

13 - Unmasked

(Caspian)

That meeting dragged on, what could have been dealt with in a day took almost four. It was obvious that he didn't have the men for the job and even though he had been Alpha for a while now he didn't have a firm grip on his pack.

It was hard to tell though if he was just doing a power play or if he really was hesitant to show his hand. We would have increased patrols on that border anyway until he could prove himself. One more rogue getting past his men and into my territory would be the last straw, and I made myself very clear on that matter.

As soon as we got back I jumped in my car heading off to where Willa worked ignoring Holden teasing me.

I felt anxious, and I wasn't sure if it was because I was about to see her or because I was nervous she was happy that I left her alone.

I tried to steady my heart as I rounded the corner taking a deep breath as my hand clenched the door of the restaurant. It was strange, this effect she had on me even when she wasn't in front of me.

I walked in and the familiar silence followed in my wake. She froze and her beautiful eyes locked on mine, it made it hard to breathe.

Her cheeks flushed slightly as she took a steady breath. Something flashed across her face and I couldn't make it out.

Confusion? Anger maybe? Possibly both.

"Caspian," She nodded formally, even though her voice was at hearing my name on her tongue felt good.

"Willa, how have you been?" I took the seat I normally did and she slid me a coffee with cream.

"Fine," She shrugged, turning her back to me.

Was she mad?

But, was she mad that I was here or that I left?

"Willa," I repeated my voice low, "Talk to me, what's going on?"

Atlas was restless but provided no support or explanation. We were both new to this whole, relationship, mate thing.

Her eyes settled on mine as she turned around, "I don't know," She huffed, biting her lip, "I don't know," She repeated.

"Did something happen?" I was immediately on edge.

She shook her head, "Where were you?" She whispered.

"I got called away on last-minute pack duties. I didn't have time to tell you," And I didn't want you to think I stalked you, I added silently.

She nodded, still chewing her lip, and turned to help someone that was sitting at a table behind me.

I sighed, pulling the warm cup of coffee towards me, wrapping my hands around it for something to do. I didn't understand what was going on but I sensed that it was somehow my fault.

She stood in front of me holding her arm, "I thought you weren't coming back," She admitted.

"What? That is never going to happen," I said without thinking, her gaze snapped to mine but I got a sense that she didn't believe me.

"I'm in this, for as long as you'll have me," The last part hurt to say, even admitting the fact that this might not be forever, "I know you asked me before, and yes, I want a mate. I've been looking for you." I didn't need to tell her that I was looking for her specially even before I knew she was really my mate.

(Willa)

My heart lurched and warmth spread through me despite myself. Damn logic went out the window as soon as his eyes locked on mine.

If he was called away for pack duties he must be important, even though I've only seen him with a perfectly ironed shirt I could tell that his body was honed for fighting. My eyes lingered on his arms, showing their width even hidden under a suit.

I swallowed as his gaze didn't leave my face. When he asked me what was wrong I didn't know how to respond.

I was hurt that he left, but understood I had no ties to him, none that I claimed anyways. I don't know what I wanted him to do, it made sense that he got called away, and he didn't have my number to text me. He came back and that's what mattered.

I wasn't mad at him, I understood, but it still hurt when he was gone.

"I know you asked me before, and yes, I want a mate. I've been looking for you." He looked at me and I swallowed against his intense stare.

"The mate bond isn't infallible," I responded, more to myself but I said it out loud. That was the thing with him, I wasn't planning my words or felt like I had to hold back. With Nolan, even after months together I still felt like I was playing a version of myself that I never felt completely comfortable in.

I'm not sure if it was Caspian or maybe I changed. Either way, it was nice to be able to have a conversation without thinking. He did things to me and affected me completely, but I was still comfortable speaking to him as my full self.

"It's not, but I'm willing to take that risk," He responded, reaching out a hand palm up over the counter, "With you," He added.

I placed my hand in his on instinct before logic caught up to me. Iris was dancing in my mind as sparks ooded through me.

"I want to make sure that you actually know me before you make that decision," I said, I wanted to get to know him as well.

Besides the comfort and his insanely handsome face, and probably cushy job, I needed to know that he was right for me. That there was something there that wasn't superficial and was deeper than the bond. I had to make sure that he was good not only for me but for Emmett.

Bringing a man into Emmett's life, was a whole other thing. We didn't talk that much about him, but we didn't really talk about much anyways.

"Also, take my number, so, if you, you know, have to leave again.." I trailed off and a smile brightened his dark features. He seemed to relax a bit after that.

"So let's get to know each other, you know what pack I'm from and we know what each other does for work. You told me you have a son and are starting college, tell me everything else." He leaned back once I slipped my palm from his, but the sparks still lingered on my hand.

I nodded, "I'm from Blue Ridge, it's small enough. Probably a little over an hour away from here."

"I know," He said, averting his gaze for a moment.

He knew what? That I was from Blue Ridge, or he knew of Blue Ridge.

I didn't say anything waiting for him to go on.

A smile slowly spread across his face, but it wasn't one of his real ones. This one seemed to be one he pulled from his mental closet of masks. I snorted at the thought and his expression turned blank.

"You're getting too good at that. Leaving the question lingering until you get the answer you want."

"You do it too," I countered and he nodded once.

"I do." A real smile tugged at his face again, "I know you're from Blue Ridge," He swallowed.

I leaned back and crossed my arms. My last table left a few minutes ago and I had all the time in the world for whatever he was about to confess.

Stalking me, researching me, I had no idea, but I didn't know if I really wanted to know but I needed to.

"I met you before." His eyes shifted to mine and I dropped my arms not able to keep up my casual stance.

I icked through my memories, I didn't remember seeing him ever. I would have definitely remembered him, he was someone I wouldn't have forgotten even when I was.. Well, when I was mated to Nolan.

Caspian had a presence unlike I'd seen before. Even if I passed him in a hall or attended an event where he was across the room I was sure I would remember.

"You don't remember," His voice was steady, "I pieced that much together. I wasn't sure at first when you.." He let the rest hang.

"When I ran away," I sighed thinking of the first time I saw him. Well, that wasn't the first time apparently.

"Yes," A faint smile appeared, "That." He ran a hand through his midnight hair and my mouth felt dry, I wanted to do the same. I wanted to see if it was as soft as it looked.

"I wasn't sure if you ran because you knew who I was and was afraid of me, or if there was something else. I couldn't come up with any other reason until you explained that you weren't looking for a mate." His words brought me out of my thoughts.

"When did we meet?" I studied his face, I would surely have remembered, especially if he did.

He looked away, something he rarely did.

"It was the night of the now Alpha of Blue Ridge's birthday," His words settled on me, "Five years ago."

I swallowed.

Thinking of that night still made my heart clench and my stomach tighten. I blinked a few times, worried I would cry.

I looked at him, and something like worry seemed to fill his eyes.

"Go on," I urged, even if the last thing I wanted to hear about was that night.

I wondered if he was there and heard me get rejected. I don't know if I could live with that embarrassment, but he was still here now even if he witnessed my most humiliating moment.

"I sat next to you, I tried to talk to you but you seemed distracted."

I bit my lip thinking. I was distracted. That night was perfectly ingrained in my memory. Camilla strolled up in that dress, commanding Nolan's attention and I couldn't do anything about it because I was forced to move down because the-

My eyes snapped to him.

Because the fucking prince was sitting in between us.