

Chapter 121

Adelaide

The next day, I stood outside James' door. I had decided not to wait any longer and was going to end things with him today. Even though I knew it was the right thing to do, it definitely didn't make it any easier.

I knocked, and within seconds, the door opened. James greeted me with the same big smile as always.

"What's up, Addy?" he said, closing the door behind him. For a moment, I felt bad again. James was always so positive and amazing. How could I do this to someone like him?

He leaned in to kiss me, but I turned my head just in time, letting his lips land on my cheek instead.

"Hey," I greeted.

"Hey?" He pulled back, furrowing his brow for a split second, but just as quickly, he brushed it off like it was nothing.

He simply slung his arm over my shoulder as usual, and we began walking.

"Take me to the woods," I instructed.

"Whatever you want," James shrugged, not questioning my words whatsoever.

If I was going to end things with him, I at least wanted to do it the proper way. I didn't want to dump him in front of the whole academy, and I didn't want to lose him as a friend—because he was still dear to me.

Coming to Starlight to make friends was not what I had come here for—but now that I had them, I didn't want to lose them.

A while later, we walked side by side through the path of the woods leading to the benches. This wasn't the first time we had come here. Over the past few weeks, we had spent many evenings in this spot, talking about everything from school to life.

That's how I found out he had more depth to him than expected. He came from an important Lycan bloodline from the second largest kingdom, with a father who was a well-respected warrior. James was born to lead, though he had made it clear that he didn't like the attention, definitely did not want to follow in his dad's footsteps—and would most likely end up as a teacher.

According to him, less attention meant fewer threats to his life—and I definitely agreed with him.

Anyway, he wasn't just an airhead. He could act like one at times, but he was far from it. He was smart, driven—and humble.

I respected him. We did connect on some level, and all of that made this even harder.

When we reached the benches, we sat down, and not long after, James began telling me about his day.

However, it didn't quite reach my ears. My chest felt heavy and strange, just like it always did when 'he' was near. Only, Alaric wasn't here at the moment.

This time, it was James making me feel that way—and for different reasons.

I really hoped he wouldn't resent me for this.

"Addy!" James' voice snapped me out of my thoughts. "Are you even listening to me?"

"Hm?" I turned to him.

James glanced around the woods before locking his eyes on one particular tree. Then his expression suddenly changed into a sad, sympathetic smile. "If you've got something to tell me, you better tell me now," he said.

At that point, it had become clear to me that he already knew. I could see it in his piercing brown eyes. All he wanted was for me to say it out loud, and I owed that to him.

I held his gaze, trying to search for the right words. It wouldn't be my first time dumping a guy—I had done it plenty of times before—but this felt different.

James wasn't just some other guy. He was someone I truly cared about.

Still, it wasn't love.

It never had been.

I took a deep breath as I reached out and grabbed James' hand. He gave me a soft nod, encouraging me to speak my mind.

"I think you're amazing, James," I began softly. "Honestly, I think you're one of the best people I've ever met."

He squinted his eyes a bit, listening carefully, waiting for me to continue.

"You were one of my first friends here at Starlight," I said. "You accepted me, even though I'm a witch—and because you accepted me, everyone else followed. I can't thank you enough for that, and I honestly don't know how to ever repay you."

A small smile tugged at his lips. "But?"

Why was this so hard?

He already knew what was about to come, so why was I struggling to find the words?

I closed my eyes for a second, just wanting to get it over with. "But...I think we're just meant to be friends," I finally said. "Nothing more than that."

A short chuckle came from James, and he lowered his head. The silence was killing me, and I desperately wished he would just say something. I couldn't stand the thought of him hating me.

"I'm so sorry," I added, my voice barely above a whisper.

He sighed, looking up before giving my hand a reassuring squeeze. Despite James being James, there was a small part of me that had expected him to lash out.

Perhaps that would've been better than that pretend smile on his face, because I could see right through it.

"I just want you to be happy, Addy," he spoke. "And if it's with him, it's with him. At least I know he'll treat you well."

My cheeks flushed as I stared at him, startled.

How did he even know?

James chuckled at my reaction, releasing my hand.

"I could tell from the start," he said, reading my mind. "I've never seen you that nervous around anyone—and I've never seen that anti-social prince sit beside anyone but Elyx."

That made sense. If Claire could see it, someone close to me, then of course he could too.

"He says we're..." I trailed off, unable to finish the sentence. Whatever he thought we were didn't matter at the moment. All that mattered was making sure James and I would be alright.

I quickly changed the subject. "Jane is totally obsessed with you."

"I know," James laughed it off.

"She seems really protective over you," I said carefully. "I know you rejected her for some reason, but I think you should give her a chance. Get to know her."

"You think?" James commented sarcastically.

I knew how fake it looked, trying to fix something I helped break in the first place—but I wasn't the same person I was when all of this started. If I had known James would be someone I genuinely cared about, I would've never chosen to use him in the first place.

Even though it seemed to affect Jane a bit more, I knew for a fact it affected James just as much. He was just better at masking his feelings, like he was doing at this very moment. If I had to believe what Claire told me about the mate bond, he wasn't doing too great.

"Can I ask you an honest question?" I asked.

"Yeah?"

"Why were you so interested in me from the moment we met?"

He let out a deep breath. "Because I needed to forget about her," he admitted. "I wanted the pain to stop, and you helped me get my mind off it because you were different...interesting."

I nodded, not surprised by his answer.

"But that doesn't mean I wasn't serious about us," he added quickly. "Because I was."

So we were both using each other...

I used him to get closer to Alaric, and he used me to forget about Jane.

"Then why did you reject her? Push her away?" I wondered. "And don't tell me again that it's about not wanting some Moon Goddess to decide for you, when I know you and your people worship her."

James smiled, shaking his head. "Then I'm afraid I don't have an answer for you."

I did have one. He was afraid of the mate bond—of being so deeply tied to someone that your entire life revolved around them.

I knew the feeling all too well, because I was scared too. Alaric had just entered my life, but my feelings for him were already growing stronger. While I was beginning to accept the idea of a mate, James couldn't.

If only he would let me help him...

I followed James' movements as he suddenly bent down to pick up a small stone. Without a word, he threw it toward a thin tree branch—the same tree he had been staring at earlier.

"What are you—" I stopped, looking at the branch that snapped and fell to the ground.

"Ow," someone groaned from behind the tree.

I froze. No way...

Seconds later, an all-too-familiar figure stumbled forward, rubbing his head. That blonde hair, those mischievous blue eyes, and that stupid smile...

It was Alaric.

"You've got to be kidding me," I let out a long sigh, facepalming. He was hopeless, cringy, pathetic—but a part of me found it kind of cute. He had really followed us all the way here. No wonder I felt that strange feeling in my chest. It wasn't because of James—it was because of him.

James must've noticed him from the start.

"What a coincidence!" Alaric said awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. "I-I was just passing by and—"

"Sure," James smirked, standing up. He gestured to the seat beside me. "Just sit down and stop humiliating yourself, please," he said.

A chuckle escaped from my lips as Alaric awkwardly placed his hands in his jeans pockets, looking around as if he hadn't just completely embarrassed himself.

James shot me one last smile, struggling to hold back his laughter.

"So, we're good?" I asked.

James nodded. "Always," he responded. "I wouldn't want to be on a witch's bad side."

He turned to walk away, and as he passed Alaric, he slapped his back hard enough to make him stumble. The guy who was supposedly meant to protect me struggled to keep his balance but eventually succeeded.

I giggled softly, eyeing him as he took a seat beside me.

"So," he began, his hands nervously fidgeting. "Rochwall and Jane? Who would've thought..."

Seriously? He followed me here, heard everything, and this is what he wants to talk about?

I cracked a laugh, tilting my head playfully. "Don't you ever get tired of yourself?"