. The silverleaf kept my mind anchored. The nightbloom gave me strength.

The thread inside me stretched. Frayed. Began to snap.

Each broken strand was a new wave of agony. Each severed connection a fresh scream tearing through my lungs.

I don't know how long it lasted. Minutes. Hours. An eternity.

But finally, finally, I felt it.

The last thread snapped.

The bond was broken.

The chanting stopped. The runes faded. The chains were removed from my smoking, blistered skin.

I lay on the altar, shaking uncontrollably. Tears streamed down my face. My throat was raw from screaming.

But I was alive.

I was free.

Luna Helena rushed to my side, gathering me in her arms.

"It's over," she whispered, stroking my hair. "You did it, Ivy. It's over."

I couldn't respond. Could barely breathe.

But somewhere, deep inside, I felt something like triumph.

I had survived.

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Ivy's Point of View

The ceremony was over.

I lay on the altar, trembling and weak. But as the initial shock faded, I realized something surprising.

The pain was manageable.

My preparations had worked. The moonroot powder had protected my soul from shattering. The silverleaf had kept my mind anchored. The nightbloom had cushioned the worst of the spiritual trauma.

I was hurt. Exhausted. Burned in places where the wolfsbane chains had touched my skin.

But I was intact.

The same could not be said for Bastian.

Across the temple, he lay crumpled on his own altar. His face was ashen gray. Sweat poured down his forehead. His whole body convulsed with violent tremors.

He had no shaman's protection. No secret preparations. He had endured the full force of the bond-breaking with nothing but his own strength.

And it had nearly destroyed him.

"Bastian!" Seraphina rushed to his side, tears streaming down her face. "Bastian, can you hear me?"

He groaned. A weak, pitiful sound.

Margot and Vivienne pushed through the crowd, their faces twisted with horror.

"My son!" Vivienne dropped to her knees beside him. "What have they done to my son?"

Margot's eyes found me across the temple. Even from this distance, I could see the hatred burning in them.

"This is your fault!" She jabbed a finger in my direction. "You did this to him! You cursed him somehow!"

I was too tired to respond. Too drained to care.

Luna Helena helped me sit up. "Ignore her. We need to get you back to your room."

Alpha Alaric appeared at my other side. Together, they supported me as I stumbled off the altar.

"Where do you think you're going?" Margot's shrill voice followed us. "Your own son is lying there in agony, and you're worried about her?"

Alpha Alaric didn't turn around.

"You're abandoning your flesh and blood for a stranger!" Margot screamed. "How can you be so heartless? So biased?"

Still, Alpha Alaric said nothing. He simply gestured to a nearby guard.

"Send Physician Aldric to tend to Bastian."

"Yes, Alpha."

Then we left. Margot's curses echoed behind us, growing fainter with each step.

"Heartless monster! You'll regret this! You'll regret choosing her over your own son!"

The walk back to my residence felt endless. My legs could barely support my weight. Every step sent jolts of pain through my blistered skin.

By the time we reached my room, I could no longer speak. Could barely keep my eyes open.

"Put her on the bed," Luna Helena ordered. "Gently. Be careful of her burns."

Hands lifted me. Soft mattress beneath my back. Cool sheets against my feverish skin.

"Where's the physician?" Luna Helena's voice was tight with worry. "She needs treatment immediately."

"I'm here, Luna." An elderly man appeared at my bedside. Not Aldric. Someone else. Someone with kind eyes and gentle hands.

"Use whatever medicines you need," Luna Helena commanded. "I don't care how expensive they are. Cost is no object. Just help her."

"Yes, my Luna."

The physician began his work. He cleaned my burns first, dabbing them with cool salves that smelled of lavender and aloe. The relief was immediate. The fire in my skin dimmed to a bearable warmth.

Then came the bandages. Soft white cloth wrapped carefully around my wrists, my ankles, my throat. Each wound was treated with meticulous care.

"She's fortunate," the physician murmured as he worked. "I've seen wolves lose limbs from wolfsbane burns this severe. But her skin is already beginning to heal."

"Will she be alright?" Luna Helena hovered nearby, wringing her hands.

"With rest and proper care, yes. She's remarkably resilient." He paused, studying my face. "Almost unnaturally so."

I kept my expression blank. The physician couldn't know about my preparations. Couldn't know about my shaman abilities. As far as anyone was concerned, I had simply been lucky.

He gave me something to drink. A bitter tea that made my head swim. Then another potion for the pain. And finally, a sleeping draught.

"Rest now," he said softly. "Your body needs time to recover."

I didn't argue. Couldn't have even if I wanted to.

The darkness took me.

When I woke, night had fallen.

The room was quiet. Moonlight streamed through the windows. Beside me, Dominic lay still as always, his breathing slow and steady.

I tried to move. My body protested immediately. Every muscle ached. Every joint complained.

But the pain was duller now. More distant. The physician's medicines were doing their work.

I closed my eyes again, ready to drift back to sleep.

That's when I felt it.

A touch.

Light. Gentle. Barely there.

Something brushing against my arm.

My eyes snapped open. I turned my head, searching for the source.

Dominic lay beside me. Motionless. His hand resting on the mattress between us.

Had I imagined it?

I stared at his fingers. Willing them to move. To twitch. To do anything.

Nothing.

But I could have sworn...

My eyelids grew heavy. The sleeping draught was still in my system, pulling me back down into unconsciousness.

'I'll figure it out tomorrow,' I thought drowsily. 'Tomorrow...'

Sleep claimed me once more.

Morning came with soft footsteps and whispered voices.

"Is she awake yet?"

"Not yet, Luna. But her color has improved significantly."

I opened my eyes slowly. Luna Helena stood at the foot of my bed, the physician beside her.

"Ivy!" Luna Helena rushed to my side. "How do you feel?"

"Better." My voice came out hoarse. Scratchy. But it was there. "Much better."

The physician approached and began his examination. He checked my pulse. Inspected my bandages. Pressed gently on various points along my arms and legs.

When he finished, his eyebrows were raised in amazement.

"Remarkable," he breathed. "Absolutely remarkable."

"What is it?" Luna Helena asked anxiously.

"Her recovery speed is extraordinary." The physician shook his head in disbelief. "The burns that should take weeks to heal are already closing. Her spiritual energy, which should be completely depleted, is already replenishing." He looked at me with something like awe. "At this rate, she'll be moving freely within three days."

Three days. That was nothing. Most wolves took weeks to recover from a bond-breaking ceremony. Some took months.

Luna Helena clasped her hands together, relief flooding her face. "Thank the goddess."

I smiled weakly. "I told you I'd survive."

"You did more than survive." Luna Helena took my hand and squeezed it. "You thrived."

A knock came at the door. Nell entered, looking hesitant.

"Forgive the interruption, Luna. But I thought you might want to hear the news about Young Master Bastian."

Luna Helena's expression cooled. "What about him?"

"He's... not doing well." Nell glanced at me nervously. "The servants in his wing said he screamed in pain all night. No one got any sleep. The physicians have been with him constantly, but nothing seems to help."

I felt a small spark of satisfaction. Petty, perhaps. But after everything Bastian had done to me, I couldn't bring myself to feel sorry for him.

"His mother and Lady Margot are beside themselves," Nell continued. "They're demanding that the Alpha send for more physicians. More specialists. They say the ceremony was rigged somehow. That it was designed to hurt Bastian more than Young Madam."

Luna Helena scoffed. "The ceremony was identical for both of them. It's not anyone's fault that Ivy is stronger than Bastian."

"Of course, Luna."

"Is there anything else?"

"No, Luna. That's all."

Nell bowed and left.

Luna Helena turned back to me, her expression softening. "Don't worry about Bastian. Focus on your own recovery."

"I will."

"And once you're strong enough to travel, I'm taking you to the Northern Forest. The healing springs there will help restore your strength completely."

I nodded, already feeling drowsy again. The conversation had tired me more than I expected.

Luna Helena noticed. "Rest now. I'll check on you again this afternoon."

She left with the physician, closing the door softly behind them.

I lay in the quiet room, listening to Dominic's steady breathing beside me.

Three days until I could move freely.

Then I could begin his treatments in earnest.

'Hold on,' I thought, turning my head to look at his peaceful face. 'Just hold on a little longer.'