

The Alpha King's Human Mate by HC Dolores

Chapter 21

“Family means no one gets left behind or forgotten.”

David Ogden Stiers?

As I stared into his dark eyes, I didn't doubt he was telling the truth.

If I ran, Griffin would surely come after me.

There's no getting out of this. O

Even as the frightening realization washed over me, I couldn't look away from him. He was staring at me in a way that nobody had ever looked at me

with pure devotion. As if I hung the stars or the moon in the sky with my very breath.

with

I'd seen that look plenty of times. I saw it in the mated couples at school, at pack functions, and even in the way my father and Grace looked at each other. Mated couples seemed to exist in their own orbit, and I'd be lying if I said I'd never been jealous.

It's not that the idea of a soul mate wasn't appealing, it was all the baggage that came with being chained to a wolf. D

I'd long since accepted that nobody was going to look at me with pure devotion and I was okay with that. The trade-off was an easy human life, where I'd be free to do and go as I please.

Griffin continued to look at me with hungry dark eyes.

My breath hitched.

His eyes flickered to my lips.

Is he going to kiss me?

I should've protested or turned away but I felt almost hypnotized by his gaze – all

I could see was him and all I could smell was his damned natural scent.

He leaned in.

I closed my eyes, waiting for his lips to touch mine. [2

And then suddenly he was off me, sitting on the other side of the bed.

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My eyes flew open and I stared at him. What the fuck was that? Surely, he was about to kiss me right there?

My frustration must've shown on my face because Griffin smirked. "Sorry, did you think something else was going to happen, little fox?" 4

My face went tomato red. Of course he had been messing with me. I had just tried to convince him he'd be better off with someone else, and only seconds later, I'm practically putty in his hands. O

All because of what? A look?

Pull yourself together, Clark. It's not you, it's the mate bond.

"Aw, don't look so upset, little fox," Griffin smirked, reaching over to cup my cheek. His tone was mocking. "I just wanted to see if the mate bond affected you at all since you're not a wolf. And now I have my answer."4

I wanted to tell him that I'd felt nothing, but the proof was in the pudding – he'd seen the way I'd closed my eyes, ready to kiss him. And had he actually kissed me, I don't think I would've pulled away.

Still, I hated feeling embarrassed and I was not about to let him think I was some obedient little mate just because I happened to let my guard down.

"First of all," I said, practically hissing at him, "My name is Clark. You can use it, you know. Second of all, that doesn't prove I'm affected by the mate bond – it just proves I'm attracted to you. You're hot, I'm sure you already know this. I would've been affected the same way had another hot guy been up in my face." (14)

I was so caught up in making my point that I didn't see the playful smirk fade from Griffin's face or the dark expression that replaced it.

When I did finally stop talking and I caught sight of Griffin's threatening expression, I shakily swallowed.

Alright, he's pissed – what did I say now?

Surely he's not mad that I called him hot? That was a compliment if anything! D

"And have you, little fox?" Griffin hummed, leaning closer to me.

"Have I what?"

"Have you let other men kiss you?"

Oh, great of course my possessive Alpha mate wants a breakdown of my sexual history.

I'm an idiot. Why the hell did I ever think it was a good idea to mention other men around him?

My face drained of color and I racked my brain, trying to think of a response that wouldn't piss him off. Although I'd known Griffin less than a day, one thing was abundantly clear: he was possessive. Probably more possessive than any other wolf I'd met if his speech earlier was any indication.

Most wolves were possessive by nature anyway. In the Blacktooth pack, it wasn't against the rules to have sex with people you weren't mated to, but it was heavily frowned upon. I could still remember being thirteen, sitting in the back of the werewolf version of sex ed as the teacher explained it to us.

In addition to awkwardly explaining how sex worked, she'd also told us that we should save our first times for our mates. She'd said that innocence was a virtue and the "purer" we kept ourselves, the happier our mates would be. Even at thirteen, it had felt like a lot of BS to me – but I hadn't argued. It's not like I ever thought it would apply to me.

And yet here I am.

So how do I get out of this one?

"Well, uh," I finally said, avoiding his dark gaze, "Does it really matter? That's all in the past the future will be different."

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Yeah, the future is going to be me getting the hell out of dodge and hopefully away from you.

"Of course it matters," he growled, "If you let others touch you, I want names."

"Okay, wait!" I said, "Let's not forget – I had no idea about this mate thing, so you can't exactly hold any of this against me. You don't see me asking for all the dirty details of

your sexual history and I highly doubt you were some innocent. virgin all these years.”
[5]

Griffin narrowed his eyes. “Don’t try to change the subject. Tell me – I want to know who there was before me.”

It was pretty clear that Griffin wasn’t going to let this go regardless of how much I tried to reason. I guess I could’ve lied and said I’d never dated anyone but something told me he would’ve seen right through me.

“Alright, fine,” I sighed, “I’ll tell you but you can’t get mad about it, okay?”

“Yeah, we’ll see,” he scoffed. (2

“I’ve only ever had one boyfriend and the whole thing was pretty short-lived,” I said, and another blush came over my face, “Lasted a few months I was sixteen.”

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Griffin’s expression darkened even more. He stood up and approached where I was sitting on the bed, leaning over me again. His face was so close I could smell his minty breath and his eyes were locked onto mine.

Well, this feels familiar.

“Did he touch you?”

I swallowed.

“Not sex,” I said quietly, trying to keep my voice from shaking. I wanted to think clearly but with Griffin so close, it felt impossible. His entire presence was overwhelming.

“How far did you go with this boy?”

“Just making out, that’s it,” I said. I couldn’t bear the intense eye contact anymore

so I looked away

until I met his eyes.

only for Griffin to gently grab my chin and tilt my head back up

“And his name?” His voice was low.

Can he hear how fast my heart is beating right now?

“Aiden,” I said.

Griffin smirked, his large hand caressing my cheek and leaving tingles everywhere he touched. “Good girl, that’s all I needed to know.”

He stepped away from me and I breathed out a sigh of relief. With him out of my orbit, it felt like I could finally breathe and think.

Stupid, stupid mate bond. C

I had told him the truth too. Aiden had been my only boyfriend. I’d known him as a kid, back when I still lived with my mom. I had definitely had a crush on him, but when I moved in with my dad, we lost touch. (a

A couple of years later, he popped up on my Instagram and we reconnected. He had only grown cuter, and it didn’t take very long for our relationship to turn romantic. He lived two hours away, so seeing him was a bit of a challenge. I never told my family about him, and on Friday nights, I’d sneak out to see a “movie” in town – but really, I was making the trek to see Aiden so we could make out in his

car and stargaze.

I had liked him a lot, but after a few months, things got too complicated and I had to break things off. Aiden started asking questions about why he couldn’t visit my home or meet my family or why I couldn’t introduce him to my friends.

I couldn’t let Aiden get dragged into a world he knew nothing about.

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I wonder why Griffin wanted his name so bad surely, he’s not planning to hunt Aiden down just because he happened to date me before Griffin even knew I existed?

Nah, there’s no way. Aiden is too common of a name and it’s not like he can kill them all. O

Chapter 22

“I’ll be okay. Just not today.” (2

– Unknown

Before Griffin could grill me any more about my sexual history, there was a knock. on the door. Griffin sighed, pulling his eyes away from where he'd been staring at

"Yes?" He barked.

"Your Majesty," a muffled male voice spoke through the door, "Sebastian and Lily Bellevue are asking to see their sister. Shall I let them in?"

Sebastian and Lily!

My heart sped up, the thought of talking to my siblings felt like renewed air in my lungs. I hadn't been able to speak with either of them since the meeting. I wasn't

sure if it was the possibility of finally interacting with someone who wasn't Griffin, getting advice about this mate thing, or just seeing my siblings again that excited

Griffin stared at me with narrowed eyes.

"Seems your siblings are a little pushy about seeing you," he said. I wondered if he could see the excitement on my face. "I'm not sure how I feel about sharing you with others, especially after only just meeting you." @

2

Sharing me? I'm not a cup of coffee – I'm a human being with an entire life that didn't start when I locked eyes with him. [3

As much as I wanted to say that, I held my tongue. If I pissed Griffin off, I doubted he was going to let me see my siblings.

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"Well," I said, taking a deep breath, "We have plenty of time to get to know each other and it would make me...very happy to see my brother and sister. If nothing else, I can at least share the good news."

"Oh, you don't need to lie to me, little fox," Griffin chuckled, "I know you're not happy about our bond. not yet. But you are right. We have an entire lifetime with each other, so I suppose the least I can do is allow you a little time with your family." H

I wanted to roll my eyes at him but I managed to restrain myself.

Keep your cool, Clark.

“They can come in,” Griffin addressed the guard on the other side of the door. O

As soon as he said it, the door opened and I watched Sebastian and Lily cautiously walk in. They both looked guarded and nervous. They took a quick glance at me but mostly kept their eyes on Griffin – perhaps waiting to see what he’d do or say next.

He’s not going to stand there and supervise this whole visit, is he?

“Your Majesty,” Sebastian was the first to speak, “Thank you for allowing us to see our sister.”

Griffin smiled but there was nothing kind about it. “It’s been a long day, I understand you want to make sure she’s alright. I remember you you’re the one who stood in front of her trying to defend her from me.”

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Sebastian blanched and I felt my own heart speed up. Surely Griffin wasn’t upset. about Sebastian defending me at the meeting? It’s not like he attacked him. Seb was only trying to make sure I didn’t meet the same fate as the king.

Former king now, I suppose.

“I apologize, Your Majesty,” Sebastian said, “What happened at the meeting...it all happened so fast. I just wanted to make sure my sister didn’t get hurt. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

Griffin hummed thoughtfully. “Oh, it’s alright. I respect the way that you stood up for your sister. That kind of loyalty is admirable. Well, I won’t intrude on your little reunion.”

Griffin strided across the room, stopping until he was standing in front of me. I was still sitting on the bed, so he had to crouch down to make eye-contact with me. Once again, I met his intense gaze and it felt like we were the only two people on the earth. Everyone, even my own siblings that were standing just a few feet away, seemed to vanish when I looked into Griffin’s eyes. 2

He smiled at me but this time, I could tell it was real and soft. “I’ll leave you to catch up with your siblings, little fox,” he said, “I’ll be back in a little bit to collect you and we can have dinner together. Be good for me.’

” 3

He leaned forward and kissed my forehead. His lips were soft and gentle, and just for a second, I wondered what it would feel like if he was kissing my lips instead.

God, what is wrong with me? I need to pull it together. O

When he pulled back, Griffin gave me one last smile before departing the room. The door thudded shut behind him and the air seemed to change immediately it's like the tension and awkwardness seemed to evaporate with him.

Lily let out a long sigh, flopping down on the bed beside me. “Well, I never thought I'd see the day I'd be in the King's bedroom,” she said, “Or former bedroom, I'm sure. Now that he's King, I'm sure he'll be getting an upgrade.”

More accurately, now that he's killed his father, he'll be upgrading his rooms.

“Certainly can't complain about this bed though,” Lily chirped, bouncing lightly on the mattress. It caught me off-guard but Lily seemed to be in a great mood, especially considering the day we had all had. Sure, I was the only one who met my mate but everyone saw the king get beheaded. O

“You sound...chipper,” I said, eyeing her.

“Well,” Lily said, smiling, “I don't want to make this whole thing about me, your mate being the Alpha King? This is great news for me.”

“Oh, how so?”

but

“Remember that conversation we had earlier today?” she asked, “About how I was worried mom and dad would be disappointed if I didn't end up with some strong Alpha mate?” O

I nodded. I did remember, but truthfully, that conversation felt like a million years ago.

Where is she going with this?

“Well, it doesn't matter anymore!” she said, smiling widely at both Sebastian and

1. He looked confused, and given that he hadn't been there to witness our talk, I

could understand why.

“What do you mean?”

“Me having to worry about finding some strong Alpha? That’s a thing of the past now – I don’t have to worry anymore,” she said, “Now that you’ve literally found your mate in the Alpha King and good job snagging that one, sis

it really

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doesn’t matter who I end up mated to. Our pack has already made the strongest long-term alliance they could possibly ever make.”

Lily looked positively gleeful, and while I was glad someone could benefit from my mate bond, the last thing I wanted to think about was “long-term alliances” with

Griffin.

“Well, I’m glad this has worked out for you,” I replied dryly.

“Clark, are you okay?” Sebastian piped up from where he was leaning against the wall. “What happened today that was intense. This whole thing is going to be intense...and I know it wasn’t exactly your plan.”

He didn’t say it but I knew Sebastian was referring to my plan to move away after college. Being mated to the Alpha King and stuck at the castle was going to put a major wrench in that especially since I’d already tried to talk Griffin out of this. whole thing.

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Now that I was alone with my siblings, I felt a wave of emotions rise to the surface. Everything I had been hoping for college, a human life, a normal human. boyfriend seemed like it was vanishing before my eyes.

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My fate was completely controlled by Griffin now.

As he had been so willing to tell me earlier, he could lock me up and throw away the key if he wanted to.

God, why didn't I just stay home? I could've faked being sick or come up with some excuse and this never would've happened.

This cannot be my life. I cannot be stuck with some possessive Alpha who treats me like an object there has got to be a way out of this for me! 2

"Am I okay?" I repeated, "No, I'm not okay. My entire life has been turned upside down. This is not how I want to live my life. I don't want to be mated to some possessive Alpha or rule over a group of people that aren't even mine. Please, Sebastian, Lily – you guys have got to help me get out of this."

Chapter 23

"You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today."

Abraham Lincoln

"Get you out of this?" Lily scoffed, "Are you crazy, Clark? We're not talking about you're talking about trying to escape your mate. The literal getting out of a quiz

Alpha King. And you're trying to drag us down with you!"

Sebastian remained quiet, eyebrows furrowed.

"Wait, hold on," I said, "I'm not asking you to escape with me or do anything that would actually put you in danger. I'm just asking for some ideas here. You two know this world better than I do isn't there some way for me to get out of this?" @

"By this," Lily snapped, "You're talking about a mate bond with the most powerful Alpha in the world, Clark. Mate bonds are unbreakable, you can't get rid of them."

"

2

"There's absolutely no way?" I asked, "I already tried to convince Griffin that he'd better off without me earlier but he didn't seem to care. But that's it then? This is

forever?”

“You tried to convince your mate, the Alpha King, to be with someone else?” Lily laughed, “I would’ve loved to have seen that.”

“You already know the mate bond doesn’t work like that, Clark,” Sebastian said softly, “You may not feel it the same way a wolf does, but you’ve been around the pack long enough to know that a mate bond never goes away. Once you meet your mate, you’ll be drawn to them forever. They’ll be the only person you want, the only person you truly desire until you die.”

I knew he was right. I had never seen a pair of mates that didn’t end up together. The cycle was pretty straightforward you meet your mate, instant love, get married, have kids, and then you grow old together.

And when mates did grow old and eventually die, the last one left standing usually wasn’t far behind.

Your mate was supposed to be the only person you could ever be with and I’d

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never seen anyone challenge that well, except one.

“What about dad?” I asked, “I know it’s a touchy subject in our family but if mates are supposed to be your one and only forever, why did our dad cheat on your mom?”

I hated bringing it up, but my dad’s affair had hung over me my entire life. If that fact could finally be of use to me, it’d be a welcome change. U

Lily and Sebastian were both silent. Sebastian’s eyebrows were even more furrowed and Lily just looked lost.

“I’m not sure,” Sebastian finally said, “You know that dad has never talked about

1. All he’s ever told me was that it was a moment of weakness but I do know he

regrets it deeply.” He paused and then his eyes widened. “The affair, I mean! I know he regrets the affair and the pain it caused, but not you, Clark. He doesn’t -regret having you.” (1

I almost felt like laughing. I might've sulked about it on any other day, but today had been eventful enough. I had far bigger concerns than wrestling with my own daddy issues.

"It's okay, Seb," I told him, "I know what you meant. Dad never said much to me. about it either, but doesn't it prove my point? Clearly, there's got to be some level of choice here. Dad chose someone who wasn't your mom."

"Yeah, for a one-night stand," Lily scoffed, "I don't mean to rain on your parade but just because dad chose to get his dick wet by someone else eighteen years ago doesn't mean anything for your situation, Clark. You're mated just like the rest. of us will be one day soon. And to the Alpha King too. Do you know how many female wolves would love to be in your position?"

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"Yes, I do!" I told her, practically shouting, "And I would love to give the opportunity to any one of them. Seriously, bring me a line up!"

Frustration bubbled up inside me. I knew that Sebastian and Lily probably wouldn't be able to actually help me, but a small part of me had hoped they'd at least understand. Or maybe brainstorm ideas for a potential escape, I'm not sure.

But you're the only one who feels trapped here, I thought to myself. Lily and Sebastian see the mate bond as just another fact of life like getting older or doing taxes. They don't realize the freedom they're giving up because they've never had it at all.

"Look, Clark," Sebastian said, "I know you're not happy about this. I know it's not what you wanted, but there's nothing you can do but accept it. Lily and I should probably go soon, Esther has strict instructions for us to pack for the flight back. But if it makes you feel any better, I've still got to call dad and let him know what happened. Maybe he'll be able to provide some perspective."

"Yeah, maybe."

The thought of my siblings leaving me here alone sent a wave of panic through me. If they left, I'd truly be alone who knows when I'd see them again?

Sebastian walked over to hug me and his arms felt warm and secure. “You know I love you, right? I wouldn’t be leaving you here if I didn’t think you’d be safe...but if anything, you’re going to be the safest person in the world from now on. And if that changes, if he somehow hurts you, I’ll be ready to wage war. You’re my sister and I’ll always protect you, Clark.”@

“I love you too,” I whispered but with my head burrowed in Sebastian’s shoulder, it was muffled.

I wasn’t big on cheesy displays of emotion, but now that I knew my siblings were leaving (and I wouldn’t be going with them), it felt like the embrace wasn’t nearly as long as it should be.

As I pulled away from Sebastian, I caught Lily’s eye. Her chipper smile had vanished and she looked dejected. Sad even. I watched her approach me and pull me into a hesitant hug.

“Look, I’m sorry, Clark,” she sighed, “I know I’m probably not the most sensitive to this stuff, but if anyone gets how much this mate thing sucks, it’s me. You’re gonna be okay, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.” O

I wanted to scream No! I wouldn’t be okay. Please don’t leave me here alone with nobody but strangers.

It wouldn’t change anything. Sebastian and Lily had to leave regardless and I had to stay. Protesting more would just make them feel guilty.

My siblings couldn’t help me get out of the mate bond, I knew this now. And frankly, it would be too dangerous to get them involved. They didn’t need to end up the same way the king did. I was back at square one but I wasn’t going to give up.

I was going to leave this castle – and my controlling mate – behind. It was just a matter of time.

Chapter 24

“Never argue at the dinner table, for the one who is not hungry always gets the best of the argument.”

Richard Whately

After Sebastian and Lily left, loneliness crept over me like a blanket. There was no denying it now – I was alone here now. My siblings would be in a completely different country in a few hours. In fact, everyone I knew would be in a completely different country. 2

What was it that Ezra had said to me at that dinner party?

That I was stuck in the wolf's den?

Although he had just said it to intimidate and tease me, there was some truth to

1. I was in the wolf's den

but more importantly, I was in the biggest, baddest.

wolf's den of them all.

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I curled up in Griffin's bed for a while, alone with my thoughts.

I drifted off at some point and it was only the knocking on the door that awoke Griffin?

No, he wouldn't knock to enter his own room.

"Who's there?" I called, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes.

"It's Esther. May I come in?"

I was definitely surprised to hear my castle "guide" on the other end of the door, but at least it wasn't Griffin. Of all the people who could be visiting me, Esther was far from the worst.

"Sure," I said, and not a moment later, she was walking through the door. I expected Esther to look as cheery as always, and while she had a smile on her face, she looked nervous too.

Surely she's not nervous to talk to me? Maybe she thought Griffin would be here too.

I slid off the bed, trying not to think about what a mess I must've looked like to her. My hair was knotted and frizzy from my cat nap, my makeup had definitely smeared hours ago, and the green romper I'd worn to the meeting was full of wrinkles. [3

“Your Majesty,” Esther said, “The King has asked that I come and inform you that he’d like to see you in the dining room in an hour. I’ve brought some of your belongings from your old room.” She waved her hand and a burly guard entered the room, carrying my backpack.

Your Majesty.

That certainly doesn’t feel right.

Esther using that title only made me feel like an imposter. I was no Queen or any form of royalty – I was just a teenage girl who happened to make eye contact with the wrong person. Absolutely nothing about me qualified me to be a queen. Not only was I a teenager with limited knowledge of werewolf customs, but I wasn’t

even a werewolf.

Esther didn’t seem to have a problem with addressing me as royalty but I wondered if she could see through me – see how unfit I was for that title.

I didn’t let any of my inner turmoil show. Instead, I squared my shoulders and forced a smile. “Thank you, Esther,” I told her.

She didn’t move from her spot. “Do you need any help, Your Majesty? The King has instructed me to help you with anything you might need. I could draw you a bath if you’d like?”

I might not be fit to be a Queen but I’m at least more capable than a toddler.

“No, that’s okay,” I told her, “I think I can manage just fine. Thank you for bringing my belongings.”

“I’m at your service, My Lady,” she said, and she bowed her head, “You are my Queen now, the Luna of Lunas. If there’s anything you need, you must simply just ask. I will be back within the hour to escort you to the dining room.” With that, Esther left the room, the burly guard behind her.

Luna.

I’d heard that word before – Lily and Sebastian’s mom was the Luna of Blacktooth pack. It was a title given to the mate of an Alpha. Lunas were like housewives on steroids. They took care of their own children but they usually helped take care of other pack children too. They’d run daycares, organize pack functions, and make food for pack members and all with a smile on their faces.

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I had seen Grace do it for years. My dad might've been the Alpha, but behind closed doors, she was the one who kept the pack functioning. She was the real caretaker and she worked tirelessly at her "job."

Personally, I was never sure how she was able to do it. She got respect as the Luna but not in the same way that my dad did. Nobody was asking her opinion on pack disputes or asking her to go to diplomatic meetings. She did it all without much gratitude, and what did she get in return? A mate who cheated on her.

For the most part, being a Luna was a thankless job and while I knew Griffin's pack structure wasn't the same as a regular pack, I didn't want any part of this Luna stuff. 2

If Griffin thinks I'm going to spend my time with crying babies or making potluck dinners for hundreds of people, he's got another thing coming. 12

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Sighing, I opened up my backpack and began searching for something fit for dinner. Given that I'd only packed for three days and most of that was heavy jackets to bear the Canadian cold my options were very limited. The wrinkled green romper wasn't an option either. That outfit had been through enough today, and if I'm being honest, wearing the outfit I'd watched a man get beheaded felt kind of morbid. O

Why does it even matter?

Why am I trying to look nice for this guy?

It's not like this is a real date or someone I'm trying to impress. What difference does it make if I show up in jeans and an old t-shirt?

Although I hated to admit it, I couldn't deny that a small, teeny, tiny, absolutely

minuscule-part did care. That traitorous part of me did want to look nice for Griffin – for him to think I was pretty.

Stupid, stupid mate bond.

Just as I was about to shove that part of me away and settle for a pair of jeans, I found a dress folded into the bottom of my backpack.

I didn't pack this.

I pulled it out

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it was a white and blue floral sundress.

This is Lily's. She must've put this in here.

Lily wasn't one to lose track of her clothes so leaving the dress must've been intentional. Maybe she was leaving me a reminder of home or just took pity on my limited clothing options, I'm not sure. Either way, the gesture brought a smile to my face.

I pulled the dress close and took in the scent – it smelled exactly like Lily. (4

It smells like home.

For the near future, this is one of the last things I'll have of my family. At least until I can find a way out of this. 1

There was a lump in my throat and I tried to will the tears away. I didn't want to cry. This wasn't the end. I was going to get out of this mate bond, and once I did, my life would feel like my own again. (2)

With that in mind, I tugged the dress on.

Time to get ready for a date with the big, bad wolf.

Chapter 25

“They were two halves that together formed a magical whole.” (7

– Dick Button S

As Esther led me to the dining room where I'd eat dinner with Griffin, I felt like a little girl playing dress up. We'd pass guards or people walking in the hallway and they'd bow to me, averting their eyes.

Did they not see I was just an imposter? Just a teenage girl stuck in a situation she had no say in? 4

The dining room that Esther led me to was different than the one I'd dined with Seb, Lily, and the former Alpha King in. The mahogany door wasn't nearly as ornate.

She stopped in front of the door, her eyes glazing over as she communicated through the mind link.

Then after a moment, she opened the door and gestured for me to go inside. I took a deep breath and walked past her.

As I'd suspected, the room wasn't quite as elaborate as the other dining room was but it was still fancier than anything else I'd dined in. The biggest difference was the size this dining room table was smaller, more intimate. It was clearly meant

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to only seat two or three guests.

And at the head of the table, Griffin's dark eyes raked over my body. He clearly had no shame in staring, and if the smirk on his face was any indicator, he at least liked what he saw.

And I'd be lying if I said I didn't like what I see either. (2

I tried to hide the flush on my cheeks as Griffin stood up from his seat and I got a full look at his outfit. He had cleaned up in dark dress pants that hugged his thighs and a light blue dress shirt that popped with his complexion. I couldn't help but notice that his sleeves were rolled up and the griffin tattoo on his forearm was on full display.

That damned tattoo.

I should've known something was off when I started dreaming about a hot guy – I never dream about hot guys.

3

"You may leave now, Esther," Griffin said, but he didn't take his eyes

"Yes, Your Majesty."

off me.

I remained planted near the door, but as soon as the door clicked shut behind.

Esther, Griffin was striding across the room to me.

He stopped only inches from me, and this time, I couldn't stop the flush from

creeping onto my face. It was just his intensity. Everything about him was intense and powerful the way he talked, the way he walked, and most of all, the way he

looked at me.

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“You look beautiful, my little fox,” Griffin said, and he tugged my chin up until my eyes met his. I had no choice but to stare back at him — or really, I should say up at him. Given the height difference, I was more eye level with Griffin’s chest.

Despite the intense eye contact, I managed to keep my composure. “You don’t look so bad yourself.”

Griffin smiled as if I’d just told him he was the most beautiful man alive, and moved his other hand to the small of my back. “I’m glad you approve, little fox. Here, why don’t you take a seat?”

He led me to the chair opposite his and pulled it out for me. The gesture felt romantic and I was glad he could no longer see the blush on my face as I sat.

He slid into his own chair next, his eyes back on me. I averted my gaze to my empty plate.

Someone really loves eye contact.

“Why do you do that?” he suddenly asked. [1

“Do what?”

“Look away from me,” he said, “It’s like you’re afraid to make eye contact with me for more than a second. Are you afraid of what you might feel if you do?”

You mean this stupid mate bond I have no control over?

“Maybe I’m just not big on eye contact,” I retorted, “The real question is, why do you feel the need to make eye contact with me all the time?” My response was

probably a little snarky, but judging by Griffin’s chuckle, he didn’t seem to take

offense.

“Why do I look at you?” he asked, his tone playful, “How could I not look at you? You’re stunning, little fox.” For a moment, his smile seemed to disappear and I was drowning in his eyes again just dark intensity that left an odd knot in my

stomach.

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“You only think that because of the mate bond,” I said, looking away from him again, “If we weren’t mates, you wouldn’t look twice at me.’

His eyes narrowed. “Is that what you think?”

1

I knew I was treading a thin line here. Dinner hadn’t even started and I was already broaching a sensitive subject, but now that I’d started, I couldn’t stop.

“Am I wrong?” I asked, “If the mate bond didn’t exist, I wouldn’t even be an

option for you. You’d pick someone else. someone on your level. It’s why I struggle to buy into this stuff. You only think you feel things for me because of the bond, not because you actually know anything about me.”

Griffin regarded me carefully. His expression was unreadable. I couldn’t tell if I was still treading the line or if I’d stepped over it. ?

“Do you understand what a mate is, little fox?” he asked.

“Yes, of course, I know what a mate is. I’ve learned all about.

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“No,” Griffin interrupted me, his voice low and dark. I snapped my mouth shut immediately. “I didn’t ask if you knew what a mate was. I asked if you understood what a mate is.”

His tone made me feel like a little girl being lectured and it was all I could do not to squirm uncomfortably.

He clearly wasn’t waiting for a response because he just continued talking. “A mate isn’t just a random person that you’re linked to,” Griffin said, “Your mate is your perfect other half. A mate completes you, they balance you. Everything about you will balance me, even if neither of us knows what those things are yet. I don’t need to know anything about you to know that you’re perfect for me, little fox. My wolf knows you’re my other half. I feel it in my soul...and every interaction that I have with you only confirms it. But don’t misunderstand me. I have every intention to get to know you and someday soon, I’ll know you better than you know yourself. In fact, I’d like to start right now.” @