



## 462 Let's Take A Chance

**Kael** 1

The doors slid shut behind me with a soft hiss, and suddenly we were alone in the small space. I placed my hands on either side of her head, caging her in without touching her—my body forming a barrier between her and any escape. 1

"Kael—" Her voice was barely a whisper, and I could see her pulse hammering in the hollow of her throat.

"Please," I said quietly. "Just... let me say this. Let me apologize properly."

She was trembling, I realized. Not from fear—I could smell the difference—but from something else entirely. That same pull I felt, that tug behind my sternum, was clearly affecting her too. Her scent—earthy musk and jasmine—was overwhelming in the confined space, and Ajax was practically clawing at my insides to get closer to her.

But I didn't move. Neither did she.

"Look," I started, and gods, even now I couldn't help myself. "A year ago, I would have convinced



myself this feeling was stress. Exhaustion. Maybe early heart disease from too much coffee and not enough sleep." A breathless laugh escaped me. "Hell, I would've gone to Dr. Eloise and demanded a full cardiac workup before I admitted what this actually is."

Thea's breath hitched, her eyes going wide with something that looked like panic. "Don't—"

"You feel it too," I said, and it wasn't a question. "This pull. Like something in your chest is trying to crawl out and reach for me." I paused, then added with a weak smile, "Which, admittedly, sounds like the start of a really terrible horror movie, but—"

"Stop." Her voice broke on the word.

The humor died in my throat. "We have six weeks, Thea. Maybe less. Six weeks until a war that could kill us both. Until the Blood Moon turns our people into monsters and Darius's army tears through everything we've built."

"Kael, please—"

"And look, maybe—" I let out a shaky breath, running a hand through my hair. "Maybe this is just trauma bonding, right? We almost died together, we went through hell, and now our



brains are all scrambled and confused. Maybe in a normal world, we wouldn't even look at each other twice." 2

Hope flickered in her eyes, like I was giving her an out.

"Except," I continued, my voice dropping lower, "I know that's bullshit. Because I've watched Hades and Eve. I've seen what this is. And Thea—" I leaned in just slightly, watching her pupils dilate. "This isn't trauma. This is fate. And I'm terrified of it, but not as terrified as I am of walking away from you."

Ajax was snarling in my head, demanding I close the distance. The mate bond was like a living thing between us, pulling tighter with every passing second.

"You're a Werewolf," I said quietly. "I'm a Lycan. We're supposed to be enemies. Hell, a year ago I probably would've crossed the street if I saw you coming." I tried for another smile but it came out crooked. "Now I can't breathe right when you're not in the same room. So either I'm having that heart attack, or the moon has a twisted sense of humor."

"Because you're cruel," she whispered, fresh



tears spilling down her cheeks. "You're cruel to make this a joke when you know—when we both know—"

"I'm not joking." The words came out harder than I intended, and I let one hand drop from the wall to hover near her face. "I know I deflect. I know I use humor when things get too real because it's easier than feeling all of this." I gestured vaguely at my chest. "But Thea, I'm not joking about this. About you."

"Then stay away from me," she begged, but she was leaning toward my hand like she couldn't help herself. "Kael, please—"

"We might die in six weeks," I said, and watched her face crumple. "Both of us. All of us. The ferals could tear us apart, or the vampires, or the Blood Moon could turn me into something that doesn't remember who you are." I swallowed hard. "And yeah, maybe I'm being selfish. Maybe I should let you push me away and protect yourself. But fuck, Thea—when I thought I was going to die in that facility, when that vampire had me by the throat, the only thing I could think was that I'd never see the people I love again. That I'd never meet whoever the moon had waiting for me."



"Don't," she whispered.

"It was you," I said hoarsely. "You were already it. Already her. And I didn't even know it yet." A bitter laugh escaped. "The moon really does have a sense of humor, huh? Giving me my mate in the middle of enemy territory while we were running for our lives."

"Don't say it." Her hand came up, pressing against my chest over my heart. "Don't make this real."

"It's already real. It's been real since the moment I saw you." I covered her hand with mine, pressing it harder against my chest so she could feel how my heart was racing. "And I know—trust me, I know—all the reasons this is a terrible idea. I can list them alphabetically if you want. I'm good at lists."

A strangled sound escaped her that might have been a laugh or a sob.

"But here's the thing," I continued, my voice dropping to barely above a whisper. "I don't know if I can do this, Thea. I don't know if I can pretend I don't feel this pull every time you're near. That I don't want to know everything about you—what makes you laugh, what you dream



about, how you take your coffee." I paused. "If we even survive long enough for coffee to matter."

"We can't," she said, but her voice had lost its conviction.

"Why?" I demanded. "Give me one good reason why we should waste whatever time we have left pretending this isn't happening."

"Because when you die," she said, and her voice was steady now, terribly steady, "and you probably will, because we're all probably going to die—I need to be able to keep going. I need to be able to finish the work, to help the people who are left, to do something that matters. And if I let myself have this, if I let myself have you even for a moment—"

Her voice finally broke again.

"—I won't survive losing you too. I've lost too much already. I can't—I won't—" 1

The elevator alarm was screaming now, and somewhere above us, someone was probably calling for an emergency override. But all I could see was this brilliant, broken woman in front of me, choosing to protect herself the only way she knew how.



By pushing away the one thing that might save us both.

"So that's it?" I asked. "We just pretend this doesn't exist? We work together on the composite, save the pack, fight the war, and act like we don't feel this?"

"Yes," she whispered. But her hand was still pressed over my heart, and she hadn't moved away.

"I don't know if I can do that, Thea."

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