

Chapter 41

Ben

I left Luke with Miguel, making an excuse about needing to shower. Okay, it wasn't really an excuse; I did need one. Pack members were actively avoiding me, telling me all I needed to know about my stench. I just really wanted to get back to the packhouse. I'd left the witch, Clara, in my room with a short promise to return as soon as possible.

She wasn't like anything I'd been expecting. I'd found her in the southern region of our state, guided by the human's rumors of a witch who lived in the forest. I'd been prepared for an old hag-like woman that I'd have to fight tooth and nail to convince to come with me. Not a beautiful blonde with shimmering brown eyes and her four-year-old daughter.

And certainly not a mate.

At first, I'd thought it was some magic she'd spelled me with. I couldn't be mated to a witch- that just didn't happen. But she was as shocked as I was, breaking down on the porch and cursing to any deity that came to mind. I told her to reject me, earning myself a slap. Apparently, witches couldn't reject their other halves without giving up their magic. Who knew? And who knew that witches had mates to begin with?

And how the Hell was I supposed to explain this Dimitri and the others? Sighing, I entered my room.

"It's about time. What took you so long?" Clara stood, crossing her arms.

"I couldn't just leave. That would have looked weird."

"Isabelle fell asleep hours ago. I had nowhere else to put her." She pointed to my bed where her daughter was curled up, hugging my pillow.

"I'm sorry, okay? You can stay here for tonight. I'll find somewhere else. Just let me grab some clothes."

"Where are you going to go?"

I shrugged. " I don't know. I'll find an empty room or something."

"Yeah. Right." She rolled her eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Just go." She sank into the armchair, glaring out the window. I stared at her, not understanding where her anger was coming from.

"Would you rather sleep somewhere else?" I asked.

"And what? Wake her up? She won't go back to sleep for hours if I do that."

I threw my hands up. "So, you're angry if I leave, and you're angry if you have to. And you've made really clear you don't want to be around me, so we can't stay here together. Why are you making this so damn difficult?"

"I'm making this difficult?! I didn't ask for you to show up at my door! I didn't ask for a werewolf mate!" She whisper-yelled.

"And I didn't ask for my mate to be a witch! I guess the Goddess has a sick sense of humor!"

Shock appeared on her face, followed immediately by hurt. Fuck.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I sighed heavily. "I'm sorry. That was out of line. We're both just really tense; this is a weird situation. I'm going to grab some clothes so I can shower and I'll come find you in the morning."

She didn't answer, so I quickly gathered my things and turned to leave.

"Ben?"

I looked over my shoulder.

"Are you...Are you going to find a she-wolf to spend the night with?"

"What?" No. I'm going to find a room to shower and sleep. By myself."

"Okay. Fine." Sitting back in the chair, she avoided my gaze.

"Clara, whether you like it or not, you're my mate. I have no desire to seek out some random girl with my mate sleeping in the same house. If you're not going to reject me, then at least have some faith in me. I may be part beast, but I'm not a monster." With that, I shut the door and left. What on Earth had made her ask me that?

"Isn't it obvious?" My wolf, Jude, asked.

"Uh, no?"

"Wow, you really are dumb sometimes."

"Are you going to tell me or not?"

"I was, but now I want to see if you can figure it out yourself."

"I hate you."

I did find an empty room, thankfully. Dumping my clothes on the bed, I stripped out of my dirty ones and threw them in the corner. Jumping in the shower, I let days of dirt and sweat run off me. I felt a million times already. Focusing my mind on my mate's question, I turned over different theories. Was she worried about losing her magic? Would that happen if I slept with someone else? Not that it mattered, because I wouldn't. Or was she just worried about Isabelle? Did she think I was the type to parade different women around in front of her and her daughter?

"Oh, my Goddess, you idiot. She's been cheated on!" Jude yelled at me.

"Huh?"

"No woman asks that out of the blue unless it's happened before. How do you not know this?"

"How do you know this?"

"Because I'm not stupid."

I hmped at him. "But I would never do that."

"I know that. But whoever hurt her really took a toll. My guess would be it was Isabelles Dad."

It made sense, looking at it from his perspective.

"Okay Mr. Expert on Women. What do I do?"

"Nothing you can do bud. Except give her time and show her you're not that type of guy. She'll come around."

"Really? All you've got is 'she'll come around'?"

"Yes. And maybe work the kid in our favor too."

"You want me to use my mate's kid to manipulate her into liking us?" I scoffed. He was unbelievable.

"It's not manipulation. Clara is our mate, so Isabelle is our pup. And she already likes you."

"That just seems wrong dude."

"If Clara came to us right now and accepted us, would we or would we not accept Isabelle too?"

"Okay, yeah. I see your point. I just don't like the way you worded it."

It was true, Isabelle took to me almost instantly. While her mom was packing, she'd asked me endless questions about what it was like being a werewolf. She had a curious mind and a wild imagination. The kid was also a little ball of energy; Like a battery that never lost its charge. Isabelle needed to see everything, know what it was, and then ask fifty questions of how's and why's.

I smiled, remembering when we were at the airport. Isabelle had been fascinated by the planes.

FLASHBACK

"Mama, how do they stay up? What makes them fly?"

"Uh... mechanics?" Clara had no idea.

"What kind?"

"The...mechanical...kind." I bit my lip to keep from laughing. Isabelle, clearly not satisfied with her mom's answer, turned to me.

"What your mom is trying to say is there is a whole lot of science that goes into airplanes. It's super complicated and involves a lot of math."

Her little nose scrunched up with disdain. I'd learned very quickly that Isabelle hated math, avoiding it when she could.

"Never mind."

Clara looked at me, lips pursed. By now, I wasn't expecting a thank you. And I didn't receive one.

"Mama! Mama, why is that lady's belly so fat when the rest of her skinny?!" Isabelle was pointing to a pregnant woman standing about five feet away. Her voice carried loudly around the area, making the women turn and raise her eyebrows.

"Because I'm having a baby." The woman told her.

Isabelle's eyes lit up. "Really? How did it get in there?"

Clara just about choked when her daughter looked at her for an answer. This time I couldn't hold back my laugh, earning myself a cold glare.

"Well... uh...you see sweetie..." Clara fumbled for words, coming up empty.

"She ate a watermelon seed Isabelle. The seed is growing in her belly, and it turns into a baby." I said.

"Really?!" Clara hissed at me.

"Yup, really."

"Wow!" Isabelle turned to examine the woman's stomach again.

"You know that now I can never give her watermelon again." Clara said lowly to me.

"Tell her it's not the baby kind, and you'll be fine. That's what my mom did with us."

"You're unbelievable."

"You want to tell her the truth instead?"

She blushed adorably, shaking her head frantically.

END FLASHBACK

My dick hardened, picturing my mates face all flushed. I groaned. Why did it have to be this way? Why did the Moon Goddess do this to me? I was a nice guy- I was loyal and hard working. Never asked for much. So why couldn't my mate be a she-wolf, like everyone else?

"We don't get to choose that. And you're being pretty selfish right now." Jude huffed.

"I just want my mate. And I want her to want me too. How is that selfish?"

"Don't you think she feels the same way? All anyone wants is to be loved."

If Clara wanted to be loved, why was she pushing me away? We were literally made for each other- she was the other half to my soul. I could say it was because she was protecting Isabelle, but it felt more personal to me than that. Maybe my wolf was right, and whoever she let in before had hurt her so bad that she didn't want to let anyone in again, mate or not.

I sighed heavily. Why couldn't anything just ever be easy?