

04 | The Bonding Ceremony

I comb through my long hair, letting it hang down my back. Working against the clock, I throw on a pair of dark jeans, leather boots, a white t-shirt, and a black jacket. He said to wear something expensive, but this event can be called a high class cook out at best.

Technically, it's a bonding ceremony, which is the equivalent of a wedding to humans except without all of the elegance, fancy clothes, and decor.

Just like Nathan said, I find him waiting for me in the living room of the pack house. He stops his pacing in order to look me over from head to toe.

"How much did that cost?"

"Enough," I answer as I walk past him.

"Is it designer?" He asks, coming up beside me.

"It is for tonight."

He makes a disapproving grunt. "We'll go shopping later. You look good though."

I stop dead in my tracks, still staring.

Did he... Did he just compliment me?

He orders me his arm, as if nothing out of ordinary had just happened. "Wouldn't wanna be late."

I wipe the petrification off my face and force myself to take the arm he's offering. It's an internal fight to keep myself from pulling away from him. Something about having any sort of contact with him seems wrong and stomach-churningly unappealing.

When we walk up to the open forested area that the party is set up in, everyone's eyes turn on us. The urge to shrink down and out of their sight is crippling, but there's nowhere to go. Plus I have too much pride to even attempt to hide against Nathan's side. Public shame can only go so far and that would be on an entirely new level.

There's no doubt in my mind that this is the latest gossip of the pack. The oh so beloved Nathan Swelter—soon to be Alpha of the Visari pack—is claiming a mate who isn't his.

He leads us past a towering bonfire whose flames reach high into the dark sky and to a long table set on a wooden platform which acts as a makeshift stage. There are four seats at the table, all on one side so that the occupants would all face the crowd.

Alpha Andre and his Luna, Nathan's mother, sit together at one end. I break away from Nathan and go past them, planting myself at the furthest end, as far away from them as I can be. To my misfortune, Nathan sits down next to me, far closer than I'd prefer.

No more than half a minute passes before he places his hand on my knee and starts tugging at my leg. I shoot him a burning glare so heated that he should burst into flames on the spot.

"Seriously?!" I snap, keeping it at a whisper.

He growls lowly, leaning closer. "You're mine now. Show it."

I clench my canines together so hard that my jaw aches. I roll my eyes and huff before throwing away my dignity and following his orders, lifting my legs so that they're in his lap.

It's a Visarian display of ownership. While sitting, the female would position herself so that the back of her thighs touch the top of the male's, though her butt stays in her own seat. In intimate cases, only between true mates, the male would wrap his arm around the female, her head resting on his shoulder.

However, that's not the case for us.

I put my thighs on top of his, but other than that, I keep as much distance as possible. It wouldn't be hard for someone to figure out that we're not mates. The still body language, the tense and mechanical movements, and not to mention my obvious disgruntlement; it's enough to make any spectator cringe with second hand embarrassment.

And of course, there's plenty of them to do so. Practically the entire pack is staring at us from below, unblinking. Despite the cold winter air, my face is on fire.

"Act natural," Nathan scolds in my ear.

"Maybe if I weren't being blackmailed I could," I hiss back.

Alpha Andre stands up, clearing his throat and sending us both a scolding look. He then slaps on a pleasant smile and faces forward to address the pack.

"Wolves of Visari, may I introduce to you to your soon to be Alpha and Luna," he announces, making a grand gesture towards us.

His speech goes on a re that. Most of it, if not all of it, is him rambling on about Nathan's childhood and his meager yet exaggerated achievements.

Not a single thing is said about me. It's almost like he completely forgot that I could've been considered his daughter at one point. I'm not surprised though.

Nearly half an hour of empty words and transparent compliments later, he concludes his speech with something along the lines of "may he reign long and prosper with this pack."

Applause bursts from the crowd when Alpha Andre sits back down. Although I tuned out the majority of his speech, I highly doubt the applause is sincere.

When the clapping starts to fade, a single hand in the middle of the sea of people pops up.

"Nathan and Adrienne aren't mates. What happens when she finds her mate? Will Nathan then find a new Luna?"

I perk up upon hearing my name. But Nathan opens his mouth first.

"There will be no other Luna," he answers. My brow furrows when I realize his tone is almost... defensive? Who knew he was such a good actor.

He continues, and slowly the defensiveness dissipates into professionalism. "I chose Adrienne. The ceremony will bind us. And if her mate has a problem with it, he can either get over it or take it up with me."

I shiver. There's something about talking about my hypothetical mate that seems unnatural. Wrong even, and I don't like it.

There were no more questions a re that. I was beyond thankful. The sooner this torture is over, the better.

Pack members begin passing out the food, giving me the dreadful cue to talk to the Alpha's asshole-ish offspring.

"When did you turn into plastic?" I ask him.

He looks at me, confused. "What?"

"You're fake, Nathan. Just like your little declaration of caring about me."

His gaze hardens and his jaw tightens, like I've hit a nerve. That's good though. Because I'd sever it if I could.

"I'd watch your fucking attitude if I were you," he warns dismissively.

I glance down at his palm resting right above my neck, then back up to him. "And I'd watch your hand if I were you," I growl, my teeth turning to canines.

Various dishes are sat down in front of me, all of them fresh and steaming. But none of them are bribing enough to make me stay.

"Where are you going?" Nathan asks as I abruptly stand up, having not even touched my single morsel of food.

I mumble a bitter retort, one I'm sure he can hear, "For a walk, get off my back."

I don't look back, not even a re hearing the rattling of silverware when a palm slams down on the table. Growling follows, low and provoked.

I guess now we both know what it's like to be inconvenienced by someone else.

"Let her go," Alpha Andre orders. I can just imagine him grabbing his son's wrist and pulling him back down before he can even get up. He's controlling like that. Except this time, I'm thankful for it.

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Darkness hangs heavy in the sky, though the dim moonlight makes the snow on the ground sparkle. Pointy and crooked shadows are cast down from the limbs of the trees above.

My hands are burrowed into my coat pockets as I trudge along one of the many paths that are well burned into my memory.

I had stormed off and away from the party. I wanted—want—away from all of them. As I come to a high point in the mountain trail, I catch sight of the bonfire far below. Like a giant burning ember among the grey, bleak landscape.

Suddenly my stomach drops.

I temporarily forget all of my woes of dread as I remember what Aimee had said to me.

"Don't go off into the woods by yourself. Stay near the pack."

As if to go with my immense feeling of regret, my skin prickles with apprehension. Goosebumps pop up all over my arms, along with the hairs on the back of my neck rising.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Aimee would kill me if she knew I didn't listen. That is if this notorious lurking beast doesn't do it first.

I tense up, suddenly getting the feeling that I'm being watched. Though I know it's only a simple symptom of paranoia. Right?

I shake my head, laughing at myself. I'm acting as ridiculous as Mya and her group of floozies.

Either way, I turn and start back down the same path I came. The snow crunches loudly under my feet, almost like static in my ears that's loud enough to drown out everything else.

As I go back down the path, my mind goes back to reality. Dread settles in my stomach at the thought of going back to that asshole whom his mother mistook for a person and named Nathan.

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When I slip back into the vicinity of the party, I can't help but to notice the tense atmosphere of the people and their constant whispering. Or how their eyes are wide and flickering around as they talk to one another.

"It's true then? They really ran him out?" I overhear a hushed voice ask as I stop at the refreshment table.

Out of the corner of my eye, a tanned skinned girl, who I know as Trisha, bobs her head of curls with a nod. "They exiled him," she says quickly, "I didn't think they'd ever do it. Not a re 3 years, especially."

What the hell is it with everyone whispering about this lately? What did Aimee say... the Exiled Alpha?

I busy myself to look casual, pouring a drink I don't even want.

"He's probably already looking for another pack to take over. Oh god, Trish, what if he's out there somewhere in the woods right now? What if he smells the bonfire and..."

"Sophia, calm down," Trisha stops the other girl's increasingly hysterical rambling. "Just... Just don't think about it."

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right," She agrees, although her voice is quivering. "Hey. Hey, are you eavesdropping on us?!"

I look up to find a pale redhead staring accusingly at me, assumedly Sophia. I can't help but to notice the vibrant hot pink jacket she's wearing, along with a matching headband.

"I know it doesn't take that long to fill a cup," she continues, her eyes apologetically, as if this sort of thing happens often.

I glance over at her before turning back to the table and picking up my drink. "You better keep your voice down. Hemight hear you," I mock as I start back towards my seat.

I have no idea who "he" is, but if it spites her, then so be it.

What happens next is nothing but a blur. While going back to my seat, I feel watched yet again. I look up to find Nathan's wide eyes staring at me. He stands up, his mouth agape and the color drained from his face. In the same instance that he points behind me, a bloodcurdling roar shakes the ground, followed by high-pitched screams.

I whirl around, coming face to face with Sophia, her arm raised in the air with something grasped in her hand. But that isn't what catches my attention.

Behind her, leaping out of the shadowy depths of the forest, is a monster beyond imaginable. An enormous, wolfish creature with glowing ruby red eyes. Even in midair it looks ten times the size of a normal wolf, and ten times as terrifying.

I don't even get the chance to panic or even so much as scream. The last thing I can process is a rock solid object crashing into my temple, erupting my skull in pain. Simultaneously, my vision plunges into blackness. Like somebody turned out the lights.

The last thing I saw was that beast coming straight towards me.

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New chapter! Hope you guys like it! Tell me your predictions as to what this terrifying beast will do because I love reading the comments ☺

Thank you so much for reading! It really does mean a ton to me!

☾ 🐺



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