

Claiming Stockholm Syndrome

I woke in the morning, smiling when I found Emma still wrapped in my arms.

I hadn't expected last night to end the way it did. As I pulled her closer, I inhaled her scent and knew I was done for.

I kissed her shoulder, smirking when she shimmied further into my embrace.

"Good morning," I whispered.

She gave a happy sigh and rolled over, her limbs tangling with mine as she looked up into my eyes. "Good morning." Her voice was soft and still filled with sleepiness.

I ran a finger down her shoulder and kissed it gently, frowning at the fact that she didn't hold my mark.

"What's wrong?" she asked, pulling closer.

"I hate that I can't truly make you mine. That we have to hide."

She shrugged. "A few more days."

I kissed her neck again. "My mark should be right here, right now," I whispered against her skin.

She hummed, and I could feel myself hardening again. She cupped my face in her hands and pressed a soft kiss to my lips. "I am yours in every way that matters. Whether you mark me today or in a week, it will not change anything between us."

I rolled above her and looked down into her bright blue eyes. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For not rejecting me every day I held you here."

"I'm claiming Stockholm syndrome," she chuckled.

"I have a mate bond that begs to differ," I whispered.

I kissed her deeper, my hands wandering down her body and eliciting a sultry hum from her lips.

"You're in a good mood."

I turned away from the training fields to find Ashton standing behind me. I shrugged. "Maybe I am."

"Does it have to do with a certain little lady?" he asked, his eyebrows wiggling.

I shoved him away and looked back at the trainees. "The new trainees aren't as advanced as I'd like them to be at this point in their training."

Ashton laughed. "I knew all those candles would seal the deal for you." He slapped me on the shoulder before stepping up on my other side.

"What is the word?" I asked quietly.

His smile faded and he straightened. "The plan is set. We've given all of the information to Green Ridge. They will be waiting. You're free to give your father the false info tomorrow as planned. Green Ridge will be here Thursday morning."

"You're sure?" I asked, turning slightly to face him.

He nodded in silent affirmation.

"The plan is solid," he added. "I don't think we could have come up with something better by ourselves. We owe Emma. It was her idea to offer your father false info and use it as a trap."

I took a deep breath. "We're ready then." I turned toward the pack house and began walking up the hill. "Get those trainees in shape!" I hollered before walking inside.

I walked upstairs and into the suite, smiling to myself as I heard Emma and Leo inside laughing.

As the door opened, Leo stood from the couch stiffly, relaxing instantly when he realized it was me. "Hey, Xaden."

"Leo," I replied, my eyes meeting Emma's. "Ashton needs help whipping the trainees into shape."

"Yes, sir," he said with a mocking salute before offering Emma a wink and a wave.

She bit back a grin and waved goodbye, watching him leave before meeting my eyes again.

"Sending all my guards away?"

I reached out for her waist and pulled her close to me. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you like them better than you like me."

She shrugged innocently, "That's because I do."

She let out a squeal when I bent down and threw her over my shoulder. "Put me down, you brute!" she hollered.

I smacked her bottom as I carried her toward the bedroom. "Take it back then."

"Make me!" she said, laughing as I threw her onto the bed.

I crawled above her slowly, kissing my way up her body, her laughs turning into happy moans.

"Xaden," she whispered, squirming under my touch.

I reached her mouth and pressed my lips to it, smiling as she wrapped her body around mine. "Everything is set," I whispered against her neck, "Your pack is ready and waiting. I'll feed him the information tomorrow."

Her whole body froze and she pulled away slightly. "Really?"

"Really."

She grinned brightly and gripped the back of my neck, pulling my face to hers. She crushed her lips against mine, and I could feel the heat growing inside the both of us as our hands wandered down our bodies. She felt so good in my arms, and I knew I was hooked. There was no going back.

She pushed me aside and rolled above me, her thighs straddling mine as she kissed her way down my chest, igniting my skin each time her lips brushed against me. Her mouth met mine again as she slowly lowered herself down on me, eliciting a moan from us both at the sensation. As she began riding me, sliding up and down me each time, I could feel the pressure building inside me, bringing the both of us closer to ecstasy. I felt her tighten around me, sending us both over the edge of oblivion.

She lay beside me, nestled in my arms as our breathing began to calm.

"What are we going to do?" I whispered.

"What do you mean?" she asked quietly.

"Do you still want to leave?"

She sat up slightly and stared into my eyes, her brow furrowed. "Do you want me to leave?"

I smiled up at her and pulled her face down to mine. I kissed her lips gently, inhaling the sweet scent of my mate. "No. I don't want you to leave. I want you to stay with me always. I want you to be my Luna. But I distinctly remember you being dead set on returning to your people not even a day ago."

She lay back down, her head resting on my chest. "I want to stay, Xaden."

"Really?" I asked, my heart skipping a beat.

"If you had asked me that a week ago, or maybe even yesterday, I would have given you a different answer. But... there's no way I could leave now. Now that I..."

She trailed off, and I found myself suddenly wanting so badly to hear her say those three little words.

"We will figure it all out," I whispered.

She nuzzled closer and wrapped her arms around me. "I trust you."

I fell asleep with the knowledge that if everything went to crap, at least I'd have her.

"Your time is running out."

I stopped just inside the door to the office at the sound of my father's words. I gave him a tight smile as I dropped into the chair in front of his desk.

"You don't need to worry any longer, Father. I got the girl to talk."

My father's face jolted up in surprise. "You've done it?"

"I have all of the information you need."

"Well?" he hollered, standing from his seat as he beckoned me closer. "Tell me, boy. Quickly!"

I stood and approached his desk, noting the map splayed across it. I pointed down to it. "Green Ridge Pack's boundary is right here," I said, drawing a line down the map with my finger.

"Yes, we know where the boundary is," he grumbled.

"But do you know it's weakest right here?" I said, pointing to a spot on the map. "They have too much territory to guard and too few warriors, so this patch always seems to be neglected. If we cut through the tip of Silver Creek Pack, we can run through the border practically unnoticed."

"Interesting," my father said, rubbing his chin in thought. "What else?"

"The pack house, we know, is here," I said, pointing to a dot on the map. "They only have two patrols around the pack house currently because all of their efforts are focused on getting the girl back."

"How would the girl know this?" he grumbled.

"She didn't tell me that part," I winked. "I have my own sources."

"Trusted?"

"Very," I replied.

He gave a vague nod, silently urging me to continue.

"But Aria did tell me that their bunker is located here, on the south side of the pack house; the entrance is just inside the back door."

"Very good," he murmured quietly. "The alpha's suite?"

"The third floor."

"And their battalions?"

"She said they have three battalions that rotate a patrol schedule."

"Only three?" he chuckled darkly. "Good, good."

"Oh, and father, my sources have reported that Green Ridge is finally preparing to strike. He says to expect them by the week's end."

He nodded, his eyes trained on the map. "How did you get all of this information from her?"

I offered a sly grin. "I have many skills, father. It wasn't hard to get her to trust me after I made certain

promises."

"And what promises are those?"

I shrugged. "We were right, she was that alpha boy's lover, but not his mate. I said that I would make her my Luna when we took over Green Ridge."

My father barked out a laugh. "Luna? Ha! She aims high, doesn't she?"

A dark grin spread on my face. "Well, when you're as good as I am at pleasing a woman, they'll do just about anything to—"

"That's quite enough," my father said with a wave of his hand. "I trust that you're quite virile, but make sure you don't end up getting that wench pregnant."

"Of course, Father. I wouldn't dream of it."

He sat in his chair and stared at the map again. "When all of this is over, I will expect you to put in more effort in finding your mate. A proper one, not like the useless one Ginger had."

I shrugged. "I will make sure my Luna is worthy of our pack; have no fear."

He nodded dismissively, and I turned to the door. "Oh, Xaden."

I turned back to face him. "Yes?"

"Prepare your battalions. I want us all ready for them," he said with a dark grin.

"Yes, Alpha," I said with a bow before leaving the room.

"How did he take it?" Emma asked anxiously when I returned to the apartment.

"He believed me. He told me to prepare our battalions."

Leo grinned. "I think this is going to work."

"Don't get your hopes up yet," I replied. "He could always figure out it's a trap and then kill all of us."

Ashton shook his head. "I don't think so. We've been watching him, and he truly thinks you have Aria wrapped around your finger."

I turned to Emma. "He isn't wrong in thinking that."

Emma turned a deep shade of red and punched my arm. "I can always change my mind and leave you!"

I laughed and wrapped my arm around her shoulder before placing a kiss on her temple. "You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?" she shot back with a smirk.

"When do we need to prep the battalions?"

"We'll head out in an hour when they're all out there for training," I replied. "We will need to have a separate meeting with our men."

"Of course," Leo nodded. "I will relay the cover info to the captains and then give our own men a brief on the real situation."

"Perfect."

"And Green Ridge?" Emma asked nervously.

"Green Ridge will have all of their people already in the bunker. They will have five of the fifteen battalions stay behind and guard the pack house as a precaution. Your father is keeping Kyle behind as well."

"Smart," she muttered with a nod. "So they'll attack Saturday?"

"Yes. Saturday at dawn."

"Perfect."

I turned to Leo and Ashton, giving them a nod as a silent order to leave. They each understood and left us alone in the suite. I scooted closer to Emma.

"What are we going to do about your family?"

"What are we going to do about your family?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, her brow furrowing.

"They're expecting you to return with them to Green Ridge when this is all over."

She took a deep breath and placed her hand in mine. "Don't worry about that. I'll talk with them. They understand that there was always a chance my mate would be in a different pack."

"Are you ready to be a Luna?"

She looked up at me with wide eyes. "No," she said with a nervous laugh, "I'm a little worried your people won't want to accept me. There's quite a bit of bad blood."

"Well," I grinned, "they know there was always a chance my mate would be from a different pack."

She scoffed. "Touche." Her smile faded, and she looked down at our hands that were still entwined in my lap. "I'm worried that everyone I love will be hurt come Saturday. I can't... I can't lose any of them, even you."

Her words were like a boulder on my chest. She had such a big heart and cared so deeply for the people she loved. And I was now included in that group.

"There's always a chance of losing the ones you love. War, disease, betrayal, old age—there are so many things that can take them from us. It's never easy and it's always too soon. Don't close yourself off because you fear losing them. With how fiercely you love, no one can ever question that you care. And they will live their lives and then one day die knowing they were loved by you."

I looked down at her, her eyes filled with tears, and kissed her lips gently. "I'm not sure what will happen," I whispered against her lips. "But I will never again regret stealing you away."