

Don't You Dare

Thankfully, I woke to find all of my injuries a not-so-distant memory. My body was no longer sore, and I could actually see out of both eyes now.

I had spent days in bed, mourning the loss of my freedom and trying to figure out how to get away from here. So far, I'd come up empty.

I walked out of the bedroom and onto the balcony just outside the living room. I closed my eyes as the early morning sun shone down on my face, warming my skin. I took a deep breath of fresh air and looked at the forest to the east. To my people.

Someday, somehow, I would escape this place.

"You're looking better."

I twisted around to find Xaden standing behind me. In the sun, his deep green eyes had flecks of gold in them when the light caught them.

"It's amazing what a few days of being fed real meals and not being beaten will do for a person."

I could see his jaw clench at my words. "I apologize again for the way you were treated. If I had known —"

"But you should have known," I interrupted. "You know who your father is. You should have known what he would do to me."

"I only ever had suspicions. And I'd never actually witnessed him torturing a prisoner before. I had thought prisoners were off limits. And in other cases, there was no way to tie him to it. I thought down in those cells was the safest place for you. If he had connected you to me..." He shook his head angrily.

"What?" I pushed.

"It... it wouldn't have been good."

I turned back to the view outside and took a deep breath. "I don't want to be here."

I heard him move closer to me and could feel the heat coming off him as he stood inches from my body. "I will keep you safe."

I spun back around and faced him, a scowl set on my face. "I don't want to be your prisoner, locked up in this room forever because you can't decide if you want to reject me or keep me."

"It's not that simple," he said, his voice low and gravelly.

"It is that simple. And if you can't bring yourself to do it, I will."

A growl escaped his lips as he moved forward. His hand gripped the nape of my neck, his fingers tangling slightly in my hair as he pulled my face closer to his. He searched my face for a moment before his eyes dropped to my lips and he moved closer, his mouth a breath away from mine. "Don't you dare try it," he said darkly.

I was frozen in place, stuck between wanting him to close the distance and kiss me or slap him across the face and reject him out of spite.

He pulled back slightly so that his eyes met mine again. "Do you understand me, Aria?"

I could feel my wolf purr in response to the sound of her name on his lips. A shudder ran through me, and I hated the smug smirk that slowly spread across his face.

I scowled up at him. "Yes, Alpha."

The smile immediately left him, and he took a step back. I tried to ignore how cold the air felt around me without his presence.

"I will see you later tonight."

"Don't bother," I shot back, staring out at the forest again as he retreated out of the suite.

I returned to the bedroom and dropped to the bed, pulling the covers up to my chin as I tried to once again fight the helplessness that seemed to overwhelm me. I'd never not known what to do. I'd always had a plan.

Now I was barely able to find my will to fight.

Hours later, there was a soft tap on the door. I ignored it and closed my eyes tightly, praying whoever it was would go away.

The door creaked open, and I heard someone begin speaking softly.

"I have lunch for you."

When I ignored him, the man sighed and set the tray down. "I'll leave it here and come back for it in a little while."

I didn't sit up until the door closed, and I heard his footsteps leave the suite.

I spent the rest of the day lying in bed in a cycle of sleeping and crying. At some point, the tears dried up and I decided I would begin finding a way to escape in the morning.

It had been a week since I had brought Aria up to my suite.

I sat back in my chair and closed my eyes, relishing the quiet of my office.

"I don't know what to do with her," I thought to myself.

Mate her, obviously, my wolf shot back.

"You know why I can't do that. Besides, she's spent the entire last week going between ignoring I exist and being furious with me. I'm getting whiplash..." I muttered.

What did you expect?

"I don't know..." I grumbled as I pinched the bridge of my nose.

Let's go check on her, Kai yipped excitedly.

"I'd rather not be verbally abused by her today. I already got chewed out by Dad for not getting any info from her yet..." I said out loud as I ran a hand through my hair.

What if the guards aren't doing their jobs? Kai whined.

"They're doing fine. Leo and Ashton have been posted outside all day."

I sat in silence for a moment as Kai pouted in the corners of my mind. Anxiety began to creep in at the thought of something happening to her when I wasn't there.

"Maybe just a quick check-in..." I mumbled as I stood from my seat and walked out of the office.

"Xaden!"

I gave a stiff smile as I approached Leo in the hallway.

"All good?"

"I guess."

"You guess?" I frowned.

"She hasn't left the bedroom in a week. You sure she's alive?"

"She's still in bed?"

"She was when I last checked on her."

I scowled at the door to the suite. "I'll handle it."

"Gently..." he warned as I stepped through the door into the suite.

As I walked into the room, I was relieved to find she wasn't in bed.

She also wasn't anywhere else.

I scanned the room, and panic began to fill me as I thought of everything that might go wrong if she had been taken or had escaped.

Just as I was about to rush out of the room, I heard the water splashing in the shower. I breathed a sigh of relief and took a seat on the bed.

Moments later, she stepped out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her slim body. She walked into the closet and was gone for a few minutes before emerging fully dressed in the few things I'd managed to find for her.

"Feel better?"

She jumped with a scream before turning to face me with a frown. "You scared me. What do you want?"

"You haven't left the bed in days. I came in to check on you."

"Because you care, right?"

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"Exactly."

She barked a laugh. "Don't lie. You just came to make sure your intelligence asset stays alive long enough to give you what you want."

"I've already told you I didn't bring you here to interrogate you."

"No, you brought me here to manipulate me into giving your alpha what he wants through food and sex."

"You're wrong."

"I know what I heard."

"You heard the backend of a conversation!" I hollered, exasperated with her ability to argue a point. "My father only thinks I am doing those things. I will not do anything you don't want me to do."

"Well, I don't want you in my presence," she shot back. "So run along back to your demon-spawned alpha and leave me the hell alone."

I could feel my anger rising. She couldn't just make this easy for the both of us. She pushed my buttons like she enjoyed it. She probably did.

She flopped down on the bed and began reading a book. I watched her for a moment, ignoring the pull that drew me to her like a moth to a flame.

"Aria."

She ignored me as per usual.

"Aria," I repeated. When she ignored me again, I pushed across the bed and gripped her chin in my hand, forcing her to look up at me. "I promise you will be safe and cared for here."

She jerked her chin from my grasp and looked back down at her book. "So you said, Alpha."

There it was again. She had to know how much I hated it when she called me Alpha. She had to know what she was doing. What I wouldn't give to hear my name just once come from those plush pink lips.

"What do you want me to do to prove that?"

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"Let me go home!"

"I can't do that and you know it!"

"Then let me leave the stupid suite!"

She looked up at me with pleading eyes, and I almost gave in right then. "It... it's not safe outside of the suite without me."

She shook her head and stared back down at her book. "Fine."

"Fine? That's it?"

She looked back up at me with a scowl, and I knew that wasn't it. "Yes, that's it."

I stared at her for a moment. If I knew anything at all, it was that this was not it. "I don't think—"

"I see that although I am 'safe' with you, it really means I am only safe in this one room," she said, her words bursting out of her like a dam had broken. "I am not free in any sense of the word. My cell just now has down comforters instead of silver bars. I am your prisoner, plain and simple, and I will never see my home or my family again in my lifetime because you warmongering fools can't get your heads out of your asses long enough to realize you don't actually have a right to other people's lands. But you keep trying anyway, and so now I'm trapped here with a man that won't hurt me physically but has injured me emotionally more than any one person could."

I stared at her in bewilderment as she returned silently to her book, unable to process what I'd just heard. It was more than I'd ever heard a person speak in one breath.

I stood from the bed. "I am sorry you feel that way."

"I wasn't lying when I said I hated you, alpha."

I stomped from the room. "I was right. We shouldn't have checked on her."

My wolf grumbled in agreement.

"Xaden!"

I turned to find Ashton rushing toward me.

"What is it?"

"They're attacking at the border. They're pushing through to get to her."

I cursed as I ran out the door, Ashton on my heels as I shifted and ran to the border.

"Is it our battalion?"

"No, it's the fifth."

"Crap..." I muttered and pushed Kai to run faster.

When we arrived, the fight was already over. Our warriors were cheering for their victory, and I walked up to find one of the commanders standing at the border proudly.

"Xaden!" he hollered with a smug grin. "You missed the action."

"What happened?" I growled.

"The Green Ridge mutts came at the border, but we pushed them off easily."

"Any casualties?" I asked, my eyes searching the area.

"None on our end," he grinned. "We took down two of theirs."

I frowned. This would not help things with Aria. "Good work, men. Return to your posts. I will report this to the alpha."

"I will join you. It was my victory after all that—"

"You will return with your men," I shot back. "I will relay everything to the alpha."

"You dare to take my win?!" he growled, stepping toward me with menace.

I stood tall and firm. "Your men have a victory, commander. Now, are you challenging me?"

He scowled, waiting in silence for a moment before shaking his head.

"I didn't think so," I replied. "Get back to your posts."

"I didn't think so," I replied. "Get back to your posts."

As they all left, Ashton stood beside me near the border. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know. They gave up too easily. I'm not sure what the plan was here."

"She's not going to be happy."

"We aren't going to tell her."

As I walked back into the suite that evening, I was surprised to hear voices in the back room. I could feel my heart stop when I recognized who was speaking. I took a deep breath and braced myself for what I was going to see.

I pushed through the door to find my father standing in the middle of the room with his hand around Aria's neck.

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