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There was no sound in the clearing for a while. Auri had pinned me with her stare but her words looped in my head. They didn't want to take root. They shouldn't take root. How could Auri say something like that right before we were going into battle. Was this just fear? Was this her own inadequacy that she was making this statement? Was she telling me that she wasn't going to fight and that was why?

"Zeke..."

"No."

It was the only word I could get out. The only one that made any logical sense. No. He wasn't going anywhere. He was my mate. He was too young. He was a father. He was our king. He was a son. He was an Alpha. He was everything to me and I would not lose him.

"No." It came out again. Stronger this time.

"Zeke, please..."

I shook my head. "No, Auri. No. I won't let him. You won't let him. How could you even say anything like that? How could you? Are you planning on killing him yourself?"

My last question was too far and I knew it. A hand wrapped around my throat as my back collided with a tree. She wasn't choking me but rather holding me up against the tree. Her eyes bright gold as she glared at me.

"Don't you fucking dare say that, Ezekiel Silver."

"I'm sorry. I know...I just...he can't. I can't...why would you

say that before the battle? Why would you put that in my mind? That he could possibly die?"

Her gaze fell and her eyes slipped back to their normal color. "I didn't want to believe it either." The grip of her hand eased and she slowly set me down on the grass. "You think I didn't do my research, Zeke? Magic, if anything, is unpredictable. It moves and flows almost as inconsistently as time does. Idu deals in both magic and time. That alone forces me to question every single thing." 1

"Okay. Then...that's it. We will protect him. He will be safe and we won't let anymore near him. Hell, you can throw him back into a portal. Vale can be home and we can..."

Auri looked up at me, those tears falling down her face again. "You think I would tell you this without looking into it? I wouldn't have said anything, sweetheart. I would have kept it to myself. No one needs the stress of that information on them. Goddess knows I didn't want it."

I swallowed, hard. "Then why the fuck did you tell me?"

"Because...because of my theory."

My body fell back against the tree that she originally had held me up against. Auri turned from me, walking away, pacing between the columns. Her eyes were searching, but not the ground. They were searching in her mind, the information that I'm sure she had stored. Most likely trying again and again to find a loophole. A loophole I needed.

"That an Alpha King is marked at conception, and it signifies the death of the Alpha King."

She stopped her pacing and looked up at me, as though Auri just remembered I was there. "Yes."

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My voice was barely a whisper. "You found..."

"A pup that fits the criteria, yes. The signs are the same as when I was pregnant with Vale. Too big, too early, too strong, too developed, and a second pup. I found them, Zeke. I found them and..."

"Stop, Auri. Stop. You don't know if that's correct. You don't know..."

She sighed and looked at me with a weariness that came with years and years of holding the future on your shoulders. "I don't. You're right. We can't confirm that the mark is there until they are born."

I smiled. "See. Then, we don't need to worry about it. We don't need to..."

"She's gone into labor, Zeke. It's the only reason I told you now. I probably would have waited, or not even told you at all. I got the call though...Naomi has gone into labor."

My mouth went dry. "Luna Naomi? Luna Naomi and Alpha Evan? The ones who took over Crescent River while Vale and Hector were there."

She nodded. "Alpha Evan wasn't able to come because his Luna was in the last trimester of her pregnancy. I confirmed the signs by speaking with them personally. I... if there was any doubt..."

"What if you just died instead?" The moment the words left my mouth, the bitterness that filled me, made me flinch. It was like I tried to get away from my myself.

Auri didn't seem to care. She didn't even look at me but I could see her hands ball up into fists. "I wish. Zeke, I wish



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I could could take his place. I wish I could stop this from happening..."

"So? Do it. If anyone has that power, Auri, it's you. You can save him. You have the fucking power to do it!" I was yelling at her, tears streaming down my face.

"I've already died...Zeke. I already a ghost of an Alpha King. I don't count anymore or Vale wouldn't have any power."

I growled and stomped up to her. Faris was forward now, snarling as he grabbed her neck this time. He swung her around and slammed her into the marble pillar. Pieces of it broke off as he held her up against the rock. Snapping at her, I let the anger consume me.

"Then kill the pup. If there is no Alpha King to replace him, he won't die."

Her eyes looked at me with pity and despair. "Would you really kill an unborn pup, Zeke? Is that who you are?"

"To save my mate? Mine. My love. My better half. My king. My everything. I would...I..." I felt my throat restrict and the anger recede.

My mind had thought of standing over the Luna, of driving a knife through her, and I felt sick to my stomach. Falling to my knees, Auri fell with me. I grabbed my shirt and screamed into the air. Auri blanketed me, holding me as I rocked. Her own body was shaking from her sobbing as I wailed like a child. Eventually, she quieted and just held onto me as my wailing turned into hiccuped cries.

"I'm sorry. I just...I..."

"You don't need to apologize to me, Zeke. I know where



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you are coming from." Auri sat back and her hand brushed my cheek. "Just don't let Vale catch you saying that."

"You walked out here because it was too far for Vale to feel me."

She nodded. "That and there is still a lot of magic in this place. It's not quite a bubble within time, but it's has a lot of magic poured into it. It's the reason why the castle was built so close to it. The battle had long been forgotten but even the ones who came after could feel the magic from this place."

The history lesson made me feel a little more disconnected from the pain and I nodded. "I don't...how... what do I do?"

Sitting back on her knees, Auri took my hands. "We try to do our best to protect him. We do our best to stop it from happening. Or try to shift it to me. That maybe somewhere they would take my sacrifice as payment enough." She stopped for a moment before she squeezed my hands. "Hector knows. I had to tell him. He can feel me no matter the distance, so I had to. I wasn't going to cut myself off like I had before. So he will be helping as well."

"I...I can't tell Vale."

She shook her head. "You can't. It's going to be hard. I know. Trust me. But he needs to focus on leading. On getting your kids back. Let us focus on protecting him."

"Goddess...why..." I fell forward, my forehead falling into Auri's lap.

She brushed her hands through my hair. "If I knew...if only I knew how Micah had transferred Logan's power. He said that it was done by a bunch of people. Witches and

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vampires and a bunch of other people. I'm not sure if it would have helped, with an Alpha King already chosen, but I would have done it from the beginning. This should never have been on Vale. It should have always been the burden I carried."

"You have to admit though, Vale fits the role."

Auri chuckled. "Yes, yes he does. He's always accept the role with grace. He knew he could make a difference and that's what he wanted to do. When he was at the High Council, he always wanted to learn from them. Learn how to be fair and a good ruler. I think he taught them more than anything. Especially knowing about how corrupt everything ended up being."

"He's done so much good. He's worried about this battle being his legacy. That this is all he will be remembered for, and that it fails."

"I would never allow that." Auri's finality in her voice made me smile. "He is my son, and I will do everything within my power to see that he succeeds. For the first time in thousands of years, there was a peace treaty between the supernatural races. They came together and that will always be what he is known for. This is only him protecting that dream and his children. So they get to see that dream become a reality as well."

My heart was breaking; my soul crumbling. I felt like everything was falling apart. We had order and we were ready to get our kids back. That they would be in our arms and we would move on with our lives. Oran would be dead and there would be nothing standing in our way of peace. Instead, peace was never within our grasp. It never would be. There would always be something that would

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destroy us.

"You can't die, Zeke."

My head whipped up and I looked at Auri, a devastating look on her face. "What?"

"No matter what happens. To me. To Vale. To anyone. You can't die. You can protect Vale and keep him safe but it will never be at the cost of your own life, do you understand?"

"No, of course I don't understand! If I can protect Vale! If I can...somehow..."

Aura squished my cheeks with her hands. "It doesn't want you." Her words were slow and forceful.

"It?"

She sighed and let up some of the pressure. "Fate. Fate doesn't want you or your life, Zeke. You would be a senseless death. Your kids need you. Your pack needs you. Fate will decide if it will take my life as payment. Otherwise, the Goddess will take Vale. You need to be left. So you can't decide to throw your life away."

"I..." I started to argue but my head was filled with Vale's voice.

'Z, WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU?'



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