

Bear My Presence

"Leo?"

"Hmm?" he hummed from where he lounged on the couch.

I turned to him and stared at him for a moment. "Can I go outside today?"

"Absolutely not," he scoffed.

"Please?" I pleaded. "Nobody can stay inside this long. I'm going to lose my mind. I've sat in this room for a week. I'm going stir crazy!"

"I can throw you back in the cells if you like," he shrugged and laughed when I elbowed him in the ribs.

"Please?"

He shook his head at me but then turned to me with a sly grin. "No, I won't go out with you, Aria!" he hollered just as the door swung open to reveal Xaden as he walked in. "But I bet Xaden would love to take a walk with you!"

I glared at him, giving him a subtle head shake. Leo gave an innocent smile in return. "No, he's too busy. I couldn't."

"I'm not busy," Xaden said as he stepped forward.

"Well..." I stammered, trying to find any excuse to not spend time with him. "L... I don't want to go with you. I asked Leo."

Leo paled as Xaden's gaze darkened. "Leo is busy." His gaze shifted to his friend, and Leo jumped off the couch and walked out the door.

"Later, Aria!" he hollered before closing it behind him.

"Traitor," I muttered. I shifted in my seat, refusing to meet his gaze.

"If you want to go outside, you're going to have to settle for me."

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"Mhmm," he hummed before walking to the bedroom.

I sighed. "Okay, wait..."

He stopped and turned slowly. "You sure? I'd hate for you to have to bear my presence longer than necessary."

"I've just accepted it as a part of life now," I grumbled as I stood from the couch.

"That's the attitude," he muttered back.

He trudged to the door and stepped to the side as he opened it, offering me the way.

"Prick," I muttered, loudly enough that I knew he heard me as I passed him.

I walked through it and immediately recognized my surroundings from the day I'd tried to escape. I followed him through the pack house and outside.

The sun shone brightly, and I smiled as it heated my skin. I angled my face toward the sky, letting it warm me.

"Where do you want to go?"

I turned to him with a frown. "I want to go home."

Xaden offered a deadpan stare. "Considering that isn't on the menu of options for today, where else?"

"I know where I'd like you to go," I shot back with a smirk.

"To hell, yes, I know," he grumbled. A shadow passed over his face, and I narrowed my eyes curiously at him, unaware of the person approaching us.

"Well, well. My son has allowed you to come up for air then, hmm?"

I spun around to face the alpha. He stood tall in a crisp gray suit, a few shades darker than the one that Xaden currently wore.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I grumbled, hating the innuendo in his voice. Clearly, he thought Xaden was ravishing me for information.

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The alpha took a menacing step forward, his face darkening as he clenched his fists.

I could feel the blood leave my face, and I took a nervous step backward. I lowered my head, refusing to make eye contact.

You are not this person! Aria wailed in the corners of my mind. Show him how fierce we are!

Xaden took an instinctive step in front of me, shielding me from his father. "Yes, I thought she might like to walk around the territory for a little while—get to understand our people a little."

The alpha straightened, a knowing twinkle in his eye.

"Carry on, then, you two," he smiled diplomatically, his hands folded behind his back as he strolled past us. It was all for show. I knew if we weren't in public that he would rip my throat out for speaking to him.

When he was out of sight, I spun to Xaden. "Does he really think we're sleeping together?"

"Of course," Xaden shrugged, as if it was a matter of fact. He shoved his hands in his pockets and continued walking.

"And why, pray tell, is he still under that impression?" I grumbled, jogging slightly to keep up with him.

"Because I told him we were."

"Why the hell would you do that?"

He turned to me and stepped closer, his eyes lifting for a moment to look at our surroundings before dropping back to my face. "You know why. He wants me to gain your trust. Help you, protect you, sleep with you, whatever it takes to get you to spill the information you know on Green Ridge."

I took a step back. "But I haven't told you anything."

"No, you haven't. Because I'm not trying to get information from you."

I narrowed my eyes at him suspiciously. "How am I supposed to believe that?"

He leaned closer. "You'll have to trust me." His eyes flitted to my lips, and I could feel the heat building my cheeks.

I stepped back quickly and continued walking. "When do your warriors do their daily training?" I asked, making conversation. I missed training with my warriors.

"Trying to get your own information out of me, hmm?" He gave a dark grin.

"I was trying to make conversation. I am..." I almost slipped and told him my position in the pack. "...curious how other packs do it. Green Ridge trains in the afternoon." That was a lie, but he didn't need to know that. "Violet Sky Pack on the other side of us trains in the early morning before the sun is even up. And Gray Moon Pack doesn't do their training until the evening, after dinner. I think that's crazy. What do they do all day besides train?"

A smile curled at the corners of his mouth, and I realized I was rambling.

"We train twice a day. Early morning, before breakfast. And then in the afternoon we do drills."

I smiled. We did the same in Green Ridge. "Can I join?"

He turned to me curiously. "You want to join training?"

"Yes."

He shook his head. "That's not a good idea. If my father found out..."

"He'd what? Torture me?" I shot back.

His gaze darkened, his brow wrinkling. "Yes."

I swallowed nervously. "Oh."

He turned to me again, stopping in place. He grabbed my elbow softly, forcing me to stop and look up at him. "I need you to know that I would never..." He took a deep breath as if trying to calm himself. "I would never hurt you like that. And the fact that he did..."

"I know." I looked up at him with a wary smile. I barely knew him and hated him, but I knew in this I could trust him. I turned away and continued walking, trying to hide the fact that I was scoping out the best ways to get through the territory. I didn't know what I would have done if they hadn't let me outside before tomorrow. I'd play nice for as long as I needed to in order to get the information I wanted.

Because tomorrow I'd finally make my escape.

I slipped out of bed in the early morning hours. The sun wouldn't rise for another hour. I slowly made my way around the bed and out the door, praying he was a heavy sleeper.

I walked outside onto the balcony and looked down. It wasn't a very high drop, but high enough to make my stomach do a backflip. I took a deep breath and climbed over the stone railing and lowered myself. I jumped to the ground, landing lightly.

I'd spent the last week watching the patrols at night when Xaden was sleeping. I knew I had five minutes before a patrol would come around the corner. Just enough time to sneak off into the trees and run off without being noticed.

Fingers crossed, Aria whispered as we walked into the forest.

As soon as I stepped just out of sight of the house, I shifted and let Aria take control.

Let's go home! I said with a smile as she sprinted off through the forest.

I rolled over and my hand hit the cold satin sheets. My tired mind knew it wasn't right. I sat up to find Aria's side of the bed empty. I looked toward the bathroom and frowned when I found it dark inside. I stood from the bed and walked outside, my bare feet tapping on the hardwood floors as I entered the living room.

"Aria?" I said quietly, not wanting to alert the guards my father had stationed outside. I looked around the empty room still darkened by the night outside. Her scent still lingered in the air, drawing me toward the balcony. I stepped outside and growled to myself as I realized what had happened.

She was gone. Again.

Yesterday had been a trick. She used me to plan her escape, and like a fool I'd taken her along for a tour.

She's betrayed us, Kai growled. I knew if it were up to him, we would have marked and mated her the day we found her.

"Let's go find her then, shall we?" I grumbled as I jumped off the balcony and ran off into the night.

I followed her scent, Kai sprinting hard into the dark forest. We must have left just after she did because in just a few moments, I could hear her paws padding through the damp soil ahead of me. I could hear the heavy breaths of her wolf and the pounding of her heart. She was nervous, and she had good reason

to be.

My ears perked up at the sound of movement nearby. We were getting close to the border. Kai launched himself forward, pushing himself even harder to catch up to her. A flash of golden fur caught my eye, and I grinned. I'd found my prey.

Suddenly, I heard voices. Several of them from up ahead.

"Emma!" one of them cried, yelling loudly.

Emma? Who the hell was Emma?

"Faster, hurry Ems!" another yelled, a female this time.

"Watch out!" another screamed as I jumped forward and caught her hind leg in my claws. I swiped at her, and she tumbled forward.

"No!!!" one of them screamed.

I put my weight on her, and she let out a yelp just as I saw four shifters move through the trees.

We shifted back, and I gripped her by the throat. "You said you would come with me if I left your family alone. Is that them?" I growled without looking up at the people in front of us.

"Please!" the woman sobbed. "Let her go."

Aria—or Emma?—I wasn't sure anymore; her eyes shifted to them, and they filled with sadness.

I looked up at them with a scowl. "Cross that border, and I will slaughter the lot of you."

"Connor," she sighed, almost with relief. "You're okay. You're alive."

"I'm okay, Ems. I'm so sorry." One of the men stepped forward, and I recognized him as the alpha I'd fought the day I'd captured her. My gaze flitted between the both of them, and a low growl escaped my lips. I couldn't help the intense wave of jealousy that surged through me at the thought of them together.

"It was worth it," she whispered.

"Release her." From the back of the group, Zane Davis, alpha of Green Ridge Pack, stepped forward. He was tall and muscular, even at his age. Unlike my father, he clearly did not spend his days sitting behind a desk. He actually worked to protect his own people.

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"All this over one girl?" I asked, realizing the entire alpha family was standing before me. I could feel the shift in energy.

And then it clicked. Emma. As in, Emma Davis. Thirdborn and daughter of Green Ridge Pack. I looked down at her, her blue eyes staring up at me, begging me to let her go.

"She's... she's your daughter," I said quietly as I turned back to Zane, my hands lowering to her shoulders. I couldn't believe it. I'd had the key to saving my people in my hands this whole time.

"Please..." Emma said softly. "You... you can't tell anyone. If they knew who I was—"

"They would have killed you."

She nodded and looked to her family again.

I straightened, my hands still firmly gripping Emma's arms. "I'm sorry, but I have to take her back. Step over that line and I will kill you."

"You and what army?" one of the sons called out boldly. They knew no matter how strong I was, I wouldn't survive a fight with an entire family of powerful alphas.

The entire Davis family shifted smoothly into their wolves, each one snarling viciously at me. I pulled a silver dagger from my back pocket and held it to her neck, a small bead of blood forming at the skin where it pricked her. "Step over the line and it will not be you; I will kill her."

The alpha shifted back, his hands raised. The rest of them stayed as wolves, growling angrily. "Stop."

I took a step back and lowered the knife. "I swear to you she will be safe. I will protect her. But there are things at play here that you don't know about."

In a split second, I fell to the ground with a pained grunt and the air knocked out of me. I recovered quickly and stood up to find Emma run into the arms of her father. She turned around with a dark glare. "I could never stay here with you. You and your people, you're monsters. They beat me, tortured me, threatened us, killed my people. You killed—" she choked on her words, her voice wavering, "—you killed my grandfather on that very spot you stand, and I will never, never forgive you for that."

I took a step back in shock. "L... I didn't kill him."

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"No," she growled. "Eli did. I saw him."

My gaze darkened and I stepped forward again and stood just within my own border. "I swear to you, he will pay." My face dropped for a moment, "And for my part in his death, I apologize. It was my fault he was out here. He was out here that day to meet me."