

## Candles and Pizza

I stepped out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around me, my hair damp from my shower. As I walked through the room, my eye caught on a bag sitting on the bed with my name written in big letters.

I walked over curiously and pulled the tissue out. I couldn't help the smile that spread to my face as I pulled out a baby blue cotton milkmaid dress and a pair of white wedge heels.

Once I was dressed, I stepped in front of the mirror. The dress fell to just above my knees and it made my blue eyes bright. I scrunched my hand through my wild blonde curls and smiled at my reflection.

*He did a good job. Can we keep him?* Aria purred.

*"It's that easy to sway you, hmm?"* I teased.

*Maybe he's not as bad as we thought.*

*"Maybe,"* I replied softly, my smile fading as I realized I would soon have a choice to make.

I walked slowly out of the bedroom and was surprised when I found the living room covered in candles that cast the space in a warm glow. In the center was a small table and beside it was Xaden. His black button-up and gray slacks fit across his body perfectly as he stood silently staring at me.

I met his eyes and smiled nervously, still unable to read his barely changing facial expressions.

"Hi," I said softly.

"Hi," he replied before stepping toward me. His unreadable face broke into a small grin. "You look incredible."

"Thanks for the dress," I replied with a smile. I could feel the blush rushing to my cheeks. I took a deep breath and stepped toward the table and away from him, keeping a safe distance between us. "You did all this?"

"Leo and Ashton helped."

I smiled at the thought of those three men and their massive warrior hands attempting to quietly light all of these little tea lights.

We sat down at the table and began eating our meal.

"So," I said between bites. "Tell me about you."

"Not much to tell," he shrugged. I could see his walls going up.

"Favorite food?" I smiled, hoping he wouldn't shut me out. I ignored the smug hum from my wolf in the corners of my mind, reminding me that I was supposed to hate him.

He gave me an exasperated look. "I don't know... pizza?"

I smiled. "Good choice. I love pizza."

He gave me a shy grin. "So that's your favorite?"

"Oh, no," I said, waving my fork around. "Steak tacos. My grandma makes the BEST steak tacos. I don't think I could physically live without them."

"That good?"

"Beyond good," I sighed. My thoughts drifted to my grandma Sophie and the very real fact I might not ever see her again. I shook the sad thoughts from my mind and looked up at him to find him staring at me.

His brow creased as he spoke. "You'll see her again."

How could he know how I felt? I smiled up at him and raised my shoulder slightly. "I hope so." I looked around the suite before meeting his eyes again. "What was it like growing up here?"

His gaze darkened and he stared down at his plate. "Fine."

I knew I shouldn't push. But I never could manage to make the smart choice.

"Just fine?" I cut at my chicken and kept rambling. "I mean, I can't begin to imagine the shenanigans you got into with Leo and Ashton."

Xaden grumbled under his breath. "I was raised with one purpose only—to become the next alpha of the great Crescent Moon Pack."

My smile faded as I realized what he meant. His father had not been a father at all. "I see."

He looked up at me with a frown. "I do not need your pity."

"It's not pity," I replied, realizing I really should have dropped the subject. "But I am sorry."

He nodded silently and his gaze dropped back to his food. He dropped his fork and leaned back in his chair. "I've ruined things already, haven't I?"

I watched him for a moment, my gaze searching his face. "No, you haven't. I'm sorry I brought it up." He finally met my eyes, and I gave him a gentle smile. "Do you think we will be successful next week?"

"I have hope," he replied. "We've been planning this for a long time."

I stared at him curiously. "Have you really?"

"I wasn't lying before when I told you that you ruined our plans."

I shrugged. "My bad." I looked back up at him. "But... how exactly did I ruin them?"

"The boys and I were trying to collect evidence to send to the council. We were going to have him removed and sentenced for his crimes against our pack."

I gasped. "Crimes? What... what did he—"

"A lot of things," he said, a low growl escaping his throat.

"I'm so sorry," I said and truly meant it. "So how did I ruin that?"

"We haven't quite gotten enough proof of his misdeeds. I wasn't ready to challenge him yet. But then you showed up, and he realized he could use you to get information on Green Ridge, and now everything is moving too quickly."

"Use me then," I blurted out, surprising even myself. "Use me as a witness. I'll tell them what he and Eli did to me."

He frowned again, and I realized it was pretty much a permanent feature of his face.

"I should have known better. I should have realized what bringing you here would do."

"Then why did you? Bring me here, I mean."

He looked up at me, and for a moment I thought I saw longing in his eyes. "I couldn't help it. I brought you here without thinking because you caught me off guard. You were so strong and fierce and beautiful. You smelled so good, and finding you was the last thing I ever expected when I went out into the forest that day. L.. I panicked."

I stared at him in shock. I could feel my heart pound in my chest. And I could feel my walls slowly crumble.

This was bad. Very bad.

I took a sip of water and tried to think of a way to change the subject, knowing I might just fall in love with him if he kept talking like that.

"Why were you talking with my grandfather?"

He smirked, and I knew he knew how nervous he was making me. He leaned back in his seat again. "I happened upon him once when I was patrolling. Instead of attacking me, he just sat on a rock and stared at me. I thought maybe he was crazy."

I laughed at the thought.

"When he realized who I was, we began talking about how things used to be. I trusted him with my plans, and he said he would work with your father to forge an alliance that backed me as alpha." His face dropped as he continued. "I don't know how Eli got there before me the day he died. And I will forever be sorry for that. Your grandfather was a good man—the only man that was willing to help me."

A smile curled on his lips. "He talked about you, you know?"

"Really?" I beamed, leaning forward slightly.

"He said his granddaughter was the fiercest warrior princess he knew and that I would be lucky to find a luna half as wonderful."

I coughed on my water and met his eyes, a playful grin dancing on his features.

"You're teasing me."

He shook his head. "I swear it. I guess subconsciously he knew we were mates before we did."

I laughed at the thought.

"And then," he continued, "when I found my mate, she was this wild thing that defended her own with an intensity I found myself wishing I had standing beside me." He laughed, "Well, actually I was spitting mad because I thought you and Connor were a thing."

I practically choked on my food as I laughed loudly. "You what?"

"I saw how you protected him and basically sacrificed yourself for him. I didn't know he was your brother. I had just found my mate, and she was crying over some guy I just beat up. I was furious."

I wiped a tear from my eye as I laughed harder. "I'll have to tell Connor. He'll probably throw up in his mouth a little."

"You love your brothers." His words were more of a statement than a question. He placed his napkin on the table and stood from his seat.

I followed his lead and stood, watching as he took a step toward me.

A warm smile spread on my face as I thought of my big brothers. "I really do. We are bonded for life. Best friends. They were my champions and my worst nightmares." I laughed at the memories that flooded me of our days growing up together.

He smiled, his eyes distant. "I get that."

"You don't have any siblings, right?" I asked, realizing I hadn't been introduced to anybody claiming to be his family.

"I actually have a sister."

I almost fell on the floor. "What? Really?"

"Her name is Ginger. She's a few years younger than I am. My father forced her to reject her fated mate and then sold her off to a neighboring pack. There was nothing I could do about it. I haven't seen her in three years."

He moved closer to me, and his hands gripped my arms gently. "That's why I couldn't risk him finding out about you. He would have... he would have made me reject you and then killed you for good measure."

I shook my head in shock. "He can't do that..."

"He would. He doesn't care. My father is not a good man. It's why I've been working for so long to free our pack from his oppression."

I looked up into his eyes and realized I no longer hated this man. Quite the opposite. He was grumpy and rough and sometimes cold. But the way he seemed to care for others—for me—it warmed my heart.

He drew closer. "I have been so conflicted."

"I know," I said softly. "I don't know what to do." I finally admitted it. Up until a few days ago, I would have said I was going to definitely reject him. But now...

His hands moved slowly down to my waist and he pulled me close, our bodies pressed together. My hands pressed against his chest, clutching his shirt in my fists. He pushed my hair away from my face as he spoke softly. "I have been waiting for you and at the same time praying you would never come. I couldn't bear the thought of my mate being taken from me after everything else he's done."

His face drew closer and his voice was low and rough. "You, Emma, are the bane of my existence. The object of my nightmares and my dreams. And I will not spend another day without you."

His lips brushed mine and I could feel the shockwaves surge through my body. It felt so incredibly right; every doubt disappeared.

I sighed as his lips pressed deeper to mine. My arms wound around his neck, my hands knotting in his dark hair. He pushed me toward the bedroom, his lips never leaving mine. The moment we crossed the threshold, he spun me around, forcing my back against the wall. He caged me in as my hands undid the buttons on his shirt. He shrugged it off, his hand slowly sliding up to the back of my knee. He hooked my leg around his waist and ground into me, pressing his desire against my core. A groan escaped his lips as his mouth crushed to mine again, our tongues dancing. A smirk curled on his lips as he pulled away and knelt down in front of me. I watched as he hooked my leg over his shoulder and slowly placed kisses up my thigh, my back still glued to the wall.

My mind went foggy as he found the apex of my thighs and his hot breath blew against me. "Please," I whimpered as he slowly began sucking.

He moved slowly, every movement bringing me closer and closer to pleasure. When he gently nipped at me, my core exploded, and I swear I saw stars as he pulled me through each wave.

He stood slowly and pressed his lips to the space on my neck where it meets my shoulder, eliciting another soft moan from my lips. He gripped me beneath my thighs and picked me up, my arms wrapping around his neck tightly as I crushed my lips to his. He walked us to the bed and set me down. I watched as he removed the rest of his clothes, my chest burning with desire.

wrapping around his neck tightly as I crushed my lips to his. He walked us to the bed and set me down. I watched as he removed the rest of his clothes, my chest heaving with desire.

He knelt down again at the edge of the bed and slowly unlatched the straps at my ankles, my heels falling to the floor. I pulled off my dress and he crawled above me, peppering kisses up my body and igniting my core once again.

"Please," I moaned, begging for more.

A wicked grin spread across his face. "Say it."

"What?" I breathed.

"Say my name."

I met his eyes, his gaze dark and filled with desire.

I smiled as I brushed my fingers down his chest. "Alpha."

A growl escaped his lips and he dipped his head, his teeth grazing my bare breast. I gasped, my back arching.

"Say it," he repeated. He teased me, his desire pushing against me, waiting to offer release.

"Xaden," I gasped.

I moaned as he pushed into me, filling me completely. "Again," he ground out.

I pulled his face to mine and pressed my lips to his. "Xaden," I whispered into our kiss.

He shoved into me again with a groan and slowly built a heady rhythm.

I could feel the pressure rising within me again and he brought us both over the edge of bliss.

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