

Emma Is Strong

"What does it say?!" Kyle asked as he paced the room. Ella looked over my shoulder, and I could feel her tears dropping on my shirt as she read the note.

"She's okay," I said, letting out a sigh of relief. We had spent the first week in a blind panic, pushing at their borders every moment we could to try and find a weakness to get in.

This last week, after her attempted escape, had been absolute torture—waiting for word of Emma and worrying about her safety. Our family and pack had been walking the border in groups, hoping that we wouldn't miss another opportunity to save her again like we did before. I would never forgive myself for that night.

"Are you sure?" Kyle asked, his pacing stopped as he looked at me. "What if they forced her to write this?"

I squinted as I examined it further. "I don't think she wrote it under duress."

"I can't believe we missed her," Kyle grumbled as his pacing began again. "We were so close!"

Ella took the note from me as I slumped into my seat. She sat on the arm of my chair, and I took her hand in mine.

"Why did she sign her name 'Aria'?" Ella asked softly.

I sighed. "I have a feeling they still don't know who she is. I think this is her way of warning us to not let her true identity be known."

"What do you think they'd do if they knew who she really is?"

Kyle stopped pacing again and looked at us with sad eyes. "They'd kill her."

I looked up at Ella, her eyes glued to the paper as she fought to keep her composure. I could see her lip quiver. She was barely holding herself together.

"Kyle, go on and check on your brother," I said, hoping a job would get his mind to calm down.

"Right," he nodded. "Connor. I'll go check on him."

As soon as the door to the office closed, I pulled her into my lap and her tears broke into sobs. I wrapped my arms around her and held her close.

"What are we going to do?" she cried. "Zane, they have our girl."

"I know," I said as I rubbed my hand up and down her back. "But Emma is strong. She's the best warrior I know. If anyone can figure out a way to escape, it's her."

Ella looked up into my eyes, hers brimming with unshed tears. "You're not really going to listen to her, are you? You'll send a battalion?"

"I'll send the whole damn pack if it means getting her out of there," I said firmly. "Just because they aren't hurting her right now doesn't mean they won't at some point."

She sat up straight. "You have a plan."

"Of course, my love," I winked. "We just need Connor to wake up."

I sat at the foot of the bed and stared at my twin brother's sleeping form. I sighed as I leaned back against the bedpost and listened to the steady beating of his heart.

He had almost died that night two weeks ago. And it had taken such a toll on him; he'd been unconscious ever since.

"I need you to wake up, brother," I whispered as I nudged his foot with my knee.

"It's too early," he grumbled.

I jumped from the bed and grabbed his shoulders as I looked down at him. "Connor! Are you awake?"

"Of course, you idiot. Quit shaking me," he grumbled as he pushed me off him.

I reached down and hugged him tightly, my eyes becoming glassy as I fought back tears of joy and relief.

"Let go," he laughed. As I released him, he looked up at me curiously. "What's going on, Ky?"

"You've been out for two weeks. Do you remember what happened?"

He shook his head as he tried to piece things together. "That long? Impossible."

"You almost died, Connor," I said quietly as I sat down beside him.

He sat up quickly, his eyes wide. "Emma!"

I pushed him back. "They took her."

He shook his head. "No, no, no, this is all my fault. I can't believe..." He looked up at me with panic. "We have to get her back."

"We're working on it."

Connor frowned. "It's been two weeks. What's taking you so long? Why hasn't she been rescued?"

"Crescent Moon upped their border patrol. We've been having a hard time finding an opening. But I think Dad has a plan."

He leaned back in the bed and rubbed his face. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been out there. You know I'm a trash fighter. She shouldn't have had me with her. It's all my fault."

"What happened?" I asked, curious to finally find out the whole story.

"Well—"

We both turned as the door slammed open and our parents rushed in.

"Connor!" our mom cried as she rushed to him and embraced him tightly. "Thank goodness you're awake."

After a few minutes she let him go, her face red and puffy. She'd been crying again. I turned to our dad with a nod. "Connor was just about to tell me what happened."

All eyes turned to him, and he sat up a little straighter as he began.

"We were out on patrol. I... I shouldn't have been there. I was a distraction. I kept teasing her about wanting to go home and eat something. Then she called out, and suddenly there are four Crescent Moon warriors rushing through the bushes. She took three of them down in one breath. It was incredible. I took one down, and then this massive alpha launched through the border. He was huge, bigger than you. Dad, I fought him until he took me down." He lowered his head in shame. "Emma took him on. I told her

to run and get help. I told her to leave me, but she wouldn't. She fought him, and she was doing well when I blacked out. Where the hell was the backup?"

My dad's eyes darkened. "The warriors were on the other side of the territory dealing with some stupid kids from another pack. Believe me, it won't happen again."

He looked up at our parents with tears in his eyes. "I'm so sorry. I should have protected her."

My mom shook her head and pressed her hand to his cheek. "She protected you, sweetheart. She took Grandpa's death harder than the rest of us, you know that. I think she sacrificed herself for you because she loves you." She looked up at us. "She said as much in her letter, didn't she?"

Connor closed his eyes as tears fell down his cheeks until they snapped open, and he looked up at us with hope. "What... what letter?"

"A letter was delivered a few hours ago from Emma. I don't know how she was able to get it out, but it's how we know she's safe and why she did what she did," our dad said.

"Do you have it?"

"It's in my office," Dad said, his head dropping to the side curiously. "Why?"

"I need to see it," he said, sitting up quickly.

"I'll get it," I volunteered. I ran out of the room and sprinted down to Dad's office. I grabbed the note off the desk and ran back upstairs. I placed it in his hands, my chest heaving as I caught my breath.

He narrowed his eyes as he read the words she wrote. He turned to the bedside table and grabbed a pen. He began scribbling on the letter.

"What are you doing?" Dad grumbled.

My eyes widened as I realized. "He... he's looking for a hidden message."

"What?" our parents said in unison, their gaze tearing to me.

"The three of us... we used to write notes to each other in a secret language. A silly thing we made up to keep from you guys. We haven't used it in years. I don't think I could even use it if I tried." I sat down at the end of the bed again. "Connor?"

A moment later, Connor looked up at us with a smile. He handed the note to Dad.

His eyes widened as he read the words scribbled at the bottom. "One week. Dawn. E."

"Are you sure?" my mom asked, her hands shaking as she held them to her mouth.

"Positive," Connor grinned. "Emma and I still write little notes to each other, usually to make fun of Kyle." He gave me a silly wink as he continued. "We've been keeping it up, claiming we might need it someday—but I think she just liked having some secret pact."

My mom chuckled. "Sounds about right."

Connor's face darkened. "We have to get her back."

"We will," I said, nudging his foot again. "Whatever it takes."

