

Mate Madness

****Taya Quinn POV****

We were halfway back to the Keep when I caught it....that damn scent. Smoke and cardamom. I skidded to a stop mid stride, my paws digging into the mossy earth as the scent wrapped around me like a warm damn blanket.

Zuki's voice echoed in my head like a feral squeal. "Mate. It's him. Rylen's close."

My heart stuttered. I turned and sniffed again. Yep. Definitely wood smoke, and cardamom. With just a hint of leather and something I could only describe as Alpha swagger with a side of danger.

I said softly, "Calm down, it could just be a bonfire.."

Zuki screeched, "With HIS BONES NEXT TO IT. Let's go!"

I howled once to Elowen... short and sharp , and veered off the path, crashing through the underbrush like a heat seeking wolf missile. A few moments later, I burst into a clearing bathed in soft orange firelight.

And there they were. Rylen Verric, all six foot five of muscled, tatted beta energy leaning back against a log with a half empty bottle of dark liquor in one hand, his eyes glowing in the firelight.

Beside him sat Jace Ironpaw, the gamma's son, smirking like he knew

secrets he shouldn't. A guitar rested next to his leg, his fingers tapping against the strings like he was half drunk and half inspired.

Elowen caught up just behind me, shifting as she stepped into the light, both of us scrambling to pull on the clothes she'd stashed earlier under a tree root. Basic leggings and oversized shirts, we looked feral chic, but whatever.

Rylen turned as we stepped into view, and gods... the way his gaze landed on me? Like I was the fire.

"Taya," he said, his voice rough and warm, like he'd been waiting to say my name all night. Zuki damn near purred. "He knows. His wolf knows. Sit on his lap. Lick his jaw. Climb him like a damn tree..."

I snorted, "Zuki, holy shit."

Jace raised an eyebrow. "Y'all look like you ran through hell."

Elowen smirked. "Emotionally? We did."

We sat down beside the fire, accepting the bottle Jace passed over like it was holy medicine. Whatever it was burned going down, but gods, it hit just right. Warmth bloomed in my chest. The tension bled out of my shoulders.

Rylen didn't say much, but he moved just a little closer every time I looked away. And Zuki? Zuki was vibrating.

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She purred, "Touch him. Elbow graze. Accidental knee bump. FALL INTO HIS LAP."

My cheeks were literally burning. "You're embarrassing me."

She snapped in frustration, "Do it or I will."

I finally let my knee brush his. The jolt that shot through my body was instant. Like lightning wrapped in velvet.

He stiffened just slightly... then leaned into it. His scent flared, Beta strength and home and gods, him... and I knew Anton, his wolf, had just shoved his way to the front too.

Rylen didn't speak, just handed me the bottle and watched me like I was the only thing he saw. We drank, and danced as Jace played the guitar, letting ourselves go and it felt amazing.

I definitely had too much to drink. Elowen was chugging from the bottle like it was a lifeline. By the time we stood to leave, I was giggly, flushed, and lightheaded in the best way. Elowen was worse, tripping over roots, mumbling about cupcakes and sword dancing.

"Okay, okay," Jace laughed. "Time to get the moon witches back home, before Daxon has our asses."

Rylen stood next to me and offered his arm. My eyes glowed as I looked up at him. I'm 5'3, he is 6'5, no clue how this will work, but damned if I'll figure it out. I vibrated with happiness as the lightning coursed through my

body again at his touch.

Zuki just purred like a kitten. I was in deep shit. We stumbled through the trees, Elowen leaning into me like a drunk little sprite, until we reached the edge of the Keep grounds. And there they were. Daxon and Ash. Waiting.

Both of them looked her over at once, the smudged makeup, the tangled hair, the red cheeks, and stepped forward without a word. Daxon scooped her up bridal style like it was nothing. Ash trailed close behind, murmuring something about hydration and a hot bath, his jaw tight but his eyes warm.

Elowen slurred, "I'm fiiiine. I can walk. I have legs."

"You have them," Ash said dryly, "but they're currently decorative."

Daxon looked at me, his mouth twitching with a grin. "Thanks for watching her."

"Anytime," I said, holding in a burp. "She didn't bite anyone, so I call that a win."

Rylen's hand brushed mine as he stepped past, and I swear something deep in my bones whispered, soon.

Zuki was already planning the wedding.

****Rylen POV****

Night. Somewhere between the Stormclaw firepit and fucking emotional

chaos after we left Elowen with Daxon and Ashrian.

I'm losing my damn mind. I mean that literally. I've taken hits to the skull that made more sense than this. Taya's laugh echoed behind me as we left the fire, and Anton was pacing inside my chest like a rabid beast in heat.

He growles, "Mate. Ours. Touch her. Smell her. Bite her."

I snapped back, "She's not eighteen yet, dumbass."

He growled in frustration, "She will be in three days. We can wait three days. But we can kiss now. We can taste."

Fuck. I rubbed a hand over my jaw, trying to breathe through the burn under my skin. I've never reacted to someone like this. Not in all my years in this pack. Not ever.

Fated mates? They were damn near a myth. The last one in our territory was over a hundred years ago, our Alpha King Draven and his Luna Queen Aelira. Everyone else? We got "compatible bonds" or "spiritual ties." Close enoughs. Safe choices. Chosen mates.

But this? This feels like my soul got branded and she's the only one who can read the mark. When her fingers brushed mine back at the fire, I felt it in my fucking spine.

And now, as we slipped into the woods, giggling and warm with firelight and liquor, I couldn't stop watching the sway of her hips or the way Zuki's

presence brushed against mine like a challenge.

She glanced over her shoulder. Her red hair was wild, her cheeks were pink from the run and her eyes were glowing like she knew what I was thinking.

"Wanna sit for a sec?" she asked, her voice soft but sure.

"Sure," I said, somehow hoarse and confident at the same time. We settled against a mossy boulder in a small clearing, just far enough from the Keep that I could pretend I didn't have responsibilities or rules for a few minutes.

And then she shivered. I didn't even think...my jacket was off and wrapped around her shoulders before she finished blinking. She looked up at me from beneath thick lashes and my entire nervous system lit up like someone struck a match inside my chest.

Her hand brushes mine. And I snapped.

One hand slid into her hair, and I pressed my mouth to hers like I was dying and she was the cure. She gasped against me, her full lips parting, and fuck me, she tasted like danger and heaven. I groaned into her mouth and pulled her closer, her body melting against mine like she was made to fit there.

My other hand found her hip, anchoring her to me as I kissed her deeper. Tongue, teeth, and fiery need. She moaned into my mouth and my knees

nearly buckled.

Anton growled, "Mark her. Bite her. Now. RIGHT NOW."

I replies gently. "We must wait."

I nipped her bottom lip, dragging it gently before pulling back just enough to see her flushed face.

"You're gonna kill me," I whispered.

She smirkes, breathless. "Not before I ruin you first."

My growl was not voluntary.

She grabbed my shirt and pulled me back in, climbing into my lap like it was her goddamn throne. My hands found her thighs, then her waist, sliding under the oversized shirt she borrowed from Elowen.

Her skin was so soft, so warm and addicting. She grinded against me once, teasing and testing.

I buried my face in her neck and groaned like a dying man. "Taya...fuck, I.. . I want you."

"I know," she whispered. "Me too."

I kissed her again, slower this time and deeper. I worshipped her mouth like it held all the answers. I didn't let it go farther. I couldn't...not yet. But gods... when her birthday came?

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I wasn't just going to claim her.

I'm going to fucking devour her.



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