

Chapter 1 - Protect Her Peace

*"He wished he could find a way back to believing, even though he knew better, that she was his to protect." —
Cassandra Clare*

Neron

"Move it, soldiers!"

It's been three weeks since the insanity. Three weeks since Zircon Moon territory was nearly burned to ash. Thankfully, Mother Nature is a healer and since then, has blessed our lands with lush green once more. The earth trembled as thunderous footsteps of warrior men and women encircled the land under the early morning sky. Golden and blessed light from the barely peeked over the horizon to dissipate the cerulean blue.

I led the charge of the morning run, adding it to the warrior's regime before their day. The cool morning breeze whipped against my bare skin, taking strands of my hair along for the ride. It felt good. It's freeing. Like a dip in a cold pool right before the heat of summer.

It's July and so much has happened within these past weeks. Beefed up border security, new members

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trickling into our community, and pregnancies. Lorelai, Kwame's mate, is carrying his pup and celebrations were in order.

I still remember the tear-stained face of Amani and Omar Dubois at the announcement. They're going to be grandparents! Praises to our beloved Moon Goddess echoed throughout the night from the Gamma family, including a few excited yells here and there.

Whenever a ranked wolf or their mate announces their pregnancies, we throw them a celebration to bless them with a healthy pregnancy and pray to our Moon Goddess for their safety throughout it all. We dance deep into the night accompanied by food, drinks, and booming music to broadcast the future member of our family.

Carrying pups isn't easy, I imagine. Witnessing my little sister's birth was enough for me.

Good news aside, one thing weighed heavily on my mind as the soldiers and I turned a corner. The impending punitive reality that awaits in August. Kiya will leave and I'll never see her again. It will separate my mate and me for good, and my strong heart pounds harder. Not at the exercise, but the future separation.

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I can't bear it. I can't bear the thought of my beloved leaving, not after all we've been through. It's unjust to force her to stay at my side when she doesn't want to, but goddamnit, I love her so much it hurts!

With every passing day, the pain in my heart grows. The time constraint is a bastard thing, taunting me at how I cannot earn the heart and trust of my soulmate. I loathed it. I wanted nothing more than to burn it under the fiery inferno of hell. Fate is telling me to give up, but I refuse.

I gave up on Kiya before. Five years ago. Now, I refuse to stop fighting. I'll continue to fight until her last day on my land.

I moved faster. I pump my legs harder. My stomps grew in volume and the world faded around me in a blur of color. It's hard to tell if it's my determination or Onyx that's pushing me. He can't bear to lose our beloved either. He's been alone for too long and it's my fault.

If I only accepted Kiya from the beginning. If only I treated Kiya with love and respect. If I wasn't blinded by grief and anger, Onyx and I wouldn't be in this precarious situation where we'd lose our other half for good.

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I can't give up.

Not on her. Not on Kiya. She's all that matters to me.

I'd give anything to see her smile at me, just like on our date at the amusement park.

After the run, I walked into the silent pack house. I expect no one to rise this early unless they're training to defend our lands. Not even the Omegas. However, the sound of cups against countertops and the smell of coffee ignited my curiosity.

Huh. Who's up this early?

As I walked closer to the kitchen, my favorite scent in the world wafted up to my nose. A deep, satisfying growl rumbled in my chest and sharp pleasure slices through my nerve endings. Honeyed strawberries and vanilla are an intoxicating mixture that I can't get enough of. It bathes my sweaty body in comfort and warmth, lulling into a deep sense of security. If I could bottle it up as a perfume, I'd keep it by my side forever.

I spend a couple of seconds longer sniffing the air like a madman before walking into the kitchenette

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to spot my mate stirring her coffee in a large mug labeled **'Feeling Kinda Stabby'**.

She's wearing pajamas. Pajamas that cast a halo around her melanin. Kiya looks so good in pastels. Her shorts revealed her legs, scarred and beautiful. Her tank top also revealed her arms and back, striking pain in my mind at the scar on her shoulder blade barely curtained by her beautiful curls. Her tired sigh echoed in the kitchen's quiet atmosphere.

"What do you need, Neron?" Her sweet voice asked, her body turning to face me with her hands cradling her mug. I took a moment to soak up her appearance, and it didn't bring my heart joy.

Why? Kiya looks like she's carrying the weight of the entire world and then some. Noticeable bags under her eyes exasperate her tiredness, her skin doesn't have that usual shine, some of her curls are pointing in every direction. My mate's on the verge of collapsing in exhaustion. She looks no different from women forced to work in sweatshops for long hours.

I'm worried. Onyx is worried and urges me to go to her.

"What's wrong, Kiya?" I ask softly, taking steps into the kitchen. "Are you okay?"

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"I'm fine." She says. Like hell she is. The heavy tone in her voice betrays her words. "It's nothing."

"It sounds like something," I reply. "Kiya, something's bothering you. You look like you haven't slept in days."

"Because I haven't been." I'm sure she didn't mean for me to hear because I watched her tired expression turn into one of embarrassment. "Ugh. Forget what I've said."

"I can't and won't." Now three feet from her, I rest my elbow on the kitchen's island. "Kiya. Tell me what's wrong. Maybe I can help."

"Not with this." She shakes her head. Pain courses through me because Kiya won't put her trust in me. She has every reason not to, and yet, I can't stop the desire to help her. I want to shoulder that burden, so she doesn't have to carry it all. So much has happened to her.

"I'm not letting this go, Kiya," I said firmly. "You look like you need someone to talk to. You need to get whatever this is off your chest."

"Why should I trust you?"

"Because I may not be the most ideal person to talk

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to, but I'm the only person you can talk to for now. I'm here and..." I huffed in a deep breath. "You look like you could use a friend."

Kiya regards me with a heavy look. By the glazed look in her eyes, she's communicating with Artemis. I wonder how she's doing. Sighing in defeat, she runs a hand through her mane of curls before gesturing at the door. "Let's go into the common room to talk."

"Okay."

"Can you also put on a shirt?"

I arch an eyebrow. "Why?"

"It's distracting." She blurts.

My ego got its daily stroke, raising a smirk on my face. "Why? Like what you see?"

"Not in your life." She mutters with an eye roll. However, I don't miss the sight of mellow red in her cheeks and the crinkle in her nose. All the little things that tell me she's embarrassed in her unique way.

Goddess, she's fucking adorable.

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Per her request, I tossed on a black shirt before we sat in the common room. Quietly, my mate faces me on the couch. Despite the distance between us, to have her this close is more than enough for me. More than enough for an undeserving man. With one leg bent and hands cupped around her mug, she speaks.

"I've been having nightmares." That caught my attention immediately.

"Nightmares? About what?"

"That's the thing. I don't know about what." Her brown eyes connect with my blue, imprisoning me in their hold. "Every nightmare has a different scenario, but they share several things in common. I always die in the end. Either by my hand or if someone forces it. It's just...I thought those types of dreams were over."

"You had dreams where you killed yourself before?"

Kiya nods solemnly, sending my heart plummeting in a sea of despair. The desire to hold her and kiss her forehead has never been stronger. My hand ached to reach into her heart and remove all the burdens, so she didn't have to feel them. Is it bad to want to carry her pain? Is it bad that I wish I had her pain, and she can be free? She doesn't deserve this

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at all.

"Dreams are symbolic, from what I've learned," I explain, stretching my arm on the spine of the couch. My fingers were inches away from Kiya's shoulder, and they're itching for the smallest touch of my mate. "They typically tell us something about what's happening in our waking life, or they can be a clue to something else entirely. Dreams are weird."

"Yeah, no kidding." She chuckles dejectedly.

"Someone keeps telling me something. I don't know who. They tell me to give up. To surrender." I know she's holding something back, but I don't push. "It's not the only thing that's bothering me."

"Tell me," I ask softly. "What else?"

"Have you ever got the feeling that you're being watched?" She asks me, moving closer to me. Her bare upper arm brushes against my fingers, sending forth rockets of destined sparks through my body. She didn't react. "Every time I wake in the middle of the night, I feel a presence in my room. Stalking me. It's watching my every move but no one's there?"

Kiya shakes her head, laughing softly. "I sound like a madwoman."

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"You aren't crazy, Kiya. Far from it." With a sigh, I fold my hands in my lap. "You've been through a lot. Maybe it's just that catching up to you."

"I don't know." She says sadly. I resisted the urge to touch her face. "I don't know what to think of it, and it's been fucking with my sleep."

"How long has it been since you got a good night's sleep?"

She pondered in thought for a moment, hollowing her cheeks slightly. I smiled as my mind made a note of another cute quirk she has. "Um...a week?"

"..."

"..."

"Can you put your mug down on the table for a second?" Kiya gives me a look, hesitates, but eventually sets it down. Without warning, I scooped my mate up in my arms with the biggest smile on my face. She lets out a squeak like a small mouse before pounding my back with her fist.

"Neron, what the hell?! Put me down, you goliath!"

"Nope," I smirked, already on my way to the upper floors of the pack house. "If I let you go, you'd run."

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"Well, that's because I don't know where you're taking me."

"Ah, I forgot to mention that?" I feigned confusion but couldn't keep a straight face when she scowled at me. If looks can kill, I'd be dead. "I'm taking you to my room."

"Excuse me, where?" She demands, now wiggling like a worm. "And why, the hell, are you taking me to your room?"

"For you to sleep. If something is going on in your room, that's bothering you, then maybe sleeping in a different room would help."

"But—!"

"Shh. Don't want to wake anyone else up, do you?"

Kiya instantly clammed up, huffing as she crossed her arms. Triumphant, I practically skipped down the halls of the fourth floor before kicking open my door. Feeling giddy over the fact I'm bringing someone special to my room is a foreign, yet electrifying feeling. I can't remember the last time I felt this excited; maybe from when Mom would return from trips with Dad. It's been so long, and my inner child is bubbling with joy.

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I set my beauty on my bed, as gentle as a feather with a clown's grin on my face. Kiya's head swished from side to side, curls swinging as she soaked in the interior of my humble quarters. There's isn't much to look at; only that it's the biggest room in the pack house with mahogany settee couches, a flat-screen television, and other accessories akin to a bachelor pad. I watched as brown eyes widened and squinted in moderate succession.

"I never expected your room to be so..."

"So, what?" My curiosity gnaws at me with the urge to know more. Why does her opinion matter so much to me? It's been my room for years and never once did I need to think about the approval of a woman. But Kiya, she's special. Obviously.

"Ordinary." She answered. "But...it fits you. Your favorite color is blue?" When I nodded, her lips formed a smirk that exposed her perfect white teeth to me. "Ah. Ordinary and boring."

My hand went to my heart, mocking offense. "And what's wrong with liking the color blue?"

"It's a common favorite color, and it's not very exciting. Not much of a fan."

"Blue is the color of intelligence and sincerity." I

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retorted as my hand picked up a blue snow globe on top of my clothes drawer. Inside it is a model of a bright green Christmas tree. The falling snow reminds me of those Christmas nights by the fireplace with Nuria and I opening gifts in our pajamas. A smile makes its way to my face. Good times. "It also symbolizes sensitivity and sincerity."

Kiya looks at me, and I look at her, soaking in her holy presence. "What's yours? Must be more exciting than ordinary blue."

"... Purple." She answered softly. "My favorite color is purple."

Royalty. Nobility. Power. Wisdom. Mystery. Peace. Magic. So many associations with that simple color, and yet, I can see why it would be Kiya's favorite. She embodies every symbolic notion of that color, and it exemplifies her beauty in the lavender tank top she's wearing. "I can see it. It's lovely. Very fitting."

Setting the snow globe down, I huffed. "Okay. Time for you to sleep."

Kiya gave me a look. "Huh?"

"You. Sleep. Now." I softly demanded, walking to the

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other side of my bed. Her weird look followed my moves, even twisting into distaste when I sat my rear on the mattress. "Kiya..."

"Why would I want to sleep on your bed?"

Good point. Why would she want to? "Because you haven't slept for a week. And what you said about something watching in your room bothered me. I, at least, want to give you a safe place to catch up on sleep."

"But training—"

"I'll take over. I know your training regime with the pups. And your friends won't have to stop theirs with the adults to cover for you."

"Um. It's early?"

"You can sleep in. No one comes into my room without permission and I'll see that you aren't disturbed."

Kiya feigned annoyance with her sharp sigh. But it sent my heart soaring. It made me happy. Damnit, what the hell is wrong with me? "You won't let this go, will you?"

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"Nope. It's my job to take care of you during your stay."

"I don't need to be taken care of." She shot back, slipping her feet under the covers. Her scent mixed with mine in the bed, making me lightheaded. The scent of your mate is legendary in making one weak in the knees, but this? This will be the death of me. I wanted nothing more than for Kiya to stay in my bed forever so I can breathe in this sweet mixture.

Pulling the covers over her, Kiya's body visibly relaxed. Her eyes began drooping and stress left her in waves. Instinctually, my hand reached to her cheek, knuckles caressing her supple skin. I promised myself I wouldn't fall so far. That I'll remain strong. Rare moments such as this truly make life worthwhile; to have my mate relax at my touch when she used to tense around me.

Getting attached is dangerous. She warned me herself. Kiya told me to not forge any further emotional connection with her. As an Alpha, promises are binding. We acknowledge requests to rest upon the honor of the wolf.

But this is one promise I cannot keep.

Kiya is my heart. The love of my life. My other half. There's no way I could not stop loving her. I've made

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amends that she'll never love me back. The chance of reaching her heart and cradling it like precious diamonds is slim to none.

But it won't make me love her any less. I'm too far gone. I've been a horrible person to her, and I will never be again. She's mine by destiny, but hers by choice.

She will *always* have a choice.

"Will you still be here when I wake?" Kiya asked me groggily. The sweet thing is surrendering to the comfort of sleep. Chuckling softly, I leaned down and planted a kiss on her forehead, soft and chaste.

"No, I won't. But I'll be here until you fall asleep."

"Fine..." In seconds, she went out like a light. Breathing steadily, I watch her upper body rise and fall with life. Valerian, long ago, spoke about the joys and love he'd feel when watching Raina sleep. I used to laugh at myself at how smitten he was with our Beta Female. Soon after Kwame met Lorelai, he'd talk about how it brought him happiness to watch her chest fill with life. It reminded him she's alive. She's real. And made for him.

I never understood it. I'd laugh at how my men had

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fallen head over heels over their mates, and now Cupid has struck me with his arrow once more. The magic of the arrow entrances me. Kiya's beauty entrances me. Watching her at peace... that's an entirely different set of love I didn't know I could feel.

I want to protect this peace. *Her* peace.


And on my honor, I will.

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