

How Did We Get Here?

"What's this?" Jackson asked as he placed his keys and wallet on the coating shelf next to the front door.

He'd come back to shower after he'd nished at the gym but by the time Lara had gotten back from the party, he'd left again. Jackson had at least sent Lara a message telling her he'd be back by six, so she'd worked on an assignment for one of her summer classes for most of the afternoon and had then started on making lasagna in the hopes of repairing whatever damage had been done that morning.

"I made dinner," Lara explained nervously, looking down at the steaming dish she'd just put down on the table. They usually ate in front of the tv while Lara distractedly worked on her assignments and Jackson watched sport or whatever new crime show he'd started, but this time she'd set the dining room table so they could talk. "I thought it might be nice since we've been having a lot of take-out lately."

"There's a reason for that," Jackson replied with a scoff. "I love you, Lara, but your cooking has never been the greatest."

Lara's nger dug into her wrist with the barb. She knew he was right but it still hurt to hear it put so bluntly. "I got the recipe from Charlotte and she promised it was foolproof," she explained with a strained smile. "And I, um, I wanted to make up for everything this morning. I know it's unfair that I've asked you to wait for so long."

Jackson sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "I'm trying to be patient," he said.

"I know and it means a lot to me," Lara told him, though a tiny voice in her head was asking if his words were entirely true— he'd been pushing her for a while now, and his patience had clearly run out if his reaction that morning was anything to go by. Lara ignored the voice though— Jackson had been waiting for two years and it was reasonable for him to be frustrated and tired of her delaying their bonding ceremony. "I'm really sorry," she said quietly.

"Can you just tell me why you're not ready?" he asked. "Is it because of what happened with your parents?" he pressed when she didn't respond immediately, making Lara inch. "Because we're not going to turn out like that," Jackson told her.

"I know," Lara replied. "I just..."

How could she explain to Jackson that while mates were meant to be head-over-heels in love and crazy about each other, she barely felt anything when he kissed her. That even though she'd been dreaming of her bonding ceremony since she was ten, she didn't feel ready to go through with it with him because sometimes she felt like all he did anymore was criticize her with his seemingly innocent comments. That when he yelled at her like he did that morning she felt a bit scared of him.

Saying any of that would upset him, and she cared about him enough— and if she admitted it, was scared enough— not to want to hurt him. Lara didn't understand how they'd gotten to this point but she knew that she hated it. She hated feeling so detached from her own mate, hated that she was lying to him about it... hated that she was a bit scared of him and how he might react if she told him the truth.

"You just what?" Jackson asked, walking over to her and placing his arms on her hips.

"I'm just scared I guess," Lara said honestly.

"You don't need to be scared, baby," Jackson told her softly. "I love you and I'm not going to ever hurt you. You're my mate, Lara, and all I've wanted since the day I met you was to have that ceremony with you. Is it such a bad thing that I want to spend the rest of my life with you? Is it such a bad thing that I want to make you mine?" he asked with a sad smile.

Lara licked her dry lips and swallowed the lump in her throat. This is why she couldn't tell him the truth. He might sometimes hurt her with his small comments and he might have gotten too impatient with her, but she knew that he really did love her. He was a good guy, and she could only blame herself for his frustration. She was the one who was being unfair. She was the one who was in the wrong.

"No," Lara replied with a smile. "It's not such a bad thing."

Jackson's grin lit up his entire face. "You see. There's nothing to be afraid of. I love you, Lara."

"I love you too," Lara told him, a twinge of guilt spearing her chest with the knowledge that she probably didn't love him as much as he loved her. She wouldn't have been looking at Greg the way she had that morning if she did. Fear replaced guilt at the thought— maybe she was just like her mother. Maybe she didn't deserve Jackson at all. Maybe despite trying so hard not to be, she was just a terrible, terrible person like her mom.

"That's exactly what I like to hear, baby," Jackson said with a happy smile, completely unaware of the horrible things she was thinking as he lowered his head to kiss her.

Soon, his lips grew more insistent and desperate, and when he lifted her, Lara obediently wrapped her legs around his waist. Jackson carried her through to the bedroom and after laying her down on the bed, he hurriedly pulled his shirt and belt off before smashing his lips down onto hers again. Lara didn't complain when he unzipped his pants and moved her hand down to where he wanted it, and she didn't stop him when he guided her hand to do what he wanted it to.

She'd done the same thing for him before but it felt different— dirtier— this time. And when Jackson groaned and bit down too hard on her bottom lip, tears stung Lara's eyes but she told herself it was just the pain that had caused them and nothing else. Jackson loved her and she loved him. They were mates. Fate wanted them to be together and Lara wouldn't be like her mother, she wouldn't deny what fate had intended.

~

Lara was changing into a pair of high-waisted leggings and a matching baby blue crop top a week later when she heard a knock on the apartment door followed by what sounded like Charlotte's voice. Lara quickly pulled her hair into a high ponytail and slipped on some socks and her sneakers, rushing through the process as quickly as possible.

"Charlotte?" Lara asked with a frown when she walked out of the bedroom to find her friend standing in the living room talking to Jackson. "I thought you'd already be at the venue setting up for tonight." It was the day of Charlotte and Liam's bonding ceremony but based on what Lara's friend was wearing, she was planning on joining Marcus's training session after all.

"Dorothy told me and Liam not to be at the venue until six-thirty," Charlotte explained with a shrug. "She didn't want us to stress about the setup, apparently."

"Sounds like Liam's mom has completely taken over control," Lara said with an amused grin as she lifted a pile of papers, which she'd been using to work out some difficult calculus problems on, from the coffee table and snatched up her apartment keys from under them.

"At this point, my own bonding ceremony is going to be a complete surprise to me. The only thing I know for sure is what my dress looks like," Charlotte admitted, making Lara chuckle.

"See you in an hour, okay?" she said to Jackson. He nodded and waved goodbye to the two of them. Things had been better between them since the night of Charlotte's party. They hadn't argued since then and Jackson hadn't pressed her about the bonding ceremony either, his frustration and impatience apparently appeased for now. They'd gone back to their comfortable routine of dinners in front of the tv and a few kisses at night before they went to bed.

"I'd be way too much of a control freak to let someone else sort it all out," Lara said, replying to Charlotte's earlier comment as the two of them left the apartment. Lara always wanted things to be done a certain way— her way— which was why she hated things like group projects. Come to think of it, maybe her perfectionism was why she felt like her relationship with Jackson wasn't what it should be— relationships were never perfect, never without their problems, and she was just struggling to accept that.

"Oh, I know," Charlotte teased playfully.

"I'm honestly so jealous," Lara said wistfully. "I've been dreaming of my bonding ceremony and that green dress since I was ten."

"Okay, I have to ask," Charlotte replied carefully. "You've been with Jackson for two years," she said with a frown, making Lara's smile falter. "Why haven't you guys gone through with the ceremony yet?"

Lara grimaced. "I know werewolves usually move pretty quickly when we find our mates, but Jackson and I aren't quite ready." It wasn't exactly the truth considering Jackson had been more than ready for a while but Lara didn't know if she could admit to her friend that the problem lay with her.

"Can I ask why?" Charlotte asked.

"I don't really know how to explain it, but I can just tell that it's not our time yet," Lara said with a swallow. "Does that sound crazy?"

"No, I get it," Charlotte replied softly, though Lara wasn't sure she did.

"Anyways," she said, wanting to change the topic. "If it were my mating ceremony later today, training wouldn't exactly be on my list of priorities. What if you get a black eye or a sprained ankle or something?"

"That's not going to happen," Charlotte argued with a laugh. "Besides, Marcus has something special planned for today and I didn't want to miss it."

"What does he have planned?" Lara asked curiously. The Medial had taken over Charlotte's training a month or so back, but two weeks ago he'd also opened a class for Lara and any other women who hadn't wanted to stay in Medial Jacobs' class. Considering Lara had been Lara's trainer for two years and hadn't taught her anything useful yet and had been a complete chauvinistic pig while doing it, Lara was more than happy to make the switch.

"He invited Liam and a few of the others to spar with us," Charlotte explained to Lara as they walked up the stairs to the third floor.

"Uh, I hate to break it to you, Lara, but I don't think we're ready for that. They're trained Council members," she replied, not liking the idea of sparring with men who'd probably think she was ridiculously useless.

"We're not expecting you to be able to hold your own against them," Charlotte said in an attempt to reassure her. "It's more for you to test out what you've learned against people you haven't trained with before."

"Great, so Marcus's idea is to have Sarah, Julia and I embarrass ourselves," Lara said with a sigh.

"It's not going to be that bad," Charlotte replied. She gave Lara a few more words of encouragement before they arrived, ending her pep talk by promising, "You'll be ne."

"We'll see," Lara grumbled, still not feeling up to sparring with Liam and his friends.

"Hey Marcus," Charlotte greeted their trainer as they walked through the door of the training room. "Lara thinks your idea for today's training is just a tactic to embarrass her, Sarah, and Julia."

Unfortunately, Marcus wasn't the only one in the room to hear Charlotte's words. Liam, Dean, Connor, and Greg were standing near the weight machines, so Lara had to sets of amused eyes swiveling towards her instead of one. Specially, though, it was the pair of brown eyes that made her fair skin flush in what must have been a brilliant shade of red. Lara held Greg's gaze for a second too long before looking away and trying to find something else to pin her stare on.

"Don't be nervous, Lara," Dean said, drawing her eyes to him in time to see him wink. "We don't bite."

"I don't think Jackson appreciates you flirting with his mate," Connor told his friend with a roll of his eyes— Dean had been flirting with Lara non-stop since she and Jackson had joined Kennedy and Liam's plot to take down the Council, but Lara knew he was just messing around.

"Well he's not here right now, is he?" Dean asked as he sent another irty wink in Lara's direction.

"Is he always like this?" Lara asked Connor with an amused sigh while Liam walked over to Charlotte and stole her attention.

"Only with the pretty ones," Dean responded for him, making Lara's blush deepen and Greg and Connor frown at him disapprovingly.

Lara cleared her throat before finding her eyes unconsciously drifting to Greg again. "I know you were sticking around for the ceremony today but does that mean you'll be going back to Seattle soon?" she asked him, hoping the question didn't seem intrusive or weird coming from her— this was only the second time they'd talked after all.

"Actually, I'm thinking about staying a bit longer," Greg replied, rubbing the back of his neck like he was embarrassed or nervous. "I thought I could spend some more time with Kennedy."

Lara nodded in understanding. "I'm sure he'd like that," she said with a small smile. "He seemed really happy to see you at the party last week."

"Yeah," Greg admitted quietly. "He's a better guy than I thought he was."

Lara opened her mouth to agree with him but Sarah and Julia, the only other girls who trained with her and Charlotte, walked into the training room before she could.

"Alright, everyone's here, so let's start," Marcus announced loudly. "Today, you ladies will be sparring with well-trained opponents to give you a taste of what you might be up against one day. Sarah, you're partnered with Dean. Julia, you get Connor, and Lara is with Greg."

Lara's eyes flew to Greg's and her palms dampened— with excitement or nerves, she didn't know.

"And of course, Charlotte gets the privilege of beating up her mate before their bonding ceremony tonight," Marcus nished saying, and if Lara's thoughts weren't on the fact that she'd be spending the next hour with Greg, she would have laughed.