

One Week

"I heard there was a bit of a skirmish at the border last night."

My face flicked up from the files I was skimming through to find my father staring at me from across his desk. "Yes," I said, clearing my throat, hoping to hide the fact my thoughts had been a nonstop stream of obsessing over how her fingers brushed against my cheek.

The warmth that rushed through me of her touch against my skin, even for a brief moment. "Not so much a skirmish but some of the Green Ridge mutts walked a little too close to the border. We scared them off easily."

"Good," my father said as he leaned back in his chair. "We can't have them attempting anything silly before we're ready."

I gave him a curious stare. "Ready for what?"

He watched me for a moment, his hand rubbing over his chin before he leaned forward on the desk. "How are things going with the girl?" he asked, changing the subject.

I shook my head. "She's a harder nut to crack than I thought. I'm pulling out all the stops tonight."

"And what does that entail?" he smirked.

"Don't worry about it," I winked, a dark smile crawling over my features.

He chuckled and stood from his desk. "We need the information she has. You have one week to find out what I need to know or I'm sending her back down to the cells."

I shook my head. "I don't think that's enough time."

"It will have to be."

My forehead creased as I thought. My face jerked up at him as it all came together. "You're going to use her as bait, aren't you?"

The grin that spread on his face was dark, almost feral. "Of course I am. When Green Ridge Pack attacks us to rescue her—and mark my words—they will try to rescue her—we will be fully prepared to counter their attack and move into the next phase of my plans."

"Which is?" I asked as I stood from my seat, hoping to hide my nervousness.

"When we demolish their rescue attempt, we will push forward into Green Ridge and take over. It will be too easy to take down their little warriors."

I could feel my insides churning. I wasn't ready. My plans weren't set in stone. Emma's family hadn't even decided if they would join my cause. I still had to get her on my side as well—something that was not going to be easy considering she currently hated me.

I took a deep breath and steeled myself, keeping my face neutral. "It sounds like you have everything planned. I will make sure my men are ready to aid in our victory."

"I expect nothing less," he said with a wave. "You are the future alpha. Our pack will be looking to you to be the example."

"Yes, alpha," I said, bowing my head before leaving the room.

I walked straight out the door and up to my suite. I walked in to find Leo and Ashton once again lounging around with Emma.

I bit back a jealous growl. I hated that they so easily befriended her. And I hated the fact that I hated it.

They jumped up from their seats, each of them searching my face. "What's wrong?"

"The timeline might be moving up," I replied.

"How?" Ashton asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

I caught Emma from the corner of my eye, curled up on the couch, watching intently. She looked pretty today in a gray tee shirt and black leggings. I took a deep breath, ignoring the whines from Kai to take her into my room and toss her on the bed.

"I just met with him. He said I have one week to get the information he wants from Emma or she goes back in the cells."

The three of them visibly paled.

"One week? How can he expect you to get what he wants in so little time?"

I shrugged. "You know him."

"And to top it off, he is hoping Green Ridge finally takes the bait and attacks our pack. He's been goading them for months."

"What?" Leo barked. I could see the anger building in him. "He would let innocents in our pack—the pack we've sworn to protect—die because he wants another *few* acres?"

"Eight hundred..." Emma said quietly.

We all turned to her with surprise.

"We are the biggest pack in the area. Nobody really talks about it. But it's not a *few* acres."

Ashton coughed in surprise. "How do you keep that much territory guarded?"

She shrugged. "That's a secret you won't be getting from me."

"Well, I understand why he's been pushing so hard to take over Green Ridge," I grumbled.

I looked to Ashton and Emma. "Can you two get another letter to Emma's family and warn them not to attack Crescent Moon?"

"I'll try."

"Good," I nodded. "Leo, I need you to get our battalion battle-ready."

"We're always battle-ready," Leo grinned wickedly.

"Yes, but this battle will be different. This battle we will kill my father."

I walked into the bedroom after Leo and Ashton had left and found Emma walking from the closet. She had pulled on some shorts and a cropped top, a sliver of her stomach showing as she pulled her hair up into a high ponytail.

"What are you doing?" I asked, watching her every move.

She smiled innocently. "You and I are going to go for a walk."

"A... walk?"

"Yes. Somewhere out in the woods where nobody will happen upon us."

I stared at her skeptically. "Is this you trying to escape again? Because I feel like you should have learned your lesson."

She barked out a laugh. "You should have learned a lesson yourself." She stood closer, her face inches from mine as she propped up on her tiptoes. "I won't ever stop trying." She hopped down and took a step back. "But as for today, I've been lounging around for too long and my body is growing sluggish. If a battle is what's coming, I need to do some training. Now that you know what I am, you're going to train with me."

I shook my head at her and crossed my arms over my chest. "Don't count on it."

She frowned, her brow scrunching. "I'm not asking."

"Maybe you should. Nicely," I said with a tight-lipped grin. "A please might help as well."

"Arrogant prick," she grumbled.

"Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"Every day," she beamed. "You should hear some of the things she says. Mouth like a sailor, that one."

"Well, I'm still not taking you out into the woods."

"Fine," she huffed, spinning around so that her back faced me. "I'll ask Ashton and Leo to help me then. They'll say yes."

A growl escaped my lips. "Like hell you will."

She turned back with a sly grin. "Well, it's them or you. Or I can just go off on my own." She picked at her nails casually before meeting my eyes again. I stared down at her with a scowl.

"Oh, come on! Please!" she pleaded, her eyes wide and begging.

I rolled my eyes. "Fine."

She clapped her hands happily and pulled me toward the door. "Let's go."

We walked out the back door and into the trees. We continued on for about a mile, making sure we were out of sight and earshot of the house.

I stood before her and watched as she bounced nervously. "What is wrong with you?"

She looked up at me with anxiety. "I'm sorry. I just... I've never fought another alpha besides family. Last time you and I fought, you flattened me. I'm not used to losing..."

"Get used to it," I smirked before giving Kai the reins. I pounced toward her and shifted smoothly into a sprint.

In an instant, she was a light brown wolf and stepped out of my reach. She spun around and launched into my side, sending me careening sideways. Kai stood from the ground and shook off the impact. We turned to find her wolf's tail swishing happily.

"*She played us,*" I scoffed, realizing she wasn't nervous at all. Kai let out an amused grumble before sprinting toward her again.

We danced back and forth, our wolves each giving and receiving blows.

After thirty minutes, I could feel myself growing tired, and I swiped out at her, hoping to end the fight quickly. She dodged me again and used the momentum to bounce off a tree and slide past me, her claws catching my hind leg.

I could feel the searing burn of the gashes in my flesh. Kai let out a pained murmur, proud and angry at the same time that our mate was besting him.

I spun around and was surprised to find she had disappeared. Panic coursed through me. She ran off again. I cursed myself for ever letting her out of the house, and just as I was about to run after her, she jumped from the bushes and plowed into me. We rolled, and I was shocked to find myself on the losing end of a fight for the first time since I was thirteen.

Her wolf snapped her teeth mere inches from my face, and I knew what she wanted. I shifted back and stared up into her wolf's face.

My hands, smudged and dirty from wrestling in the woods, reached up and touched the soft fur of her face. Her wolf's bright blue eyes were the same as Emma's.

Emma shifted back and stared down at me, my hands still cupping her face. Our chests heaved as we tried to calm our breaths from the fight.

"If you had fought like that two weeks ago, you probably wouldn't be here right now," I said.

She nodded. "I know. I hate myself every day for that."

"Why?"

She averted her eyes, staring at the trees for a moment before looking back at me. "Because I have trained for over a decade to be able to win every fight I'm in. But that day, I was so distracted and so worried that I slipped up."

She shook her head as she pushed the thoughts of the past away. "Well, I won. Do I get to take you home as a prisoner now?" she smirked.

"You can chain me up any day, sweetheart."

My eyes widened at the realization I'd actually said that out loud. Emma laughed loudly and pushed off from me. She stood and offered her hand, pulling hard to help me up off the ground.

"That was the first time someone got me on my back in a long time."

"I'll put you on your back any time you like," she shot back, her hand flying to her mouth as she realized what she had just said. "I mean... in training. Not for... oh gosh."

I bit back a smile. "I wouldn't be angry with either scenario."

She nudged me with her shoulder. "Good. Someone needs to humble you a little; might as well be me."

I looked down at my watch with a sigh. "I need to be getting back."

She nodded, and we walked back through the woods toward the pack house.

"How bad do you think this is going to get?" she asked softly.

I let out a long breath. "Bad."

"That's what I was afraid of."

When we returned to the house, I could see her demeanor change the moment we stepped inside. Her walls were back up, and I was the enemy again.

But for some reason, I couldn't allow that. I couldn't allow the new camaraderie and tiny bit of progress we'd made to disappear. Against my better judgment, I wanted her.

She began climbing the staircase to the suite, and I placed my hand atop hers where it rested on the railing. She looked down at me from where I stood in the foyer. "Hmm?"

"Have dinner with me tonight?"

Her brow furrowed and she scanned the room before her eyes returned to mine. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because we..." she hesitated and looked around again. "We can't."

"Just dinner."

She sighed as she looked down at our hands that still touched. "Fine. Just dinner."

I nodded and released her hand, immediately missing her warmth against mine. I watched her walk up the stairs and into the suite before heading out to find Leo and Ashton.

