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The castle looked empty. At least walking into it from the now ridiculously large exploded hole. Auri, King Uriel, Vale and I stepped over the rubble and the dead bodies of the witches to enter it. Everything was eerily quiet, as though no one had been in here at all. Had all the forces emptied out the different exits just now? Or were they lurking somewhere deeper?

"The castle has an underground area as well, correct? If I saw the building plans correctly." King Uriel looked at the three of us.

Vale was the one who answered. "Correct. It has a full underground stadium area and most likely where they are keeping the pups. Or in one of the catacomb areas. It's a huge labyrinth down there."

He hummed. "We should split up."

Auri frowned. "I don't know. We don't know what's ahead. What we are up against."

"I think he is right, Mom. I think we need to do this. Uriel, if you would take the upper floors. I have a feeling there will be more witches and some other vampires who are able to deal damage through the windows and the top of the castle. If we can get them out, our forces don't need to worry about what's above them. They can focus on those around them."

The king nodded and reached out, shaking his hand. King Uriel brushed Auri's cheek before taking off down the hallway and heading up a huge spiral staircase.

"Mom, head downstairs."

She shook her head. "I shouldn't leave you two. Uriel can handle himself but you two need..."

Vale gave her a small smile. "I have Zeke. He'll be with me and we can sweep this floor first, making sure there is nothing left before heading down to meet with you. I just want to make sure we find the pups. If there are any grotesque monsters, it would make sense they would keep them in the arena below ground."

"Vale..."

"As your King, trust my judgement. I doubt anyone is left and I would rather be safe than sorry. In case they stowed the pups in one of the side rooms here. I know this place. It was once my home. I know the nooks and crannies, the secret staircases and the hidden doors. We will meet you once we finish our sweep."

Auri wasn't happy and neither was I. She wanted to argue but Vale had pulled the Alpha King card. Her head bowed and she finally conceded to him.

"Stay safe. Stay together. Do you understand? Protect one another. Come down once you are finished. Or you mind link me if there is an issue here."

"We will. I promise." Vale kissed her cheek.

Squatting down, she took my muzzle in her hands. Her forehead touched mine.

'You keep him safe. You need to call for me if anything bad happens. I will come for you immediately. Remember though, you can't die. We are here to stop his death. Yours

won't matter. Do you understand, Zeke?'

'I do. I will protect him though. I promise.'

She nodded and stood up. "Alright. I'm headed down. Keep me updated." Tapping her head, Auri took off and I watched as she kicked open a door about twenty yards down the hall. Disappearing into it, I didn't hear anything else from her. Looking up at Vale, he was taking a deep breath.

"Let's go. We need to sweep the entire floor and this is a huge area. We need to make sure the pups aren't here."

The further into the castle we got, the more frustrated we got. Neither of us could smell Reagan or Rowan.

Someone had come through and basically swept the floors with something akin to pepper spray. It tickled and irritated my nose. It seemed to have the same effect on Vale because at one point, he grabbed some cloth and covered his mouth and nose with it. Each door we kicked down with nothing in it was like a stab in the heart. Like we were failing them more each time. Vale was feeling the frustration too. If we ran into anyone, they were instantly turned into a pile of ash.

'Mom said she found some of their monstrosities in the arena.'

'Like you said.'

Vale nodded as he kicked another door down. This one had some covered furniture and discarded books. Most of the place looked run down and abandoned. It pretty much had been after the High Council took off into the wind the years prior.

'King Uriel also is doing a good job of wiping out the rest

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left on the upper floors. Though he says there aren't nearly as many as he was expecting. He has yet to head to the roof though.'

I sighed. 'We need to find the kids. Now. We need to get them out of here.'

"I know!" Vale kicked in another door but it was just an empty broom closet. "Where does there need to be so many damn doors in the place?"

We continued down the hall. We had woven our way around the right side and around the back. There were two large double doors that were closed tight. They had to be around ten feet tall or so. The mirrored the front entrance and the entrance to the High Council chambers. Those doors I knew well and we had already checked to see that the chamber was empty.

"I don't remember this being here last time."

I looked up at Vale and his brow was furrowed. He pushed open the doors with ease and it opened up into an opulent room. It was untouched, even with the state of the rest of the castle. Suits of armor lined the walls with red plush carpet that led straight up to a secondary level. There were banners hanging from the ceiling and like the High Council chambers, there was a second level of seats. Only this had it on the right and left side, not straight ahead.

Faris growled deeply and I felt the hair raise on the back of my neck. On the raised floor level, that was only separated by about five or six steps up, was a throne. It was made out of stone but draped and adorned in different fabrics that matched the banners hanging from the ceiling. However, there was a man, sitting on throne. It

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wasn't the Vampire King though. This person was far older, far more sinister. His eyes were nothing but black as he picked his fingers with a knife.

"Well, took you long enough. I didn't think I would have to stoop to such measures in order to get you here. I thought what I did to your mother would have been enough. But apparently..." He looked at us, and I dug my claws into the floor. Anything to stop myself from running. I wanted to run. This was madness and the power to back it up. This was a force that neither Vale or I could even touch.

"...you don't really care that much about your mother. So I had to go after the kids. What a surprise when my boys radioed me that there were two sets of twins. I just said nab them both. Couldn't hurt. The more the merrier. Only to realize just how much I wanted both."

"Oran." Vale ground out his name like he was chewing on rocks.

The vampire swung his legs off the armrest and crossed his legs, leaning his head against his hand as it rested on the other armrest. "I guess I should properly introduce myself, since I am sitting on your throne. I've never actually been in front of either of you in my actual form. I am Oran Aonghus Balor Beryford...the fifth if we want to get technical."

I moved closer to Vale. 'We can't take him, Vale. We aren't powerful enough. We need Auri.'

'She needs time to get here. We will give her that.'

'No, Vale! We need to go! We need to run! We can't take him! Not even the two of us combined! Please, Vale.' My heart hammered in my chest as I kept my eyes glued to

the man in the chair.

I wouldn't blink if I could help it. He outclassed us in power but by a percent I couldn't even fathom right now.

'They need to find the kids.'

'Vale! Don't fucking do this! I am begging you.'

Vale stepped into the throne room though, making Oran smile like he had just won a prize.

"You have done nothing but make my family suffer all these years."

Oran shrugged, twirling the knife in his off-hand. "I mean, your father actually got a pretty good deal out of it for a while there. He was happy with his outcome. Until he grew a conscious. Or maybe it was brother. Who knows. Either way, I have't made your whole family suffer. Not continuously anyways."

"You also were what spawned Micah. You tore my family apart from the beginning. Even your stupid vampires tried to kill my mom and you almost succeeded."

He waved the knife around. "Your mother is my favorite toy. I wouldn't never actually have one of my minions kill her. No. I'd want to test my toy myself. She is here. I can feel her in the bottom floors. Dealing with my failures. Ah well. It will be sad to see them die. There will always be more though. Always be failures on the way to innovation. Your mother is my masterpiece and I intend to make more. Her two children will do nicely. Yours were purely for the sake of bringing you here. Hers though...already have the components of vampires and wolves? Spawned from the most powerful being on this earth? Coupled with an actual mate bond? It is truly a spectacular nab even if

it was a mistake."

I growled, stepping up next to Vale. One thing I promised Auri is that I wouldn't leave Vale. I wouldn't let him fight this on his own. It would mean putting my life on the line to save him. It would be okay though. If we could give Auri time to get here, she would be able to stop him. We would be okay as long as we held out against this one vampire.

"You weren't clever enough though. Your army is gone. We are here to rescue the pups. All your plans have fall through. Morgan is taking up the throne as Vampire King now. There isn't anything else for you to do but to die." Vale gripped his sword tighter, his foot sliding back ever so slightly.

I lowered my back, ready to spring with him. We would work as one; as a team and as mates.

"You think you have me all figured out, do you? What did you think I was here for, little Alpha Prince? Did you think I was here to keep my crown? To keep wearing that disgusting skin? What do you know of my plans, little one?"

Vale growled, his voice meshing with Naresh. "It doesn't matter. Any and all your plans end here. You will die. Just like the rest of them. You will turn to ash and no one is going to remember you. No one is going to wonder what happen to your work or what you did. Because we can easily remove a stain like you."

Oran stood, anger in his eyes. "You will never be able to wipe my existence out. I will always be there, lurking in the shadows. Your mother will see to it that my work lives on forever. Her precious mate as well. My name will always

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be remembered."

"No. It won't. They won't utter your name ever again. They will move on to a peaceful life. Their kids will grow up knowing love and acceptance. They won't remember you. They will only be special. Nothing about you will live on. You will die here. Your legacy will die here. You are nothing and will be nothing but ash on the floor for the wind to blow away."

Oran roared and stepped once toward us. His body disappeared before us and I felt a tingle behind us. Jumping to cover Vale's back, I saw a flicker of Oran appear before his kick landed directly into my stomach. Slamming into the back of Vale, we both went flying into the room. The large doors shut behind us but I could barely move.

"Zeke....Zeke..." Vale had me in his lap but his eyes were squarely on our enemy. "Thank you. I didn't even feel him."

As quickly as I could, I shifted back to my human form. Coughing, I tasted blood in my mouth but I sat up, slowly getting to my feet. Wiping my face, I rolled my shoulders.

"It will take more than just a sneaky kick to take us down." Vale stood up next to me and readied his sword at my side.

"We will turn you to ash, Oran. Ash and dust."



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