

## Chapter 18

Ace's wolf was even bigger than I remembered. And much more terrifying.

He stood as still as a statue as I approached, watching me through pitch-black eyes, a towering figure of raw strength and beauty.

Every inch of his frame radiated power. His coat shimmered in the moonlight streaming through the small, barred window opposite his cell, a mesmerizing mix of deep silver and midnight black.

His muscles bulged and contracted, his chest heaving with each one of his snarling breaths. Foamy spit dribbled from the corners of his mouth.

I stopped walking just a few paces before I reached the front of his cage, every cell in my body switching to high alert in the presence of this dangerous animal.

The wolf's eyes zeroed in on my now unmoving feet.

Out of nowhere, he surged forward and slammed his body against the bars.

I screamed and stumbled back, only to have my back meet Madoc's front.

That only made the wolf snarl louder, thrashing within the confines of his cell with relentless fury. He lunged again and again, each movement more desperate and violent than the last.

It was terrifying, yes. But I was surprised to find that another part of me was heartbroken for the poor beast.

"Alpha!" Madoc shouted over the wolf's deafening growls. "For fuck's sake, you're scaring her!"

While the wolf continued to struggle, I studied his enclosure. There wasn't much to it. It was a simple cell made of stone walls covered in claw marks and thick metal bars.

"He's been *here* this entire time?" I managed to say around the hazardous racing of my heart. "This is horrible."

"We tried to give him a bed, but he just tore it to shreds," Madoc explained. "These aren't the conditions I want him in either. But this is what he wanted, so..."

I knelt down slowly a few feet from the bars, watching as the wolf tried to shove his face between them.

He whimpered when he couldn't get through and sunk to the ground with his face halfway through, staring at me with his big wolf eyes.

I stared back, studying him. He really was beautiful. This magnificent, terrifying beast who could kill any creature with a single sharp snap of his jaw.

"Is there a way we can convince him to shift?" I asked Madoc.

Madoc shifted uneasily. "I'm sure Ace is fighting for control. But his wolf loves you just as much as he does and has never gotten to spend much time with you. Plus, he's been worried about you."

Oddly enough, my heart swelled a bit at that. Ace continued to scratch at the bars and attempt to shove his head through, trying to get to me.

It didn't look at all pleasant. Any normal creature would walk away with some massive bruises with how hard he was throwing himself at those bars.

"Is he hurting himself doing that?"

"I mean..."—Madoc eyed Ace—"probably. He can't help it, though."

*Jesus. He really can't control himself.*

"My dad told me the bars were made of silver," I said. "Does that mean he's burning himself?"

"They're laced with silver. It's not burning him, just weakening him."

Ace started gnawing at the bars like a dog chewing on a bone.

"This is him when he's weakened?" I asked.

Madoc watched Ace gnaw and slobber on the metal with raised brows. "Believe it or not, this is the weakest I've ever seen him."

I licked my suddenly dry lips. "Can I... can I touch him?"

As if he heard me, Ace thrashed harder, snarling and trying to thrust his massive body between the bars. I sprang back with a gasp.

"Does that answer your question?" Madoc asked.

I scooted closer once again and slowly lifted my hand. The wolf froze in anticipation.

"Will he bite me?"

The wolf started pawing at the ground and making impatient whining noises through his snout.

Madoc smirked. "Not unless you want him to."

I leveled Madoc with a slight glare, not appreciating his humor at the moment. Ace's wolf was unpredictable and wild; that much was clear. But would he hurt me?

Madoc sighed. "No, he won't bite you. He just wants to take care of you, I'm sure."

Yeah, right. Before or after he rips out my jugular?

Letting out a shuddering breath, I looked back at the unhinged animal in front of me.

His head was still partially squeezed through the bars, his eyes were stretched back, and his mouth was half-open, his lolling tongue hanging out while he panted. He looked...silly. Less intimidating.

Fingers trembling, I reached forward and gently placed my hand on his massive snout, right above his wet nose. The wolf didn't move.

I held my breath. I didn't know what else to do.

*Do I pet him?*

He wasn't a dog. He was a savage wolf.

And yet, I found myself caressing his nose, feeling his silky fur beneath my fingertips. The wolf melted under my touch, no longer struggling. He leaned into it and tried to nuzzle me back.

It was sort of...sweet.

I was surprised to feel familiar sparks roll through my form—sparks that were proof of our mate bond. Maybe it really was Ace in there.

With that in mind, little by little, I was able to relax. My touch became a little more confident, reaching back to pet behind his ears and over his head. He was so soft.

And much calmer than he had been a few minutes ago.

"H-hi," I whispered unevenly to the wolf. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"I think I'll give you two some privacy," Madoc said behind me.

His voice startled me a bit. I had almost forgotten he was there.

Keeping my hand on Ace, I asked, "You're leaving?"

Madoc had already started to back away. "I'll be right upstairs if you need me. Just shout."

I shook my head. "But what if...? What if—?"

"I'm protective of you, too, Doe. I wouldn't leave you alone with him if I weren't sure he wouldn't hurt you."

I looked back at Ace, who was now nuzzling and licking my hand between the bars. He resembled a teddy bear more than a wild animal.

"Okay," I finally responded. "Just stay close."

Madoc nodded. "I will. Remember, you have the key. He doesn't come out unless you let him."

With that, Madoc left me alone with Ace.