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"I thought you said he wouldn't be able to reach me?"

Auri chuckled. "I said he wouldn't be able to feel you. The ability of an Alpha King and how far we can mind link, especially with our mate, is pretty far."

I winced. "He's pissed."

"I mean, it is kind of a weird time."

"He probably thinks we went off and did some mission to fight ourselves."

She smirked and shook her head. "I mean, you thought that too."

"I..." My eyes narrowed. "You could hear me?"

"And your ridiculous explanation about why you don't call me Mom anymore."

Sighing, I slumped back and closed my eyes. 'I'm here, Vale. I'm not too far from camp.'

'Don't fucking give me that. You're with my mom, aren't you? What are you doing?'

'Nothing. Just talking.' The emotion caught in my throat and I squeezed my eyes together, trying not to cry.

How long would it be? Would today be the last day I would hear his voice? See his smile? Or at this point, his angry face as his eyebrows pinched together and a frown on his face. Would this be the last I would have of my sweet mate? Auri pulled me to her and held me, my forehead resting on her shoulder. She was so small but

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her presence was so big that I felt comforted.

"You have to be strong, Zeke. You have to pretend. Vale needs you. If you're not his rock, he's going to waver. Don't let this get to him. You have to protect him but you need to protect him from this too."

"Auri, this is too much. It's too damn much. I can't keep this from him. I can't keep myself together."

She raised my head and I opened my eyes to look into hers. "You have to, Zeke. There is no 'I can or can't'. You just have to. I know you can do this." Taking a deep breath, Auri stood up. "Come on, we need to go back. Before Vale really thinks we did a clandestine mission. We can get started on breakfast for everyone."

I took her outstretched hand and she easily pulled me up. We didn't walk arm in arm back but we did stay side by side. Auri was walking a few paces in front of me and peaking out from the neckline of her shirt were the shimmering blue runes.

"Are you going to be removing the runes?"

She twisted around to look at me. "Not all of them, no. I'm not sure what would happen if I removed all of them. I'm not willing to find out either. Not with this many people around."

"You don't know your limits?"

"I don't. But I've killed too many in the pursuit to find it. I don't want their death to be senseless. Just simply for the fact I couldn't control myself while trying to find the limits of my power." She chuckled. "I'm a monster. People think vampires and werewolves are monsters of the night but they are nothing compared to what I can do. What I could

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destroy. Including those I love and myself while I'm at it."

It was said in such a matter of fact way, I would almost think it didn't bother her. The words were too practiced though; too precise. Knowing Auri, I knew it hurt her. She never wanted the power of the Alpha King to begin with. Let alone whatever power she now had as a hodgepodge of supernatural creatures Oran made her into.

"I don't think you're a monster, Auri."

"Mary Shelly would disagree."

I rolled my eyes and shook my head as she chuckled. Auri stopped, taking my hands in hers, as she turned to me.

"I would gladly be marked a monster if I was able to protect my family, Zeke. The issue comes is when I can't. When I'm at a loss and all this power I've accumulated means nothing. Then, truly, I am just a monster."

Before I could reply, she turned and walked away from me. I wanted to call after her, to try and sooth the suffering she had in her eyes. However, Vale was stomping through the forest in our direction. He was livid and I chuckled at his blatant disregard for everything in his way.

"Mother, where did you take him?"

"The ruins of the old fey palace. That's all. I thought he would be interested in seeing them. We probably won't be here again."

Vale looked like he wanted Auri to burst into flames right where she was standing but it didn't even phase her. His eyes slowly slid to me, looking me up and down to make sure nothing was wrong. I put my hands up, trying to smile.

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"It was beautiful. The carved white marble. Though, I wish there was more of it to see. It's sad that all that's left are a few columns and some of the stairs."

He wasn't happy but his shoulders dropped a little and I saw his chest rise and fall. "Don't leave again. Not without telling me."

"He was with me, Vale. Nothing was going to happen."

Vale growled at her but she just chuckled at him. She slapped his cheek softly a couple times before walking past him.

"I'm going to start breakfast. Send Zeke in when you're done assessing that he is, in fact, all in one piece and untouched."

Auri left me with my very upset mate and I sighed. Vale stomped over to me and took my head in his hands. Slamming his lips against mine, I threw my arms around him and held him tight. I wanted to think about it. I wanted to cry and hold him and never let go but I couldn't. I couldn't and I wouldn't. My job was to be Vale's mate, his strength, and when the time came, I would protect him with all of my power. I would not let him go. We would all go back as a family. The little pup that might be the next King but Vale could train him. Auri and I would stop this. No matter what.

"You okay? You sure she didn't do anything weird?"

I chuckled. "No. Nothing weird. I promise. We just walked and talked about some history of the place."

He hummed and sighed. "You scared me. I woke up to a cold bed and I couldn't feel you. I'm not sure what I would

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have done if I wasn't able to reach you."

"I'll be okay. Auri laughed at me because I thought it would be like her to try to do some mission behind everyone's back."

Vale grumbled. "That's exactly her MO."

"Come on, since you're awake, we can help make breakfast and work out the details of what we want to send with the messenger."

He wasn't at all convinced, his eyebrows pinched together but it was as close as we were going to get at this point. Taking his hand, I laced my fingers between them and pulled him with me as I walked back in the direction of the tents. We weren't very far and I wondered if Auri had done something to close the distance we walked. Vale didn't seem put off by the location she showed me, more that I didn't tell him I was leaving.

We slipped into the tent and I smiled. A few of the kids were lounging around, still sleepy from how early it was in the morning. Hector, of course, was raring to go as he helped Auri get out the ingredients for breakfast.

"Morning you two."

Vale grumbled but I replied good morning. Herr walked over to me sleepily and lifted her hands up. I picked her up and let her sit on my shoulder while Vale broke off to go help Auri at the kitchen they had set up.

"Zeke, everything will be as it should be." Herr patted my head and I looked up at her.

"Herr, you keep your mouth shut. What have I told you about reading people without their permission." Hector



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chastised her.

She huffed and laid her head on top of mine. Her weight got heavier and I felt like she decided to fall back asleep leaning on my head.

"Yes, Dad."

I chuckled and walked over to some big fluffy bean bag like chairs and deposited her small body onto them. She giggled and laughed but curled up in the cozy warmth. After throwing a blanket over her, I gave Gale a fist bump who was reading in one of the other bag chairs.

"So, what is the plan with the message?"

Hector hummed. "I don't really know. Logan did this the last time. I didn't really have any input. Bryan might know but I sure as hell am not waking him up right now."

"Well, I think at this point, nothing we say is going to change anything. So we might as well go all out with it." Auri shrugged.

"So what, you need to surrender the Vampire King to our custody? Give us back the children that you have taken, and we will spare the lives of everyone else here?"

Auri grumbled. "Well, not everyone."

"I don't think they need to know that, love." Hector took her hand and kissed it before going back to shredding potatoes.

"Alright. So we send that. What then? They comply or they don't? What's the plan after?" I asked, leaning against the long dinning table they had set up in the middle of the tent.

Vale sighed. "Well, if they do comply, we destroy Oran



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right there on the spot. I don't want the chance of him getting away. I want to kill him immediately and advise that Morgan has taken up his rightful place as Vampire King."

"Then do a sweep of the castle. Even if they don't bring the kids out, there are a few in there I would like to get my claws into." Auri added, flipping bacon in a pan.

"And if they don't?"

Everyone was silent for a bit. The only sound was the sizzling of the bacon, Hector sloshing around the water as he rinsed the potato shreds, and Vale cutting apples.

"If they do decide to spit in our face, then we will create our battle plan. Start to put pressure on them. Get started on their outposts and work out way in." Vale finally said.

"And if they kill the messenger, we start immediately." Gale added, not looking up from the book.

Hector sighed and I looked from Gale to Hector. "Is that true? Isn't there something against killing the messenger?"

"Yes, there is. You're not supposed to. They come in peace and wish to negotiate. If they are killed, it is considered a call to arms. We would attack. Which is why we need to be ready as soon as we send out the messenger, just in case." Hector stared down at the starchy water his hand was currently submerged in. "Knowing Oran...it's something right up his alley to do."

"First, we need breakfast. We aren't doing anything on an empty stomach." Auri hip-checked both Hector and Vale.


I smiled but my heart wasn't in it. This was a real war. Not some battle at the edge of the territory. There wouldn't be

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just one loss. A misstep here could mean more than just hundreds of lives. I'd lost my best friend and now, there was a strong possibility I could lose my mate this time. It struck fear into me and I gripped the edge of the table tighter. I wouldn't allow it to happen. No matter what.



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