

## Mated to the Alpha and His Beta Chapter 396

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Xander

I wanted to be sure my Beta didn't feel like we were shoving him out of the way again, but I didn't even have to say anything. Zane was already clearing away our empty bottles. He turned to face me.

"I know the two of you need to go handle this stuff.

I'll be here if you need anything from me, okay?" He shrugged.

I got up and clapped him on the back. "You got it. I'm going to head down to the security center and check out their tech setup. I want to find out more about those spiders Malachi was talking about."

Mason nodded. "I'll go with you to see what I can do about this phone. It could be just this one, but maybe something's going on with the equipment that's being distributed."

"You think someone's on the inside?" Zane asked.

"Could be," my brother said with a grim expression on his face. "It would make sense, wouldn't it?"

"No place is ever as secure as the people in charge want and need it to be. Not even Brightsky," I concluded. "And Zane, just so you know, when all of this gets sorted, I'm also working on getting you security clearance."

He grinned and waved a hand in my direction. "No rush. I decided I actually kind of like being a gentleman of leisure."

I laughed. That was as far away from the Zane I knew as anything could be. "Right. What are you going to do while we're gone? Get your nails done? Maybe a spa treatment?"

"That actually doesn't sound half bad," Zane said with another broad grin. "A massage..."

"Ugh," my brother cut in, holding up Goldie's phone.

"All of that sounds better than dealing with this f uckery."

Anything sounded better than that. We left Zane behind in the apartment and made our way through long hallways and several levels to get to the command center. Mason peeled off to go to the equipment while I asked for entry to the audio/visual hub.

"Xander, right?" A tall, lean man with pointed ears got up to shake my hand. "Pleasure to meet you. We've heard a lot about you and your brother. I'm Franco.

This is Jordy"

At my look of surprise, Jordy laughed. "Yeah, we're twins."

Both had the same startlingly blue eyes, the irises rimmed with pale green, and slightly oblong pupils

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instead of round. Their white-blond hair hung past their shoulders, braided and tied back in a complicated design. They were identical. The only way to tell them apart was by their different colored shirts.

"What can we help you with?" Franco asked. He wore blue.

Jordy, in red, swiveled in his chair to gesture at the large bank of screens showing many places in the complex. "Want to take a gander at what's going on around here?" from."

Franco pulled up a chair. "Have a seat. Tell us about what kind of security you had back where you came

"Forgive my brother," Jordy said with a roll of his eyes. "He doesn't get out much."

The two of them even sounded alike. It was weird. I took the chair Franco had offered and looked at the

screen closest to me. It was showing a familiar sight.

The training grounds.

"Do you have anything on the outside?" I asked. "Can you see who goes in and out?"

"Yeah, sure. Of course." Jordy typed quickly and the screen changed to show an empty expanse of tundra.

Together, the twin brothers walked me through the entire setup.

"But nothing in Standard?" I questioned.

Franco shook his head. "Standard's the portal town, but we don't have jurisdiction there.

We could set up

equipment, I guess, but someone would have to do the maintenance on it, which would

mean someone from

Brightsky would have to be assigned permanently to the town. Nobody wants to live there all the time. Not

when they could be here instead.”

“But since it’s the place everyone who comes to the enclave has to go to first, wouldn’t it make more

sense to have eyes there?”

I didn’t want to get too deep into the newcomers who’d shown up in town. Franco and Jordy were on the

security team, but that didn’t mean Malachi had alerted them of something happening outside of the enclave.

Jordy shrugged. “Anyone seeing entry to Brightsky has to be approved, vetted, and confirmed. If th

made it to Standard in the first place, they’re already pretty much guaranteed to be accepted into the

“People do come to Standard who have no clue about Brightsky, though. Right?” I asked.

Franco answered this time. “Sure. It’s a legitimate town. We keep records of who comes and goes, o

course.”

“Can I see them? I’m particularly interested in any new arrivals over the past, oh, six months.”

“Yeah, sure, no problem.” Jordy spun around again to do some more typing. He made a surprised noise.

“What the.....? Franco, look.”

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His brother bent over Jordy’s shoulder to peer at the screen. “Where’d all those files go?”

“I don’t know,” Jordy said. “They’re just gone.”

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Lanie

I grinned at my grandfather. “Bring it on, old man!”

Malachi winced. "For the sun's sake, Lanie. Please try to address me with a bit of decorum."

"Oh, Ancient one," I teased. "Is that better?"

"Marginally," Malachi said.

I was feeling good about putting my body to the test and passing it. My muscles that had been aching were sore but in a good way now. I was pumped up.'

Energized. I felt like I could probably run up the walls and across the ceiling if I tried hard enough. I felt like I could fly.

"Calm down first," Malachi added as I bounced back and forth on the balls of my feet. "You're so easily distracted."

Greyson chuckled, earning him a sharp look from Malachi. Charlotte frowned at him, too, shaking her head, but then her lips curled into a small smile. She took his hand and squeezed it. I could tell they were speaking to each other through a mind link. The love that shone out of their eyes for each other was so beautiful, it almost moved me to tears.

"Your emotions are out of control," my grandfather cut into my thoughts. "By the Goddess, I can practically smell them. Wipe those sappy tears away, granddaughter. Focus. If you don't get yourself under control, you're going to hurt yourself. Or worse, one of us."

"I didn't think I'd be able to hurt you," I said, but I did as he commanded and dashed away my tears of happiness for my friends.

He was right. My emotions were all over the place.

There was no reason for me to be so overcome by them. To my surprise, Braden put an arm around my shoulder and pulled me against his hip.

"Stop plaguing her, Malachi. Lanie's emotions are part of what makes her so unique. She can't just turn

them off like they're coming out of a faucet," Braden said calmly. "If she didn't feel so deeply, she'd never be able to harness her gifts."

Malachi's eyebrows went up, but then his eyes narrowed. "Would you like to take responsibility for her if she allows her emotions to hamper her progress? What if it causes an accident because she's too worked up?"

"Hey, you two. No fighting. Braden, my grandfather has a point. I do need to learn to manage myself. I'm not saying I don't think I should feel," I corrected hastily when Braden looked like he was going to protest. "But

he's right. If I want to learn how to use my hybrid traits, I need to be focused."

Malachi shot Braden a smug look. For someone centuries old, my grandfather sometimes acted even

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"Let's try telekinesis," Charlotte cut in, bringing my attention back to the tasks at hand. She put a small, weighted ball on a table in front of me and stepped back. "Try to move this with your mind."

it."

"Can you do that?" I asked curiously.

She shook her head. "No, but it is a talent some vampires have. Malachi has it, so you might."

My grandfather demonstrated by lifting the ball and setting it down merely by looking at it. "Now,

you try

I did, but even though I stared hard enough to make my eyes hurt, the ball didn't budge. I frowned.

"What's the trick?"

"There is no trick. You can either do it or you can't,"

Charlotte said. "Looks like you can't."

That was a disappointment, but there were many other tests I had to do. My earlier confidence and good feeling from mastering the fast run was fading quickly as I was unable to do anything else my grandfather or Charlotte asked me to do. I wanted to cry again, but this time the tears weren't happy.

Charlotte hugged me. "Don't worry about it, Lanie.

Think of it this way. The more we eliminate, the more opportunities you'll have to focus on what you can do, without everything else clouding it."

"Enough of this sappy nonsense," Malachi said, snapping his fingers. "Let's test your mind reading."

I tried Greyson first, but although I could tell anything from him. Braden, on the other hand...

e was thinking hard to give me a good chance, I couldn't get

"I can't...quite...tell what you're thinking," I said slowly as I concentrated. "It's more like I'm getting flashes of your feelings."

Charlotte nodded. "That makes sense. As your grandfather pointed out before, your own emotions are running high. You're connected to feelings, especially deep ones."

"If you can't discern Braden's thoughts, then describe his feelings," Malachi demanded.

I did my best to create that shift in my mind again.

That opening door. But when I looked at Braden's face, something became so clear to me I didn't have to read his mind to guess what he was thinking.

He didn't want me to share his feelings with anyone in this room, and especially not with my grandfather.

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Zane

Silence surrounded me after Xander and Mason shut the door behind them.

I was the only one left in the apartment, and I couldn't remember that last time that had happened.

It probably never had.

Come to think of it, when was the last time I'd really been alone with nothing to do but entertain myself?

Too long. I wasn't used to not having any tasks to complete, but I was going to take advantage of having no responsibilities, at least for the moment. Everyone would be back home in a few hours, and family life would resume.

I loved my family, but there was no doubt that the grind of caring for three children as well as three other mates, plus a mother-in-law, could sometimes feel like a strain. Like it was taking everything out of me but not putting much back.

I did consider giving Greyson a call, but then I remembered that he was helping Lanie with her testing in Malachi's quarters. That was actually a relief, because then I truly had no reason not

to indulge myself in  
doing...nothing.

Unfortunately, the problem with having nothing to do meant there was, well, nothing to do. I wasn't really hungry or thirsty, and although a nap alone in the quiet sounded like a decadent luxury, I wasn't sleepy enough to take one. I didn't need a shower, and I was feeling too lazy to do any kind of workout.

"Well, s hit," I said out loud to the empty space. I made myself laugh, shaking my head. I wanted to be lazy, but it just wasn't in my nature.

The kids had left a few board games out, so I gathered up all the pieces and sorted them into the correct boxes to put them all away. We had housekeeping staff come in for the actual cleaning, but I knew if Lanie came home and saw the mess, she'd clean it up.

I didn't want my Luna to come back from her training to do any chores. She'd probably be wiped out.

As I was putting the games back on the bookshelf, I decided to open the cabinet set into the shelves. I'd never bothered to look inside it before. What I saw inside made me laugh out loud.

"No way!"

I couldn't remember the last time I'd watched anything on TV. Months ago, at least. Here inside the cabinet was a giant flat-screen hooked up to every streaming service I'd ever heard of and a bunch I hadn't.

My Alphas had gone off to handle their leadership duties, and this time, I wasn't upset about being left out. In fact, looking at this big screen, I was glad I didn't have to go deal with anything other than making myself a huge bowl of popcorn with melted butter. I grabbed a couple of cans of soda, too, and settled myself into one of the comfortable leather recliners facing the TV.

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I

stations to see what options I had. I was used to the human offerings, of course, since that was most of what

we had access to back home. I was surprised to see how many new episodes of shows had aired since the

last time I could remember watching.

Apparently, the Fae had an entire broadcasting system, with their own game shows, dramas, and even comedies. Fortunately, they were subtitled so I could understand what was going on, but I quickly switched away from the channel after only a few minutes. I had enough drama in my life. I didn't want to watch it on TV.

I kept scrolling until I found the sports stations. Every sport from around the world, plus all the supernatural competitions. There were even channels devoted to on-demand replays of the best matches of

all time.

face.

"This is more like it," I said out loud. I dug a hand into the bowl of popcorn and shoveled some into my

I didn't want to indulge in anger about how the High Council had screwed us all over for so long, but when

I saw how many supernaturals were out there living their lives, competing in sports I hadn't even heard of, I

couldn't help feeling the fury and frustration.

We'd been denied an entire world.

The "house" phone rang, startling me with its harsh, discordant jangle. It was more like an intercom system than a landline, you could only use it for internal calls. If any of my mates or even Gabriela had wanted to reach me, they'd have used my cell, so the fact that someone was ringing the house line meant something of an emergency.

"Zane Constantine," I barked into the handset.

"Zane, hello, this is Myrna from the Brightsky school.

You need to come and collect your daughter, Stella.

There's a small problem. You really need to come right away."

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Mason

I knew Brightsky had a system set up to distribute tech to its residents, much the same as we were all provided with food, clothes, and medicine.

Computers, phones, reading tablets, and the like all came from the central equipment hub, and there was

an entire IT staff dedicated to servicing all of it.

"Can I help you?" the vampire behind the desk asked politely. Her fangs peeked out over her lower lip when

she smiled. She looked about twelve, but I knew she had to be much older than that.

"I'm looking for a new phone," I said casually.

She nodded and swiveled in her chair to face the computer on her desk. Her fingers poised over the

keyboard. "Sure. Name?"

"Mason Constantine."

She looked back at me. "Oh, my: You're Malachi's granddaughter's mate!"

"That's me," I said with a chuckle. I wondered if I'd ever get used to being kind of a minor celebrity around

here. "Does that matter?"

"Well, certainly. It gives you access to a much greater range of equipment," she said with a nod.

"And if we

don't have what you want in stock, we can order out for it"

"Not everyone has that privilege?" I asked, curious about how it all worked. Charlotte had given Xander a laptop to use for the leadership meetings, but we all still had our own cell phones from before we got here.

None of us had needed to requisition any equipment since we'd arrived.

The vampire behind the desk pressed her lips together primly. "All residents of Brightsky are permitted to have whatever equipment they want, but if they want something beyond the standard, they're on their own to

order it. Special gaming systems, things like that.

We don't provide that kind of upgrade."

"But if I wanted something powerful like that, I could get it," I clarified.

She nodded. "Yes. It would take a few days, but I could put in the order for you. Were you interested in

that?"

"No. Just a new phone." I studied her as she typed, asking me my brand preference and any specs I wanted. "So if someone does order in equipment, does it still come through here?"

She frowned, looking at her computer screen. "No.

The residents are responsible to order it and pick it up themselves. We have nothing to do with it."

Which meant there was no oversight of it. Which meant that anyone could bring in tech that was

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compromised, either with spyware they didn't know about...or maybe, they did. The phone in my pocket that Goldie had given us felt suddenly much heavier.

I was going to have to fill in my brother about this. I knew he'd have something to say about the possibilities of a security breach.

"Does your IT staff do any repairs on it or anything, if there are problems?"

She laughed. "No. And believe me, sometimes people complain about that a lot. But what do they expect?

If it's not our equipment, we can't be held responsible for it. We do always warn people that if they want to

go outside of the department for their tech, they're on their own."

"Ah," was all I said. The wheels were turning in my mind. I could sense a spike in my brother's emotions.

Something was going on with him, but he didn't reach out to me through our mind link.

She typed quickly, fingers flying over the keys in a blur, much like the way I'd seen Malachi running.

It was impressive. I wondered if she made many mistakes. I could only hunt and peck, myself.

"There. All ordered," the clerk said cheerfully. "If you wait right here, I'll have someone bring you the new

unit. You can have a seat there while you wait.

Complimentary soft drinks and coffee, too."

"Is this going to take that long?" I asked, a little concerned.

She laughed. "It shouldn't, not unless you're here for a repair."

True to her word, another clerk brought me a new, boxed phone. I unwrapped it to check it out, specifically

looking to see if it had the same issues as the one Goldie had given me. It all looked fine.

Nothing wrong with it.

Casually, I took out the broken one. "While I'm here, I wonder if someone can take a look at this?"

I handed it to the vampire behind the desk. She looked it over with a frown.

"There's something wrong with this phone," the clerk said. Her frown deepened.

"I know, that's why I want a tech to look it over."

She shook her head, turning the phone over and over in her palm. "No, I mean...where did you get it?"

"It was given to someone I'm working with on the leadership council as a temporary unit." I didn't say who

or what for, and the clerk didn't give any indications that she was trying to guess.

She shook her head and handed it back to me. "Well, all I can tell you is that we don't carry that type of



unit. Wherever they got that phone, it wasn't from here."

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Zane

"What happened?" I demanded at once.

The voice on the other end of the phone cleared her throat. "I think it's best if you just come down here."

"Is she hurt?"

"She's not hurt, nothing like that," Myrna assured me.

"I'm the school nurse, and I can honestly tell you she seems in perfect health. But her teachers asked me

to call you to come pick her up."

"I'll be there as soon as I can get there."

The school nurse had said Stella was in perfect health, so that could mean she'd eaten too many snacks

and had a belly ache or something. Or, more likely, she'd misbehaved in some way. The nurse hadn't sounded

too shocked, so that made me feel a little better. She probably saw kids getting up to hijinks all the time.

Bad enough to get sent home, though?

I thought about using the mind link to alert my Luna and my Alphas that Stella was in trouble at school,

but then I decided against it. They were all busy, and I was her parent as much as any of them, even if I had no

biological ties to her. Quickly, I cleared away my snack bowl and started hunting for the boots I'd kicked off

earlier.

my

Damn, this was the problem with wearing the same size as both Xander and Mason. One of them must've taken my favorite boots. I found an older pair instead and put those on. I grabbed my phone, too, just in case

someone needed to get ahold of me while I was out.

Oops. There was a call from the school and also a text.

No wonder they'd finally called the house phone.

The voicemail and text didn't say anything more than what Myrna had told me on the phone, so I guessed that whatever Stella had gotten into couldn't be that serious. Still, I was worried enough that when the elevator

was taking way too freaking long to arrive on our floor, I chose to take the stairs instead

Popcorn and soda sloshed around in my stomach as I ran up the stairs. When I came out into another hallway, I was a little turned around. Cursing Brightsky's labyrinth of corridors, stairwells and public spaces, I navigated as best I could toward the school. I reached a locked door, though, preventing me from accessing the corridor beyond. It didn't have any signs saying why it was restricted or anything on it, and this was the first time I'd ever encountered something like that.

Cursing a little under my breath, I backtracked. Even though I hadn't been too worried at first,

the longer it was taking me to get to the school, the more uneasy I felt. Even if it wasn't something serious, the idea that my little girl could be sick and waiting for her Papa made me pick up my steps.

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accessible from one central point, which was great for safety but a pain in the ass when you needed to get to your sick kid. I could see some of the different classes through the windows, but there was no way to get in there from here. I didn't spot Stella, either.

At last, I made it all the way around to the front entrance. I didn't recognize the three adults sitting in the vestibule. One man, two women. I gave them a nod as I passed, going to the front desk.

"I'm Zane Constantine. I got a call from the school telling me there was a problem with my daughter,

Stella. I'm here to pick her up."

The receptionist looked...scared? Startled? She stood up and cleared her throat. "Yes, well, um, thank you

for coming right away."

"What's the problem? Is she sick?" I braced myself for bad news about her behavior.

The receptionist looked past me. She cleared her throat again. "No. Well. I mean..."

Irritated, I leaned a little closer. "I came right away because someone named Myrna called to tell me there

was a problem with my daughter. I'd appreciate it if you stopped beating around the bush and told me what's

going on. Where can I pick her up to take her home?"

"She's..." the receptionist tipped her chin behind me to the vestibule.

I turned and saw the same three adults who'd been there when I came in. Two women, one man. I

frowned, scanning the area for any sign of Stella, but the three strangers were the only ones waiting.

"Hello, Papa," said one of the women as she stepped forward. She had a clear, warm voice and looked like

she was at least twenty years old.

"What the..." I began but couldn't say more than that.

I was too shocked.

The adult woman was Stella.

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