

Who Did This?

I woke to the sound of low growls inside my cell. My eyes shot open and I inhaled sharply as I saw the man from the woods standing above me.

I tried to move away but couldn't even manage to sit up without crying out in pain. I looked up at him through my one good eye, the other swollen shut.

I could see the anger practically surging from him. I gripped the threadbare blankets on the cot tightly as he moved closer.

"Who did this to you?" he growled, his voice just as low and dark as I remembered. "I did not leave you like this. Who did this?"

I could feel the tears welling in my eyes as his scent surrounded me. Cedarwood filled my senses and I tried to fight the desire that burned inside me as he slowly knelt down on the floor beside my cot.

I flinched as he lifted his hand toward me. "I won't hurt you," he whispered. He leaned closer, his fingers brushing away the hair that had stuck to the blood on my face. "Tell me."

I took a pained, shaky breath as I looked up at him. "The alpha... and Eli..." I whispered, my voice hoarse.

His dark facade broke and for a moment I thought I saw him flinch at my words, but as soon as it happened, it was gone and his scowl returned. I coughed and he shot up from the floor and out of the cell.

I watched with worry, waiting for him to bring someone else in to hurt me. I was surprised when he came back in a moment later with a cup filled with water.

"Drink," he said softly, his deep voice gravelly. He lifted it to my lips and tipped the liquid into my mouth, then he set the glass down and looked into my face. "Now, tell me everything."

"Why?"

"Because I can help."

I scoffed. "What can you possibly do against an alpha?"

The corner of his mouth curved up in a smirk. "You'd be surprised."

I shook my head at him. "Leave me alone."

"I can help you. I'll get you out of here and—"

I turned away as a tear fell down my cheek. "You brought me here. You left me to be tortured and starved. I don't want your help. You are no mate of mine."

I felt the bed shift as he stood and walked across the cell. I turned, expecting to find him gone once again. I was surprised once again when I found him pacing the room.

"I didn't know he was torturing you. I didn't know he was hurting you." I could see his whole body shaking as he tried to keep his fury in check as he paced. "I should have known better! I didn't think. I didn't think when I brought you here. If I'd thought for one minute he was beating you, I would have—"

"Would have what?" I shot back at him. "Challenged your alpha? Please, spare me your grand words. Words do nothing for me here. You do nothing for me here."

He spun to face me. "I am your mate."

I scoffed at him. "You are no mate. You are meant to care for me and protect me—not leave me to be broken. Get out. I don't want you here. I'll figure it out on my own."

He bounded toward me in two large steps and towered above me, his face dark. He leaned down and scooped me up into his arms. I let out an involuntary groan of distress at being moved, my crushed ribs crying in pain as he lifted me.

I lay limp in his arms as he carried me, and I found myself leaning into him, my head resting on his chest as he walked up the stairs. "Where are you taking me?"

"Be quiet," he snapped as he rushed down a corridor and up a set of stairs.

I lost track of where I was, all of my skills useless now that my body was so severely injured. I winced as a door was flung open and the sunlight shone brightly throughout the room.

He set me down gently on a large bed, the dark blood-red satin sheets cold against my skin. He left the room and returned quickly with a cloth and a large bowl of water. My eyes widened in horror as he began slowly peeling my clothes that had been torn to ribbons from my skin.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm doing as you wanted. I'm caring for you," he said quietly as he pulled the fabric from my wounds.

I hit down on a cry and gripped the sheets tightly. "Sorry," he winced as he peeled another strip from my body.

I shook my head, unable to find words through the pain. I gasped as he placed a warm rag against my back, the stinging agony surging through my body.

"Tell me exactly what happened," he said darkly.

I closed my eyes tightly as I tried to clear my head through the torturous ache. "He came every morning. He would ask me the same questions. He tried to get information from me about my pack. Information I... can't give..." I said cautiously. "When I didn't answer, he would let Eli..."

His hands stilled on my back and I turned my head to find him sitting beside me, his eyes dark and jaw clenched. "And what did Eli do?"

"Take a look at me," I whispered. "What didn't he do?"

I could hear him inhale sharply and could tell he was well past angry as he slowly bandaged my back in silence. He helped me sit up and pressed his palm gently to my cheek as he surveyed the bruises on my face and neck. I couldn't help it as I leaned into him slightly. He dropped his hand and stood from the bed.

"Lie down and get some rest. You will be safe here."

My eyes shifted around the room. "How can you be sure?" I asked quietly. "The alpha... what if he—"

"I'll take care of it, I promise. My father is just a—"

"Your... your father?"

I could see the fear building in her eyes as she assessed me. My father had beaten and tortured her, and I'd let him. I'd handed her over to him like a good son.

"I will protect you," he said. "Sleep." He gripped my shoulders and slowly laid me back down. "I will be just outside."

I closed my eyes, my body giving in to the rest it so desperately desired. I didn't know my mate, I didn't know his name or what he had planned. But for some reason I couldn't explain, in this moment I trusted

him.

I stood in the doorway and watched her sleep. "What have I done?" I muttered as I ran a hand through my hair.

"Xaden?" I heard Leo call out from the suite entry.

Ashton and Leo strolled down the hall toward me. "What's going on? Why did you call us?" Ashton asked, his eyes widening as he looked past me to see the girl sleeping in my bed.

"Did you call us here to brag about your conquests?" Leo chuckled as he slapped a hand on my shoulder.

"I called you here because I need to go speak with my father, and I need you to watch my mate."

Leo's gaze flitted to the girl lying in the bed. His eyes narrowed as he took in the scene before him: the bloody rags and shreds of clothes on the floor, the dried blood stuck to my hands, and the unadulterated hate in my eyes. "Did he... did he do that to her?"

"Yes," I growled, the fury rolling off me in waves.

Leo gripped my shoulder hard. "No. You can't go like this. You're too—"

"Too what?" I snapped. "Too involved? Too angry? Too stupid to think he wouldn't commit a damn war crime?"

Ashton stepped forward. "I'll stay. Leo, go with him so he doesn't do something stupid."

"I know how to behave," I growled. "I don't need a babysitter."

"Like hell you don't," Leo hollered. "You weren't thinking when you put her in that cell, and you sure as hell weren't thinking when you broke her out."

"He was torturing her!"

"We get that," Ashton replied. "But we could have come up with a plan. There's no way your father will allow you to keep her without asking too many questions."

"I'll handle it," I replied darkly.

Ashton and Leo both sighed, clearly uneasy with the whole situation. We were walking a very fine line.

"If you're coming, let's go," I said before walking toward the door.

We walked to my father's office in silence, both of us now playing the parts we were taught to play.

"Alpha," I said, bowing my head as I walked in through the door.

"Xaden, Leo, what do you need?" he asked without looking up from the papers on his desk.

"The girl."

My father's gaze shuttered before meeting mine. "What about her?" he ground out.

"I want her."

"Excuse me?" he grumbled, his eyes darkening.

"Obviously, whatever methods you're using are not working," I said, keeping my voice even as I dropped casually into the chair in front of his desk.

"Are you challenging me, boy?" he growled.

"Not at all, Alpha," I replied. "I am simply stating a fact. Now, I think it's time for a different approach. She may be a warrior, but she is a woman first. Let me use that against her. The girl obviously can't be broken, so I will gain her trust. Let me take her and act the hero. I'll feed her, pamper her, bed her, and use whatever other means I can to make her think I am trustworthy."

I sat deathly still as my father looked me up and down. I knew he was trying to come up with a good reason for the state she was in. He leaned back in his chair, his hands steepled beneath his chin.

"Fine. Give it a try. I'll warn you though, one of the guards roughed her up a bit." He waved a hand casually, "Don't worry, the guard has been dealt with. We do not approve of such measures in Crescent Moon."

Like hell you don't, my wolf muttered angrily.

I stood from my seat. "That works perfectly to my advantage. I'll go swoop in and save her from her misery."

My father gave a dark chuckle. "Good, good," he laughed as he dismissed us. Just as we reached the door, he spoke again.

"The girl, Aria. Her pack sent another missive insisting we send her back or they will show no mercy."

Aria... her name was Aria. I took a deep breath and reined in my emotions before I turned to face him, "They plan to attack us over one girl?"

"I have a feeling she means more to that alpha brat than they are letting on," my father said, tossing the note on the desk. "Seems we might have a future luna in our midst."

The grin I gave was dark and feral. "Well then they'll be lucky if she isn't sent back in pieces after what they did to our warriors."

My father chuckled in response. "My thoughts exactly. Hurry up with her. I don't want them attacking until my plans are complete."

I bowed my head and walked out the door.

"Well, that went surprisingly well," Leo muttered as we walked back toward my suite.

"It was almost too easy," I grumbled. I stopped at the door, my hand resting on the handle as I turned to Leo. "I think he's desperate to get that information from her."

"You think he's moving up his timeline?" Leo frowned.

"Possibly," I nodded before walking into the suite.

"That was quick!" Ashton called out from the couch. He set down the book he'd been thumbing through and stood from his seat. "Well?"

"He gave the okay. I am to gain her trust by whatever means so I might get the information he wants from her."

Ashton rolled his eyes. "What a jerk."

My ears perked up as I turned to find the girl standing in the doorway. Her hand shot up to her mouth, as if hoping to take back the gasp that had escaped her lips. She slammed the door shut and ran back to the bed.

"Crap..." I muttered, swiping my hand down my face in exhaustion.

I heard Leo whistle behind me, and my two friends retreated silently out of the suite, leaving me to deal with Aria.

My wolf purred at the sound of her name as I walked slowly to the bedroom.

I tapped on the door slowly and turned the knob, muttering to myself when it didn't open. "Aria?"

"Leave me alone."

I let out a frustrated huff. This was not how I'd planned my day to go. "Aria, open the door."

"No."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "I wish to speak to you. Open the door, Aria."

"Go away!"

"If you do not open this door, I will break it down. Now!" I hollered, jiggling the handle again.

"And how exactly would breaking the door down earn my trust, you backstabbing bastard?!" she yelled from the other side.

"You were not meant to hear that," I grumbled.

"Obviously."

"No... that, that came out wrong. You have it all wrong."

"I can't possibly see how that could have been misinterpreted," she spat.

"This is ridiculous! Open the door!"

"Screw you!"

"I'm giving you one more chance!" I roared.

"Which is more chances than I'm giving you!" she bellowed. "I reject—"

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An involuntary growl escaped my lips as my anger exploded. I threw my shoulder into the door—and it splintered open in an instant. I stormed into the bedroom and paused at the sight of the empty bed. Just as I turned to the side, I was thrown to the floor as something hard was slammed into my skull—and stars danced through my vision.

