

Bonding Time

Taya Quinn POV

Later that night, just after the campfire and the forest lip lock of death.

I didn't want to go back to my house alone. Too many voices. Too much space. Too many damn eyes watching me like I was about to ascend into matehood and grow fucking wings.

So I turned to Rylen as we stepped through the inner gates of Stormclaw Keep, and blurted out the one thing Zuki was chanting in my head like a horny witch.

"Can I stay with you tonight?"

He froze mid step. Not in a what the fuck way. More like....trying not to pounce on me like a beast with no self control kind of freeze. His green eyes met mine, burning low under the torchlight.

"Yeah," he said, his voice rough and certain. "Of course you can."

No hesitation. No weirdness. Just yes. I exhaled like I'd been holding that breath for a year. Jace peeled off toward the east wing, mumbling something about needing earplugs and sage. Rylen took my hand. Big. Warm. Steady. The exact opposite of how I felt.

The Keep was quieter now, the halls humming with soft torchlight and distant whispers. He led me up a short flight of stairs, down a narrow

hallway, and through a thick wooden door carved with the Stormclaw crest. He had to hold me up, because ya, I was toasted.

His room smelled like pine, leather, and him, that cardomom scent. I sucked in a deep breath.

Gods help me. I stood awkwardly by the bed, unsure what to do with my hands or my heart or my desperate, spiraling desire to climb him like a tree again.

He tossed his jacket on a chair and ran a hand through his hair, clearly fighting the same losing battle.

"You sure you're okay?" he asked, his voice gentler now. "After everything?"

I nodded. "No. I mean yes. I mean..." I laughed, because it was either that or cry again. "I just didn't want to be alone."

"You're not," he said, crossing the room in two strides and wrapping his arms around me. His body was massive, heat and muscle and safety. I buried my face in his chest like a coward and let the moment stretch.

Then I tilted my head back, and he was right there. Those damn eyes. That soft, knowing smile that could break me.

I rose onto my toes and kissed him again. Slower this time. More ache than heat. He was so tall he had to bend down, but he just scooped me up and held me close to him.

He responded like I was made of glass. His hands found my waist, then slid under the hem of my shirt, his fingers teasing the skin just above my hips.

I moaned against his mouth, and he growled softly, not out of anger, but possession. His mouth trailed to my neck, his teeth grazing, those lips feather light, while Anton roared inside his chest like a storm.

Zuki whimpered. "Now. Claim. Closer."

My hands explored the ridges of his back, my fingers splayed, memorizing him like he was something sacred. Because fuck me, he was. We stumbled backward, falling into the bed in a tangle of limbs and heat and unfinished want.

He kissed me until I forgot my name. I kissed him like I'd never get the chance again. And then... We just breathed. Chest to chest. His arm around me, one leg tangled with mine, my hand fisted in his shirt.

"You're safe here," he murmured into my hair.

And maybe it was the liquor. Or maybe it was him.

But for the first time in weeks...I believed it. Sleep took me before I could say it back. But Zuki said it for me.

"Ours."

Daxon POV

Bonding Time:



Back in our chambers. Later that night.

She was drunk. Not tipsy. Not cute and giggly. Fucking obliterated. Elowen swayed in the hallway like she was on a ship mid storm, mumbling about wolves and cupcakes and something about "species, mating and liquor"

Ashrian stood beside her like a fucking statue, calm and smug, holding her up by the elbow while she hissed at him like a rabid possum.

"She's going to puke on you," I warned, crossing the room and taking her other side. "And I won't be cleaning it up."

"She already tried to bite me twice," Ash said smoothly. "I feel we've moved past vomiting and into feral gremlin territory."

"I heard that!" Elowen snapped, glaring between us with bloodshot blue eyes. "I'm not a gremlin. I'm a forbidden hybrid. Respect the brand."

Ash raised an eyebrow. "I respect many things. Your balance is not one of them."

She slapped his chest. Or tried to. It was more like a drunken pat.

"Stop being so smug, Dracula. I could still take you in a fight."

"You can barely take your pants off," I muttered.

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Oh, Alpha, wanna test that theory?"

Ash made a sound that might've been a laugh. Might've been a growl. I sighed and scooped her up bridal style before she could throw hands, or collapse face first into the floor. She blinked up at me like I was personally responsible for her entire life falling apart.

"I hate you," she mumbled, slurring into my chest.

"You told me I was hot five minutes ago."

"I can think both."

Fair enough. We got her into the bathroom, and Ash turned on the shower, adjusting the temp like he'd done this a thousand times. He probably had. Vampire centuries and all.

"I can shower myself," Elowen grumbled, trying to shove us both out of the room with the strength of a damp tissue. I didn't move. Neither did Ash. She turned to glare at me, stumbling again. I caught her.

"Y'all are like...like sexy prison guards," she mumbled, swaying. "Lemme live."

"Not letting you drown in the tub counts as letting you live," I said, biting back a grin.

Ash stepped closer, his voice lower now. "Let us help you, Elowen. No strings. No alpha posturing. Just... let us take care of you."

That hit her. She stopped struggling. Her big blue eyes dropped. Then

she whispered, "I'm so tired of being strong."

That? That shattered me. I helped her out of her shirt while Ash carefully untied the waistband of her leggings. She didn't protest this time. Just stepped under the water and let it wash over her, her head tilted back, those beautiful eyes closed.

She looked like some war-drenched goddess, battle-worn and fragile under the spray. We didn't leave. We stood just outside the glass, our backs turned, listening for any sign she was slipping or crying or about to throw up again.

When she stepped out, I wrapped her in a towel, and Ash dried her hair like she was made of glass. She didn't fight us anymore. We got her into one of my shirts, way too big on her, and tucked her into the center of the bed.

She was out cold in seconds. Ash looked at me, the tension finally melting off his shoulders. "I didn't think she'd make it through this week."

"She barely did," I murmured. We stood in silence for a while, just watching her breathe. Then, almost at the same time, we each sat on opposite sides of the bed, not touching her.

Just guarding her. Because tonight, that's all she needed.



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