

## Chapter 296

He'd studiously avoided Connor since he'd arrived at the compound...well he hadn't actually had to make that much of an effort to avoid his eldest brother he had to admit to himself. He'd been a little tied up with his new mate and new responsibilities within the pack. It had been relatively simple to be somewhere else whenever Connor showed up at the main house.

His brother had appeared to sense his unwillingness to interact with him and had given him a wide berth too. Possibly Aaron or Cedar had said something to him, convincing him to stay away until Dayton was ready to face him.

His siblings so far had accepted him back into their lives as if he'd never been gone but to have to face his parents...to have to look into his mother's eyes and see the pain he'd caused her. It was suddenly too much for him and his steps faltered before he reached the door as he came to a stand still bringing Freya up short beside him.

Freya turned to look up at her mate and saw complete panic on his face. Up until that moment she had been fighting her own inner demons, railing silently about being forced into the situation of having to meet her new in-laws and be 'nice' to them.

The thought was total anathema to her and she'd been struggling hard to do this for her mate even though deep down she was afraid that they wouldn't accept her into their family and he would be hurt by their rejection. She didn't care if they hated her personally all she cared about was how Dayton felt.

Now she stared up into blue eyes so filled with fear her heart almost broke to see the expression on his strong face. No one had the right to make him doubt himself like this, she didn't care who it was. He had done what he'd needed to do to survive a loss of unimaginable proportions and that was all there was to it.

Stiffening her spine she gripped his hand tightly and shrugged off her own concerns about the upcoming meeting. "I will protect you, Dayton. You do not stand alone. I won't allow anyone to hurt you ever again."w©©.n0Ve/W0r-M.c.rM

Her fierce words and equally fierce expression startled him and he smoothed out his expression as a warm feeling flooded through him and he realised how pointless it was to hide from what had to be faced.

"I know that, honey," he sighed softly wrapping his arms around her and stealing a deep kiss to settle his nerves. "I'm just being silly worrying about seeing the family again. I know they love me. Just as I know this isn't easy for you either."

He was amazed at how strong she was being about this meeting, having only argued for half an hour before she'd finally conceded to go. Nors had told him that when Freya didn't want to do something, she could rail for weeks on end before finally giving in. He'd been smugly impressed with himself that he'd managed to defeat her objections so quickly.

"I will adapt," she smiled against his lips, her sweet scent soothing him as only she could.

"Then there's no putting this off," he sighed again. "Rafe doesn't think the Hanlon pack will come under attack but it is better being safe than sorry." He couldn't keep the slight unease out of his voice. Only Connor and Brody lived at the Hanlon compound but the rest of the family would be there today because he knew Connor would have called them and told them he would be coming.

Taking a deep breath Dayton opened the door and stepped out of the Alpha's house. There were two Jeeps parked just outside. His eyes automatically went to his eldest brother who was leaning against the hood of the first Jeep, arms crossed nonchalantly as he chatted with Aaron who was standing just in front of him. Cedar was sitting beside him on the hood, smiling up at him as he talked.

Dayton's breath froze in his body as Connor's head turned slowly towards the open door, his pale blue eyes seeking and finding his unerringly. His eyes took in every minute detail of the ruggedly handsome man with shaggy blond hair and intimidating physique. This was the sibling he had known the longest, they had been born together, the first of the Alexander children.

He couldn't judge what his brother was thinking because his expression was closely guarded as his gaze flicked from Dayton to Freya who was holding his hand so tightly he knew he was going to bruise. Appreciation flared in Connor's eyes and a slow smile curved his lips.

"Well, now I understand why you were locked in your room all this time, Day," he finally drawled softly. "Having a beauty like that hanging off a man's arm is more than enough reason to go AWOL. Kind of crushed it wasn't because you were shit scared about seeing me again, though."

There was more than a hint of teasing in his voice and Dayton felt some of the tension leaving his body. Connor was...well he was just Connor, usually laid back and friendly though quick to blow his temper when riled. That he was relaxed said a lot about how he felt about seeing his younger brother returned from his self-imposed exile.

He watched him push away from the Jeep and saunter over. When he got close enough he raised a meaty clenched fist and Freya stiffened at his side instantly expecting some form of attack.

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Dayton couldn't stop his lips from curving into a smile at his mate's protectiveness even when it wasn't warranted. He squeezed her hand gently before releasing it and knocking his fist hard against Connor's. They had always greeted each other like that, ever since they were young boys. It was Connor's way of telling him that nothing had changed in his eyes.

His brother reached for him and pulled him into a tight bear hug, pounding his back hard. "Good to have you back, Day." As always Connor kept words to the minimum when feeling emotional. His words were short but the emotion within them conveyed everything he wanted to say.

He pulled back and regarded Freya intently for a long moment and then presented her with his fist. She stared at him blankly for a second and then repeated what she'd witnessed her mate do. She banged fists with the blond wolf wondering if this was some weird wolf ritual she wasn't aware of.

Connor winced loudly, shaking his fist in the air as the vampire almost pulverised his knuckles into dust. "Hot damn!" he muttered through clenched teeth. "I've got to get me one of these female vamps. You got any single friends, darling?"

Freya stiffened first in mortification for hitting the wolf too hard judging from his pained expression and hoarse voice, then from confusion at the way the easy endearment flowed from his lips directed towards her. She was accepting of the way Dayton spoke to her because he was her mate but this man was a stranger to her.

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Swallowing down her initial reaction which was to hit the wolf again only harder this time, she carefully controlled her expression as she counted to ten to cool her temper. "I don't have friends and even if I did I'd be surprised if any of them would be interested in a wolf."

If she'd thought her cool words would somehow crush the man before her it only brought a dazzling smile which was so unexpected she turned to look up at Dayton in confusion.

"Feisty as well as strong," Connor chuckled. "You lucked out, little bro. Pity she doesn't have any friends. Though don't suppose that really matters now she's got us."

"Don't let Connor ruffle your feathers, Freya," Cedar called out from her perch on the car hood. "He likes to think he's a lady killer when really he's a big teddy bear deep inside."

"Dial it down a notch, Con," Dayton said quietly, his arm keeping Freya firmly at his side to stop her from fleeing. Getting a blast of the Alexander clan so full on was maybe a step too far for his usually solitary mate.w(w)w.novèlw(©)rm.čóm