

## Chapter 202 Hold Tight

"Ethan," I said as I walked into his tent.

He was sitting on his makeshift desk, looking at the reports and making marks on a map. It had been a few days since we'd talked about anything substantial.

"Rosalie? Is everything okay?" he asked, hopping up with a worried look on his face.

"I'm okay, but I have some news and I figured you should know."

He put aside what he was doing, paused for a moment, and asked tentatively, "You've got news from Soren?"

It was as if he could read my mind. I sighed, "Yes and no, that's why I wanted to talk to you. My scouts caught up with him, and we confirmed that it was Damian causing chaos in Kal's ranks."

He smiled and commented, "That's good news. His plan worked. Brilliant!"

I was a bit surprised. It wasn't often to hear Ethan admit someone else had come up with a brilliant plan. It was nice to hear him pay Soren a compliment.

I nodded. "However, we lost contact with Soren afterward."

His smile faded and was replaced with a frown.

"The scout couldn't get in touch with him and I'm really worried..."

Deep down, I knew that there wasn't anything Ethan could do about it either, but I just thought I'd feel better sharing it with him.

Ethan guided me to sit down on his cot and crouched down with one knee kneeled in front of me, his voice was deep and soothing. "I'm worried about him too, but let's have faith in him. I used to underestimate Soren, but he had proven me wrong. I believe he's got everything planned out and he is capable of protecting himself."

I nodded, but I was still unsettled.

Ethan tentatively reached out to hold my hand. Seeing that I didn't pull it away, he patted it gently and added, "Besides, no news is good news."

I looked into his eyes, and I could tell he said all that not because he was heartless, but because he truly believed in Soren.

There was tenderness in his once-icy eyes, and I found myself lost in that pair of intense blue orbs.

Ethan had changed.

So had many of us.

When I felt my heart start to speed up under his gaze, I looked away. To cover my nervousness, I said, "You're right. I'm sure Soren is going to be fine."

He pulled up a smile, and agreed, "Exactly! Let's focus on something we can control. Soren created an excellent opportunity for us, so let's not disappoint him. Now that Kal has retreated, there isn't a better time for us to chase him down and end this war once and for all."

His positive attitude cheered me up. I pushed aside my worries and focused back on our action plan. "Ethan, as for strategy and implementation, what we've done has been working well. Do you think we continue with you designing strategies and me leading the attacks, now that I am more experienced at rallying the troops?"

"You're not more experienced at rallying the troops." Ethan shook his head, a serious expression on his handsome face.

My eyebrows arched. Here I was thinking he was good at paying compliments and he had just denied my progress... I stared at him for a moment, not sure what to say.

"You're amazing at rallying the troops." A crooked grin pulled up one corner of his mouth.

I dropped my eyes to the floor, feeling the blood rush to my face. I wanted to smack him in the arm for messing with me, but I didn't.

"Thanks," I muttered. He was laughing at his own joke, and I giggled, too.

I loved hearing him laugh. It was so rare.

"Anyway..." I continued, "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Yes, I do," he said with a nod. "I think it's a fabulous plan. I can't wait for this war to be over."

"I'm sure everyone feels the same way," I agreed with him.

My thoughts went back to what the Seer, Gayla, had told me when she had come to meet with me, looking for Ethan, and told me that so many citizens had been forced to take part in the fighting. It wasn't fair to them. We needed to do everything we could to return everything to normal for everyone who lived in this war-torn land.

"Well, Your Majesty," he said, staring at me in a way that made my skin heat up, "please allow me to walk you through what I had in mind."

"Ethan, please stop teasing me," I requested, my face red.

He let out a lighthearted laugh, then led me to his desk.

The two of us made plans for what to do to finally defeat King Kal and our other enemies and drive them from the land. I took what Damian was doing as the basis for our plan, and Ethan expanded upon it. He took the idea and ran with it, and within a few hours, we had a solid plan.

Over the next few days, we put our plans into place. Ethan chose the teams and explained his strategy to them while I stood beside him and got our troops rallied up so that they knew exactly how important all of it was. By the time I finished with my rousing speeches, the warriors were ready to hunt King Kal's troops down and rip out their throats.

I stayed in the back, cheering them on, but I watched as our warriors burst through Kal's lines and attacked. He had no idea we were there since we used the scent hiding tricks Soren had brought to our forces, and by the time we struck, they were scrambling to fight back.

Some of them didn't even have a chance to shift.

We struck in the middle of the night when they were sleeping or early in the morning when they were just getting up.

Then, just as they began to recover from the surprise, Ethan gave the signal for our warriors to fall back. They disappeared into the trees, sometimes in prefabricated hiding spots, if King Kal was even strong enough to come after us at all. Sometimes he did; other times, he stayed back, licking his wounds.

We always inflicted more casualties than we suffered, and if someone was injured, I was able to help.

The only concern I had was that we were still outnumbered. Would our limited troops be able to sustain such a long journey to Mirage, even though we seemed to be making good progress?

"Your Majesty!" General Vandough walked in, his tone rushed.

I frowned, thinking we might be in some sort of trouble.

"A large group of wolves approached us!"

My heart sank.

Ethan asked, "Kal's reinforcements?"

General Vandough paused, and then broke into a smile. "No, not at all! Actually, quite the opposite. Those are the nearby packs that volunteered to be our allies! After we sent word that we are the White Queen's army, their Alphas sent messengers saying they're willing to fight alongside us!"

I exchanged a pleasantly surprised look with Ethan.

Everything went even better than we had originally planned. We thought that as long as the packs along the way allowed us to pass without a fight, we would be able to conserve our energy to focus on Kal.

Now with new warriors joining us, it would make our final goal so much easier to achieve!

"Great news!" I exclaimed. "General Vandough, please express my gratitude to them and arrange a meeting with those Alphas! We'll figure out the most effective way to integrate their warriors into our troops!"

The night ended with everyone leaving my tent in great spirits. Only Ethan stayed behind.

I finally felt like there was hope in our immediate future that this war would be over soon, and that our baby could finally live the peaceful life he, and all children, deserved.

"Want some more good news?" Ethan asked, after everyone was out of sight.

"Of course! Good news is always welcome." I smiled.

"I think my strength is starting to stabilize."

I couldn't hide my excitement. "Really? That's wonderful!"

It was a great day with all good news. Ethan and I couldn't help but smile at one another, then I heard Rowan's cries from outside of my tent.

Seraphine walked in with our boy in her arms and I hopped up to go get Rowan.

"I'm so sorry, Your Majesty," she said, looking at me with apologetic eyes. "I'm afraid he's not feeling too well. Perhaps he's teething? He wants you."

"Mama, mama," Rowan said, reaching for me.

I took him from her and sat back down to feed him. He was a little warm. I mixed some of my blood with his milk, knowing that would help.

Seraphine left, and I rocked him back and forth. "It's okay, Rowan," I said. "Sweet boy," I patted his back and kissed his little head before looking up to see Ethan's eyes on us. I smiled up at him. "Everything okay?" I asked him.

Ethan nodded. "You, uh, still call him Rowan? With an A?"

I froze for a second, then I felt my face flush. I remembered the conversation he was talking about.

I'd been so mad at Ethan that I'd screamed some awful things at him. That was when he was still the Rogue King, and I was trying to stall him so he wouldn't go after Seraphine and Soren as they took Rowan to safety.

I'd said I'd spell it with an E.

This must have been bothering him for a while.

"Yeah," I said, looking away from him. Rowan fell asleep, so I fixed my shirt and moved him to my shoulder. "You're still his father, and I'm still his mother. Just because we fought..." I paused, watching his face. He raised his eyebrows, listening carefully. "Just because we're not married, that doesn't mean he shouldn't carry both of our names."

Ethan's smile widened, and he nodded at me.

"You want to hold him?" I asked Ethan.

"Me? Oh, no. He's asleep. I'm worried that I'd wake him."

I realized how little time Ethan had spent with Rowan, especially when he was himself, not the Rogue King.

"That's okay," I said. "If he wakes up, you can just rock him a little, and he'll go back to sleep."

"I think he wants you," Ethan said, still looking a bit afraid to bother the boy.

"Well, I'm not going anywhere," I reminded him.

I could tell Ethan really did want to hold him, so I continued to give him an encouraging smile until he came over and sat next to me. I handed the baby over to him, and he took him, placing him on his shoulder, just as I had been holding him.

Ethan had held his son a few times before, but never when he was already asleep. Rowan woke up a bit and fussed.

"Pat his back," I whispered.

Ethan did as I suggested, and within a few moments, Rowan settled down, falling back asleep. Ethan relaxed and held him close, rubbing his back gently. I saw how sweetly he was looking at his son, and it brought tears to my eyes.

"Are you all right?" Ethan asked, his forehead crinkling in concern.

I nodded. "Yes, I'm fine. I'm just... glad to see him in your arms, that's all."

Ethan reached over and patted my arm, his hand slipping down to my fingers, where he gave my hand a gentle squeeze before he let it go.

I couldn't help but wonder—if Ethan could find a way to take Rowan back into his arms, could he, someday, take me back into his arms as well?