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3 - 36 Balance The Scales

"We weren't sure how we would handle this part," Thea said. "But we need to act fast before it all turns to chaos. Does anyone have ideas?"

"We need to call in the Alphas we're giving the packs to," Alaric said. "Let them know what we've done. They'll need time to get their warriors organized."

"We should call in Alpha Ledger and Alpha Stoll even though we're not giving them a pack tonight," Thea said. "They should see the other Alphas in action, and the other Alphas should see them in action. It will build their confidence. It will be good for everyone."

"I'll call them," Alaric said.

Thea nodded, and they got to work. Alpha Ulric, Beta Walter, and the triplets all got their phones out and started calling Alphas. Delta team searched the bodies. They found poison on Alpha Jett.

Xavier stayed next to Thea. She sat down and rested.

Alpha Ford walked up to them.

"Thank you for everything, Alpha Ford," Thea said.

"Of course, Luna," he said. "I want to say that I'll do anything you ask, but I am hesitant about taking over another pack.

Honestly, I don't feel prepared, considering my own is in shambles."

She focused on him, reading his thoughts and insecurities.

"You are an Alpha, Alpha Ford," Thea said. "The goodness in you helped you recognize the bad traits in your father. Your young mind decided it wanted to be the opposite of your father, so you developed other traits. The good Alpha traits are still there. We'll help you remember them and sort them from the bad things you remember about your father."

Alpha Ford looked at her in awe, wanting more guidance. He was thirsty for it.

"We'll help you with anything you need," Thea said. "Pay attention tonight. To the other Alphas. To how they lead. When it's your turn, trust yourself. We will all have your back, but your pack wants your leadership. They know you're better than your father. They want to follow you. Command."

Alpha Ford nodded.

"Taking over another pack may be the best thing right now," Thea said. "It's a reason to make big changes in your pack. Fresh blood can invigorate change. Your pack members may rise to the occasion when they see all the former slaves and omegas that were beaten down. Some may sympathize and know what they need. It may inspire them."

Alpha Ford nodded. "Yeah. I didn't think about that."

"If we do your pack last, we could stay and do the

assessment right then. Help you get things in order as the big change happens," Thea said.

"That sounds like a smart plan," Alpha Ford said.

"Then that's what we'll do," Thea said.

"Thank you, Luna," Alpha Ford said.

Thea smiled and nodded, and Alpha Ford went back to his men.

"Can you sense my Life energy?" Thea said to Xavier.

"Yes," Xavier said.

"How is it?"

"Getting better."

"Your blood heals it?"

"Looks that way."

"Can I have some more?"

Xavier sliced his wrist and held it out. Thea sucked on his wrist for a moment. She felt better and stronger.

"Thank you," Thea said when she released Xavier's arm.

He nodded.

"So it's the kill that hurts me, right?" Thea said. "When the Life energy disintegrates or breaks, explodes, whatever. I couldn't differentiate anything. My brain was probably

unraveling too. It was all I could do to focus on the job at hand."

"Yeah. Taking the canines breaks the bond of the wolf, but it also breaks the magic, and it starts the dying process. It's a slow leak of radiation. Probably nothing to worry about if it's just one person. This many, it affected you." ①

"Yeah."

"A quick kill is like a nuclear bomb. All the life energy is released at once. Still, if it was just one person, you'd probably be okay. I don't think it would kill you. Not immediately. You'd have time to get my blood, or maybe you'd be able to use your own magic to fix yourself. But a room full of people all at once? I think you need to stay far away from that."

"Maybe you can measure how far the radiation spreads before it dissipates next time, so we know how far away I need to be." ①

Xavier nodded. "Only if you're not in the vicinity. We can't risk it touching you."

"Yeah," Thea said. "Why didn't you tell me about this, Zoe?" Thea said in her mind.

"I didn't know," Zoe said. "Your gift has never been given before. Life magic isn't the werewolves' area of expertise."

"So we don't know how else my gift can kill me? That's disheartening," Thea thought. "It didn't affect anyone else in

the room?" Thea said out loud.

"No," Xavier said. "Your Life energy is different from everyone else. Your magic is infused throughout all of you. The radiation affects your magic, I think."

"Which is infused into my lifeforce," Thea said. "I'd be dead if it wasn't for you."

Xavier met her eyes.

"We didn't know I'd be affected like this, and we didn't know you'd be able to mitigate the damage," she said.

"Maybe the goddess wanted it this way," Xavier said. " Maybe she put me on the path that led me here."

Thea gasped, and her eyes fell to her lap. She didn't want to believe the moon goddess would make Xavier a monster, let him hurt, rape, and kill all those innocent people so he'd be sentenced to death, then get his brain fixed and develop a conscience, be turned into a vampire tortured with guilt, all so he'd be able and devoted to helping her.

It was cruel, but it couldn't be a coincidence.

She realized she was responsible for Xavier in more ways than she had thought. He didn't choose to devote his life to her like Delta team did. This was done to him—because of her. Everything he did as a werewolf was because of her. That made the dead Xavier's sins her burden to bear as well.

"After what I've done," Xavier said, pulling Thea from her

thoughts. "If I can help you, maybe I can balance the scales. I know I can't make up for the bad I did—there's no way to make it right—but maybe I can end up doing more good than I did bad," Xavier said.

Thea didn't know what to say.

"I never told you how sorry I am for what I did to you," Xavier said softly.

"You never have to, Zay," Thea said. "It wasn't you. It wasn't your fault."

"I am, though," Xavier said. "I'm so sorry I hurt you." ①

Thea leaned her head against his shoulder and linked her arm through his.

"I forgive you," Thea said. She knew he needed to hear it, but it felt dishonest. She felt like she should be apologizing to him.

They stayed like that, not talking.

3 - 37 Gifts With Strings

Soon, Alphas started showing up to the school cafeteria. They took in the scene with shock on their faces.

Alpha Knight came over to Thea and Xavier. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay, thanks to Xavier," Thea said, looking at Alpha Knight. She sat up. "He's already saved my life."

"I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing," Alpha Knight said. "We never want your life to be in danger."

"But it will be, and I'm glad I have Xavier around. Why don't you sit with us, Alpha Knight?" Thea said.

Alpha Knight sat next to Xavier.

Once everyone arrived and settled, Alaric told the story of what happened.

"We could take these packs for ourselves," Alaric said. "But we'd rather strengthen our allies and increase the numbers of good packs."

"You want to give these packs to us?" Alpha Reese of New Moon said.

"Yes," Kai said. "Most of you share borders with at least one of these packs. It makes the most sense for a neighbor to take over the land. We know you'll treat the new pack

members right, and you'll get them prepared for the war."

"The bad Alphas played their hand, forced ours, and they lost," Conri said. "Now we have the opportunity to make this whole area a stronghold for good. All of us aligned, helping each other grow in wealth and strength, with no reason to fight amongst each other. No evil influences or rogues will dare to cross into a united territory like this. Together, we will lead the revolution for good."

Thea smiled with pride at her mates. They were inspiring the other Alphas. [1]

"You'd be doubling our land size and our pack size," Alpha Reese of New Moon said.

"Whatever businesses or wealth the previous Alphas had are yours too," Alaric said. "We are well aware that this is a lot of responsibility. It will be a lot of work to rehabilitate your new pack members. You'll have to teach them how they should be treated and treat others. You may have to educate a lot of them. The former slaves we've taken in were never taught to read. Remember, we are here for you. We know this is a lot to take on, especially while preparing for the Great War. This is what the goddess requires of us all."

"What is the plan? How do you propose we go in and take these packs over?" Alpha Darwin of Syzygy said.

"The direct approach seems best," Kai said. "Bring their dead Alphas to their packs and announce the takeover.

Whoever is taking over the pack will bring their warriors."

"There will be pushback from their warriors or other supporters," Alpha Lee of Harvest Moon said. "If the Alpha had a son, the title would pass to him. We'd have to challenge him."

"Yes," Alaric said. "As their new Alpha, you will have to accept any challenges. That will ultimately be what makes the pack yours instead of ours. The Alpha power will transfer to you. There will be higher-ranking members of the pack who won't want to change, who want to keep abusing weaker pack members."

"Your job is to squash that," Kai said.

"We don't have the numbers to keep that many people in line," Alpha Lee said.

"Most of the people who don't want the change will fight when we get there," Conri said. "You'll probably have to take care of most of them tonight, and we will be there to help you do that. We should all be there at each takeover. With this many Alphas, it will hardly be a fight."

"It will be good for the pack members to see us all as a united front," Kai said. "It will give them faith that they're joining a strong pack with strong allies. It will inspire confidence and loyalty."

A few of the Alphas nodded, thinking.

"Thea," Conri said. "You could separate the pack members

who are bad from the ones that want to be good, right?"

"Yeah," she said.

"After the initial fight, Thea will separate the pack into good people and the ones who will be problems," Conri said. "Do whatever you want after that. Put the bad ones in the dungeon. Give them a trial, let their accusers speak of their crimes, then punish them however you see fit. I imagine many of them have done things that warrant the death penalty. Whatever you do with them, if they're in the dungeon, you don't have to worry about keeping them in line."

More of the Alphas nodded. They could see how this would be doable.

"We will all help everyone in the initial takeover," Alaric said. "Then you'll each have autonomy over your new land and pack. If you need help at any point, we are here to support you."

All the Alphas nodded in agreement.

Alpha Ulric and Beta Walter looked at each other, proud of their children.

"Who wants to go first?" Kai said.

"I'm ready," Alpha Sharpe said. "My warriors have been on alert and are ready to go."

"The rest of you, tell your people to start preparing, but come

with us so you can see how this is going to go," Kai said.

"Seeing all these Alphas together should inspire confidence and obedience," Alaric said. "It will make them understand that their lives will be better and that something momentous is happening."

The other Alphas nodded.

"Whoever is going to be their Alpha will do the talking at that pack," Alaric said. "The rest of us are there to back you up."

More nods.

"I like sitting back and letting them take care of things," Thea said to Xavier.

"Especially after you nearly died?" Xavier said so only she could hear. His father had joined the other Alphas to discuss tactics and strategy.

"That could be why I'm happy to sit on the sidelines," Thea said. "I'm a little shook."

"You have other very demanding responsibilities. You don't have to do everything," Xavier said.

"I can't do everything. I don't want to do everything. Not anymore," Thea said, her hand on her belly.