



Ellie 2

Author: *Erin R. Flynn*

Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Ellie Reed is the Chief Administrative Officer at one of the largest hospitals in the world, ASH—or All Supes Hospital—that's basically the entire city of Atlanta. Patients come from all over the world for the most cutting-edge and renowned care... And she's in charge of it.

Every. Single. Part.

Dr. Ha-joon Clark has wanted to work at the mecca of medicine for supes since he was a little boy—even after his application was denied countless times. So when the board of directors offers him the chance to get his foot through the door, he takes it.

Even if he knows it will piss off the one person he needs to impress to have a career and thrive.

He proves himself during the first catastrophe the hospital encounters but learns something he would never have guessed. Namely, Ms.

Reed is involved with the biggest cad in the hospital and the type of doctor that makes them all look bad.

It's not his business though... Right?

Total Pages (Source): 90

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

1

Ellie

I was heading over to Carla to leave something with her, using the excuse to stretch my legs and clear my head a bit.

Instead, I walked into a situation.

“Oh, there she is,” Dr. James said with a smile but then looked around. “I’m not sure the conference room off of the emergency department will hold all of us.”

“All of us?” I hedged, glancing around and seeing all the department heads gathered.

Along with the remaining members of the board of directors.

And Dr. Mandy Tate with them.

“She wasn’t invited to the meeting,” Dr. Carla Greer seethed. “Her email is wrong on here. It’s ‘read’ instead of ‘reed’ in the address.” She shot the board a look. “You tried to trick us all into meeting thinking it was something Ms. Reed had approved.”

“May I?” I asked her as I held out my hand. I quickly read over the email on her tablet, getting the gist fast. I gave it back and studied the remaining board members. “Another coup? Really? The last one didn’t end well for people.”

“That was about power, this is about what’s best for the hospital,” Leroy Gordon

interjected.

“Yes, so much so you had to get people together,” I drawled before glancing at Mandy. “And you picked the wrong person to make this move with. But go ahead. Take your best shot. I’m fine with ending this today.”

Rage filled his eyes at being dismissed and mocked. He went into a lecture about my unprofessionalism and discrediting doctors—my complete contempt for them. That my jealousy and even my misogyny because I was jealous of female doctors was the problem with the hospital.

“They’re all doctors, Ms. Reed,” Leroy Gordon finished, gesturing to the department heads standing behind me that I could feel rage coming from. “Doctors should run a hospital. Dr. Tate is definitely right about that. Your qualifications are lacking, and you’re not fit to run this hospital. The board agrees after how things have spiraled out of control.”

“You’re right, doctors should run a hospital,” Dr. Alan Carpenter said firmly as he stepped forward from the group of department heads. “You are right, and this mistake should be corrected. Today even.”

I bit back a laugh and glanced at all of the department heads. “Are you in agreement? You agree with that to make this move?”

“Beyond ready,” Dr. James bit out.

Leroy Gordon seemed shocked but then smiled. “I’m glad the department heads all agree. That’s reasonable and—”

“We’re having two different conversations here,” Alan chuckled as he walked over to him. He clapped him on the shoulder hard enough to almost knock the man over.

“We’re agreeing that the board should be dissolved since none of you are doctors. You’re right that people who aren’t doctors shouldn’t be involved in running a hospital.”

“We are talking about Ms. Reed,” he seethed. “We’re business advisors on the—”

“You’re parasites who take money away from funding we could use better and your egos make you useless,” Dr. Renee Bass cut in. “And you keep making these stupid plays without the right information, also not doing your research. It’s theatrical and unbecoming of your positions. You should be removed from them.”

“And it’s just ridiculous since we’re all on her side. We’re on Doctor Reed’s side,” Alan added.

“You’re supposed to be on the hospital’s side and—what?” Gordon did a double take and then frowned. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No, you don’t,” I sighed as I pulled out my wallet, glad I had it since I was going to swing by the vending machines. I opened it and easily found my medical license ID card and handed it over to Gordon. “Your entire premise is faulty, though the hypocrisy that I would need to be a doctor as CAO and you don’t as the board is a joke.”

“And don’t even bother trying to say it’s fake,” Alan chuckled. “I’m the one who certified her ongoing accreditation as a surgeon.” He gestured to the other department heads. “Several of them do the same. We knew she was a doctor.”

Gordon blinked at it like he couldn’t fathom what he was seeing. “You’re licensed in several fields? There’s a list on here.”

“I am,” I confirmed, meeting Mandy’s gaze. “More than you, Dr. Tate.” I took it back

from Gordon and held it up to the other board members. “I warned you that your days were numbered if you made another play. You should have made it good if you were going to try another coup.”

“This makes no sense. Why would you ever push everyone to call you Ms. Reed if you were a doctor?” one of the members snapped.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “People used to call me Doctor. When I worked here even. But decades ago, there was still a bit too much sexism in our world—especially in the hospital and medical field. Any time I asked anything, too many of the doctors saw it was a challenge because of the letters after my name.”

“It was always drama and power plays,” Dr. Bass confirmed, gesturing to the board like they were exactly the problem as well.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“So now that we’ve established you once again have no idea what you’re talking about, let’s put the final nail in this coffin,” I about purred, focusing on Dr. Tate. “And how silly you were to listen to this woman’s idiocy and manipulation.”

“Dr. Tate is—” Gordon started to blast.

“Not going to be a doctor much longer,” I chuckled, spilling the beans. I smirked at her. “‘Criminal negligence,’ right? That’s what you’ve been charged with so far. They’re still deciding what else to bring against you after you killed—”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she seethed. “You’re making up wild stories to cover how you behaved yesterday and—”

“It’s true,” Ha-joon said from my left.

I hadn’t even known he was there. I blinked at him a moment, internally wincing at how much trouble I was probably in personally after he learned about me being a doctor this way.

“I just received the same information from my mum,” he said firmly, meeting Mandy’s gaze. “Go ahead, tell everyone here that the Alpha Mate of London is a liar, Mandy.” He chuckled when she didn’t. “Yeah, I didn’t think so when your family is still in that pack. And it’s a stupid play. Just because you got a new job here doesn’t mean the charges won’t be—”

“She thinks we’d cover it up so the hospital wasn’t embarrassed,” Dr. James chuckled. “No, we wouldn’t. We’d be the first to turn you over.” He chuckled when

Mandy seemed equal parts shocked and disbelieving. “You are the problem, and we protect the good medical staff here. The patients. Who you are a threat to. So yes, we’d turn you in.”

“Immediately,” one of the other department heads confirmed.

“And you thought if you announced we were together again that my parents would intervene for you,” Ha-joon added as he moved closer to her with a sneer. “Except they always hated you. Your family was almost kicked out for how you treated me when we were kids. But we’re not kids anymore and I’m not some dork who lets a pretty girl push him around.

“You’re toxic. You’re a manipulative narcissist who cannot accept responsibility and blames everyone else. Who are you blaming for killing a pregnant woman and her child, Mandy? Who are you going to try and pin this on? This is why I told people not to hire you. You learn nothing from your mistakes and think you can skate through—”

I was there in a flash to grab her wrist when she went to slap him. “No, you don’t get to smack him for speaking the truth. You killed that woman and her baby.” I glanced behind the group and smiled. “And my people are too smart to believe your crap and will do as they should.”

She glanced back and went pale. “Why would you call the police here? The matter to handle is in the UK—”

“Which you fled,” I purred, not letting her go when she tried to pull away. It surprised her. A wolf was normally stronger than a vampire.

Normally. I was much older and special.

“You missed your hearing, Ms. Tate. A warrant is issued then. This whole plan was ridiculous. They would have just come to collect you from here once—”

“It’s in your contracts that your attorneys will protect the doctors,” she snapped.

Oh fuck, this woman was ridiculous. “From problems here at the hospital. Not just anything you do, idiot.” I nodded to the police who moved through the people. “This woman is wanted in the UK for serious charges. I assume you know who to contact and how to hand her over.”

He nodded. “Your security briefed us when they called and said they’d hold her. Thank you very much.”

“Get your hands off of me,” Mandy screeched as he went to put handcuffs on her.

“If you shift now, there will be additional charges and in North America,” the officer warned her.

She went off on him, bile coming out of her mouth. She had some choice words for me as well and even threatened Ha-joon that he would always regret doing this to her.

He laughed. Full belly laughed and had to hold his side which took a lot of the steam out of her.

Then she was gone. People watching the show shocked and confused. Well, those who came later were or even patients coming in for appointments.

It was so horrible we were doing this all in the main lobby. It disgusted me to see more patients coming in and witnessing this.

“Resign from your positions and you will get the rest of the quarter’s pay or I take the

seats away through paperwork I don't want to do and you get nothing," I told the remaining board members. I waved for security to handle them. "Get their hospital identification and security credentials to access areas. Also, add them to the banned list."

"You don't have the authority to—" Gordon tried to blast.

"I do. We all know I do," I drawled.

"You're just a mouthpiece for the founder, and I demand to talk to him. He has to know what's happening here," he seethed, shoving away one of our guards when he tried to grab him. "I will end you—"

Alan lost his temper and grabbed Gordon. "You assume we're not all in communication with the founder and owner of this hospital. We are. We know who they are."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

Carla snorted. “I had a lovely conversation with them yesterday. Fools.” She turned to me. “Don’t give that one anything. He’s always pissed me off.” She beamed as she clapped her hands together and rubbed them. “Oh, it’s going to be so nice to not have a board of directors. What annoying—”

“No, we’re becoming the board, Carla,” Dr. James interjected.

She frowned but then recovered. “Yes, but not really. I mean, our meetings will be like—we never listened to the board or—”

“No, we’re not becoming auselessboard, but a good one and to actually help Ellie,” Alan told her firmly. “Which is starting with auditing your whole department and personnel. I want mine all to have a chat with this new head of HR and—” He cleared his throat and looked at me. “We’ll talk.”

“We’ll talk,” I accepted, glancing at my watch. “Since we’re all gathered, let’s talk real quick about the change and ideas.”

“Perfect, because I brought treats,” one of the department heads chuckled.

Clearly, he didn’t know it was supposed to be a coup.

Did coups have snacks?

Probably.

I turned to leave but then remembered Ha-joon. I went over to him, noting how he

was staring off at nothing, clearly in shock.

“Thank you for your help, Dr. Clark,” I said as I went to move my hand to his arm.

He raised his arm in a jerky motion so I couldn’t. He took a step away and disgust filled his eyes when he focused on me.

Everyone around us froze.

“Sorry,” he whispered, but didn’t look it. He cleared his throat and ran his hand over his head. “Yes, right, happy to help. Best of luck with the new board, Dr. Reed.” He spun around and walked off... In the wrong direction from his practice.

Okay then. Yeah, I was definitely in trouble.

I shook it off and let him do what he needed to.

And I did what I needed to.

Alan wanted everyone in his department to sit with the new head of HR. However she wanted to handle it, but he wanted to know what they didn’t like and to start focusing on what could be fixed. Without recourse. People wouldn’t believe that, but it was what he wanted.

Also, for her to flag problems so we could get rid of them. It was time to get some staff turnover.

And not because the doctors were sluts.

Others agreed and promised to talk to Beth and set up the schedule and timeline so I didn’t have to and would keep me in the loop. A good idea and I didn’t have to

manage it all?

My day really was looking up.

“What happened with Dr. Tate?” Alan asked as he walked me to my office after the meeting. “I mean, the details.”

I nodded. “People had already figured out that she was an entitled princess and probably had choice words about how she finished med school and training. She jumped hospitals each time, and this time she didn’t want to. So when she was frozen out of surgeries and not included, she went to find her own.”

“Normal for the young ones,” he accepted.

“Yeah, but she isn’t an intern or resident,” I drawled. “She was a junior attending. You get frozen out because you’re crap.” I waited until he nodded. “She pushed to operate on someone who didn’t need it. The woman would have healed in the ICU with her rapid healing and it was safer that way since she was pregnant.

“Then she left a surgical instrument in the woman.” I nodded when he did a double take. “The report I got didn’t say which one. But clearly not just a sponge or something unfortunate but benign. It killed her. And when she started tanking, Tate didn’t want to admit her mistake and didn’t tell anyone. So she—the hospital is trying to quietly handle it which was why—”

“Why they wouldn’t tell us anything,” he sighed. “Lovely. This bullshit of trying to pass off problems to get them out of your hospital—we all need to be better.”

I snorted. We’d done the same. It was unfortunate, but... So was life and I needed my sanity.

“How did the OR nurses and team not realize anything was wrong?” he asked after a few moments. “Our support staff would never have let that mistake happen.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

I nodded. “They caught it. The senior nurse did when counting instruments. Tate blew up on her that it was her mistake and someone had to have thrown something away. She had them digging in all of the garbage bags and threatened their jobs if they let it get out. So she’s in trouble as well for not speaking up. She was scared of Tate and has kids.”

“That’s sad, but a woman and child are dead,” he sighed. “What a mess. I cannot believe she thought pushing in here and securing a new position would just make it all better.”

“I am known for going to the mat for our doctors. I mean, even if people don’t know it’s me doing it—the hospital is known for it.”

“True, but there are limits. She’s an idiot.” He clapped my shoulder. “We need to celebrate. No more of that fucking board. We never should have allowed it.”

I gave him a tired look. “You know why we did. It was a different time. A hospital run by doctors—andfemaledoctors at that—would have been run into the ground according to people. We were vulnerable to slander and—you know why we did it.”

“I know why we did it,” he said gently but then hugged me. “I’m just glad it’s over now and we can go back to thriving. Toxic is on tour and kicked out. Now we thrive and grow.”

Now we thrived and grew. That sounded like the best tagline ever.

Ha-joon

What happened flustered me. I wasn't sure if I was really hurt or pissed or... I didn't know.

I was overwhelmed. I was feeling too much.

I needed to figure out what was in my head and recenter.

Which was why I texted Mum saying I was coming home for the weekend to visit and see my London friends. Luckily, they were all going out Saturday night because of Matt's promotion. I invited myself and was glad they sounded happy to have me.

I was out the door after the last patient, shocking my staff since I was normally the last to leave. I'd already told the office manager that I was going to London for the weekend, so she knew at least. She'd probably tell the others and that was fine. It wasn't like I was going to hide it, and I didn't want anyone to worry that there was an emergency.

I went home and grabbed the basics. I still had a full room at my parents' London estate, and Mum would definitely have it stocked and ready for me.

Relief filled me when she was waiting for me even. She'd set it up so their warlock opened a portal from the front of my condo building when I was ready, but it was late in London and my parents were home from their evening's events already.

"What has happened, my youngest?" she asked gently after we hugged.

"A lot and not too much and I'm being sensitive," I admitted, glad it was just us.

"Tell me while we eat."

“It’s too late for your dinner, Mum,” I hedged.

She chuckled. “We are wolves. We can always eat. I will pick, and I’m sure your father will sneak into the kitchen soon for food.”

I nodded and let her baby me. “The condo is perfect. Thank you so much, Mum. It’s—it’s been such a comfort while adjusting. You have no idea how much. It was exactly what I needed, and I appreciate the time and touches you put into the updating.”

“Good, good,” she accepted.

“You did always have a smooth tongue,” my sister, Seo-yeon, mocked as she walked into the kitchen. Her name meant “prosperous omen,” and she never let anyone forget it as if telling them that she lived up to the name.

I never found that she did. Fine, she was graceful, which her name meant too... But we all were as wolves.

“Because I mean what I say,” I told her, giving her a look of warning. Right then was not the time for the normal bullshit and bullying.

It really wasn’t.

I focused back on Mum who was surprised at how I acted as well. “You work for everything at ASH unlike all of the bluster and promo of my last place. I’m taking over male patients that were a problem for a female doctor—”

“Dr. Joyce Tai,” Mum interjected. “Brilliant but quirky, and that can have problems.”

I snorted. “Being a genius as a woman can be one. We both know that. And she’s

careful—some men are just stupid. I've heard several ramble at all the green lights she gave that she was interested and not one was valid. Good patient care? Not flirting. Fitting them in when there was an issue that couldn't wait? Not flirting."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“Not unless my doctor has recently become a lesbian,” Seo-yeon snickered as she moved over by us. “Can I partake in this feast or is it for the baby only?”

“Do not pick a fight when I do the same when you have issues and need your family,” Mum warned her, her tone cold.

And that was the time not to push Mum... If you liked breathing.

I nodded for Seo-yeon to go ahead. “It’s nothing confidential. Though I would prefer you not use it as ammunition later.”

She probably wanted to say something shitty but shot a glance at Mum and thought better of it. Then she seemed to bite back a smirk. “I wish you the best in Atlanta, Brother. Whatever we can do as your family to make it work.”

And get me out of London—the UK or Europe even. I wasn’t stupid. I knew exactly what she meant.

Which was why I had wanted to leave and have my own life out from under them.

“There was a major shake-up in dermatology and two doctors were out,” I told Mum, not caring if Seo-yeon listened. It wasn’t like people couldn’t find the information out. “I’ve been helping—”

“Because you’re suddenly a dermatologist?” Seo-yeon snarked.

“Yes, I am,” I sighed. I nodded when she froze in eating. “For shifters—yes, I am. I

did a fellowship that gave me the credentials and I've kept them up."

Mum tapped the counter in front of me. "How is that department head? Are they grateful or the problem?"

"Grateful and a great doctor," I told her honestly. "Dr. Carla Greer is one of the best and dedicated." I explained what happened, both of them shocked at the drama and wanting to hear the tea.

"Good that she immediately stepped up and smacked people into line," Mum praised. "And that she stood with Ms. Reed."

"Oh, Doctor Reed has a lot of allies," I snarked but froze in what I was going to say next. I met Mum's gaze and couldn't hide my shock as I dropped my chopsticks. "You knew."

"Yes, I knew," she confirmed, searching my eyes. "And you are a bit too upset that she kept it from you."

"He likes her," Seo-yeon purred.

There was no point in denying it. "I've been her ally and we've become friends—I helped her get away from Dr. Fitz who was abusing her. I just..." I shook my head. "I told you that I think I'm being sensitive. It's just all balled up together, and how I found out..." I sighed and sat back, rubbing my hands over my head. "She knew about Mandy already. I don't know how. Or when."

"It couldn't have been long," Mum muttered. "She is one to act."

That was fair and I nodded. I wasn't going to say it was upsetting because I'd been with Ellie last night before it all happened and that was something we should have

probably discussed. Hell, I'd gone to her right away when I'd found out.

I told them what Mandy had pulled with the board and how it had all blown up. The scene it was right in the lobby of the main building by security—the mess it all was. Even what I learned later about the department heads thinking Ellie was involved in the meeting they were called for. That had been so petty and childish.

Also, how scared I'd been coming in late and thinking Dr. Carpenter was going to stab Ellie in the back.

“Your hospital needs to be a reality show,” Seo-yeon muttered, looking shocked and a bit disgusted. “Does any healing actually happen there?”

“Yes, lots, but—we've seen how quickly toxicity can bloom in even a good group like our pack,” I reminded her. Ten years ago it had happened to Da when a group wanting to take over got to some of his Betas—it had been a mess.

And he'd had to clean house.

“Yes, we do, but also—I remember ASH before the board,” Mum defended. “No one took it seriously because it was a hospital started by ‘idealistic fool doctors’ who had no knowledge of how to run a business. Half the department heads were women and Ms. Reed ran it for the founder—a woman. A hundred years ago?”

“Sexism at its finest,” Seo-yeon chuckled darkly. “And clearly a PR campaign against the leadership of the hospital in an attempt to take power. People with big names and bad intentions wanting in on the money and prestige. I wonder how many of those board members were the original ones?”

“That's a very good point,” I admitted. “I have no idea. I know Dr. James said two were being too bold for only being on the board ten years. I don't know if the seats

were passed down or—that's something to think about.”

“So what worries you?” Mum asked. She searched me a moment and I realized she probably misread what she was getting off of me. Probably embarrassment. “You are upset for Mandy.”

“No,” I immediately answered but then frowned. “I’m sad that’s where she ended up. Even if I hated her and all she’d done.”

“You knew the girl she was and hoped things turned out differently for that girl,” Mum surmised.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“Yes.” I blinked at her. “Yes, that’s exactly what I’m feeling. Thank you, Mum. I couldn’t put a name to—I was just overwhelmed with the crazy.”

Seo-yeon snorted. “So you ran home to—”

Our father walked in and cleared his throat, Seo-yeon instantly shutting her mouth and reaching for more food.

“Hey, Da,” I greeted as I wiped my mouth. He preferred “Father” when people could hear us or with others present, but in our home like this... He was just our da, not the Alpha. I stood and gave him a real hug. “I wish you would let me pay for the condo. Seriously, I made a good sale on the last place.”

“That place you bought without coming to us,” Mum complained. “Luckily, you have learned from being too independent. Your siblings were bought similar places.”

I sighed and nodded. “I mean no offense, Mum. I make good money and have for a while. I don’t need to eat into your funds.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Da told me. “Your mum says your big boss has a successful company on her own too. We might ask for a meeting for your sister. She’s looking to branch out.” He chuckled when I flinched. “Not Atlanta. But North America. They have a good market.”

I nodded, trying to swallow my annoyance. Both my parents immediately sensed it, and Seo-yeon was amused, so she did too. “I’m sure that can happen but not right now.”

“No, not right now,” Mum agreed, giving my da a look. “The board tried to throw a coup on the woman. She just kicked them all out and will be restructuring.”

Da winced. “Yes, not now. I understand your reaction. You don’t want to be the one to add to her life personally. However, now is the time to float some ideas professionally. She’ll need wins and you have good ideas, lad. You really do.”

I felt seen and loved that he immediately had faith in me like that. I nodded. “She agreed to have the physical therapist in my practice. We have one from the ortho department right now and the feedback is good.”

“She approved converting an unused lounge to be added to Ha-joon’s practice,” Mum added. “It’s a bit small, but it will work.”

“It will, and she was smart to let the ortho team come work with us on the special needs for my practice. The cross-training could be better than hoped,” I told them.

“Good. She’s a smart lass then,” Da praised.

“She’s over three hundred,” Mum chuckled.

Da took it in stride. “Makes sense that it’s not a nipper running ASH. Good. Glad she’s got a good head.” He gave me a firm look. “Still not a bad plan to dust off that idea, Ha-joon. If you’re getting in well with your department head and your mum says you’ve been working with dermatology. Flesh it out with them.”

I considered it a few moments as I ate some more kimchi and scallion pancakes. “Yeah, you’re right. At least the scheduling idea. ASH would definitely be more open to that than my other hospital.”

Da nodded but then grabbed my chin and stared me down. I felt his wolf and let mine

be explored. He gave me the look I deserved.

“I know, but I’ve been better in other ways,” I defended. “I’ve gained at least three kilograms and gotten into a good routine at the condo’s gym. All my other vitals and levels are excellent, especially nutrition and not all just takeout.”

“Fine, that’s good,” he accepted, backing down. “But you’re taking runs as your wolf this weekend. We can go in the morning with your brothers.”

Fuck. Just...Fuck.

“Aye, Da,” I agreed with a tight smile. It wasn’t meant to be a punishment... But it was. My brothers hated me and the feeling was mutual.

My parents simply dreamed of a time that their children all got along.

“And you will have an introduction with the Atlanta pack or I will come there and hold your hand like I’m taking you to school,” he warned.

“Yes, Alpha,” I agreed, smirking at him when he frowned.

Well, he was sounding more like my Alpha than my da... And the look Mum gave him backed me up.

“I said taking him to school,” Da defended as he made himself a plate.

We all chuckled, and the tension broke.

I got caught up on the family and pack while we ate, but then they headed off to bed or to start getting ready. I was on Atlanta time and it was only six there, so I hit the family gym and got in a good, extended workout since I kept skipping.

Well, skipping to have amazing cardio—the best cardio I’d ever had.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

Just thinking about it got me hard. I sighed and glanced at my groin, annoyed it wouldn't behave given I was at my parents' gym.

For fuck's sake.

I had more food as I worked on my laptop. Da was right that it was time to dust off some of the ideas my last hospitals shut down. I added some details and potential extras given I knew Ellie and Dr. Carpenter wanted to refocus on training more—dermatology as well.

It was ten my time when I wrapped up and ate way too much from the fridge. I quickly cleaned up and left a note to Mum and the personal chef apologizing if I ate something that they'd been planning to use for meals, but I was a growing boy.

That would get me smacked less. After a moment of thought, I also added that I had something special coming for dinner tomorrow because I was raised better than coming empty-handed.

Even when just home.

I quickly ordered what I wanted online to be picked up, and in the memo line I put in the rest I would love but I didn't want to be an ass asking for that much so late. But if they could manage it to text or email me and I would approve the extra charge to my card.

I crashed hard after all of that.

Except it felt like I'd barely closed my eyes and someone was being loud. What I replied was less than friendly.

Fine, I cursed. A lot.

Which was why I got carried out by two of my brothers who now didn't let me throw on more than my shirt and shorts that I'd slept in.

Da only sighed when I was tossed into the trunk of the Land Rover.

Yes, I had more choice words for that.

The drive to the pack's lands wasn't far, but far enough for all three of my brothers to threaten to pound me if I didn't shut up.

I was seething when Da let me out of the back, gesturing to what I was wearing. "It's two in the bloody morning my time, Da. And I'm a bloody doctor, so the next one who grabs my wrist flippantly, I'm gonna break theirs."

He studied me. "Both are fair." He glanced behind me. "You're all too amused. Don't be gits or I'll let Ha-joon get revenge."

I smirked at my brothers after my father walked away... And they got nervous. Yeah, I was a bigger wolf than them—my father even. They were one wolf type or another, but I was sort of both. I had features of both and I was fairly large.

I took off what little I was wearing and shifted, letting my wolf have the time he needed. He immediately snapped at me, and I apologized. I'd been a dick to him and barely let him run in Atlanta. I promised to do better.

Just to be polite, he went over to Da and flopped onto his back, showing his belly and

neck and making it clear—as always—that we weren't a challenge and accepted his dominance over us. Da chuckled while my brothers made noises and called me a kiss ass.

He squatted down and scratched my ear. “Good lad. Go give your wolf something he needs to apologize. I know you're doing your best. Your mum has been filling me in and we're proud of you. My wolf is glad you like your new den from us and we provided like parents should, so let's not bring it up again.”

Damn. He won. I would let the condo thing go.

I rolled to my feet and licked his face, nodding that it was done.

I also agreed with him that my wolf needed a bit of spoiling and gave him permission to misbehave a bit... I just didn't foresee how he would do it.

My wolf ran hard—faster and longer than the others which actually pushed Da. He was getting a bit lazy too, and when my wolf growled at him in warning that was dangerous, he nodded, accepting his chastising.

Which reminded me that my parents were overdue for their physicals. I would talk them both into getting on the books so they could see firsthand how ASH ran and was different, but also their health was important to me.

“You're a fucking git,” my eldest brother snarled after we shifted back.

I gave a half shrug. “Da gave my wolf permission to misbehave. It's not my fault he had an axe to grind with you.”

“Give Ha-joon the front seat after he rode here in the trunk,” Da ordered when they got dressed. He gave me the look I deserved but then covered his mouth and spoke

under his breath. “I shouldn’t have enjoyed that as I did, but the git deserved it. He’s been a bit too big for his britches.”

“If you ever want my opinion on that for real, let me know,” I told him just as quietly. I sighed when he went tense. “I want the family and pack to succeed and I don’t have other motives, Da. I don’t want to lead. I like my life. So I’m the one person you can trust besides Mum that we’re rooting for his success and nothing else.”

“I’ll think about it,” he accepted after a moment. “And you will visit on weekends more to push my wolf. He’s all fired up.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“Fine, but not attwo in the morningmy time,” I grumbled as I climbed in the front seat.

“That’s fair,” he chuckled as he got behind the wheel. “We can do a lunch run on Saturdays if you come home Friday nights.”

“Once a month would be nice,” I admitted. “Learn some balance.” I took the opportunity when he nodded. “Like you and Mum need. You’re both late for your physicals. I’ll talk to Mum and get you both scheduled for—”

“We’re healthy and don’t need—”

“You are not the doctor,” I snapped. “And you set a bad example for the whole pack when you don’t take your health seriously. I see people with issues all of the time that could have been somethingsmallif they had just fucking gotten checked, Da. Physicals savelives, and you get to spend time with me telling you that you are healthy. That’s time not wasted.”

I was so into blasting him that I didn’t feel the tension and upset in the vehicle until I let out a few breaths.

Fuck.

“I won’t apologize for saying that,” I said evenly. “But I should have waited until we were off pack lands so your wolf doesn’t think it a challenge. I’m a son talking to his da about not being a git.” I met his gaze for a moment. “I listen to you as family. Listen to me and respect my knowledge too, Da.”

“You’re right,” he accepted after several tense minutes. “Even if I disagree, I should never be so dismissive of you. Sorry, Hugo.”

Steam was coming off my brothers, but I’d heard Da apologize to them too. They were too much and he should smack them into place.

“I was thinking of bringing up the idea of doing more outreach programs to the new board,” I told Da. “The blood drive turned out awesome. We should keep that going.”

“The vamps get enough damn blood and—” my second brother drawled.

“They’re most of our soldiers and first responders,” I cut in, shocking them again that I wouldn’t just let that go. “Yes, our soldiers mostly sit around and run drills.”

“But they keep peace and are deterrents to remind the other governments we fought for peace,” Da said firmly. “And we need to take better care of them. The vampires are valid that they’ve been pushed to blue collar roles because of what they handle better. We push our people to go into business and make a lot of money.

“They push theirs to serve in jobs that don’t pay anywhere near as much. I’ve talked with a few Alphas that are nervous. The vampires are voicing more upset over the way things are, and we’re fucked if they ever hit their limit.” He growled when my eldest brother snickered. “They control the fucking military, duffer. The police. They have access to everything.”

“Yeah, that’s a terrifying point,” I muttered as one of my other brothers agreed. “And they have the extra expense of blood. Shifters equate it to the extra food we eat but so do vampires and magics. We just don’t go around helping people move and do more with our extra strength. We protect and help pack. Our pack needs to be more than wolves.”

“It does,” Da agreed. “You come up with a plan and we’ll help. Even if it’s not with ASH’s additives, donate blood to give to the police and European military. Get a basic screening for all members—including kids—of the pack that donates. Maybe a screening day for London’s police that we can pay for so it’s not all on ASH especially stepping outside of North America.”

“That’s actually a great idea, Da,” I praised. “Yeah, most of the practices are closed on weekends besides overflow. We couldn’t do a full day with the time difference—that would mess us all up too much.”

“An afternoon is better than the nothing that’s been happening,” he accepted. “Get one on the books and more could follow. ASH is a leader and the founder a visionary who wanted to save lives and push peace.”

“What?” I asked.

“I heard a story about the founder, but I don’t know if it’s true. He risked his life to save some humans,” he muttered. “Everyone has monsters in their ranks, and several of the humans took advantage of the situation—we saw it here too.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“A mayor of where they lived or leader—maybe a minister—I don’t remember—wanted to marry a woman, but she wasn’t interested. When the chaos started, he threatened to name her whole family witches if she didn’t marry him. She was going to do it, but her father clocked the git, saying they’d never sell their family.

“He had them dragged in front of the town to be ‘outed’ and then locked them in their house, setting it on fire. The founder knew the woman and family. He was training her to be a nurse I think. He outed himself to save that family—got them all out with only minor burns and killed the guy and his men.

“The family thanked him and didn’t care, but the rest of the town freaked out and tried to kill him. But the story was that the founder of ASH used to treat humans. It wasn’t originally AllSupesHospital, but AllSouls. He didn’t want humans to be shipped off because that would corrupt them all against us. He made quite the stink about it, but people said a doctor—”

“Only knows medicine. Yeah, Ms. Reed is dealing with that now,” I said with a sigh.

Da nodded, frowning. “I remember a Reed from the beginning of ASH. I thought I once heard it was Dr. Miller who founded it, but—the memory fades.”

I snorted. “Our brains don’t deteriorate with age like humans. You just have too much to store.”

My da let out the rare full laugh, shocking my brothers. He laughed and laughed... But I saw the worry and tension. Something was going on with him and the stress was overwhelming him.

And I was going to figure it out. As his son.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

Definitely as his doctor.

3

Ha-joon

I woke to hear my parents arguing. Being able to hear my parents in their room was the only negative of coming back to my old room. All my siblings had rooms in their own wing of the estate, but after my parents found one of my siblings trying to smother me as a toddler... My room was moved next to theirs.

And they would never tell me which of my siblings was the monster that tried to kill their own brother.

It wasn't the jealousy of a kid who didn't understand either. Oh no, my next eldest sibling and I had a thirty-year age gap. My eldest brother and I were a lot further apart.

So they were all full-grown adults when I was born. One of them was so jealous of how powerful I was born that they tried to kill a toddler.

I was pretty sure I knew which it was—who would be scared and jealous of that, but my parents would never admit it. They would never have told me, but my second sister had made a shit remark when I was about ten about how much they all wanted me to disappear, but unfortunately one failed and missed their chance.

Seriously, my family was fucked.

Mum was laying into Da that he kept making the gap between me and my siblings worse by poking them. That they would never love me if they always felt so inferior to me.

I sighed and decided to rescue my father, worried about the stress I'd sensed from him earlier. I went to their room and knocked.

"Now isn't the time, Ha-joon," she called back.

"I can hear everything in my room, Mum," I reminded her gently. "I think I get to weigh in."

She sighed and opened the door, waving me in.

I knelt in front of her the moment she sat. "Mum, you did the best you could—everything possible. Some things just cannot be fixed. Some bridges never mended, and honestly even if they all acted perfectly and never gave me crap ever again, the damage done—I couldn't forgive them."

"Forgiveness is for you so you heal," she worried.

"Fine, maybe one day I can forgive, but I can't move on," I told her gently. I gave Da a worried look. "At least I can be motivating." I sensed the slight guilt and worry.

Something was really going on with him if I even sensed it.

I smiled at Mum. "You both love me and I have family. I know they're my full siblings and we carry out this stepsibling or even half-blood-related drama, but—leave it, Mum. No matter your power or desire, you cannot fix it. You can't force people to feel differently."

“Family shouldn’t be this way, my youngest,” she rasped. “You were born of our love just as they were. You are just as much our child and family as they are. It kills me.”

I reached up and wiped a tear that fell. “I’ll beat them all up for making you sad, okay?” I might have said more, but my phone beeped. I pulled it out and smiled. “The surprise is ready proving I’m not an ungrateful son. Let’s go with the warlock to get it and have some fun before I go out with my mates.”

She leaned down and kissed my head. “You are always a grateful and good son. You don’t have to bring gifts to come home—just yourself. Eat all of our food. We can get more. I just want my children happy.”

“I know, Mum. We are in our own way. We just won’t be friends.” I gave Father a wink and walked out with her. A few of my siblings were waiting in the kitchen... And one reeked of guilt. I asked Mum to get things set up with the warlock which she promised to handle.

The moment she was gone, I was on my brother. He didn’t even have a chance to block or defend himself. I decked him and knocked him out with one hit.

I turned on the others who were ready to jump me. “We all know I can take you fools, so save your breath.” I pointed to my knocked-out brother. “This is now how I handle you gits making Mum cry. Hate me. I don’t fucking care. I hate you too!” I rolled my eyes when they seemed shocked. “I’m not the nipper anymore following you around for love and attention.

“I think you’re all fucking pathetic. You’re entitled, and allof you could be as strong as me if you worked for it. But you don’t. You’re lazy. You’re selfish. Your egos are too big when you’re unaccomplished, and I tell a lot of people I’m an only child because you all are embarrassing given my level.” I smirked at them when they

growled.

“You aren’t as hot of shit as you think, Ha-joon,” my eldest sister snarled.

“I think I’m right where I am in life and my accomplishments speak for myself,” I chuckled darkly. “And you’re all so jealous that it’s all I smell when I’m around you. Enough making Mum feel it. Fucking suck it up and be fake around her so she stops suffering.”

“I can do—”

“What?” I demanded as I moved over by her, letting my wolf flex until she showed her neck to me. “What can you do against me? I’m stronger.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“Because you were born a freak and a fluke,” she growled.

“No, because I work at my endurance and health,” I purred as I sniffed her fear. “I worked harder in school. My private funds and investments are absolutely bigger than yours. All of yours. With no start-up from our parents.” I snorted when none of them believed me. “I’ll make you a bet. If any of you have private funds you started on your own more than mine—”

“You’ll leave and never come back?” she mocked, flinching when Da growled. “What?”

“I’ll let you tear the mickey out of me and never say another word as long as you don’t do it in front of Mum.” I gave her a wolfish grin. “All six of you can play. But when I win, this shit stops because it breaks Mum.”

They were quiet a few minutes and it was my second sister, Seo-yeon, who broke the silence. “I agree that we stop running to Mum or involving her.” She sighed when the others gave her looks. “Not because he says so. Grow the fuck up. I’m a hundred, and I’m done running to my mummy because I dislike our baby brother. She’s too good to us to suffer like this.”

My eldest sister gave a nod. “She walked out of here crying earlier and Mum doesn’t deserve that. I agree.” She let out a long breath and met my gaze. “No more involving Mum, but I still want to see what you got because I don’t think you beat me. Making money is my field, and I know Da asked you to make me connections. I don’t want it. I did it all on my own and will always.”

“You got start-up and some of your funds were from that,” one of my brothers muttered.

She bared her teeth at him. “You got a flat. I took that money and invested it. Built it up. Fine, I’ll take out that one building and the start.”

“You got other things, like your schooling as Ha-joon did,” Da cut in. “But yes, be fair if we’re going to be this petty in our damn family.”

Ouch. I heard the chastising for me as well and accepted it.

Ha-yun did too and backed down, muttering she’d called the others and we could compare and handle this. I nodded in agreement and left with Mum. Honestly, out of all of my siblings, it upset me most that Ha-yun was a git to me. She was the most like Mum, kind but fierce and always there for the others.

And always overlooked first as the eldest female in an old,oldpack like London. As much as my parents fought against that—it was the way of shifters too often. I even heard my grandfather giving her shite that she was a female and her job was to quietly support my brother.

I’d been about five and kicked him in the shin and defended her, but that had never won me points with her. She simply called me a kiss ass.

Can a five-year-old know enough to kiss ass and be so manipulative? I’d just thought Granddad was wrong and she was hurt and it upset me.

She was even given a docile name as if to remind her of her place. Da hadn’t known the meaning and Mum had apparently been out of it from giving birth, so her father named her first daughter. Da got to name his first son, but Mum’sfathergot to name the next child.

When the fuck did Mum get to name anyone when she carried us for so long and went through giving birth? Seriously, it pissed me off sometimes especially since shifters said we were the least sexist of any species.

We weren't. We just hid it better. Magics were by far the least sexist.

But Ha-yun was... We should have understood each other better. My sister was "summer combined with sky" lovely to everyone else. Just never me.

A name for a sweet baby girl who always did her duty and stepped aside. I'd felt bad for her when she was smarter and better than our eldest brother in every way.

Except beating and bullying me, but she wasn't far behind.

"This is too much, Ha-joon," Mum chastised as we picked up the catering.

"It's not," I chuckled, thanking the owner as the staff loaded up the carts we brought through the portal. They'd been able to accommodate even the extras I'd ordered and I was grateful. I told the owner as much.

"We appreciate the business," he said honestly. "Kept the staff working and used the ingredients we had. Business has been too slow since—" He chuckled awkwardly when he caught himself.

"I know everyone at the hospital loves this place," I muttered, shocked they were having trouble. "I was immediately told it's the best ribs and barbeque chicken in Atlanta."

His eyes shined with pride. "You got that from Ms. Ellie. She always tells all the transplants to come here. She's a gem. Works too hard and needs more help, but such a kind heart."

“I think she’s finally getting it,” I told him.

Mum and I managed with some additional large paper bags and I thanked them again before the warlock opened another portal. My family was beyond shocked when I brought in enough meat for several pigs and three dozen chickens. I simply shrugged.

“It won’t get eaten around here?” I teased.

“If it’s half as good as it smells, I’d eat it all on my own,” Da muttered. “I love American barbeque. Your mum promised we’d get it more with you moving, and it’s the only way I could let you go.”

It was sweet of him to say.

Weird, but sweet.

We ate and my other siblings showed up to eat as well. Mum glanced between us all, clearly knowing something was going on from the way we were all fired up.

Once dinner was over, we all pulled out our own laptops and brought up our financials. I gave my brothers disgusted looks when they were all immediately knocked out.

I actually had choice words for them and let them have it a bit in Korean that they needed to do better and not act like such entitled men who knew they'd inherit money. Da was a self-made man before he was ever considered Granddad's successor and they should aspire to that.

They didn't appreciate the tear down, but when it was clear that my three sisters were disgusted too, they changed gears and demanded to see what I had that was so great.

Ha-yun couldn't hide her shock as she looked it over.

And I had about the same shock as I looked over hers.

"You little shit," she hissed. "How? I'm way older than you and—how?"

"You have overhead and staff," I muttered as I studied the numbers. "I don't."

"This is impressive," she admitted.

“Who won?” Da asked, already having filled in Mum but not about the bet and the stakes.

“She does,” I said the same time she said that I did. She shot me a shit look and I sighed. “It would come down to stock prices in this moment, but you took out that building and I was thinking—I took more stock options in my contracts because I didn’t need to worry about funds and had my trust.”

“I did the same,” she conceded. “I’ll accept a tie and we will still name you winner.” She scrolled down a bit. “This is impressive, Brother. I didn’t think you had a finance education or—”

“Just the basics and I can’t take the credit,” I admitted as I sat back in my chair and met her gaze. “My mate from uni is an attorney. He’s always negotiated my contracts. His parents are pains who don’t like doctors but love me. I talk them into physicals and their appointments and he handles my legal everything. I have a financial advisor mate too.”

“Your last sons group,” she muttered, nodding when I did. “They did right by you.”

“Your range and diversity are impressive. It always makes me too nervous.” I looked some more and sighed. “I want to see one of your buildings.”

Instantly, her mood changed and she bared her teeth at me. “That wasn’t part of—”

“It’s not the intro Father wanted, but I heard something that you could use,” I told her. “In Miami, which is a tough market for most to get into.” I saw the interest in her eyes. “But I don’t know you, Ha-yun, or your practices. All of these places could be slums you overcharge for.”

“We would never allow that,” Mum defended.

“Agreed, but I’ve never seen it, and I have enough that haunts me from losing patients to—is it really so wrong to see one of my sister’s buildings?”

“No and I have nothing to hide,” Ha-yun said firmly. “I can give you a quick tour of any building you pick tomorrow before you leave.”

I extended my hand to her. “If it lives up to what I assume it will, I’ll even invest since clearly you’re a good investment.”

“And you’ve got the money to do it,” one of my brothers said bitterly.

“Deal, baby brother,” Ha-yun accepted. “And I want to talk to your money guy mate. The market has changed and I would like to talk numbers.”

I nodded. “You’re more than welcome to join us tonight for a drink and intro, but I do need my mates and don’t get them often.”

“Just a drink,” she accepted.

Maybe hell really could freeze over.

My mates couldn’t hide their shock when I walked in with my sister. One even spit out his beer all over the table.

“Smooth, tosser,” I chuckled as I walked over and introduced her. I growled when I scented something I shouldn’t have. “Oi, my sister, gits. Don’t even think it.”

“You’re all too young for me,” Ha-yun chuckled smoothly. “I’d hate to chew up one of my baby brother’s friends.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

My sister kept to her word, even buying the round of drinks when she learned they were out in celebration. She got her intro and ducked out.

“It’s really hard to think she’s the same Ha-yun we’ve been hearing about for decades,” my best mate, Matt, muttered after she was gone about five minutes so no chance she could overhear him.

I bobbed my head and flagged our server. “I hear my siblings are really nice people. They have a lot of friends and are genuinely liked—especially in the pack.” I swallowed loudly before finishing off my whiskey. “That’s just not what I know of them. Tonight was the first time she said anything nice to me or wanted...” I shook my head and ordered shots from the server.

I already had enough to sulk about. I didn’t need more or to go looking for more.

“I barely get to see you tossers and you should celebrate,” I said when they told me to unload what was going on.

“You’ve done the same for us,” my other friend, Russ, told me. “And we’re here to celebrate my success and that I’ve made it big enough your sister wants to talk to me professionally. So let me crash at your nice flat when I need a break from London and we’ll call it even.”

“Always,” I agreed, patting his back.

So I told them. All about the new job and how Mandy showed up—how she behaved and how that all blew up.

“I knew there was a bird,” one of my mates said with a cackle when I started to tell them about Ellie. “How is she? It good between you, yeah?”

I blew out air between my lips and took another shot. “Mate, it’s like—it doesn’t even fit the normal scale. And when she feeds from me it’s like my mind and soul—mywelfare at a new level.”

“Really? I’ve always been—I’m not food,” one of my other friends muttered.

“It’s not like that,” I said, a few of my mates echoing me. He seemed to accept that and I moved on, telling them the rest.

“So what’s the problem? She’s awesome and finally got that twat out of your life forever,” Matt asked. “I love her already.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “I feel like I might be going down the same path—history repeating itself. She didn’t tell me she was a doctor? What else is keeping and—”

“No, no, no, no,” Russ interrupted. “Nothing but love for ya, mate, but ya way off base on this one.”

“I know but I don’t, and it’s all just anxiety,” I mumbled, rubbing my chest.

“Mandylied, as in told you bullshit to your face when you were too young to sense it or just too in love,” he told me firmly. “Sky was purple, night was day. This bird—lady didn’t tell youyet. You’re not official, and clearly she’s had shite with her beinga doctor in the past in her current role. If youaskedher if she was a doctor and she said no—that’s a lie.

“This isn’t even hiding she’s talking to her git ex-lover keeping things from you. This is too new knowing each other and the information didn’t come up. If she was doing

shite in the operating room or trauma bays during the disaster and hid it—that's lying. She's clearly a bird who's been damaged. You know how that feels and the care needed. She's not Mandy."

"I agree," Matt and the others said, basically repeating what Russ said but in different ways with good examples as well.

"I hear you," I accepted and rubbed my chest. "I just..."

"You're falling hard," Matt chuckled, nodding when I blinked at him. I saw the others nodding as well. "Oh, come off it, mate. You're so into this lady that you've got hearts around ya. That's the anxiety and worry. The only other woman you ever got lost in like that was Mandy. But you were—we were stupid nippers.

"I didn't see her shite either and I thought she was a bitch." He shrugged when I did a double take. "I never liked her and not for you. But I never saw the lies. We were duffers." He reached over and patted my shoulder. "Now we're not. You know this is different. Fine, that wasn't how you should have heard it, but she was in deep shite.

"You take a breath—like a smart bloke and you have—and then go apologize for taking the time. That you wanted to make sure your head was on straight with all the stress you're both under and she's too important to make mistakes with. Even take the week and settle better into your life and your routine. See what you need and then go back to her and explain."

It was maybe the best advice he'd ever given me and that was saying a lot since he was my attorney.

"Though I'm still gonna kick your arse for signing a contract without letting me have at it first," he added with a bit of a hiccup.

It made me realize we were all pretty hammered. I texted my father asking for the driver to take them all home because they'd been good mates and helped me sort out my head through too many shots.

Then I remembered what he'd said. "The starting contract is the starting contract at ASH." I held up my hand to hold him off. "But yes, I should have let you check it. The situation was crazy and I jumped at the chance since I always wanted it."

"Fine, let me see it now. There could be some wording we could change or—just let me see it and stop making me worry, git."

"I promise. I'll email it to you the moment I sober up." I pulled him close and kissed his hair, laughing when he smacked me away. I should have still given it over to him when he handled so much for me.

Thirty minutes later, Da walked in and looked amused.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“Oh fuck, who called the Alpha?” one of my mates hissed.

“I asked for our driver to get you gits home,” I admitted as they all tried to stand and be respectful.

“You’re fine, lads,” Da forgave, greeting each of them with smiles. “Thanks for taking Ha-joon out in his rare free time. He’s needed a taste of home and his mates.” He smiled at me. “Make sure they have your mum’s number if they need to use the warlock we’ve hired.” He nodded when my mouth dropped open. “We’ll make it happen.

“I know your dream has always been ASH, Ha-joon. We just worry, and your mates visiting will help you settle there.” He looked over at my mates again. “So anytime you want to visit my boy, we’ll get you there and home.” He nodded as they all thanked him and asked about the tab. He chuckled when they argued who was going to pay for Russ’s night. “I got it.”

“Da, I didn’t call you here for this,” I argued.

“Ya didn’t call me here at all, just asked for the driver,” he reminded me.

Oh, ouch.

“Well, now we gotta have one with the Alpha since he’ll drink with us,” Russ said with a big happy grin. “Never had a drink with ya, Alpha. This is a celebration now.”

I shot him a grateful look and we pulled up a chair for my father. It was a good

moment, and I managed to grab the tab before he could, thanking him for coming and hanging out with us duffers. He nodded, but I decided to not leave it alone and brought it up later when we were alone.

There had been too many in our party for just the driver, so he took most of them and Da dropped off a few so it was just him and me at the end.

“Da, I don’t—”

“It’s fine, Ha-joon,” he interrupted, clearly knowing where my head was. “I shouldn’t have been petty that I had to invite myself to go out with your mates. Your brothers make a point to invite me—”

“They do?” I couldn’t hide my shock which made him frown. I swore under my breath. “Those fucking gits. They always tell me to leave you alone and you don’t have time for all our petty wants when you have the lives of so many on you. And they go out drinking with ya?”

He let out a slow breath. “I’m sorry they bullied ya that way too, but I’m glad to hear that’s the disconnect.”

I sighed. “It’s not just that, Da. My mates—we’re all the youngest with issues like I have with my siblings. We’re the misfits. That’s not the crew the Alpha hangs out with.”

He blinked at me for a moment before focusing back on the road... And then burst out laughing. The full laugh my father very rarely let out. It took him a few minutes to calm down. “Misfits? You lot are some of the most successful pups in the pack. Who the fuck has been telling you that...” He instantly lost his amusement.

Yeah, our families had been the ones to tell us that we were misfits.

“But it’s also that we’re rowdy, and you get enough of that, Da. That’s not who I would want you to spend time with to know more about my life.”

“I’m missing you,” he admitted.

That was fair. I was drunk after all. “Ya Alpha of London, Da. Come have dinner and cigars with Dr. Carpenter and Dr. James. Dr. Bass too. She knows a lot about wine and—that’s your speed. That’s your own mates.”

He shot me a look of love which surprised me. “Oh, lad, your heart is pure and I feel loved. But that’s who I have to be as the Alpha of London. I miss the days of getting rowdy at the pub and getting into a bit of trouble.”

I reached over and squeezed his shoulder. “Then we’ll get pissed with some of the attendings where they won’t care that you’re the Alpha, Da. I’ll set up a poker night at the condo and we can just have some fun.” I felt relieved when I saw the interest in his eyes.

Maybe there was a way to balance a better relationship with my family and what I needed now that I was living far away?

That would be nice.

Really nice.

4

Ellie

If he had gone silent for the weekend, I would have understood. Ifullyunderstood taking a weekend and sorting out your feelings and trying to wrap your head around

too much.

I'd done it.

I'd done it to him even. Fine, it was Sunday to Tuesday or whatever, but I understood that.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

But I'd never ignored him. When he'd shown up at my door, I hadn't turned and walked the other way or ignored him and just gone inside.

That was basically what he'd done when he ignored my text Monday.

And Tuesday.

Oh, and he literally turned around and walked away when he saw me at work on Tuesday.

I was a lot less understanding when a week went by.

And I was all out of understanding when another weekend passed without a word from him, especially since I'd sent more than two texts by then. I'd also left a few messages asking that he at least check in and tell me if he needed time.

Or if he was out.

I got nothing in reply. Not a damn thing.

Bastard.

So I was in less than a pleasant mood even if summer was right around the corner. Actually that normally put me in a shittier mood anyways. Most loved summer.

It was practically a requirement when living in the South.

I wasn't a fan of the heat. I would take being cold over being hot every day that ended in Y.

So all of them.

Fine, now and again I did love laying out by the condo's pool and getting some fresh vitamin D, but... The rest of the time it was too fucking hot.

It was too fucking hot right then at the end of April.

I flinched when something bumped my leg, snapping out of my snarly thoughts about stupid men and the stupid summer too. Glancing down, I saw bright green eyes blinking up at me.

"I'm lost," the child said to me and reached for my hand.

I let him take it but studied him a moment. I swallowed a sigh. He looked between five and ten and probably too young to be left alone by parents. I couldn't ever tell the ages of children. People always picked on me for that.

First, I wasn't a damn pediatrician. I dealt with adults and was rarely around children. Second, everything was more confusing when it came to supes.

Very fucking confusing.

I'd seen fifteen-year-old warlocks who looked seven because their magic hadn't flourished correctly and it had stunted their physical growth. On the flip side, I'd met seven-year-old shifters who I would have sworn were fifteen.

We weren't human. Everything was more complicated.

“Let’s find your mom or dad,” I said to him with the best smile I could manage.

“Daddy, no mom,” he mumbled, glancing around before looking up at me. “What’s a house husband?”

“What?” I asked, studying him again. This child was filled with a lot of confusion, but he wasn’t scared or even worried about being lost.

That was odd, right? Or were children... I had no idea.

“Daddy said to be nice to you because he could be a house husband then,” the kid mumbled.

Okay, so he was old enough to easily understand but still young enough where he wasn’t the best at keeping secrets.

“Is that so?” I chuckled darkly. “What else did he say before he sent you on this mission?”

The child beamed at me. “Daddy called it that too. Rich Mommy Mission. He said I’m too cute for anyone to turn down.”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

No kid was that cute... Though he was a cute pup. “Do you know where your daddy is? Is that why you’re confused? You aren’t actually lost?” I swallowed a snort when the kid immediately spilled the beans.

He excitedly told me about the big new room he would have and all the toys—the new expensive school he was going to attend when I became his stepmom. Not that he wanted me or a mom—he wanted stuff.

That’s why I wouldn’t feel bad giving a very firm no to this proposal.

Fuck no.

We “found” his dad at the security desk being the worst actor in the world.

“Just stop,” I told him firmly when he went to start the next act of this whole stupid play. “Your son is a better man than you because he’s honest and has integrity. He told me everything.”

His son nodded. “I told her about my new big room when she becomes my stepmom.”

Everyone around us froze.

“Who is this man?” I asked security, saying loudly that I wasn’t involved with him for everyone watching. “He’s not just a patient if he knows too much about me.”

The security guard gave me a pitying look. “I wouldn’t be sure about that, Ms. Reed.

It's spreading like wildfire." He waited until I nodded. "But he's a regular driver—delivers medical equipment to the hospital."

I nodded and covered the boy's ears, giving the dad a death look. "You are disgusting and vile. Sending your child to—women don't just lose their minds over kids. And the fact you promised a lot of everything you cannot give him to get him excited—disgusting. You think because you bring a child to the picture that is worthy of getting my money?"

"I can have children. I'm not unable or even—you are an idiot, and I hope he inherited his mother's intelligence." I let out a slow breath to get myself under control before I just yelled all day. "But you're right that he is a cute child and he makes me feel something."

It was seriously hard not to punch the guy when his eyes filled with hope.

"That you're lucky he's a good boy and confessed," I hissed. "And he was honest that his father is an idiot because otherwise I might make the call to get you fired." I nodded when the guy went pale. "The fact you're shocked is also disgusting, but if you dare yell at this child for being honest or try to punish him, I will."

I took my hands off the boy's ears and told him to go by his dad.

The kid frowned up at me. "But Daddy said if I talked to you that you'd be my stepmom and we'd get all the cool stuff."

I felt worlds better when everyone around us—patients and staff—looked at the dad with utter disgust. I ran my hand over the boy's hair and caught a glance of someone else. "You are adorable, but that's not enough for me to act stupid. You can't just do bad things and be rewarded because you're a cute pup."

And I said it while staring at Ha-joon. He'd walked up onto the scene with a few other doctors, so the timing was fitting.

"Don't ever try this again on any other woman, and if you ever treat your son like a tool for your financial gain, I'll call family services. So this better be the last time you try and act as a con man, yes?"

"Yes, Ms. Reed," he mumbled, wise enough to not even try to deny it. "Sorry." He grabbed his kid and practically raced out of there, the poor kid asking when they were moving into my house if they were leaving.

For the love of fuck.

"So you've had a day," Dr. Joyce Tai said as she came over to me, glancing towards the exit before meeting my gaze again. The WTF look she gave me was fairly hysterical.

"I always have those kinds of days," I drawled before looking at security. "Let's make sure he doesn't come back when he's not working. I'm not the only one he could target here."

He nodded but gave me a funny look. I held back a sigh until Joyce and I were alone. Clearly, something was up with that.

"Some of the former board are running their mouths that you hid that you were a doctor and your wealth because you don't manage it well," she explained. "That it was all from a mate and—you know how—"

I burst out laughing which shocked her, but it was maybe one of the stupidest rumors anyone had ever come up with about me. It took me a few moments to calm down, but when I did I had to wipe under my eyes. "If you had any clue all I'd done to not have

to mate—fuck, that’s so funny.”

I shook my head and walked towards my office, ignoring her curious looks. Maybe soon.

Maybe one day I could actually open up about my past.

But probably not.

The whole situation resonated with me though. I’d always known how cruel people could be, but... It just never got better.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

So I needed to be better to myself.

I made some calls and set up a few appointments. One was a recommendation from Sean and could fit me in during lunch. It seemed like such a foreign idea, but people did it all of the time.

People actually handled their lives during the day and made allowances for themselves.

My immediate staff were beyond shocked when I told them that I was stepping out to handle something personal during lunch but could be reached on my cell. It was actually amusing.

Like one of them dropped their sandwich in surprise amusing.

Dr. Renee Bass intercepted me on my way out. She was the Head of Psychiatry and Mental Wellness, and I'd asked for help a few times recently. She cut me a quick glance but was unreadable otherwise. "Lunch meeting?"

I nodded. "I've never updated my condo since it was built. I liked some of the newer features in another unit that I saw. Sean gave me a recommendation for a contractor and he could fit me in today to start getting some ideas—measure the space."

"And this is a response to this morning?"

"It's a response to a lot of things and even your reassuring me that my spa Saturdays are healthy. If the world will always beat on me no matter how much I help, I need to

make sure I'm helping myself too."

"Good, glad to hear it."

I stopped when I got near the door, knowing there was more to this. I turned to her with a tight smile. "What's up?"

She sighed and nodded, moving in closer and lowering her voice. "Joyce wasn't gossiping."

"I know. She never does." I bounced that around. She actually did all of the time but more passed information to me and what was being said around the hospital. "She never betrays a confidence."

That was very true.

Renee nodded, glad at least I understood this wasn't an attack. "She said she sensed panic and fear coming off of you when you laughed about the situation this morning. She feared the whole thing triggered you and you said something..."

I thought about it a moment and frowned. "I didn't think I felt that, just annoyed at the absurdity. I can't say she was wrong."

She studied me a moment. "How about we pick up takeout when it's time to get off and we can talk while you tell me what the contractor said?"

And tell her what I'd been talking about that set off alarm bells for Joyce.

"Yes, but how about tomorrow so you don't have to scramble for childcare and juggle things with your husband?" I said gently. I reached over and moved my hand to her arm. "I swear I'm not breaking. I just—sometimes things are so absurd you

laugh instead of swear.”

“Tomorrow would be lovely.” She covered my hand with hers. “You’re doing great. I know everything with the board—it will get better.”

“Thanks.” I meant it.

And yes, things after we kicked out the board had been rough.

Really, really, reallyfucking rough.

The meeting went okay. I had reservations about Fred. He seemed... Flighty. Which wasn’t something you wanted in your contractor?

He was ready to move heaven and earth to get the chance to give me an estimate and get his foot through the door, but then I couldn’t get any real answers from him. It wasn’t like I wanted to know when everything would be completed and a cost when we hadn’t even settled on a design and he’d really just gotten ideas from me.

But asking things like what’s his schedule looking like? What does a job like this range? Basic questions people ask and he had no real answers and mumbled everything evasively.

Yeah, so not confidence-inspiring.

I called Sean on the way back to the hospital and he laughed at my assessment. He said he completely understood where my head was and he should have warned me that Fred was the artist of the projects. He was super eager to get in and see the space, work on ideas, and give customers their dreams.

It was everyone else on the team—especially his business partner—who handled the

details and prices—scheduling and all of it.

Yes, that absolutely should have been in the notes when he referred them. But it was last minute and I probably threw Sean for a loop even asking. They were all worried about me... I understood. I thanked him for explaining and told him that I was looking forward to what could come out of it.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

I was ridiculously excited when he sent me the photos of some of the renovations Fred had come up with on his house outside of the city. They were gorgeous and exactly the vibe I'd want in my condo.

Basically, trust the process.

It was hard. I didn't have faith in people most days, and even more recently it seemed things were falling apart left and right. That trusting people was stupid.

I sighed and reminded myself of Joyce. Renee. Carla.

All the department heads who were stepping up and taking matters seriously. Alan was all over managing with his department to work closer with my staff and the president to get more blood drives going.

Faith was validly granted at times. I had to keep reminding myself of that.

The pep talk I'd given myself was shattered when I arrived back at the hospital and walked up on a situation. A woman and her daughter were both being unloaded out of an ambulance... Along with another woman berating her for making a fuss over nothing.

Instantly, I was thrown back to the past. I wasn't sure if it was the exact wording or the stress that I was already under that triggered me—probably both.

But it was also the amount of times it had happened and with different women.

“Ma’am, you need to step back and not get involved,” I said harsher than I should, interjecting so fast that even the EMTs hadn’t seen me coming.

“Who are you to tell me what to do?” she snapped, doing a double take when she realized what I was.

As I did her which made it all the worse for me. Something I could freak out about later.

She rallied though, not caring that another vampire was stepping in her way. “That’s my granddaughter and daughter-in-law and I—do you have any idea who I am?”

“Lady, she runs this place, so you better check yourself before you make an enemy you cannot afford,” one of the EMTs suggested sounding too tired.

And normally getting to check people amused EMTs and support staff. They stopped getting yelled at then when the big bosses arrived or at least people who could shield them.

Which told me that this woman was in a whole other league.

“They’ll take good care of your family, ma’am,” I pushed, getting a clearer picture when she flinched and anger filled her eyes.

It was starting to be red flags for as far as I could see. Seriously.

I forced her to admitting to fill out paperwork and reminded her that she would need to call her son to let him know that his wife was hurt. She ranted that she wasn’t going to bother her son for something so unimportant and her daughter-in-law was just attention-seeking.

She finally realized she needed to tone it back when just about everyone around us looked at her like she was a monster. Clearly, she was, but monsters were normally better at hiding it.

“How bad?” I asked when I rejoined the group, speaking to the EMTs.

Rage was coming off one of them at my question. “We couldn’t get any information to figure out much because of that woman trying to answer everything. The woman fell holding the child. That was all she would say and she was being ridiculous having called an ambulance.”

“She did let it slip especially since the kid woke backup,” the other EMT added.

Absolute monster.

The mother was so scared that they were having a hard time treating her. In such pain that her mind wasn’t her own and all she cared about was her daughter.

I moved right to her head and held it still as I pressed my lips to her ear. “Calm yourself, darling. I will protect your daughter like she was my own. Your mother-in-law, nor husband, will go near her until you say otherwise. Not in my hospital, I promise. And we will help you get out of whatever you’re in and keep you both safe.”

She stopped thrashing and simply closed her eyes, tears leaking out. “I haven’t ever felt safe. I wish I had jumped, but then my baby would never have been born. I cannot keep letting her be hurt. I failed as a mother.”

A growl distracted me and I glanced up to meet the gaze of one of the emergency department doctors. “This was not nothing and minor. She’s got four cracked ribs, not just broken, and a list of injuries. This wasn’t just a fall.”

“Stairs,” the mother gasped. “I fell down the stairs when she threw things at me again.”

“I’m making the call,” I told everyone there. “She’s a victim of domestic abuse. Private room and guard at all times. No one is allowed in besides staff until I say otherwise.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“We know the drill,” the doctor promised.

One of the nurses was already pulling out his cell phone. “I’ll contact the advocate.”

I nodded and went to check on the child, my heart breaking when she was desperate to know how her mom was. I promised we would take the best care of her—them both and keep them safe.

I just needed to know what happened.

“Grandmother is horrible,” the little girl choked out. “She’s so mean to Mommy. I hate Daddy too. He ignores it and—he never believes us. She got mad at Mommy and threw something at her. It hit Mommy in the head, and she was holding me, protecting me, and we fell. We fell down all the stairs and Mommy shielded me as best as she could.”

“You lost consciousness, right?” I checked, elaborating what I meant when that seemed to confuse the little girl.

She nodded but then winced, her neck undoubtedly hurting her. “I woke up and Grandmother was screaming at Mommy. She said bad things meaner than normal. She said she wouldn’t just make us leave but would kill us because Mommy called help.”

“She threatened your lives?” I checked.

The little girl nodded. “She said if Mommy really called 911, she would kill us both.

Mommy said she didn't but called Daddy, but Grandmother screamed she was a liar when the ambulance and police came. Mommy did something with her phone. Grandmother tried to take it but couldn't unlock it."

"Okay, okay," I said gently when she tried to sit up and tell me more. She was in pain and needed to stay still. "That's enough for now. I can get the rest from your mom when she's better. Now I can call the police and—"

"They don't help," the girl said too loudly, tears going down her cheeks. "Daddy lies that he doesn't see anything, and it's him and Grandmother against Mommy. I don't count. So they never do anything."

"They will this time," the doctor promised. "Ms. Reed is the guardian angel of women who are being hurt. She saves them." He reached out and booped her nose. "If I am ever in trouble or being hurt, she is the first person I will run to so I'm protected. That makes you very lucky to have come here today when she was near."

The girl stared at me cautiously. "But you're a vampire like us. Mommy says they won't ever help us."

I reached over and gently rubbed her shoulder since her head had to hurt. "Because I was a vampire like your mommy," I confessed, ignoring when people went tense around us. "Someone in my family hurt me too and no one cared. Someone helped me, and one day when you're both safe and living wonderful lives, you and your mom will help others too."

"I would," the little girl promised. "I would help. If you help Mommy, I'll help lots of people when I'm older."

I winked at her and went off to battle knowing exactly what came next and what I needed to do.

Ellie

The woman was a mess of new wounds... And some old. That wasn't normal as a vampire, but the mother-in-law didn't let her have as much blood as she needed.

And she would need more to heal from injuries.

These sorts of situations were so triggering for me because I was almost the woman who came in. It was the fate I'd almost faced not once before, not twice before.

But three times. That last time even after I'd showed I was different and special. Father thought he could win the absolute brass ring selling me off after learning just how special I was instead of just taking over the family and being his successor.

That was when I'd first decided to run. I didn't blame others for not running though. Especially back then it was certain death, and it was a miracle that I hadn't become one of the many who fled and regretted it.

Death wasn't worse than being bled dry more than a normal mating, and I didn't have a child to protect. Once there was a child, it trapped the women.

I listened to the exhausted and traumatized woman tell me her story. She was on pain medications and potions now, so she wasn't in pain and could talk.

Well, she wasn't physically in pain, but her soul would be for many, many years.

Unfortunately, it was a story I'd heard too many times. The woman before me was sold to a wealthier family for an alliance and to raise her family's station. The men of the family deciding it and the whole situation setting off the mother-in-law.

Thelie the “matriarch” had been told about how she’d have power and a voice when she was married or when she’d had a son—any of them—were finally shown to her. She realized she would forever not matter, and that last shred of hope that she wasn’t just a broodmare and now past her prime and not even respected for birthing children was gone.

And she’d snapped. Lashing out at the new woman in her family who would at least be respected for birthing the next generation of males in her family—“stealing” her position and place in the family. It was like a mental breakdown and the daughter-in-law was blamed for everything.

Instead of who should be blamed.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

Instead of blaming herself for ever believing any of the bullshit or even allowing her life to become what it did.

Another woman in the cycle of abuse who was now full of such self-hate that she'd broken. And she couldn't take it out on her mate. There would be no point and probably punishments if she did.

Her son was technically innocent in it all and probably didn't mistreat her. Except he would now not treat his mate as he should and she raised the man to behave that way—another sin in her eyes that she couldn't accept.

None of this was excusable. No one should feel bad for her.

Maybe just feel bad for the girl she once was and this was her fate.

But now she was the monster she'd suffered through with her mother-in-law or whatever female family members had done the same to her. Other women were the only outlet to abuse after years or decades of being kicked.

It was disgusting. It was... I would rather have walked into the ocean.

Not everyone could handle their lives going to shit or how to fix it all. The mother-in-law could have walked away at any point. She could now, and by the law she would be set. She could leave and be protected. But she didn't. She'd clung onto the lie or promise that being the matriarch of the family meant something and she'd have some sort of power.

Until she realized the truth and they would forever lie to her. None of that was her daughter-in-law's fault, but she blamed her. She blamed the woman sold like she'd been for not being able to choose the mate for her son.

It was all so ridiculous and horrible.

"It got worse when I gave birth to a daughter," the woman told me. "Before then, it was just hazing and being her servant. Stuff you expect mating into money and my husband told me to just be patient with her and let her adjust. She stopped when I was pregnant, and I thought it was over. She cared more about being a grandmother."

"But you realized it was that your husband was around more and checked in on everything—truly paying attention because you were carrying priceless cargo," I offered.

She gave a slight nod and a pitying look. "You know from experience."

"No, but I'm older than you and saw it again and again coming from a wealthy family," I told her gently. "I ran. I blew up the first two sales for me, and things got much worse, so I ran."

"I hate myself for wishing that I'd run, but then I wouldn't have my daughter and she's everything," she choked out. "I'm a horrible mother."

"You're not, darling," I comforted, moving onto the bed with her and holding her as best as I could. "You're not. You kept your baby safe and got here. We'll get you free and safe. I swear it. You made it. This is the day you protect your pup and we break this cycle so she never knows this pain—never knows the fear of being sold."

I wiped my eyes a few times as the woman sobbed. It was in pain but also so much more.

Relief she was safe. Fear it wouldn't last.

Hope I was right about her daughter though she was too exhausted to have much hope and she didn't have faith in much anymore. I understood all of it.

I truly did.

But I did not fail the women I came across in this position. I never had and I never would. Not as long as they did as I said and stayed strong—followed the program we had in place.

I had all the ammo I needed once I got the list from the doctors for both mother and daughter. Also, the mother had been smart enough to record the mother-in-law this time... And apparently, several other times recently. Clearly, she'd hit her limit.

She was hesitant to give it over to me until she saw the security guard that I promised would be posted just for them and her daughter joined her in the private room. I went over the procedure of domestic abuse cases and how the room was under another name just to be safe. Also, it was flagged not to be disclosed in our system.

When her daughter told her that the doctors said I was an angel who saved women, that was the moment she let go of the phone. She had questions in her eyes that I didn't make her ask.

“Besides running this place, I'm the founder of the largest domestic abuse shelter for vampires,” I explained. “And just like I told your daughter, one day when you're safe and in your newlife, you will help someone as you are being helped. That is how we break this madness—this tradition of selling women and allowing our own people to be treated this way.”

Tears filled her eyes. “I can't even picture what it would be like to ever be able to

help someone else. It's like a reality beyond what I could dream of."

I reached over and squeezed her hand. "The women who will help you said the exact same thing when they were helped. Listen to them and stick to the program to get free and you will be where they are someday. Trust us and do not listen to your husband or allow him to..."

The hate in her eyes said it all. Yeah, this wasn't a case of backsliding or love could cloud too much.

Gerald was waiting for me in the hallway. "I didn't know you were the founder of Amanda's Hope. There's no founder listed—people have talked for years wondering who Amanda is or how to find Amanda Hope."

I searched his eyes and found only genuine curiosity and worry. "Amanda Hope died many, many years ago. She is the only reason I lived after I ran from my family. I named the foundation after her. That is not to be shared."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“Of course,” he accepted before nodding towards the room behind me. “How can I help?”

I was surprised but actually not really. I let out a soft chuckle. “A warrior too, huh?”

He took in a deep breath and let it out. “The world is so much better than what it used to be, but there is still so much wrong that—I realized I’d become selfish and lazy. I took my success and sat back to bask in it.” He studied me. “But you hid your success and used all you’ve done to always keep fighting. I don’t like realizing I’m selfish.”

Fair enough. I nodded to my left, my warrior already here. “This is Alexis Gomez, lead counsel of Amanda’s Hope. If you’d like to coordinate with her or help—we can always use it.” My lips twitched when Alexis snorted. “The former head of the legal department was always trying to fight this and a women’s shelter ‘fishing’ for cases at the hospital.”

“Well, the disgust coming off of him at that makes me like him even if you hadn’t already said good things about him,” Alexis said with a chuckle before extending her hand. They introduced themselves and she promised she could absolutely use the help.

That raised warning bells with me. “What’s going on that I don’t know?”

She gave me an amused look. “Lots. Always lots, but you’re a bit busy, Ellie.”

“Yes, but—what can I do?”

She started to tell me nothing but then sighed. “Fine, I can give you a list of hospitals that are being pains and not calling us like they agreed to. A bit too much pressure too often and shit thrown back on them and they—”

“They’re turning a blind eye because it’s easier,” I grumbled. “Yes, get me the list and I’ll handle it.” I held up my hands in surrender when she sighed. “I have presidents currently owing me favors. Our president is a vampire and a huge advocate for Amanda’s Hope. I will makehimremind them of that.”

“Done.” She nodded towards the door. “How bad?”

“Husband wasn’t physically abusing them, just turning a blind eye to it all and needs to cut the umbilical cord with his monster mother,” I answered. “It all ramped up when she had a daughter—same story we’ve seen. Hopefully, no lasting physical damage on either of them, but it will be a long road.”

“Any abuse on the daughter?”

“Grandmother throws things and yes, has hit the child,” I confirmed, holding up the phone. “Threats to kill them both that I will send you.”

“Good. Okay, I will walk her through the process and get started on it all,” Alexis said as she reached for the door.

“Wait, she’s being treated and on pain medicine,” Gerald cut in. “Anything she signs will be called into question and would—”

“Yeah, I know, and this isn’t my first rodeo, kitty,” Alexis drawled. “You’re the new kid here. Listen and learn.”

He blinked after her as she didn’t even wait for a response and went inside. “Right,

okay, right then.”

And then he followed after her.

The security guard and I shared an amused look but then I had to put on my game face and jump into battle.

And a battle it was.

The husband was there now and his mother was playing the ultimate victim. Female vampires were some of the best actors there were, and it wasn't a compliment since we'd all learned from an early age.

It was a needed skill for survival.

But we were all taught to be manipulative and to act well, so we—our society was truly fucked up.

“Enough!” I snapped, focusing on the man. “Your mate will be filing for a dissolution of your—”

“My wife,” he corrected. “She's not my mate. She's just my wife that I was—it was a strategic marriage.”

His mother slowly looked at him in horror and he cleared his throat knowing he'd slipped up but kept focused on me.

But I wasn't going to let it go. I let out an evil chuckle and waited until she met my gaze. “And you thought you raised him so well—not like those other monsters or your husband who abused you, right? Your sons weren't going to be like others, but he is. He will find his mate just like the rest of them while—”

“Shut up!” she screeched. “You know nothing and—”

“I know this world and game too and I’m older than you,” I snapped. “I ran from becoming you, so I have every right to stand here on my soap box and lecture.” I moved closer to her, stopping only when someone cleared their throat to remind me to keep my head.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

These situations were the only times that I ever cracked, ever broke my professionalism, and those who had been at the hospital for a long time knew it.

It also made it a bit odd that Tommy really hadn't known anything about my family background. Then again, it was our security normally involved, and they were under my department... And kept their mouths shut.

"You are the whore to these vile men," I hissed at her. "You are the one that was bought and their mates are the ones they love. You think you're the matriarch and the respected one, but we all know the truth. You were bought like the broodmare you are and—" I caught her hand when she went to slap me and backhanded her instead.

And my hit had her landing hard on the floor.

"I will sue you and this hospital for all you have," the man threatened. "I want my wife and daughter right now and we're leaving to—"

I snorted, meeting his gaze. "Go ahead and try." I pointed to all of the cameras around us. Then I pulled out his wife's phone and played the recording she told me about first. It was his mother hysterically screaming that it was his wife's fault for falling down the stairs and she'd kill them both if she called for help.

The bile that came out of her mouth and was recorded made people go pale around us.

The man just got annoyed.

“Shut it off,” he finally snapped.

“Sure, I have something better,” I purred and played her a recording of one of their conversations where she tried to tell him that his mother was abusing her and their daughter.

“That was illegally recorded in my home and—” he started to interject and tried to reach for the phone.

Two security guards stopped him and gave him looks not to be stupid.

“Yourhome, huh?” I chuckled. “I’m very sure it’s the law that she can record anyone in her home that she wants especially when she feels unsafe and is collecting evidence to leave you.” I nodded when he froze. “She was getting ready to leave you. She needed evidence that you were complicit so it didn’t go to court and you could play the clueless victim.”

“I had no idea Mother was abusing her,” he snapped.

I smirked at his mother. “Look how fast your beloved son turned on you when it’s to save his own ass.” I focused back on the son. “Don’t worry, you’re in just as much trouble.”

He snorted at me. “I never touched her. You don’t know what you’re talking about, and if she’s saying otherwise—she can leave, but my daughter will stay with me and—”

“So you can sell her?” I roared, and someone from security had to stop me from moving closer to him. “No, this ends. The disgusting cycle of this family is broken and you’re going to prison, you monster. You will never—”

“Forwhat?” he bellowed, security having to hold him back as well.

I wiggled the phone at him. “You knew she was sold.” I smirked when he stopped fighting. “She wasn’t allowed to leave her house after she told her parents she wouldn’t marry you. That’s false imprisonment and more. And you knew that. She has you recorded saying you not only knew but that her parents would kill her if she didn’t mate you.

“You were an accessory to all of it. You didn’t report it like other honorable men have who freed their forced mates. And there is no statute of limitations on this. On any continent.” I beamed at him. “And how long has this been a law for? How many years?” I smiled even wider when he ground his jaw. “Over fifty years, right? That’s your mating—sorry, marriage.”

I waved at the police who had arrived, signaling that we were the ones who wanted them. I explained the situation, but apparently the younger rookie with them wasn’t well-versed in vampire everything.

“Wait, isn’t she a victim as well since they didn’t report she was sold as well?” he asked, glancing from me to the mother-in-law with worry in his eyes. He winced when the other officers gave him a look to shut up.

“He’s a warlock,” I reminded everyone there, deciding to explain it to the pup. “She was. She was a victim up until the moment she became part of the cycle and abused her daughter-in-law. She had the ability to report her own sale and then the buying of her daughter-in-law, but she didn’t. Instead, she abused the woman and her granddaughter. She’s not the victim.”

He nodded but then shot the woman a long look, swallowing loudly. “Villains really are made, not born.”

I nodded. “I mean, some evil is born or just born wrong but yes, monsters are made. But that was her choice and weakness. Lots get out and save others.” I met the woman’s irate gaze. “I’ve met many who helped their daughters-in-law escape.” I nodded when she couldn’t hide her shock. “And those daughters-in-law went back for them when they could.”

My last parting words to the husband were to wish him luck on his time in prison and being trapped just like he’d let his wife be. That even criminals didn’t like vampires who bought women, so he would have fun there.

He finally looked more than mad or annoyed.

Good.

I knew the patriarch of the family would stick his head out and make trouble, but I really wouldn’t have guessed he’d do it in such a stupid way.

“Let’s have a chat, Ms. Reed,” a man said from the vehicle that pulled up next to me as I was walking across the hospital’s campus to the parking garage.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

I snorted and didn't even look over. "Go fuck yourself. There, good chat."

The vehicle swerved in front of me to block my path and I looked at the man then, seeing the same rage-filled eyes I had earlier on the husband.

"Your father really needs to get you in line, girl," he bit out.

I threw back my head and laughed. "I'm older than you, boy, and my father is a useless piece of shit who is as deluded as you are." I smirked at him. "But bully on you for doing your homework and learning I'm from that family. At least you're not a lazy adversary. Even the former board of directors didn't do their due diligence."

He didn't hide his surprise well and shook his head. "Laziness really comes at all levels."

"Oh, I didn't think there would be anything I agreed with you on, but I do that." I still made it clear that I looked down on him. "Well, good chat. I'm too busy for this, and I believe you're wanted by the police, yes?"

He adjusted his neck and opened the door, getting out of the vehicle. "We're about to handle that, so get in the car and let's have a pleasant chat before this gets ugly, Ms. Reed."

The window of the passenger's seat rolled down and I saw the gun before I heard it click.

I smirked at that guy. "Yeah, go ahead. Not only would I be fine, but cameras are all

over here and security is absolutely on their way since they always watch my walk to the garage. So your threat is stupid and—”

“You are on my last nerve,” the patriarch snarled as he moved towards me.

I was ready to block him when he reached for me but gasped when he suddenly wasn’t there.

And instead, was on the ground being mauled by an extremely large wolf.

Oh shit.

The guy in the front seat opened the door to get out and help his boss, but I kicked the door hard. It bounced him into the car and he dropped the gun.

“It’s Dr. Clark!” someone yelled from my left.

I saw security coming out of the corner of my eye as the driver got out. He was armed too, but he saw that more help was arriving and flipped the gun in his hand so it wasn’t a threat.

“The wolf is Dr. Clark,” one of the guards I knew well said as he joined us.

Oh, right, the wolf.

“Makes sense,” I muttered, giving a half shrug when the wolf turned to me and huffed. “Hey, it’s not like I’ve seen your wolf, and I was kind of focused on all of this.” I gestured to the vehicle and people.

I took it as a good sign when the wolf just plopped down next to me.

“He’s alive,” a different guard said as he went to the now-mauled vampire. He glanced up at me. “We have to like help him, right?”

“Yes, we’re a hospital,” I drawled. I rubbed my hand over my face before looking down at the wolf. “You are really an enigma and just made a huge fucking headache for yourself.”

“We were alerting people we were leaving our posts because you had a problem and Dr. Clark blew by us,” the first guard explained. “I’ve never seen someone run that fast and then his stuff was on the ground and...” He gestured to the wolf.

Yeah, he shifted. Even I was caught up on that.

“Alright, let’s go handle the next headache for me instead of the salad in my fridge from that new place I’d been planning for my exciting night,” I drawled as I headed for the police who were pulling up.

Always, always something to deal with.

6

Ha-joon

I had thought I’d beat Ellie to her condo given she had to talk to the police and handle more, but then again, I’d had to talk to them as well. And security.

And I’d stopped for flowers.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

That had always been the plan since I was going to talk to her tonight anyways. It was well past time. That was glaringly obvious from her comments earlier today.

So yeah, I'd been ready to wait outside her door, but instead I realized someone was already inside. I took in a deep breath and slowly let it out before ringing the bell.

And no one answered. I waited a whole minute and no one answered.

Did she think it was someone random or... I had no idea how many people even knew where she lived. I'd learned more about her today and she wouldn't be happy about that, but it wasn't my fault.

People weren't even gossiping. My hearing was just too good.

I rang the bell again, feeling like an asshole when I did it a third time. I should have taken the hint, but I was pretty sure that I would have had a hard time coming back if she didn't open now.

She looked less than thrilled when she pulled open the door... In a bathrobe, dripping wet.

"Shit," I hissed.

"Yeah, idiot," she grumbled and spun around.

I caught the door before it closed and came inside, locking it behind me. "Sorry, I thought... I wasn't thinking just—ya know and—sorry."

She didn't say anything until she returned several minutes later looking as if she'd finished her shower. She sighed heavily as she gestured in a weird way as if to all of me and maybe my issues that followed me in? "I really don't have the mental nor emotional energy for all of this and I had a piece of the funny brownie. I just don't have the energy to kick you out either."

"Okay then," I muttered, unsure of how to handle that and my plan of groveling not going well. I extended the flowers to her. "I was going to come talk to you today anyways, not just—"

"Because you played my white knight?" she drawled, ignoring when I frowned. "Though I can't even be mad. I wouldn't have sat still either if someone pulled a gun on you. We're people who dive in. It's fine."

"I wasn't really looking for a thank-you, but I didn't think I was going to be in trouble," I hedged, mentally wincing when she gave me a death look. "For that. I know I'm validly in trouble for a lot."

"Well, at least you're not a complete moron then," she mumbled. "I picked up Chinese on the way home. Help yourself." She rubbed her neck and frowned. "Just because I'm letting you in and feeding you doesn't mean we're okay. You're a super huge dipshit. I'm just being an adult. You should try it sometime."

Oh, ouch.

"Can I explain?"

"Can you?" she mocked as she headed for the kitchen.

I let out a slow breath. "Are you open to hearing where my head was? You said you didn't have the emotional energy for all of me and my issues. I didn't know if that

meant be quiet or just don't expect a response from you."

"The latter, but I'm less pissed at you that you're making that distinction and genuinely checking," she admitted as she loaded up two huge plates. "And I wasn't being a grammar shit. I was asking if a man could explain his feelings after being so stupid."

"I hope so. I hope I can put this into Ellie," I admitted.

"Alright, let's see how this works," she accepted. "I retained most everything after the last brownie fun. Maybe this is the better way to handle conflict." She snorted. "It would be nice if I got to handle problems like this."

Fair enough.

I told her what I'd figured out at home, what Mum had helped me understand and then even what my mates had clued me in on. I was honest but tried to be concise as we ate.

She waved at my chest when I was done. "Take off your shirt. I'll be less annoyed at you for comparing me to that slutbag in any way even if I know it wasn't really about me but your issues."

I slowly blinked at her for a moment and then mentally shrugged, yanking off my sweater and staring at her as if to ask what next.

She burst out laughing. Ellie let out a magical laugh that was perfect and she almost fell off the chair she was laughing so hard. She stopped laughing when I went over to help her, pointing back to my chair. "You're still in the doghouse. Go sit there like a good boy and hopefully say less stupid."

“I can sit there, but I’m sorry because there’s more stupid,” I admitted as I made sure she was stable. I sighed and took my seat again. “I was going to come right back and text you. I was going to ask to see you, but checking out my sister’s building turned into seeing a couple and—it was interesting—seeing that side of her.

“And then I was asking about the opportunity in Miami. I was going to swing by your office and ask to talk that night, but then I wasn’t ready, and I didn’t want you to think I was distracted or wanted to use you.” I hurried on when she frowned. “Asking about American real estate or owning buildings since I’m going to invest with my sister.”

“Is that smart when she’s proven not to treat you right?” she hedged. “Could you really sue your own family if she screws you? How much pressure would your parents put on you not to get involved or make problems for the family?”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

I opened my mouth but then closed it, frowning. I let out a heavy sigh and stretched.

“Do it again,” she chuckled when I busted her for watching.

Yeah, sure, I would do whatever made her happy.

“I don’t know, and clearly I needed to talk this through with you since you’re smarter than me,” I grumbled, frowning when she snorted. “You are. But I didn’t want to mix things. We do handle things well, but this is the priority.” I gestured between us. “But you were also dealing with all the fucking fallout with the board. It seemed selfish—”

“You don’t get to decide that. I decide that,” she snapped. “Don’t decide things for me. I was texting you asking if you were okay and reaching out—”

“You’re right,” I said firmly. “You are completely right and I was an idiot—I am one.” I let out a slow breath when she seemed to accept that and calmed down. “I shouldn’t have made the decision for you and you’re right. I would just like to explain where my head was at.”

She took a large, angry bite but then gestured with her fork for me to go ahead.

“You were overloaded and looked overwhelmed. Adding to that when I’d been stupid seemed cruel. It seemed like I’d be trying to break you. I couldn’t help you, so I could at least stay out of your way. I was raised not to be a problem and to stay out of the way.” I frowned as I realized how true that was, folding into myself a bit.

“That’s clearly not a line from what I’m getting off of you and you just realized how

badly you've been treated and trained," she mumbled.

"Yeah, I don't think I saw the way it leaked over before," I whispered, staring at my plate. "How easily I push what I want or need to the side so I don't bother others. And now I just found out part of it was a lie. My brothers were setting me up so I didn't get closer to my dad. They're always so worried I'll want to become Alpha or—it's fucked.

"I'm sorry my fucked leaked over so I didn't handle this better. I let it go too long. It should have just been the weekend, and I should have told you like an adult. You're right on that. Saying I needed a time-out to sort my head is completely acceptable. I just—it went too long, and I kept thinking just push it back a day until things calm down for you and don't bug you."

"I understand where your head is, and I even appreciate the consideration, but I'm mostly pissed you ignored what I was saying for you to decide what was better for me, Alpha."

"I didn't mean it like that," I whispered. "I really didn't. I see how it came off like that, but I swear it wasn't my goal or where my head was."

She didn't say anything for several minutes and just kept eating, my wolf practically squirming as she did. Hell, he was ready to show her our belly just to get out of trouble or feeling this pressure from her. "Only time will tell. Your actions don't fit your words, and as much as I want to believe you, I need to see the pudding."

That took me a moment. The proof was in the pudding, right, got it.

I nodded and opened my mouth to apologize again.

"But part of this was my not telling you things. I'm glad your friends sorted you out

on that, but you need to accept that I won't tell you shit. We're not even fucking dating and we barely know each other. You told me a lot and I accept that—am always willing to listen. Just because you told me about your family does not make me obligated to tell you dick, and I won't be—”

“You're right,” I agreed.

“Stop fucking interrupting me,” she blasted, rage and something else in her eyes.

Fear. My wolf scented it and that was why he was squirming. This was setting her off and she was afraid.

Not of me. Of the past repeating itself?

Was I acting like Tommy Fitz to her?

I really, really hoped not.

I didn't say anything for a moment, unsure of how to handle this. Then I decided to just be honest, pushing my hair back and letting out a long breath. “I'm not interrupting to be dismissive or because your words aren't important, Ellie. My wolf and I don't like seeing you this upset. The more you're talking, the more your anxiety and anger are rising.”

“That's for me to decide,” she mumbled. “I appreciate you caring, but I just got out of an emotionally abusive and manipulative relationship. Even I understand that I need to feel that I'm being heard and not brushed off.”

“You're right. You're absolutely right. I'm sorry.”

She nodded and then gave an inch, saying that it was normal for people to interrupt

when things were heated or they were excited. She just needed the consideration when there were issues.

And I was proud of her for saying that. I wished I could articulate my needs that well. It clearly had taken a lot for her to say that too.

Which was why I moved to sit next to her, sliding my arm around her and kissing her hair. “I’m on your side. Even when it’s on the side against me because I’m being a butthead.”

“Stupid butthead,” she mumbled... But didn’t push me away.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

We talked a bit more and my wolf seemed settled that she believed me but wasn't accepting things were okay. She said as much and that she needed some time to process after this was all blown way out of proportion.

"Can I ask why you didn't tell me about Mandy?" I hedged, still needing to know that.

She gave me a tired look. "I only found out at the end of work the day before. I was going to tell you, but someone made me completely forget everything else and I didn't think she'd be so stupidly bold to pull something the next morning. Of course I would have told you if I'd known there was a clock on it. I figured oops, we had fun instead and I'd tell you at lunch."

Fair enough. Yeah, that was more than fair.

"Is it a mess with your pack?" she asked as we cleaned up the containers and stored stuff in her fridge.

"My parents are trying to keep most of it from me because they're worried I could feel guilty or still have lingering feelings for her," I answered honestly. "It's really not like that. My feelings for her died hard a long time ago when I realized I was just an investment to her—a way to move up in the pack and her station."

"Yeah, everything changes when you realize you're being used like that. Others can't always understand that."

I realized I needed to be honest with her when I was pushing for it as well. "I

overheard some of what happened today. The guards weren't gossiping. My hearing is just that good and they were warning a newbie that while the hospital gossips, never about your situation and how you help vampires like that."

"Because I was once in that situation," she finished for me. She sighed when I didn't say anything and turned off the water before wiping her hands on the towel longer than needed. "I was never mated but yes, my parents tried to force me into a few to benefit them. It's way more complicated than that and I ask you leave it be."

"Of course. I just wanted—I didn't want..." I let out an even longer breath. "I don't want lies between us. Not telling each other things yet or—it gets my pup head tied up. Keeping things from each other seems like secrets and lying but I get it. Mandy was a mix because I needed to know too and it involved me. Your stuff is yours."

"Yes, and I am sorry you found out like that." She snorted. "I'm sorry it blew up and hurt you but shit, it was the cleanest break to get the board out that I hadn't seen coming. So I almost want to thank the slutbag. I mean she can't fuck with you again either since she's going to lose her license and be in prison for a while."

Yeah, that was more than fair.

"I'm sorry you had to run from your family," I told her after a moment. "Even with our messed up dynamic, I still had people to turn to and get help from. I've never completely been on my own and had to run. I cannot imagine how terrifying that was for you."

She looked a bit too haunted as she stared off in the distance. "Thank you, but I'm also glad it happened. A lot of good things wouldn't have come about in this world if I hadn't experienced what I did." She cleared her throat and finished up around the kitchen. "As someone you declared smarter than you, I have some advice if you're open to it."

“Always,” I accepted. “From you? Always.”

She seemed to truly hear me that I meant it and relaxed. “You said you had your mates who helped you and you truly trusted. Money man and an attorney—a few others. All successful and from big families in the pack.” She waited until I nodded. “Form an LLC with them here and that is how you invest with your sister for this Miami project.

“She might be willing to fuck you over, but could she handle the pressure of other predominant families being upset with her in your parent’s pack?” She smirked when I blinked at her. “Always hedge your bets, darling. I know people are judging us for the board mess, but it was aneededevil to get to this point. One we knew we could get out of. Do the same.”

“That’s perfect. Thanks, Ellie.”

“Of course.” She cleared her throat, and I took the hint.

“I should go,” I mumbled, wanting to stay more than anything.

She reached out and grabbed my forearm when I went to walk by, not looking up at me but focused on the counter. “I don’t know if this is okay to ask, but I’m going to anyways.”

“Please do,” I whispered, leaning into her.

“We’re not okay—I mean, I think we’re going to be okay. This seems like a smaller hiccup that I just need to feel you really mucked up and it’s not—I think we’re going to be okay. Just not yet.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you and fucked up.” I leaned in and kissed her hair, unsure of what

else to do or what she was asking for.

She moved closer, so I took it as doing the right thing. “Please stay. Nothing funny or naughty. I just don’t want to be alone, and everything has been so—you made this so much harder on me by making me feel like discarded trash because I didn’t behave how you wanted.”

My heart hurt. It was like a kick to the groin to hear her say that. “I’m so sorry, love. I didn’t feel that at all. It was my stupidpup head.” I hugged her tightly and relief filled me when she snuggled closer. I could just about feel her exhaustion.

Which was why I wasn’t too surprised when I realized she’d fallen asleep against me.

I carried her to bed and got her all tucked in, making sure to dry her hair a bit even. I made sure everything was how it should be in the condo and it was all locked up before joining her. I simply held her and slept.

And it was exactly what I needed. It was perfect.

Fuck, I’d missed her. I’d been such a duffer to risk this and make such a fuss out of everything. She could be a doctor or an alien or—I didn’t care.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

I just wanted her to be my Ellie.

She let me kiss her good morning, but that was it. She seemed hesitant and cut me a few looks as she walked me out.

And that made me nervous.

Very nervous.

Which was how I forgot my parents were coming for their physicals.

And that I'd done something the night before that I needed to tell them about.

Shit. Shit... And double shit.

Luckily, I came across Dr. Carpenter on the way to go meet up with them. "I need a favor and it will help Ellie, so you're not telling me no."

"You're getting a bit too bold there, kid, and it's annoying me," he grumbled but sighed. "The guy you mauled last night. I was just informed the Alpha of London is here for his physical. I assume you didn't tell your parents."

"No, I made up with Ellie and—" I sighed when he growled. "Not like that. I don't even know if we're good. She's going through something and obviously is having trouble sleeping but—"

He grabbed my arm rougher than I would have expected and forced me to face him.

“Her insomnia is back?”

I blinked at him. “I don’t know. She didn’t tell me. She fell asleep hugging me after we talked.” Hope filled me. “Is that the weird looks she was giving me this morning?”

He studied me a moment. “I might stop being annoyed with you if you can help her sleep and—did she have any nightmares? She normally has nightmares after a case like yesterday and when she has to save a vampire.”

I slowly shook my head. “She didn’t stir once. I was holding her. I would have woken—I woke when she got up before her alarm. That was it.”

“Fuck, fine, okay, you can have her if you aren’t an idiot. She hid from Fitz when she was upset. If she can turn to you—fine, let’s go help you so you can help her. We need her,” he grumbled and dragged me along.

What was in Ellie’s past that was seriously so bad?

I knew I wouldn’t get the answer, but of course it would worry me.

Dr. Carpenter was perfect and laid it on thick that of course such a respected Alpha would have a son who was a protector. That the guards were impressed how strong I was and how fast I’d handled the situation to keep everyone safe.

But Mum saw through the bluster and was focused on me. “Is that all that is wrong, Ha-joon?”

I dropped the act for a second and met her worried gaze. “I didn’t think I was such a pup and knew all the ugliness in our world. I thought this ugliness was in our past—that we’d evolved past treating women this way. Not just the patient and her

daughter, but hearing that man speak to Ms. Reed like—pulling a gun on her—it was hard to hold back.”

Dr. Carpenter didn’t hide his shock before reaching over and rubbing my shoulder. “You did good, kid. Really. I know Ellie would have handled it all on her own, but she shouldn’t always have to. We should be a family who protects each other. We’ll protect you next when they try to use it against you. The guards already submitted everything to the police and—”

“I know it’s not standard, but I would like to be looped in,” Father said quietly. “He hasn’t even met with the Atlanta Alpha yet, only my mate. Things have been too busy for Ha-joon, and I don’t want this to negatively affect his life here when it is the life he has always wanted.”

“I won’t allow that, Alpha,” Dr. Carpenter promised. “Your son is an amazing doctor and asset to this hospital. And I’m not one to give praise easily. None of our department heads, but they all have praised him. He jumps in and doesn’t have the ego any of us with his talent would. Myself included. We protect ours, but I will ask Dr. James to speak with the Alpha.”

“Thank you, truly,” Father accepted before giving me a sad look. “I’m sorry that your name hinders you again.”

“Da, it’s not like that,” I said quietly. “Thank you for not holding me back to fit the form of what most would want from an Alpha family member. That’s why I know I’m so loved. Really.”

Relief flashed in his eyes, but then he was back to being Alpha and smoothly handled Dr. Carpenter as well. He took a quick tour of my practice before we got started on their physicals. Mum was having hers with Dr. Tai—for obvious reasons—but Da was with me.

He made jokes about not sticking my finger in his ass like the humans had to do for prostate exams. My staff shared glances like they didn't know if they could laugh or not but lightened up a bit when I chuckled. My father tried hard to set people at ease so they didn't get anxious being around Alphas.

Sometimes he just missed the mark.

Others wanted that fear or worry people had being around them but not my parents. They were Alphas who understood that pack was family, and while sometimes that meant tough love... It was all supposed to be founded in love.

I slipped some extra questions in the normal physical ones because I had suspected a few things with my father after the visit. Luck was on my side because his phone was going nonstop and I told him it was fine to answer texts while answering my questions.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

Which was how I got him to slip up and admit what was really bugging him.

“My eldest isn’t remotely ready to take over the pack and he thinks he is and I don’t know how to handle it,” he muttered absently. “Others want me to believe he is, but I’d be setting him up to fail. They know things would be more lax under him and maybe...” He blinked at his phone and slowly looked up at me with horror.

“Da, someone who loves you should know this, and I can help,” I said gently as I squatted down in front of him.

Tears burned in his eyes. “I’ve already failed you as a father. I always thought it was petty or a slip of madness when he was young. Seeing it so clearly with your visit when you hadn’t been home regularly was—we failed you as parents—I have and—”

I pulled him to stand and hugged him. “Da, ya did the best ya could. I never doubted that. This is them. They should have done better. He should have.”

“I didn’t raise him right. My da told me I wasn’t ready and kicked me out to find my way and I did. He raised me right so when I slipped, that would work. It won’t work with your brother and—”

“Grandpa didn’t lead a pack out in the open,” I argued. “Even he has said your job—our lives are that much harder now being the Alpha family. It’s easier for everyone else but us.”

And that was ridiculously apparent from the test results of my father’s physical. If he didn’t get a grip on his stress and health, he wasn’t going to be around as long as he

should be.

So what I would do next wasn't just for him, but our family.

Even if they didn't deserve it from me.

7

Ellie

I didn't need three guesses to figure out who it was when I felt a pissed-off Alpha that I didn't know heading my way. It was all over the hospital that the Clarks were there for their annual physicals, and everyone was kissing their asses. I'd already texted Mrs. Clark promising I had everything in hand with what happened the day before and Ha-joon wasn't in trouble.

Well, he was, but I would keep him safe. It would all get dismissed, and I'd even talked to the local wolf Alpha playing it up that Ha-joon had done well.

I'd also put out a fire there that I was pretty sure the Clarks didn't know about because Atlanta's Alpha was worried about Ha-joon coming to take over. I'd laughed so hard that it took me a bit to calm down.

And I hadn't even been acting. I swore up and down that he had no desire to be Alpha. He wasn't even one in the hospital and only cared about medicine. He hadn't shown his face to the pack yet because if he seemed too eager it would worry people.

But now it had backfired and they felt dismissed.

I told the wolf honestly that things hadn't been going well at the hospital and he'd been pulled into too much. Off the record, Ha-joon was an asset for Atlanta and the

Clarks were not looking to expand. They were worried about their son and were trying not to start trouble or flex on anyone. I told him how Mrs. Clark had even come with her hat in her hand asking to protect him.

I was pretty sure the fire was well put out, especially after I promised the new “board” was going to have meetings with all the local supe leaders and get their input on how things were going with their people. We employed most of Atlanta—even indirectly since our staff was who shopped or ate everywhere.

ASH was Atlanta, and people who didn’t get that were just deluding themselves.

He slipped onto the elevator with me and growled when I didn’t even look up to acknowledge him. “What are you doing to my son?”

I absolutely lost my mind for a moment because of how high everything was piled on me. I would admit that and have to apologize to Ha-joon later then. “Right now? Nothing. Later? Probably ride him like he loves and feed from him before he bends me over something and plows me.”

I flinched when his aura changed so rapidly that I saw it even out of the corner of my eye.

Oh shit.

I glanced up and his eyes were comically wide. “Well, clearly, you didn’t know we were involved and that wasn’t what you were talking about, so now I’m confused too.” I was going to say more, but I had a flash of the man before me but younger, and my magic sparked against his aura.

Fear filled me instead of sass and sarcasm. I had no reason to be afraid now, but given our past—it was instinct.

It took him a second longer, but recognition filled his eyes as well. “You.”

“You’re mistaken,” I whispered, grateful when the elevator doors opened. I stumbled getting out but then caught myself and hurried off. My phone was in my hand, and I was already texting Ha-joon. I couldn’t hide this from him and have another misunderstanding blow up between us.

Especially because I hadn’t known. I’d seen Alpha Clark in the media in passing and never made the connection. Hell, I was pretty sure I’d been at events where he had been even.

But not this close. Not like this.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

Not in hundreds of years.

Ha-joon immediately texted me back where he was and that he was looking for me too. I hadn't realized his mother would be with him... Or that his father had given chase after me.

I caught on to that too late, feeling him right as Ha-joon and Mrs. Clark came into view. I saw Ha-joon's eyes flash something and I started to turn to face off with his father.

Except I couldn't see anything. Ha-joon moved that fast and blocked me, pushing me behind him even.

And he was letting out his full Alpha aura.

"Don't challenge me," his father growled. "I cannot believe you would pick her over family."

"I am picking what is right over all else," Ha-joon snarled. "She is scared and it's focused on you, Da. So stand down before my wolf goes too far because he protects her. She is ours."

"Oh dear," Mrs. Clark whispered. "Okay, well this complicates things if she is your—"

"No, we signed an agreement," Ha-joon mumbled. "It's complicated, but after we were both so badly burned—we—it's between us." He let out a slow breath. "Sorry to

overshare, Ellie.”

“No, I started it when your dad tried to pull rank with me, though I don’t know why he’s upset with me,” I admitted. “And I need you to—I didn’t know that I knew him. I swear it. I never knew his name.”

He flinched. “Did you—have you been with my da?”

“No!” his dad and I exclaimed together.

“How do you know Ms. Reed, and why is she afraid of you, Marlon?” Mrs. Clark asked, her voice tight.

He sighed and I felt his wolf back down and Ha-joon reacted in kind but not all of the way. Enough de-escalated that I felt comfortable at least moving next to Ha-joon. We were by receiving and no one was around. Evidently, the Clarks had already been wanting to talk privately.

Alpha Clark scrubbed his hand over his head and met my gaze. “I’m sorry for what I did to you back then. Truly. I was scared and—”

“Explain then apologize,” Ha-joon snapped. “We’re—you went after Ellie now because you felt my unease?”

His father sighed. “Yes, I thought she wasn’t being fair with you at work. I didn’t realize you were together, and it was a hiccup. You were upset when I mentioned her and...”

“You put two and six together and came up with twenty,” I filled in, easily forgiving it. “Sorry I was shit back, but there is too much going on.”

“What did you say?” Ha-joon asked, snickering when I winced. “He deserved it.”

“Yes, but you never deserve being thrown in someone’s face,” I mumbled. “I’m sorry, and I’ll make it up to you later.”

He was quiet a moment. “Just explain why you were so hesitant this morning. That’s why I’m worried. I thought we were going to be okay, but then you were hesitant. Was it because you didn’t have nightmares with me like Dr. Carpenter thinks?”

“Yes.” I admitted it because it wasn’t fair for him to worry when it was my past and issues. But I didn’t like him bringing that up in front of his parents.

Though there was already a mess, sooooo... Life was fun.

“When I got too big for my britches, my da kicked me out for a bit to go become my own man,” Alpha Clark explained, his gazelocked on mine. “My family knows the story well, and I’ve said time and time again that it was the best thing for me and my da was a wise man and I’m not half the Alpha he was.

“But he made it clear that I needed to become a man on my own and that meant making a path—money—all of it. I wasn’t—I thought I had more ready and could handle that easily. I didn’t. I struggled, and after years of failing, I was ready to go back and admit that I failed and I wasn’t worthy of the pack.” He let out a slow breath. “Then I stumbled upon you.”

“Yes, you made it very clear that I was the prize you had been looking for and would drag home to be—”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, truly sounding like he meant it.

“Your son inherited your habit of interrupting it seems,” I bit out. I moved away from

Ha-joon and shoved his father's shoulder, reminding myself I wasn't that scared girl anymore. "It wasn't one slip. You chased me for a month until—"

"Until I regained my senses and realized what I was doing to a person," he whispered, grabbing my wrist when I went to shove him again. He flinched when Ha-joon growled and immediately let me go. "I was young too. Too old to have behaved that badly. I know that. I'm sorry, and I did look for you later to apologize but..." He sighed.

"What did you think you would even get from bringing a vampire to the pack?" Mrs. Clark asked.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“Don’t you dare,” I bit out. “You’ve sinned against me enough already.”

He nodded before looking at his mate. “You already know she’s special like Ha-joon. Leave it at that. I was a bastard and lost my head out of fear. It’s inexcusable and I have always regretted it.” He looked to Ha-joon. “But it’s the reason I won’t make the same move against your brother. It worked for me because my sanity returned. I fear it would only bring out the worst in him.”

“I agree,” Ha-joon said sadly, confusing his mother and me. He let out a slow breath before turning to me. “You won’t tell me, right? Whatever this is, you won’t tell me.”

“No.” That one word hung in the air, and I got annoyed when he adjusted his neck. “He shouldn’t know. That’s not my fault, and I’m not being bullied into—”

“I know,” Ha-joon growled but then shook his head, shaking off his wolf really. “I know.” He snarled and then was suddenly on me, backing me against the wall and sniffing me. “I know it’s not fair. It’s just not fair to me either that my father knows things about you that I don’t when I’m in your bed. You have to see that’s not fair to me.”

“I do.”

“Good.” He sniffed me again and shivered. “I know I’m still in the doghouse, but my wolf is demanding you feed from us tonight even if no sex. Da doesn’t give you that. We’re the wolf that shares that with you. Please, give me that so I can process this and behave.”

“Okay,” I accepted, rubbing my hand over his chest. “It’s not my fault, but I’m sorry. I don’t tell people.” I met his gaze. “Only Alan knows here, and I’ve known him for over a hundred years, Ha-joon. Your father doesn’t know what he thinks he knows. He just knows something.”

He opened his mouth but then closed it before nodding. Then he kissed me in a way that was not suitable for his parents to see.

And it was everything—itsaid everything he was feeling but couldn’t convey to me verbally.

“I need a minute,” he mumbled before walking off.

I blinked after him with a scowl for a full minute after he was gone. “Oh sure, I’ll just handle your parents after that, you dipshit.” I felt better when his mom snorted. I sighed and glanced at her. “It just sort of happened. Your son is very charming.”

She threw back her head and laughed. Even his dad seemed amused, but I was more focused on her.

Mrs. Clark came over to me and cupped my face, kissing both of my cheeks. “If anyone can heal your heart after an abusive relationship, it’s my Ha-joon. And I see you doing the same. I now understand why he was so upset when he came home. The situation blowing up with that woman and finding out you were a doctor while being involved—”

“It got messy, but he didn’t give me a chance to explain,” I confirmed. “And then the idiot ghosted me until yesterday.” I nodded when she frowned. “Men.”

“Yes, how they are in charge most times astonishes me.”

Her mate was less than thrilled to hear her say that, but I snorted in agreement. I'd felt the same so many times it wasn't even funny. I was pretty sure most women had.

"And he hasn't been feeding me," I told her, giving her my best pout as a way to refocus them. "I'm out of everything and I returned all of my containers."

Her eyes danced with amusement as she pet my hair. "Oh, you poor lass. My son is a monster to keep you away from your daily kimchi and needed soy eggs."

"Heis," I agreed. "And someone brought me this blackberry peach crumble that has protein in the granola so it's healthy and filling, not just sugar and butter. It's so good that I immediately ordered two huge trays to share with you, but when he wasn't answering me—what was I to do? I gave it to my staff."

"I cannot believe he would deny me Southern desserts like that," she said with a gasp... While trying to hide a smirk, her glance cutting to the left. "Well, now he'll have to buy it extra for the trade-off."

"Yes, I'm sorry, Mum," Ha-joon agreed as he rejoined us. "And I do have all of her washed containers. I was the jerk. Tell the chefs that—"

"They're thrilled to have the chance to make so much food and not just the whims of your siblings," Mrs. Clark said, her voice a bit tight.

So clearly something was going on there.

I decided to take the bullet on something and protect Ha-joon as my apology for being flippant with his father. "I heard about the investment opportunity in Miami. I advised Ha-joon against the idea as it was presented to him."

Mrs. Clark flinched away from me as if she was shocked I would insult her, but

Alpha Clark was pissed... And the one I was worried about on this topic.

“It’s not like it sounds or—” Ha-joon started to say, but it was my turn and I pushed him behind me, probably shocking him with my strength.

I kept Alpha Clark’s gaze. “If your daughter who has repeatedly bullied him and not treated him as she should pulls a fast one because she now has the chance, are you fine with him fighting back? Taking things to court and not getting screwed over? Will you allow that embarrassment for your family and pack when—”

“You’ve made your point, Ms. Reed,” he bit out.

I swallowed loudly when I felt Ha-joon’s pain... And I wasn’t the only one from the way the Clarks immediately looked at him.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“Ha-yun would never is what your father is saying,” Mrs. Clark said quietly.

“I don’t know that I believe that, Mum,” Ha-joon mumbled and I felt like I saw him as a child being neglected—after his siblings bullied him again.

“You already made a promise to her, Hugo,” Alpha Clark said firmly. “You can’t just back out—”

“Nothing has been signed, and you will put your family’s image before your son, not hold your daughter accountable,” I snapped. “So he can back out at any time if there aren’t guarantees.” I hurried on when anger about radiated off of him. “But I suggested he form an LLC with his mates who are also in the pack and invest that way.”

“That’s actually a better way to handle it,” Alpha Clark said after a moment. He glanced past me. “Ha-yun is sincere in this. She wants her own life just as you do.”

“Yeah, but I never shit on anyone in the family to get there. She can’t say the same, so Ellie’s right that I shouldn’t trust her after our past,” Ha-joon said quietly. “Especially in a new market and...”

Alpha Clark met my gaze and let out a long breath. “No, she’s a good person to protect you without trying to make problems for you and our family. Thank you.”

I gave a shallow nod. “As your mate already knows, I have family issues of my own. Clearly on a different level than your family, but I’ve had the rug pulled out on me too many times to believe people change. If they do—lovely. I just never have any

faith in it. So I would never think to invest with his siblings, but he wants to. I just want him to do it safely.”

Alpha Clark nodded. “I understand. I asked Ha-joon to introduce Ha-yun to you after learning about your business—”

“Da,” Ha-joon cut in.

“But he said with the board issues it wasn’t the right time.” He frowned and glanced at Ha-joon. “You’re involved with her. What does it matter now—”

“It matters because I’d drain your children,” I chuckled darkly, letting him see in my eyes that I wasn’t kidding. “Leaving aside our personal relationship, I don’t let anyone give the staff of ASH trouble. It’s why I handled the situation with the local wolf Alpha that I’ll talk to Ha-joon about. But your other children give him trouble. So no, do not let them around me.”

“You did not just say that to one of the biggest Alphas in the world,” Ha-joon whispered under his breath, his tone full of awe.

I snorted and looked at him. “I run ASH, love. I basically run Atlanta and boss around all the different supe groups I want. I have a direct line to every president and they all owe me favors. No shade against your family, but they aren’t the big hitter standing here. I am. You know of one company.” I tilted my head and studied him. “Why do you assume that’s the only one?”

He let out a long, deep breath before lowering his forehead to my shoulder. “Please stop making me long for you more. I’m trying to be good and not be all over you after I was a jerk and give you the space you asked for. You can’t be so damn sexy and—”

“Enough from you,” I growled and moved so he stumbled. “Now you’re really in trouble, pup.”

“I was just being honest,” he mumbled.

Gods save me.

“On the note that I have a lot on my shoulders, I need to get going,” I said to all of them before focusing on Mrs. Clark. “Though I hope you can schedule lunch soon.” I hurried on when her eyes flashed shock. “As a respected patient who has the best interest of ASH at heart and keeps her eyes and ears open.”

She dipped her head to me. “Yes, I have many notes if you’re open to them.”

“Always.” I wasn’t offended when Ha-joon and his father snorted. “From people that I trust and won’t just try to change everything for their best interest. You have no interest or reason to insert yourself here.”

“No, no I do not,” she agreed. “And my notes are very minor—mostly praise. Dr. Tai—she is—I’m not sure I’ve met a moreimpressive physician and for her not to even be a shifter—astounding, a true talent.” She gave her son a look to shove it.

“I accept that since I’ve never been your doctor,” he grumbled good-naturedly.

Well, that was one way to leave the “meeting” and make my escape.

And I was a smart enough woman to do it.

8

Ha-joon

Ellie was a mess of every emotion after the run-in with my parents and whatever the fuck her past was with my father. I made it clear that I wanted to pound him after she was gone—which shocked the shit out of my parents to say the least.

“Yes, if I have my way she will be my mate,” I told them under my breath, done with the pretenses since they knew now. “So deal with it. My wolf wants her to be ours now and—I don’t care about what the pack or family thinks. So this one time make the exception for me or—”

“Ha-joon, we would never object to her,” Mum said firmly... But Father hesitated, shocking both of us.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“It’s not about her not being a wolf or shifter,” he sighed, scrubbing the back of his neck. “You’re special enough, Ha-joon. You know the problems that comes with. I never want—I want my children to have easy lives.” He gave me a serious look. “You will not have an easy life if that woman is your mate. Hear me.”

“I don’t care,” I told him firmly... With the same firmness as the one time I went against him and announced I was going to medical school.

“Then I will support your dreams. I learned not to stand in your way. I almost lost you doing that. You ask so little—just don’t let her...”

I nodded. There was no good way to say that mates couldn’t have secrets between them. I needed to know the real Ellie Reed before we could ever be mates. “She’s nowhere close to where I am. I’m just being honest. My wolf knows the truth, and being without her even—it just made everything clearer.”

“So be it,” he mumbled before turning and walking away.

Mum and I shared a look. Seriously, what did Da know about Ellie that made him worry so much? Hadn’t he wanted to bring her into the pack’s fold before?

It was going to be very,veryhard to let this go, but I had to if I wanted her.

And I wanted her. In every way possible... Especially the naughty ones after I’d been an idiot. Yes, completely my fault and I accepted that.

It didn’t mean I was going to fight fair.

When work was over, I changed like I was going to work out instead of leaving in scrubs like normal. I felt the stares I was getting wearing a fitted tank top and the right kind of running pants that showed off my lean hips and nice ass.

Luck was on my side when I didn't even have to go up to her office to try and get on her radar. She was talking with a few people in the lobby of the administrative building. I bit back a growl when Gerald Woodthe thirdwas there, too close to her like always.

Fine, time to mark my territory even if covertly.

I moved up next to the group and politely waited, making sure to sling my bag over my shoulder so my bicep and muscles were clearly on display when she looked at me.

“Did you need one of us, Dr. Clark?” someone from the group asked.

Ellie did a double take and her eyes immediately filled with interest.

Line cast.

I smiled easily. “Yes, just needed to talk to Ms. Reed. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt.”

“Me?” she asked, glancing between me and the group and then back to me.

“Yes, about dinner.” I put on my most innocent face.

The woman who first spoke let out a small gasp. “Are you two—is this a date or—”

“We're neighbors,” I clarified... But didn't deny it because I would go out with Ellie any day she let me take her out.

Duh.

“She’s become friends with my mum and they trade food,” I hedged, shooting Ellie a look like I wasn’t sure she wanted people to know that.

“Oh yes, everyone knows to leave the containers from your mother alone in our break room fridge,” another woman said with a chuckle. “Though she did let me have a soy egg and—very interesting. I would love that on a bowl of soup.”

I dipped my head to her in thanks. “Since we’re so busy, we’re sort of piggybacking off of that. Ms. Reed’s been telling me all of the best spots and sometimes I pick up dinner for her as well and sometimes she does for me. It’s easier given her long hours at the hospital and I keep jumping in on surgeries to help.” A thought hit me and I stretched knowing she was looking. “I’m not used to standing still that long. It’s a whole different workout.”

“Well, it’s good to keep in shape,” she muttered, clearly affected.

Yeah, fine, but she wasn’t my goal.

I looked at Ellie and pretended not to notice the heat in her eyes. “What are you hungry for tonight, Ms. Reed?”

Yes, everyone probably heard the innuendo there, but I kept my face innocent... Until Gerald growled.

I rolled my eyes. “We’re adults. Don’t be a duffer.” I smiled at her. “What are you in the mood for?”

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

She smirked at me, clearly knowing exactly where my mind was. “Surprise me. I shouldn’t be the only one to shape your culinary journey of America or Southern cooking. Go find a new place I’ve not even tried yet. I’m sure you know what I like by now.”

Oh damn. Like...Dayuummmas I’d heard other doctors in America say.

She was really laying down the gauntlet now.

I pretended to think about it and snapped my fingers. “Got it. I know exactly what you need.”

“I just bet you do, pup,” Dr. Carla Greer said under her breath at a level that most in the group wouldn’t have heard.

But Ellie and I did. So did Gerald from the scowl he was shooting me.

I apologized again for interrupting and headed out, stopping at the security desk. They seemed to be tapped in on everything at the hospital and beyond. I asked if they knew anything new that opened up that was getting good reviews.

One told me there was a new Middle Eastern place, but it was getting mixed reviews. From what he’d heard people were trying it that didn’t know what Middle Eastern food was and then called it weird—idiot feedback. But people who knew what to expect seemed thrilled.

Perfect.

I worked out hard and then went back out to pick up food, texting her when it would be ready at my condo... And the code. We were ready for that—or at least I was ready to let her have it and access to me as she wanted.

She responded to let me know she was starving and when she was even pulling in.

I acted like it was no big deal, but I was all over the place inside. There had been so much with my parents and being an idiot—I should have been nervous.

She walked in hesitantly, calling out to check where I was. She set her things down on the kitchen island while I was getting plates. The moment I set them down and looked at her, she was on me.

But not in the way I'd hoped.

Or not expected?

She'd hopped up on the counter, grabbed my head, and sank her fangs in my neck. I groaned and held onto her as she fed from me, my wolf howling happily inside of me. It felt amazing and a connection like... It was as intense as sex but different.

Really different but also not? Hopefully, it was like that because we were intimate and having sex. I couldn't think vampires felt this always feeding.

She licked the bite closed and kissed my neck when she was done. We were both affected in different ways. I went to kiss her, but she had already turned away and slid off the counter.

She smirked at me as she grabbed one of the bags of takeout. "Thanks for dinner."

I frowned and felt like I'd been kicked in the nuts. I moved faster than she would

have expected and blocked her from leaving the kitchen. “Come on, I’ve never disrespected you. I’m not food.”

Her eyes instantly flashed regret as she met my gaze. “No, never. Sorry, I wanted to give you sass back after your display earlier. I didn’t mean—I would never—”

I leaned down to kiss her, giving her a chance to stop it. I could understand a joke or teasing going wrong. I even understood how vampires didn’t see feeding the same way other species did. It was needed for them and desensitized them from it. I’d heard that again and again.

Ellie met me the rest of the way and gave me a soft kiss that she picked up the heat for. I shivered when her tongue slid against my lips and I let her in. It snapped my patience and I lifted her up under her lush ass and put her back on the counter. I cupped her face and devoured her mouth the way she liked.

She pulled away after a few minutes. “Forgiven?”

“Is that the only reason you kissed me?” I checked, chuckling when she sighed. “I wasn’t the one who stepped in it, and I do a good job apologizing. Don’t you want the same for me?”

“Yes,” she hissed and gave me a quick peck. “No, I didn’t kiss you so I was forgiven. The thought interrupted my fun of the kiss, so I wanted to know.”

I hugged her and nuzzled her neck, taking a long sniff of her scent. “You’re staying for dinner, right? Not just feed and leave? I could forgive you then.”

“Deal.” She hugged me back. “I really was just trying to be sassy back. Clearly, that’s not my strong suit. I’ll leave it to you and just be...”

“Fabulous and sexy. You’re always fabulous and sexy,” I promised her. That seemed to do the trick.

It was so funny how she was sort of pouting that her attempt at being sassy failed when I was the one who got hurt from it. But at least the Middle Eastern place was legit. We both agreed that it was fabulous and definitely needed to get on the rotation of places we ate from.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“I think you’re right about Gerald,” she said quietly when we were finishing up.

“Are you saying that to make me jealous and I have a green light to have you?” I asked, genuinely not sure why she brought it up. I cleared my throat when she shot me an unamused look. “I’d prefer to be honest and ask instead of misunderstandings. Clearly, I miss the mark too. So where is your head at?”

She huffed and covered the leftovers. “I was—I thought I’d been dismissive. I was validating you. I wasn’t—I don’t play jealousy games. I was saying I trusted your judgment and paid attention. I think you’re right.”

I moved behind her and pressed my body against hers, kissing her neck. “Thank you for explaining. I’m glad you understand now and yes, he wants you as his, not just for fun. He’s—it’s clear he wants me out of the way to make a real move.” I flinched.

“What?” she asked, turning in my arms when I didn’t respond. “What? Tell me.”

“I don’t want to start trouble, and I don’t know if I’m right, but there is something you might need to know,” I hedged, sighing when she waved me on. “I didn’t put it together until now, and it only made sense after I overheard the security guys talking about keeping their mouths shut that you came from a rich vampire family and had to run from them.”

She put it together without me having to say it. “I figured Gerald knew. Yes, I’m from that Reed family. Your mother knows and there’s no reason to deny it. You didn’t ask, but—it’s more complicated and I doubt even your mother knows that.” She cleared her throat and ducked under my arm to get away. “No sane Alpha family

would want me to mate in if they—”

“Most shifters are way more understanding of crazy family dynamics than you’d expect,” I promised her. “I’m not prying and you’re not ready to tell me. I just want that clear.”

Shit, I’d said too much. She gave me a scared look and like I was crazy.

I chuckled and cornered her again. “I didn’t mean for us when we’re not even officially together, Ellie. I just—there are enough misconceptions out there. It’s only when it’s the eldest or maybe in the old days the next eldest. Otherwise, Alpha families are pretty understanding and support inter-species matings even.”

“That’s not been my experience, so your family is just better than most, pup,” she warned me quietly. “Or maybe London, but be careful. There are a lot of packs and prides—tons of shifter groups who still outlaw inter-species matings.”

I frowned. “That’s been against the law for—”

“I know, but we both know that people get around a lot of what’s legal.”

That was more than fair and yeah, we did both know that.

I gave her a soft kiss. “I know I’m rightfully in trouble, but you could stay and just... Stay. I’ll be good.”

“You’re always too good which is half the problem,” she grumbled, eyeing over my body before meeting my eyes. She flinched. It was minor, but I caught it. Then she cleared her throat and moved her hand to my chest, gently pushing me back.

I took the hint and didn’t fight her, stepping away and giving her space.

“I have work and stuff to review. Renee is coming by too—she wants to talk and check out the renovation ideas. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Of course,” I accepted. I snuck another quick kiss. “I’m glad you liked the place. Have fun, and if you want any insight, I just renovated some of this place too.”

“I will,” she said before collecting her things—including some leftovers so she wasn’t eating Gerald’s food—and was out the door.

I sighed. Heavily.

She was holding back and I had no one to blame but myself. I’d made us backslide.

“Tomorrow,” I reminded myself when I felt lost.

Except tomorrow never came.

Well, it did. Of course it did. But she didn’t come over and spend the night. I didn’t get to catch her or stay at her place either.

Time for more luring my sexy vampire in.

In the morning, I posted in the doctor’s lounges that I was starting a running group before office hours. That was the only time to do it since it was already getting to be hot now that it was the first days of May.

Something I took advantage of. My schedule was light since things were recovering in dermatology. So after my last patient before lunch, I went on a run—well, more a sprint to get some energy out. Then I showed up to the cafeteria with my tank top tucked into the back of my shorts and my chest covered in sweat.

“Okay, enough of the calendar shoot, Clark,” Dr. James called over.

I took a few gulps of my water and chuckled. “It’s hot here, mate. Like—are ya all having a laugh with this heat already? Yeah, my shirt comes off. You’re lucky I’ve got anything on. I had to sprint because that was all the sun I could take.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“Oh boy, new kid is going to die his first Southern summer,” a female called over. “And I think more of the hot guys should come in shirtless. I hear about my ass in scrubs often enough. Give us some fun.”

People chuckled and moved on, but I still threw on my tank top... But not before I noted a certain vampire’s attention.

Perfect.

I went over to her like I was stopping on my way to get a tray. “We’re doing dinner trade tonight, right? I heard of this place with strawberry pie and it sounds aces. I’m so ready for something sweet after a long, hard week.”

I kept her intense golden gaze... And ignored when two people spit out their drinks around us.

Amusement and a healthy dose of frustration flared in her eyes. “Send me the link to the place and what you want.”

I frowned. “I can pick it up.”

She focused on her food. “It’s fine. You did last time, so it’s my turn. Just send me the place.”

So, I did, guessing something was up... And unfortunately, I was right.

I received a text later that day that food was delivered.

And at my door.

But only the food was there.

“You deserve this. You deserve this,” I reminded myself as I tried not to take it personally or get too upset. “You did this to the relationship.”

It was hard though. I just wanted her, and I knew I’d fucked up, but... I really had no one to blame but myself. I was desperate and even called Mum to ask what I should do, apologizing for how late it was.

“Whatever you’re doing is the right plan, my youngest,” she told me firmly. “Ellie has said a few times that you’re being amusing and groveling well.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” She was quiet a moment. “She is a woman that many have not appreciated. Even I know at the hospital that she is the one everyone blames and never praises. That has only changed now that so many understand she is the reason they have easy housing or consideration most don’t. She has to move mountains to be given any allowances.

“And you did the ghosting the first time you found out something you didn’t like or didn’t trust her. I understand your perspective, but I also understand hers as a woman. You hurt her. You need to put in your penance to fix it. But she didn’t tell me what you were doing, simply that it was amusing and she sounded... Good. It was good.”

Well, that was something. At least I wasn’t annoying her then.

So I kept with it.

I made sure to wear everything that I knew she would like or catch her eye... Sometimes lack thereof. I brought her food from Mum and stopped hiding that we were friends outside of work. I even asked Mum for extras for Ellie's direct staff. I kept focused on helping at work and doing what I should so I was never a problem.

And I kept some of the pests away.

I think I fell a bit more for Ellie when I saw her duck in and check on that vampire who had been abused by her mother-in-law. Apparently, she did every day and got a report directly from the guard on the room that everything was calm.

She was ridiculously impressive. She constantly had dozens of balls in the air and never dropped one. I could never be that coordinated or amazing.

I could barely handle the problems I had and currently one was from ortho. He was poking me every chance he could and challenging me. He was talking shit and undermining me and the way I practiced medicine.

Part of me wanted to use it as an excuse to talk to Ellie and get in front of her, but bringing her problems when she had so much going on was about the shittiest way to flirt. Even I wasn't that dense.

Instead, I asked Dr. James for a meeting. That alarmed him because normally I caught him in passing and just hashed out whatever. So he told me to swing by his office immediately.

Good to know he was just as impatient of a shifter as I was... And man probably. It was best to be honest about that.

"You should have come to me before you were ready to explode," he grumbled as I walked into his office.

That made me freeze, but then I sighed. I closed the door behind me and sighed again. “Do you have that noise-canceling thing that—” I nodded when he flipped a switch on a machine behind his desk and recognized the pitch. “I need one of those for my office.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

He frowned. “That should have been already in there.” He seemed to shrug it off as I did but promised to handle it. “What’s going on?”

“First, this is where me being different can be a problem,” I hedged as I sat down. “I’m not as upset as you’re reading.” I nodded when he seemed skeptical. “I promise you that I’m a healthy level of annoyed at petty adults and that I have to run to ‘dad’ to handle this. I’m not remotely ready to explode. I’ll find you if I ever am and you will...”

“What?” he asked, his tone curious and not dismissive.

“It will take your breath away,” I admitted with a shrug. “It does my dad and he’s Alpha of London. I’m not a normal wolf—a normal Alpha at my age even.”

“Well, you know yourself better than I do, and you’re not the only special supe we have here, so it’s not that odd. I’m just glad to hear you didn’t wait until things are ready to explode with the typical Alpha pride.”

I shook my head. “I handle my own issues as best as I can, but once I hit the line of not being able to see a productive course forward, I have no problem asking for help that I know will come through.”

He chuckled, hearing the compliment in that. “Okay, then do you have a suggestion, or do you want me to resolve it?”

“It’s time for me to give a lecture to the hospital staff on how what I do is different,” I told him firmly. “Or things will blow up and you’re going to need to replace a few

people in ortho.”

To say he was shocked was an understatement, but at least he heard me out... And agreed with me that it was time for him to tap in. That was always the best outcome when there was a problem and you had to involve your boss.

9

Ellie

Ha-joon was trying to drive me crazy.

No, I was driving myself crazy denying us both what we wanted. It wasn't to be petty. I swear it wasn't.

I just... The stove burned me.

Funny how I'd let Tommy burn me, walk all over me, and emotionally abuse me, and now the slightest hiccup and I turned into one of those women who couldn't make up her mind about a man. Or maybe that was being too harsh on myself.

Renee said it was, and we weren't friends, so I was pretty sure her advice was legit and not just what I wanted to hear. To be fair, Joyce wouldn't have just told me what I wanted to hear either, right?

Maybe not best to test it.

No, I knew her better than that. It depended on the situation. Something easy and could still be changed? Yeah, Joyce would have been honest with me and even offered help to fix whatever.

Renee... I really didn't know, but I thoroughly enjoyed spending time with her. It didn't feel like a session, but it was. I would be deluded if I didn't acknowledge that, and I even thanked her for the session.

She'd simply chuckled at being busted and said she was glad that I was open to it as long as it involved food, wine, and distractions.

Especially since she wanted to keep having them. She was honest that I needed to talk to someone for real besides Alan knowing my secrets or I was going to implode. Everyone needed that, and it was to take the leap and trust at least her since we'd known each other for so long.

Like decades.

Yeah, that was fair.

I couldn't even deny I needed help, though probably not for what Renee thought. No, it was for being a sadist.

Wait, it was a masochist when it was self-inflicted?

Except I didn't enjoy it. It was just torture.

What was the term for that?

Awesome, I was a doctor, board-certified in several different fields, and I didn't even know the basics of idiocy. But it was getting embarrassing.

Mostly because trying to turn the tables on Ha-joon made it abundantly clear that I had no game. I was... I wasn't super old to be this lame.

My first attempt at being sassy and I hurt him. He wasn't faking or milking it. I saw the genuine hurt in his eyes that I would treat him as food.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

I really and truly hadn't meant it like that. I'd meant... I wasn't sure. To be sassy. He'd left me hanging and I wanted to leave him hanging. Yes, it was games but more forcing him to wear the shoe on the other foot.

Not demean him.

Leaving the food at his door on Friday night was almost painful because I knew he would tend to every fucking need I had.

And several I didn't even think to ask for.

So why did I hesitate and just leave it at his door? That hadn't even been a game. I'd planned to have dinner with him and a few kisses.

Probably fear because I knew it wouldn't stop there and I... I just kept replaying how mad he'd gotten when he'd found out I was a doctor. I had so many more and way worse secrets than that.

I didn't want to get burned again.

Funny because that reaction and him ghosting me after hurt worse than maybe anything Tommy had done. Well, besides that last blowup, but that was probably because my eyes were finally open to what was really going on.

Ignorance wasn't actually bliss, but it was less painful. That was for damn sure.

But Ha-joon did not let up on the full-court press to get on my radar.

Saturday he came in on his day off to help the emergency department and get some OR time... And made sure I saw him in a casual sleeveless flattering top along with black cargo pants that just—fuck, he was fine.

Like droolworthyfine.

Sunday I had a reprieve, but he picked up again Monday with his new running club. He wasn't the only one shirtless then, but he was the eye candy of the group for sure.

Definitely the only one I checked out.

Though I did do a double take when I saw Alan in the group.

He simply shrugged. "I need to move my ass more." He groaned and caught a bottle of water from someone. "That was glaringly obvious."

"We'd love if you'd join us, Ms. Reed," Ha-joon offered sweetly.

I snorted. "I don't run." I felt bad when people gave me a range of looks. "I mean, I'm not a runner. Some of us are—I get my cardio other ways."

I swallowed a groan. Even I caught the innuendo and flirt there.

"She means swimming, you idiots," Alan chuckled, helping me out. "Ellie's vampire genes evolved from fish, she's such a fast swimmer."

"Maybe now that the board isn't all over me constantly about bullshit, I can find time," I muttered, accepting that we could all do better. "It would be nice."

"You still need to keep your step count up, Ms. Reed," a petty nurse who used to be all over Tommy said with fake concern.

I shared a look with Alan and we burst out laughing. I waved him off when he went to say something and unlocked my phone and pulled up what I wanted. I waved it at her when she frowned... Then her eyes flashed shock when she saw what it was.

“I race around here for atleastten hours a day putting out this fire or that one. I think the lightest day I’ve ever had was fifteen thousand steps and I had eaten something bad.” I smirked as I took my phone back. “And I do it all in heels.”

“Which as a doctor you know isn’t smart and something we should actually address,” Alan muttered, losing his amusement. “Admin is the only department wearing professional attire like that. I’ve gotten some good research from two hospitals in Europe that when they relaxed the dress code and allowed sneakers with business casual—”

My sigh echoed around the open space. I smiled at him with love when he chuckled but like... Come on. Give a woman a break. “Send it to me and add it to our next meeting’s agenda.”

“Yes, boss,” he teased. He glanced over at the nurse I’d shut down. “Plus she has a walking pad in her office for meetings. Ellie always does the best she can. She has the job of like six people.”

“That just makes me sound like I cannot delegate,” I said with a frown.

We both kind of shrugged. That wasn’t unfair, but also things had been too messed up to trust who to delegate to. Hopefully, that was going to change.

Hopefully.

Page 37

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

But Ha-joon thought my comment about walking so much in heels was a hint for him because he showed up with dinner that night and an offer for a foot rub. I knew where that would lead and told him I had a foot massager, but I could do dinner.

I felt like I'd slapped a puppy with the pout and disappointed look he gave me.

The next day, he was dressed to the nines because he'd had breakfast with his Mum and had to come by and drop off food from her. I had to honestly check if there was drool he looked so fucking good.

The food was amazing, but he was what I really wanted to take a bite of.

In several ways. Mostly dirty.

Then he happened to spill on his last pair of scrubs and came to ask if I knew anyone who kept extras... And took off his shirt. I gave him a look that might be a bit much while reminding him YouTube could teach him how to do his laundry if he wasn't a real adult.

Again, I got puppy eyes.

If he was going to keep pushing my buttons, he was going to get snapped at. That was how life worked.

And yes, he did keep pushing my buttons. I honestly lost track of why he kept being around me shirtless, without sleeves showing off his fabulous arms, or dressed up.

I was just dripping in lust because of it.

Over a week of that and I was losing my fucking mind and mad at myself for not just giving in. Like... What was holding me back? What was I really waiting for?

To completely crack it seemed.

Monday, Ha-joon was having his lecture to discuss how his forcing a shift was much different than what we were used to and how it was done wrong—bastardized by too many weak Alpha shifters who couldn't admit they didn't know their limits. He said it nicer than that, but that was really what he was saying.

Gerald had a few choice words about that when we were alone that I wasn't a fan of, but he kept it professional when we reached the auditorium. I also received a disapproving frown when I split up from him to go by my friends.

It was probably time to talk to him.

Probably past time to talk to him if I was honest. And if nothing else, the way he handled situations like right then was enough for my choice to be crystal clear. If things didn't pan out the way Ha-joon wanted, he gave me puppy dog eyes and said he hoped I had fun or a nice night.

Gerald gave me disapproval. Was I sensitive to it after Tommy?

Yes.

Undoubtedly yes, but it was... There was judgment always. I wasn't an idiot. It was looks of disapproval like I didn't jump at the chance to spend more time with him or when I might go sit with Joyce instead.

Why the fuck did he get to disapprove of that? Judge it?

So yeah, that—it would never have worked.

He was a pushy Alpha. Not bad, but he needed to be Alpha.

I wanted no part of that. Ha-joon always knew that Ilethim be Alpha.

Just like he let me take charge. It wasn't a need for one of us.

It was a need to not be a pain in the ass with each other. It made sense in my head.

“Is she allowed to join us?” Carla teased as Joyce sat down with us.

“I'd pick her over you,” I drawled... Shocking all of them and others who overheard. I sighed and rubbed my forehead. “That was uncalled for.”

“Don't you dare apologize for sticking up for—”

“I wasn't going to,” I interrupted. “I was just acknowledging it was uncalled for.”

Carla blinked at me a moment and then burst out laughing, the noise echoing in the large lecture hall. She leaned in and lowered her voice. “Okay, you are too adorable when frustrated and pent up. The sassy pants you're wearing are sexy and I'm here for it but...” She trailed off when I turned and looked at her like I'd never seen her before.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“Oh, for the love of—did you just realize Carla flirts with you?” Renee hissed at me from the other side of Carla. She sighed when everyone around us looked at her that she of all people was supposed to word things better. “No, shut up. I get this. You’ve known her for decades and didn’t—”

“Yes, of course I knew she was bisexual,” I snapped back quietly. “I’m not a moron.”

“I’m also not subtle that I like both genders, but you probably missed that I lean heavily towards women,” Carla said with a chuckle. “And yes, I flirt with you because flustering you is my favorite form of stress relief. I know you’re not up for swinging my way and I’m not what you need.”

She leaned in and kissed my cheek to be a brat.

“I love you but yeah, everyone knows she flirts with you, Ellie,” Joyce said in barely a whisper.

Okay then.

Alan interjected before the lecture going over a few things we’d decided and protocol changes. He made it abundantly clear that Ha-joon was doing something great working so closely with ortho and our amazing occupational therapists, jumping in on surgeries to expand his knowledge, and the way he saved dermatology’s bacon.

“What I’m saying is he is kicking a lot of your asses all over the place and asking nothing extra for it. I hope a lot of you see that and start checking your egos because we’re getting rid of the toxicity at ASH and bringing in more of this type of doctor.”

He stared down the large room. “He has not tried to steal one ortho patient he’s been called in on.

“He’s consulted. That was the dream having such a huge hospital with this massive campus. If people don’t start learning from his example—it’s on the agenda to do away with the bonus structures.” He nodded when people couldn’t hide their shock. “Most of the department heads want it gone. It was needed once, but now it’s led to darkness.

“Or there are a few proposals coming up that the bonuses will go to the staff and baby doctors of a practice. We’re not sure, but things will be changing. Already these changes with HR and legal are smacking people back into line. We’ve cut out some cancer. I promise you that we will eradicate it here, so make sure you’re not part of it.”

Ha-joon was less than thrilled to go on after that. He cleared his throat and frowned when Alan seemed amused. “Well, I appreciate the glowing praise for everyone to glare daggers at me while trying to deliver this important information.”

“Let’s see how well you can handle the pressure, pup,” Alan threw right back.

I wasn’t the only one surprised when Ha-joon looked way too amused and immediately relaxed. Huh?

He set down his materials and leaned on the podium, staring Alan down. “This is one of the least intimidating moments of my life, Dr. Carpenter. Being the youngest of one of the most prestigious Alpha families comes with constant intimidation. Full moon pack gatherings are terrifying compared to this or anything you can throw at me.”

“Nice to know and—” Alan started to reply good-naturedly.

“And while I pride myself on not being the typical Alpha who is overbearing or can’t work well with others, I’m still an Alpha wolf and world-renowned in my field. So the next time you call me ‘pup’ in a professional setting like this, I won’t just ask HR to have a word with you, but let my wolf grind the axe he now has with you, sir.”

“Shit, that’s hot,” someone whispered from behind us.

I could see Alan’s reaction because he was sitting up front off to the left with Sean and I was towards the back right with my group.

He took in a slow breath and then let it out, keeping Ha-joon’s gaze the whole time. “You’re right, Dr. Clark. I apologize. We lead by example here and that’s not the behavior I would want any other doctor to have in these lectures. I will apologize to your wolf because I don’t want any lingering animosity. I truly meant to break the ice and tease.”

It was Ha-joon’s turn to take that in a moment. “I appreciate the effort, and I’m one who knows that not everything lands well on a Monday morning. My wolf is fine, I promise. As I said, I’m not a typical Alpha. He normally just needs it acknowledged and moves on.”

“That’s impressive,” one of the other department heads praised.

Ha-joon gave a half shrug. “I’m not a normal wolf. There’s no way for me to hide that, and you’ll see now what that means for the health and safety of shifters.”

“Shit, even I’m turned on that he not only handled it so smoothly but got back on track,” Joyce breathed.

Yeah. Me too... Which is why I backed him up.

Well, because he handled the situation so well, not because it turned me on.

Me: If you give him shit again professionally because I'm involved with him, I will suck you dry and hang you from your toes in the front of my hospital as a warning, Alan. We've settled how he got in here and he's an asset.

Me: I can't stop you from giving him lectures outside of work or being a shit on the side like you're my dad, but you fuck with him again professionally because of me and I will open the dam to do the same.

I was glad when I saw Alan glance at his phone and wince. Good.

Dipshit.

Loveable dipshit but still a dipshit.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

About five minutes into the lecture, Carla poked me and snapped me out of my thoughts... Which were naughty.

Like picturing Ha-joon in nothing but a towel hanging low on his hips naughty.

“Seriously, where is your head?” she hissed under his breath.

I cleared my throat and sat up. “Nowhere I would admit.”

“Oh, I could scent that,” she drawled sounding like she was losing the battle to laugh.

Yeah, I couldn’t blame her.

Two minutes later she had to poke me again because I was back to picturing Ha-joon mostly naked.

The third time it was because I was so deluded that I had started imagining him stripping for me right there while giving the lecture. For the love of the gods.

Seriously.

Just...Seriously.

I might have laughed it off, but I realized I was actually distracting people. They scented so much lust off of me—or at least in the area—that it was distracting from his lecture.

Fuck. I needed to get a grip.

“Stop,” I told Carla when she was trying not to giggle. “I’m basically sexually harassing him and everyone here being so—”

She immediately lost her amusement. “That’s intentional and we both know it. This was an accident, and you’re overloaded. Enough. You don’t get to be down on yourself for something natural like lust. Now pull up a picture on your phone that you can’t be dirty in front of. It’s how I get a grip.”

That was actually really helpful and not just for myself. Female shifters had the highest sex drive of any supe because they were so affected by the lunar cycles, so any tricks old and powerful shifters like Carla had should be shared.

It did work, but I missed most of his damn lecture. What I did hear was amazing and compelling. By the time he showed the videos from actual patients and that him forcing shifters to change forms worked, my mind was on the medicine.

I was grateful for Joyce immediately asking a question to help me out, but I realized that wasn’t it and she was truly focused.

“Have you done any testing with potions or other specialties?” Joyce asked the second Ha-joon opened the floor.

“You mean before forcing the shift?” he checked, shaking his head when she confirmed that was what she meant. “No, only pain meds after. My last board didn’t want the stigma of forcing shifts to interfere with—”

“Their money,” Sean cut in, giving Ha-joon a look not to deny it. “You can talk honestly here. Just be out with it.”

He dipped his head to Sean. “With all due respect, Dr. James, but I don’t out people’s intentions, and most don’t trust that an Alpha shifter can truly sense that much. There was sound reasoning presented to me and that’s what I’ll say. Everyone can draw their own conclusions.” I thought he was going to leave it at that, but he went one. “Especially when people here don’t keep their mouths shut.

“I don’t burn bridges and certainly not with a hospital that supported me doing something people here were ready to immediately shut down. I’ve gotten pushback here and heavily from some. Yes, it was profitable, but I saved one of the board’s grandchildren, so that wasn’t about money to them.”

“Understood, and good on you for having integrity,” he accepted.

Ha-joon nodded and focused back on Joyce. “I have wanted to try a pain management and muscle reliever potion mix, but the ones I’ve worked with are too strong. Or take too long to take effect. I need the patient lucid, and by the time someone gets in front of me, waiting any longer is torture.”

“Yes, that would be painful for them,” she accepted.

He winced. “Well, yes, but I meant me.” He nodded when people froze. “I’m not sure I can explain it—I haven’t been able to so far but—”

“The pain of knowing you could have helped them sooner so they didn’t need to suffer is almost crippling,” I said without even realizing I was going to talk.

His gaze immediately snapped to mine and he slowly nodded. “Yes. My wolf is a protector and—shifters in pain in front of him is hard. Especially young shifters because we both hate the old mindset. Several of them even.”

Yeah, a lot of us hated those old mindsets as well.

He found me after the lecture and dragged me into the stairwell, backing me up to the wall. Ha-joon moved his arm to the wall and his hand to my waist as he leaned in and sniffed me. “You’re killing me.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

I cleared my throat and looked over his shoulder. A weaker woman would have played it off or acted innocent, but I was an adult who owned my actions. “I apologize. I didn’t mean to—”

He chuckled and sniffed me again, inhaling my scent deeply as his nose ran along my neck. “Thank you for not trying to play it off. I know your lust and apparently can scent it in a full lecture hall I’m so locked in on you.” He kissed that spot under my ear as he massaged my hip. “I just don’t get what—”

“I’m not playing games,” I defended.

He slowly raised his head, so our gazes met. “I know that, love.” He nodded when I searched his eyes. “You’re not amused when you hesitate; you’re hesitant. I smell it, Ellie. You’re worried. You’re scared and I did that. I made you not feel safe with me.”

He gave me a soft kiss when I tried to object. That was one way to shut me up.

“I did this to what we had,” he whispered against my lips. “And I’ll rebuild that trust. You were gentle with my demons and I’ll be gentle with yours. So take the time you need.” He waited until I nodded. “As long as you’re not mad at me for...” He frowned.

“You’re not playing games either,” I said, pretty sure that was what I felt.

“I’m not, but I am,” he muttered, seeming to confuse himself. “I’m not making light of what happened. I’m—you told Mum you were enjoying it.”

I felt bad that he was tying himself up in knots and decided to give him the answer on this one since I knew it. “It’s touching to see you try so hard for me after walking away or hitting pause too long. That’s what’s in my head on this.”

He studied me again and took a long sniff. “Okay, good. I don’t want to be pushy and that bullshit that it’s okay if the guy is hot—it’s not okay. It’s never okay to pressure a woman when she’s not accepting of the courting. Ever.”

“I’m accepting,” I whispered.

“Then I’ll reach out to you as many times as you need, love,” he murmured, leaning in against me. “But I am going to punish you for giving me a stiffy during my first fucking lecture here.”

Yeah, that was fair.

10

Ha-joon

“Yes, that would be painful for them,” Dr. Tai accepted.

I winced. That hadn’t been what I’d meant, and this next part might not go over great. “Well, yes, but I meant me.” I nodded when people froze. “I’m not sure I can explain it—I haven’t been able to so far but—”

“The pain of knowing you could have helped them sooner so they didn’t need to suffer is almost crippling,” a woman said and immediately I knew who it was.

My gaze snapped to Ellie’s and I slowly nodded. “Yes. My wolf is a protector and—shifters in pain in front of him is hard. Especially young shifters because we

both hate the old mindset. Several of them even.”

I relaxed when the whole room was in full agreement and clearly cared about the state of medicine.

I leaned on the podium and focused on Dr. Tai. “If you can come up with something that is an eighth in potency of what we currently use to start, I would absolutely be willing to work with you on this. I’m always open to consultations and insights. That’s how we do this better and save the next kid or even...”

I let out a slow breath, not sure how to continue.

“You said you were rusty with large-scale trauma,” Dr. James surmised. “The earthquake and bridge weren’t your normal wheelhouse.”

“No, they weren’t, not for many years, and it still wasn’t like that,” I admitted. “This was so much better. This was—efficientdoesn’t even come close to where my mind is. ASH hasefficiencydown to a science unlike any hospital I’ve ever seen, and that’s something that needs to spread.” I waved off others when they wanted to interject. “That’s not the point of today.

“The point of today is education and learning what we already know and people bastardize too much.” I pointed to the screen that had shown the videos. “That is the point of the Alpha power to force a shift. It is to save lives and heal pack when traumatized. What you all know is the bastardized version of this punishment crazy and doing more harm than good.

“The main problem is that’s all too many know because too many psychos found aweaponin this power and that’s what it became. To save lives—especially children—I need people to learn what I’ve taught you and I need the professionals in this room to understand that and help me—help them.” I let out another slow breath.

“Shifters have the highest suicide rate.”

“Especially in Asia where they push too hard the idea that anything they do—any little slip is a shame on their family and shifter group,” Dr. James interjected. “Yes, Dr. Greer and I have lectured several times together on the importance of mental health advocates in a group’s leadership to intercede and stop letting our people die because they were shamed.”

I nodded. “And one of the biggest reasons people are shamed from the old mindset that needs to die is having a rough first shift.” I let out another slow breath and decided to trust the people there in a way I hadn’t other colleagues. This was why I wanted to be at ASH.

It was time to show I was worth the trouble it took to get me there.

“I had an incredibly rough first shift,” I said evenly. “I had one of the worst first shifts my family had ever seen—even my grandfather, the previous Alpha of London who was in charge for over a hundred years.” I glanced around and stared down most of the shifters with egos. “Had I done what too many still preach and my family not been so evolved—”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“Our world would have suffered,” Dr. Carpenter said firmly, people giving him shocked looks. “You are a gifted doctor, and I’ve talked with Dr. James about your research and more. I’m thrilled you’re blowing the lid off of this at ASH. This was why ASH was built.” Sadness was in his eyes. “Glad you were born to such good people, Ha-joon. Truly.”

I smiled at him, his earlier crap forgotten even by my wolf. “Me too, sir.” I focused on the rest of the room. “Now, how many of you have figured out something important?”

“A bad first shift can be a sign of a strong shifter or possible Alpha that most wouldn’t have expected,” Gerald Woods of all people replied.

I met his gaze head-on. “Yes, I’ve found it to be about 50/50. Either it’s some form of neglect, malnutrition—being unprepared for what was coming. Or it’s an indicator that the shifter will be more powerful than a preteen’s body can handle.”

“Trauma. You’re forgetting trauma,” he corrected.

“No, I put that in a different category,” I clarified. “But good to bring up, thank you. I’m speaking on non-trauma-related cases that I’ve seen.” I gestured back to the screen. “Of the four you saw, one was trauma, two were the issues I listed, but that first one was an incredibly powerful female hawk that didn’t understand not to hurt her person when she was finally free.

“But because her first shift was difficult and shifters are more sexist than we like to admit—no one can convince me otherwise—she was shamed. And we all know how

easily that snowballs. We're doctors. We see it all the time. A child is told they're stupid and worthless and they stop trying. They fail again and again without support.

“Yes, there are the rare ones who push through and prove them all wrong, but that is the exception to the norm, not the outcome most lie to themselves that was supposed to happen. It's lazy parenting and leadership. Even if the child excels, they fail in so many other areas because they were not molded well. It takes a pack to raise a pup.”

I realized how personal I was getting there and cleared my throat, moving on and continuing with the Q&A.

A witch asked something over the line, but it was clear she was struggling with the information and how to process it. Some of what I discussed was well-defined to shifters, but—I wouldn't understand magic to a level she did either.

I warned them that this was not to be shared outside of the room or even ASH because too many would think I was a threat to Alphas in America, especially Atlanta. And that was the last thing I wanted.

The amused looks too many gave me like I was full of myself or just full of shit made me want to sigh... Until I let them feel most of my Alpha aura.

And I didn't even let it all out. I hid maybe forty percent? Maybe more. It wasn't like a speedometer after all.

“There was more, right?” Dr. James asked me after the lecture. He laughed when I gave him my most innocent face.

Dr. Carpenter clapped me on the back. “Well done. Probably the best lecture a new attending here has ever given. Fascinating insights and especially for those of us who aren't shifters. We've already changed the crisis protocols. You being here has kept

our people safe which is great.”

Oh, and he sent his apology to my wolf later even if I’d told him not to.

A whole fucking cow.

Yeah, seriously. The git sent me a whole butchered cow from a local organic farmer. I had the invoice paid for in my email and I just had to schedule a time to pick it up.

At least he apologized well.

The next weird was Dr. Greer sending me links to Instagram models with some serious thirst traps... Who were all men. I kept responding with confused emojis or playful GIFs basically asking her WTF?

Finally, she sent me one back with a “hint, hint, idiot.”

I didn’t understand. I called Mum instead and told her about the cow, asking if they had anything coming up where they could use some cuts for prime rib or whatever.

She mostly wanted the bones for broth. Apparently, there had been some issues in the UK with... I didn’t understand it all, but getting the right bones to make soups and bases had been harder to track down at the moment.

Which was how I got on the phone with the farm and asked if I could add to my order and buy a ton of the bones since they had options to buy butchered meat as well. They were glad for me to take them off their hands and Mum promised to handle them well and for the pack.

It left me feeling warm and fuzzy. I’d wanted to be a doctor to help people and that wasn’t always limited to medicine.

Ifinallyput it together when Dr. Greer messaged me after work asking if I got any good inspiration or if I wanted advice on which shots to send.

“Oh, I am a slow duffer,” I mumbled as the pieces fell into place. “She’s trying to help us.”

Then I had to admit that I had no idea where to start to take a thirst trap or even pictures like that. I wasn’t someone who even took selfies.

Her advice was simple—don’t take selfies, take pictures for Ellie.

I could do that, right?

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

Apparently, I could given the results.

I took a shower and set up my phone to take a few shots of me in nothing but a towel, water dripping all down me. Then I took a few on the bed with the towel half off. I wasn't a cad, but... I was hard for her and that was obvious.

Not pornish though.

"I'm going to hell," I mumbled as I picked the best of each and sent them with a message that I was thinking about her and the cold shower hadn't helped. "Oh, I need a sandwich to handle all the cheese."

Except it worked. I threw on shorts and went to put something together from dinner. I froze when I heard the code to my door being put in. I ducked my head around the fridge door just in time to see her storming into my kitchen.

But she didn't seem mad.

"Really? Like—really?" she demanded as she waved her phone at me. "I can't. I just can't anymore. You're too—you're just too—" she waved towards my body as if that was the answer.

Maybe?

"I don't know if I'm in trouble or—tell me what to do," I muttered.

Heat filled her eyes. "Me. Dome, Ha-joon."

Yes, ma'am!

I closed the fridge and slid my arm around her. She got the idea and jumped as I lifted her up and wrapped her around me as I attacked her lush lips. "You're sure?"

"Yes, fuck, I'm so sure. I'm—please. I can't—I was such a perv during your lecture and it's so distracting. I keep thinking—I'm so fucking horny for you."

That was a lot to unpack, but I was glad it was focused on me and not just too long of a dry spell.

I dumped her on my bed and studied her. "So you're like back, right? Or we are?"

Her lust cooled off a bit. "I want to be. I plan—hesitantly."

"I'll take hesitantly," I immediately agreed and climbed on the bed. "I just—I can't be your one and done again."

"You're not," she promised... But then moved her hand to my chest when I leaned down to kiss her. "But no more ghosting me either, my Alpha. There's a lot you don't know, and I need to know you won't just toss me aside again if you learn something shocking or there's too much to process."

But not something bad. She was saying what I needed to hear, but I decided to check.

I leaned in and kissed her forehead. "Not a mass murderer, right?" I bit back a smile when she snorted... And helped her take her top off, which she liked. "Not mated."

"Idiot," she grumbled... As we got her out of her pants.

I thought of anything that would be too big of a line for me. "Children?"

“No,” she answered, clearly thinking that was fair. “Never married even by human rules. No children. No in-laws. Just very,verycomplicated.” She begged me with her eyes to understand.

I gave a half shrug. “You’re already my boss, so nothing could really hit me professionally.” I frowned when her heart beat funny but focused on the kiss she laid on me. Fuck it was good.

And she probably just didn’t like being reminded that I was her subordinate. That was fair.

Especially when it didn’t matter to me.

I was naked now too and rolled us so we were sitting up and she was straddling my lap. “I promise. I can’t promise not to fuck up, but I promise that, worst case, I may need to walk away but will always walk right back. No more big spaces or going silent. That was—I won’t ever do that to you again.”

She let out a shaky breath. “Okay.” There was another one as she fidgeted with her hair. “Yeah, okay, that’s enough.”

I had been listening to her. Really and truly... But then her huge tits practically slapped me in the face when she moved like that and I—my cock ruled me sometimes.

I wasn’t the only git in the world that was true for.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

I grabbed her right one and kissed it all over. “Is this mine?” I growled when she didn’t answer, grabbing her other breast as well while I sucked on the right nipple. “Are they mine, Ellie?”

“They mine,” she gasped.

I wanted to roll my eyes. Yes, of course they were and she knew what I meant. She was being intentionally obtuse.

Or maybe I was because I was missing some sort of point, but there wasn’t much blood in my brain at the moment. I bit her nipple harder than I should have and she fucking loved it, moaning and getting wetter to the point some dripped on me.

“Are these mine?” I growled and switched tits.

She simply moaned. The minx really did push all my buttons.

“Say they’re only mine, Ellie,” I demanded and bit her other nipple. She went wild and my fingers found her dripping cunt... But all I did was tease her. “Say it. Don’t make me punish you.”

She tried to force my hand, so to speak, but I moved my hand completely and swatted her ass before rolling us. I loved on her tits for a few minutes while keeping her hips still and control over her body.

“Are they mine?” I asked as I stared up at her, smirking at her flushed cheeks and glazed-over eyes.

“Yes, my Alpha,” she panted. “My tits. My pussy. All my body is yours. Please, please make me come. I need it so bad. Toys—it’s not the same with toys anymore after being with you and—”

I kissed her to silence her and teased her clit with my fingers. “If you say anything more enticing right now, I could go too far and hurt you. I don’t want to lose control of my strength when I’m this on edge.”

She flipped us and mischief was in her eyes. “Yes, punish me, my Alpha.” She leaned in and kissed my shoulder before moving down my body. “I need to suck you. Ineedyour cock in my mouth and to taste you so—”

“Ellie,” I growled in warning... Even as I tangled my fingers in her hair.

She smirked at me and left love bites on my hips while talking about how much she loved my cock in her in so many ways. The woman was about to experience a whole new way if she didn’t watch it because my wolf wanted to give her something she’d never had.

So it was beyond time to be careful.

I moaned deeply when she took me into her perfect mouth. I only let her bob her head a few times before pulling her off.

She blinked at me after a moment. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Just telling my wolf to stuff it,” I admitted after a moment and cupped her cheek.

She licked her lips and I saw desire in her eyes. “What? Tell me.”

“He’s a jealous ass,” I warned, mentally sighing when she chuckled. “He’s pushing

for you to admit some things and spoil us after you were hesitant but didn't shut down someone circling you when you know it bothers us."

There, that was a fairly delicate way to phrase what I was feeling.

I wanted to take it all back when she rolled off the bed, but she held up her finger to me. Shit.

You're such a fucking jealous asshole. Good job.

My wolf basically gave me the proverbial finger and said we should have done it sooner.

Ellie came back in the room with her phone and waved for me to get up. She took a deep breath and then let it out before showing me the passcode to her phone and unlocking it. Then she handed it over with Gerald's contact pulled up.

"I'm giving you permission to read his messages and emails. We never talk specifics that you can't see in those. Or I think some in email, but you know what to skip. I hope that gives you the peace of mind to know—"

"I know," I promised her firmly even as I took the phone. "I know you're not playing me and this is doubt in yourself or—"

"It was more exhaustion," she sighed, nodding when I frowned. "I know I should have handled it sooner. I've just been so tired and I didn't have the energy." She rubbed her hands over my chest. "Forgive me? Make the call you need and know it truly was—I've been too overloaded. Handle it for me, my Alpha."

I leaned down and brushed my lips over hers. "Now you've done it. I'm going to fuck you way harder than I should so you never forget tonight and all I do to you."

Something dark twinkled in her eyes. “Yes, my Alpha.” She smirked as she slowly sank to her knees. “Make the call.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

While she blew me. That was the real apology.

Fuck. Me. Dead.

I took the offer. The moment she had my cock in her mouth I tapped her phone, my eyes never leaving hers.

“Hey, Ellie,” Gerald answered almost immediately.

“No, she’s a bit busy at the moment, but she gave me permission to make this call on our behalf,” I told him, my tone amused.

He was quiet a moment. “I want to think you have the integrity, Clark, I really do, but that doesn’t sound like the reserved Ellie I know.”

That was actually fair and Ellie seemed to realize it. She seemed to swallow her nerves down and gave a nod.

“Fair. She can tell you herself then,” I said before bringing the phone down to where she was.

She naughtily slurped off my cock so he could hear. “I gave permission. I thought I already made my position clear, but since you keep not respecting that I’m in a relationship, I gave my Alpha permission to handle it.” Her eyes flashed shock when he growled.

But she went right back to sucking which was such a fucking turn-on that I didn’t

even realize I was leaving the phone there to catch more. Not until I heard a full snarl like he was having a hard time controlling himself.

“Sorry, mate, lost me head for a moment,” I admitted when the phone was back to my ear. “I think the point has been made unless you’re daft.”

“Not the point you were trying to make probably, mate,” he argued, his tone cold and deadly.

Oh, he wanted to play? Fine, Ellie and I loved to play. I smirked down at her. “If I wanted to fuck you while he listened, would you let me?”

Her eyes flashed shock, but then she pulled off my cock. “Yes, my Alpha.”

“If I want to fuck you in front of him, would you let me?”

“Yes, my Alpha,” she whispered, swallowing loudly.

“Will you let me do things to you tonight you’ve never done before?”

“Yes, my Alpha.”

“I get it,” Gerald snapped. “She’s more submissive than I thought and—”

I laughed, shaking my head at what a duffer he was. “No, you missed the point completely. She’s agreeing not because she wants to do any of that but because she trusts me that I would never make her do any of them. I would never demean her or reduce her to just sex because you’re pushing my buttons and disrespecting our relationship.”

“I know that, my Alpha,” she promised. “But I’d still do it if it was what you

needed.”

Her saying that while stroking me just about set me off. “Get on the bed and I am going to do something new to you and I promise you’ll fucking love it.”

She nodded and stood with my help before walking over to the bed and sitting down.

“Stop pursuing my lover,” I told Gerald. “She doesn’t need that kind of shit when she’s overloaded and has already made it clear she’s not open to it from you.”

“She didn’t and—”

“Bullshit,” I growled. “She declared our relationship—allowed it to happen knowing she’d have to declare it. And I know she’s defended me to you. Enough. Leave her be or deal with it that she’s given me permission to stop being passive about it and the mess you’ll have.”

“Understood,” he bit out before hanging up.

For the moment. I didn’t see Gerald Woods as the type of man to piss off after one warning even if it was a big one. He seemed too stuck up for that.

I tossed her phone onto the overstuffed chair and went over to her, making it clear what I wanted without asking.

She gave it to me. She swallowed me down to the point she was practically choking herself and I fucking loved every minute, finishing down her throat. I loved watching her gasp for air and being so affected after—so full of lust and wanting more of me. She was fucking dripping and begging me to do everything I wanted to her.

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

So I did.

Multiple times.

11

Ellie

Ha-joon kept his word and rocked my world... And other things.

I didn't have his finger in my ass.

I just didn't love it either.

Renee looked at me like I was crass when I said it like that. I looked right back at her like she was nuts. He had his finger in my ass. There was no need to pretty that up or talk in circles. It didn't make it better to say his digit was in my nether flower or forbidden entrance or some bullshit.

He had his finger in my damn ass. Grow up.

Like... Grow the fuck up and just be adults and call it what it is. He fingered my ass. He did something new to me and I wasn't sure if I liked it.

I didn't dislike it. I liked how much he fucking loved it.

Seriously, the man was so into my damn ass that I was fucked better than porn or

movies or my wildest dreams. I ached in ways I hadn't known possible, and I was a vampire with advanced rapid healing. So that was unreal and amazing.

And after he woke me up for another round, I threatened to go back to my condo if he didn't let me get the sleep I needed. The pout he gave me was great, but there was too much going on for either of us to call out sick.

I did promise to come back over the next night so he could calm down and not try to get a month's worth of sex from me in like eight hours.

Though I did understand given how amazing it was.

What wasn't amazing? The annoyed lion Alpha waiting for me at my parking spot the next morning.

I swallowed a sigh, accepting this was happening and something I'd let go on too long for us to end up here. That didn't mean I wasn't validly annoyed because he could have just let it go.

Clearly, he wasn't the sort without at least a conversation.

"You shouldn't have poked him," I said as I got out. "We both know you did so don't even try it. You took shots at him in front of me knowing I was involved with him. There's no way you didn't do that with him for him to react that way. Obviously, there were things happening that I missed because he doesn't get jealous for no reason."

Gerald seemed shocked that I came out swinging, but then the disappointed look came back and he opened his mouth.

It irked me and I was sleep-deprived.

Sleep-deprived from amazing sex, but sleep-deprived just the same.

“He’s not the right fit for you, Ellie, and we both know that—you’re smart enough to know that.”

I snorted, giving him a look of disgust and shaking my head which again shocked him. “Let’s stick to work, Gerald, because you’re not even someone I’d be friends with outside of work, much less ever date.”

“Excuse me?” he hissed, looking completely affronted.

And taken aback.

I turned to face him and focused on his confusion. “You’re judgmental, Gerald.” I nodded when he frowned. “You’re judging me right now. You’re giving me that disappointed look you do often right now. Like you have any right to judge my decisions or in any world I should defer to your input or opinion. You have this misconception that just because I listen to your legal advice for the hospital that—”

“Wait, I do not and—”

“You do,” I defended. “So don’t gaslight me and try to act like this is me. I’m also not the only one who’s seen it.” I held up my hand to him and decided to use Renee to help me. “Go tell Dr. Bass what you said to me about both of us knowing that Ha-joon isn’t the right fit for me and that I’m smart enough to know better and see what she says about that.” I smirked when he flinched.

Because he should.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“You’re good at your job and I’m fine with a professional friendship, but even if I wasn’t involved with Ha-joon, I have no desire to have an association with you outside of work. I’m sorry to be so blunt, but you are pushing the issue, and your comment last night that I haven’t been specific enough—I cannot be any more specific and firm than that.”

“No,” he whispered, blinking at me as if he’d never seen me before. “No, you cannot, but—I don’t understand. We have—it’s not that I’m an Alpha.”

“No, you’re the type of Alpha that I don’t want in my personal life, Gerald.” I sighed when I realized that wasn’t going to be enough. “You need to be Alpha. You want to be deferred to. That’s the judgment. You were disappointed with me that I sat with my friends yesterday instead of you. Ha-joon would be disappointed he didn’t get to sit with me.”

“That’s what—”

“That’s not what you felt, and if you are honest with yourself, you’ll see the difference.” I studied him, sad when I saw genuine confusion and sadness in his aura. “I’m an Alpha too. I can sense more than a normal vampire. I can tell. I’m also not a pup. I don’t need guidance.” I let out a slow breath. “I really don’t need the judgment.”

“I understand,” he muttered. He waited until I was almost to the elevator. “I’m sorry, Ellie. I really didn’t—I didn’t think...”

“I’m glad to hear it.” I decided to be nice since he’d really helped me and the hospital out a lot. “Talk to Renee. She can get you on a better path and to accept where you’re

at. She's working miracles with me after all."

I was glad when he didn't hurry after me and left it alone.

I did text Ha-joon and let him know that I had a calm conversation with Gerald and made it clear that what he said was the truth. My Alpha was very, very, very happy to hear that.

And then he made me ridiculously happy that night.

Several fucking times.

Shit, why had I been avoiding him again?

I was an idiot. No, not really but... Yeah, maybe that too.

Now that we'd had time resettling after the board had been kicked to the curb and with the department heads being the new board, the next few weeks we were focused on the future of ASH. We'd made a hospital-wide announcement that we were making appointments to listen to proposals and we were encouraging people to give them no matter their level.

And we meant it.

Every morning before most of the practices opened, we were gathered to listen to them with someone bringing in breakfast. There had already been a shocking one that everyone had dismissed because of who the appointment was with.

But I'd known he was a diligent worker, and if he had something to say, I would always listen. And I was right. An industrial mopping robot might not have been revolutionary, but when a man from the maintenance staff who wasn't even a

manager had charts and numbers crunched... I was fucking impressed.

Plus, he was right. The value was there and the right move. Our maintenance staff was stretched too thin and always responding to issues, so they never had time to handle their assigned cleaning responsibilities. We were always calling outside cleaning teams and that was way more expensive than having our own people.

But some of the presentations were also some duds.

Duds to the point that their department heads were embarrassed. One even acknowledged that he should have checked what it was first before wasting all of our time and would do better in the future.

That was worth the dud meeting. A chastising where I didn't even have to open my damn mouth was my perfect type. Seriously, that was amazing and a live example of how people should step up and stop leaving so much for me to handle.

Especially when Alan, Sean, Renee, and Carla were all very involved in presentations from their departments. One Carla even rescheduled right in front of all of us saying it wasn't ready yet and needed another week at least. She admitted that she didn't think it would work with ASH, but that wasn't her decision to make.

However, it was lazy in its current state, and if it was to be presented, she would let anyone in her department present shit.

Awesome. Really.

Alan had been in charge of the schedule and managing all of this while I'd been handling the fallout of the board being kicked to the curb. I appreciated it, but that was how I was surprised when Thursday morning Ha-joon walked in... And I'd had no idea.

It did explain why he hadn't wanted to see me Wednesday night.

"Oh, so there wasn't any pillow talk about this?" one of the department heads teased me.

Without even realizing I was going to, I launched the muffin in my hand at his head. I simply shrugged when he couldn't hide his shock. "That was unnecessary and out of line. You know it was."

"Especially when several people here are shocked and confused," Ha-joon added. "So everyone here didn't know."

"You're an ass," I told the department head, glad when he held up his hands in surrender and apologized.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“I swear I thought all of us knew and it was the cutest secret we were keeping for your feelings.”

“Oh yeah, great job, asshat,” Alan drawled, cuffing him upside the head as he walked by.

“And no, I would never use my relationship with Ms. Reed for something like this,” Ha-joon said firmly before anyone else interjected. “Some of these are ideas I’ve presented before to the hospital I worked at. They were shot down and a couple I even understand why. With work, some could be implemented here at ASH, and I’m open to them being a launching pad.”

“He has ideas,” Carla muttered under her breath and shot me an impressive look. “He’s the first to have multiple.”

“And they’re good,” Sean bragged. “But yes, I do agree they will need adjusting to fit with ASH. One I think will do well with Renee’s department.”

“I can’t see how,” she muttered, sounding annoyed. She sighed when the tension shot up in the room. “I apologize, Dr. Clark. I’m still shaking off the last proposal.”

“I said I was sorry,” one of the department heads bit out.

“She wasn’t picking on you, just the doctor being so detached from reality,” I hurried to interject. I realized I needed to explain a bit when Ha-joon looked worried. “Obviously, this goes no further and we’re not going to say who—”

“Of course not,” he accepted.

“The doctor walked in here and basically gave us a list of things we already do,” I told him dryly, nodding when he blinked at me.

“It was rather difficult to be professional and not tell him ‘no shit’ repeatedly,” Carla drawled. “Like thegitprobably looked up ‘best hospital policies’ on Google and presented them as his ideas. ASH is probably who Google is referencing.”

“Well, glad I’m not that stupid,” Ha-joon muttered. “My ideas might not work, but I know it’s nothing you already do.”

Fair enough, and I was glad for the lead-in to get back on track.

Ha-joon started off with a bang. “I was bouncing an idea with my father when I was home recently, and not to influence ASH implementing it, but so you know it would work, he committed to being part of it. Not because I’m his son or involved, but he agrees that vampires are overlooked too often and pushed to... Middle-class jobs.”

“Yes, we know how often our kind are edged into becoming soldiers, police, and jobs that are too volatile for shifters,” Alan said evenly, but I could see the anger in his aura. “The argument always being that we have more strength than witches and warlocks but without the risks of shifters turning into animals and making situations worse.”

Ha-joon nodded. “It’s an argument that’s not wrong, but—we know there’s more to it. I think it’s time we—in the medical community at least—show that we value them. I know London’s pack is in, and if they are—people follow leaders.”

“You want to broaden the blood drive,” I muttered. “Your mother hinted at that and she was available to help more.”

“Yes, but—” He let out a long breath. “I’ve heard it time and time again in the pack even getting them to get physicals is impossible. Supes are stubborn. They think they’re above medicine too often. Only the younger generation is really embracing the change, and too many are stuck in the way of hiding in the shadows still.”

He seemed relieved when we all snorted or made noises of agreement. He was definitely speaking to the right audience.

“Many times they just need to know where the line is to see someone. Once they get the care they should have—people like being taken care of.”

“Yes, the studies about how once people get into the health care system after needing it, they don’t take the risk again,” Renee muttered. “You’re right that it’s breaking the old mindsets and ways even if it’s been over a hundred years. Fear isn’t always rational, and a lot of us even remember that fear of being outed.”

“So you propose some sort of outreach program to get around that?” Alan pushed.

“He does,” Sean cut in. “Saturdays for...” He cleared his throat. “Sorry, Clark. Go ahead.”

Ha-joon nodded to him and then brought up his presentation and the information to show us. The idea was basically to have pre-screening events, quick questionnaires and short sit-downs with baby doctors for training. And the price?

Donate blood that we would either put our additives into and sell or contribute directly to police and military around the world.

I shared a look with Alan. This was the missing piece we’d been looking for. We’d long since wanted to give a discount to vampires who were in such blue-collar service jobs.

There just hadn't been a good way to do it. Not without too much blowback and accusations of favoritism since some people knew the owner of ASH was a vampire.

Sean knew the issue as well and waited until Ha-joon was done. "Now, to add to his idea, I think it would be best if we worked in conjunction with local hospitals. This shouldn't be something for the glory of ASH or of course only ASH could pull this off with our funding. Frame it all as teaching moments so we always have the best doctors available to our world."

"And shifters finally getting off their asses to really show they value our fanged friends who save our asses all of the damn time," Carla added. She shared a look with Alan and then Ha-joon, doing a double take at whatever she got from him. "Off the record, your dad's of the same opinion as more wolf Alphas right?"

"You would need to be more specific," he hedged. "But I am of the opinion—off the record—that if we don't start taking better care of vampires, shifters could have a serious problem since vampires control the military and police on every continent. My father understands every serious issue and is a wise man."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

I bit back a smile at the answer, amused when Alan snorted. “You and your father are both wise to be worried.” I shrugged when the shifters and magics in the room froze. “You all know I would never push for violence, but I’m also tired of my kind being constantly treated like security guards and meter maids while other species get wildly rich.”

“And so are a growing number of vampire leaders,” Alan warned. “I can’t say this will heal all the hurt, but it’s at least something. Long overdue, but I think it will make a powerful statement that its origin came from the son of a very powerful Alpha.”

I interjected when Ha-joon looked a bit pale. “We’re not saying to use your family or back your father into a corner.”

“No, but you’re right on the framing if it’s also going to be political and try to mend a growing issue,” Renee muttered. “More he was raised right and clearly such a powerful Alpha teaches his pack and children to respect the sacrifices vampires make. It’s a smart message.” She shot me a worried look. “One that will epically backfire if they are the only ones to do this.”

“Still, he wins for the best presentation and idea so far,” one of the other department heads said firmly. “I thought the mopping robot was going to be the only decent one this week, so good job, Clark.”

I heard her loud and clear that it was time to move on.

He nodded and cleared his throat as he leaned over and tapped the keys on his laptop

a few times. “This next idea was presented to my last hospital and rejected. Harshly.”

And obviously that had left a mark on him.

“ASH is more open-minded than others,” I reminded him, flicking off a few people when they made kissy noises.

Ha-joon ignored them and gave me a grateful look.

But it was hard not to cringe and withdraw my earlier comment when he told us the idea.

“Hear him out because he also talked to me about this and I think the idea has promise,” Carla interjected. “And I think I see where Sean’s head is about involving Renee and it’s brilliant.”

“Yes, bringing in dermatology would be smart,” Sean muttered. “I went right to mental health and—”

“ASH is never going to have a medical spa,” Alan interrupted. “It would shatter all of our credibility and—”

“Then it wasn’t launched correctly, and you still have too much toxic here that would undermine growth,” Ha-joon interjected, not backing down when Alan was annoyed.

“Even your own hospital rejected the proposal,” Alan threw back.

Ha-joon winced but seemed nervous. “I apologize for not being clearer. They rejected it because it wasn’t money-making enough in the current state. They’re planning to implement it now that I’m gone in the way I wouldn’t be a part of. I told them I would walk if they went with the way they wanted it.”

I knocked on the table when several people opened their mouths at once. “Let’s all calm down.” I met Ha-joon’s gaze and ignored the puppy dog look he was giving me. “The sensitivity in this room is because too many have looked down on ASH and accused us of being a medical spa basically.”

“Corporate charlatans making up problems supes don’t have to cure them like we’re all humans,” Alan grumbled, his tone mocking.

Yes, because we’d heard that too often especially when ASH first opened.

And that was bullshit because it all came from people who were upset they hadn’t come up with the idea first or didn’t control it. But they were people with power and reach, so their bad intentions had been the least of our problems.

“We’re all going to give this conversation and idea a clean slate,” I said to everyone there. “His first idea was too good to brush off a different one because of our biases. I put myself in that category, and you all know how I feel about medical spas.” It was the truth even if I felt bad saying that for Ha-joon. “Now, explain it to us in crayon-eating terms.”

That made him ease down a bit and he nodded. “I’m not saying doctors recommend back rubs, here’s a punch card for you, and don’t forget to hit the gift shop on the way out. No, none of that.”

“You’re saying...” Someone started to interject but sighed when I shot him a shit look. “You said conversation, Ellie. We don’t need a lecture. We need a conversation and yes, I will try to be open to it. But I think I see his point.”

“Sorry.” I sighed when that wasn’t enough and rubbed the back of my neck. “The board tried to beat this idea into me every other month. This whole thing is tense for me.” That worked, and I was glad we got back on track.

“You’re saying sometimes there’s a need for something between ortho appointments and physical therapy,” the department head said as he focused on Ha-joon. “My mind is immediately on wolves since you are one. There are too many times I’ve heard ortho say they told the parent of a young wolf that physical therapy isn’t needed—”

“And they immediately hear everything is fine and the problem is done,” Ha-joon finished for him, nodding. “But really take-home exercises were prescribed along with massaging joints and soaks.” Several of us nodded, knowing the situation well. “In my perfect world, the standard of care after a first shift would be the following—”

My mouth wasn’t the only one that fell open when he clicked for the next slide. There was a whole flowchart next to a questionnaire.

“The child is brought in as soon as possible after the shift. They are asked questions that the parents do not answer, especially when we know they will give certain answers out of embarrassment. From there, each child is given a full and specialized health plan. Girls that age will start their menstruation if they haven’t already.”

“Or our menstruation changes and certainly our sex drive which is always a dirty secret that hurts especially wolves,” Carla muttered, her tone a bit haunted. She’d seen too many be hurt and abused.

Just as I had with vampires.

“Exactly,” Ha-joon agreed. “They are then enrolled in a free seminar about what to expect and how to handle it. Not the pack, pride, sloth—any of that bollocks. Parents won’t pay for it, but we know they’ll accept free. We all know female shifters who would gladly come in and help if they had a way.”

Carla snorted, clearly meaning she would do it for every female shifter if she could.

“Males are enrolled in a different one about their aggression and need to hunt.” He sighed when most of the women in the room flinched or went tense. “Men are more aggressive. We also don’t handle it as well. My sisters are very strong wolves—could take my older brothers if they worked harder, but I’ve never, not ever heard them say they were itching to hunt.”

“I want to defend them that maybe they don’t feel comfortable saying such things, but that seems like a slight against your parents,” Carla admitted, glancing at me when I snorted.

“I’ve spent enough time with his mother that if her daughters wanted to hunt, she’d set up outings and source the best animals for them. She’s a doll like that. They would accept it.” I gestured to Ha-joon. “They have a special child and pushed him to thrive. Daughters hunting would be fine.”

“Yes, thank you,” Ha-joon whispered, seeming touched I thought so highly about his family.

Or his parents at least. I had choice words for his siblings.

“Fair.” Carla studied him. “Off the record, how often do you truly get the urge to hunt? I have it maybe once every six months.”

“Weekly,” Ha-joon answered immediately, nodding when even Sean seemed shocked. “My wolf gets anxious and acts out if I don’t have a large takedown weekly. A real hunt, not just a lamb left out that can satisfy some. He needs to hunt.”

“That’s not normal,” Sean muttered.

“No, it’s not, but again, would most shifters know that they’re not alone if they felt that, or do they self-destruct because they hide it?” Ha-joon pushed, proving his point. We all agreed, and he continued.

We were all stunned when he was done, but I recovered first. “You’re not suggesting a medical spa, but a whole way to revolutionize how we handle a sector of medicine—create new specialties and programs to certify. You want there to be a new board-certified doctor who specializes in first shifts and transitions.”

Ha-joon slowly nodded. “Yes, I guess I do.” He kept nodding. “Yes, you’re right, that is what I want.” He tapped a few keys. “And I have more.”

Yes, yes, he most certainly did.

12

Ha-joon

I was thrilled the board was truly listening and heard the true idea on the merits and intent instead of brushing it off as I’d worried... Or looking at the dollar signs like

my last hospital had.

“But I also want there to be a bit of subterfuge or—ASH has so much to offer, but itssizemakes certain aspects available that—”

Ellie immediately caught on. “People are embarrassed to be seen going to certain doctors. Yes, we know that well and have ways around it.”

“Yes, yes, ASH does,” I agreed. “I want to use that. Specifically, for—a doctor I worked with—she’s amazing and...” I stifled a snort when I immediately scented annoyance from Ellie.

“Move on,” Ellie said firmly when people started looking at her.

“Professionally, she’s amazing,” I clarified. “She’s a shifter OB-GYN and specializes with those who have a hard time carrying to term. My previous hospital was so busy bragging about how great she was that she barely had any patients. People who needed her were too ashamed to see her—too embarrassed to be seen needing that help—”

“Or admitting they failed as a woman that they couldn’t give their partner a child,” Dr. Greer said sadly. “Yes, we are more sexist as shifters than we like to say. Poor women. So you want to steal her?” She waited until I nodded. “Forgive me, but this sounds like a shifter addition, Clark.”

“Not at all,” I said firmly. “This is just what I know. This is the starting point. I do know that some new vampire mothers have problems because not only are they breastfeeding but giving their babies blood and—”

“Our society still treats female vampires like broodmares too often and who cares if they suffer,” Dr. Carpenter grumbled. “Yes, we’ve seen it many,manytimes and how

it can basically strip the vampire of their immortality.” He nodded when I couldn’t hide my shock. “Every species has such dirty secrets.”

“Yes, yes, we do,” I agreed sadly. “But with ASH’s reputation, even the most sexist father would want their children to come here to be checked over by the most advanced new addition and doctors. That’s when we can help these mothers. That’s how we change things, and those mothers tell sisters and cousins—we change the mindset and stop the shame and insanity.”

“So you’re saying this new addition would focus on those who fall through the cracks most,” Ellie muttered before looking at Dr. James. “And that’s why you thought of Renee. There’s still too much stigma against mental health, but this could be the lead-in or even excuse someone used to be at ASH.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Dr. James said the same time I did, but he continued. “You’re saying instead of a weekly session, they could say they’re helping teach a free teenage group counseling.”

Ellie shrugged. “Why not? Or that could be the price of help if they’re worried about their mate finding out with insurance. We could have all kinds of free education that people could sign up for. Hell, work with schools and get it on community service points. Make them as a bonus for college applications that they took seminars here learning about magics as shifters.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:14 am

“Oh, I like that,” a different department head said. “So not a medical spa but medical outreach and education addition. The next step in the best healthcare and knowledge for supes so that we continue peace and the harmony we all want.”

“We could work in something free for vampires so they feel valued,” Dr. Greer suggested, clearly knowing as much as Da and I did. “The humans have their support groups. We could do more of them for our police and—we have to do better. Fine, our military doesn’t kill, but even support groups about how they feel pigeonholed into roles could help.”

“Agreed,” Ellie muttered, jotting down more. “Speaking as someone who was pigeonholed for a role—yes, it would help. It’s not lost on many of us that we went from one type of pigeonholed role to another, and most aren’t thinking it was a step in the right direction.”

A thrill of fear raced through me. That was worse than even Da or I knew. I really needed to talk to him that this was serious and a concern he needed to make more understand.

There was actually a great discussion and more points brought up. More and more was thrown out there for different species and how to evolve the foundation of my idea. After another twenty minutes, Ellie called it and told all of the department heads to seriously consider this and discuss it with their senior attendings.

But not to tell them where the idea originated.

She shot me an apologetic look and I understood. I had too many gold stars on my

name already and they didn't want to start trouble.

Well, that kind of trouble.

Fair enough, and I accepted it mostly because I knew Ellie would be fair with me later when people learned the truth and how things actually came about.

"This was really great, and we will include you in the meetings going forward," Dr. Carpenter promised as the others stood. "We'll get something scheduled for next week after office hours and another round of brainstorming after we talk with our respective attendings. Both ideas were impressive, and clearly bringing you on was the right move to—"

"He's not done, Alan," Dr. James chuckled.

"Pardon?" Dr. Carpenter asked, glancing between us.

"I'm not done," I confirmed. "I have two more ideas."

"The last one is the one I think will be your favorite," Dr. James added with a smirk. "It's something you're always pushing for but the board shut down."

"Huh," Dr. Carpenter huffed, blinking at me for a full minute. "Okay, well, I need to use the restroom and then I think we reschedule the other appointments, yeah? I want to hear what Clark has to say."

"Whatever you all agree to," Ellie accepted. "I think it's best I abstain." She gave me a subtle wink when they all agreed they wanted to hear my ideas over whoever was scheduled.

Nice.

After the break, I jumped right into my idea of scheduling portals to be opened all around the world just for appointments at ASH. Also for them to be opened back to the same area at certain intervals throughout the day starting from a few hours later. There was no need for every hour or at will. That would be too costly but five times starting at noon was worthwhile.

The tension in the room shocked me and I was just about to crack and demand what was going on when Dr. Carpenter cleared his throat. He gave Ellie a look and nodded.

She sighed. “You aren’t the only one with this idea. That’s what you’re feeling.”

“More than that, it’s the map,” Dr. Bass muttered. “It’s been a few days since I’ve seen it, but—seriously, pull it up.”

Ellie sighed again and pulled a drive out of her bag before coming over to the laptop I was using. She checked that she could interject and seemed tense when I agreed.

I understood when she brought up what Dr. Bass had referred to. It was a world map marked up like I had for my presentation.

Now I understood, and they were worried I would think someone stole my work—or someone would think I stole theirs. Shit.

“I presented this to my last hospital and I can prove that,” I hedged.

“No one worries you stole an idea and we know it wasn’t stolen either as it was presented here at ASH before as well,” Dr. Carpenter said firmly.

“I knew the idea briefly, but—I didn’t see the map,” Dr. James confessed. “His other ideas had my focus and I zoned out as he spoke about getting more patients in. I apologize, Ellie.”

Right, this wasted time. Double shit.

I slapped on a calm smile. “Theirs is even a better map with more information than I’m privy to.” I moved closer and pointed to a few spots in Asia. “I didn’t know any of this or the issues—even this development. This is someone better connected than I am.”

“I am, thank you,” Ellie said with an amused tone.

I did a double take, the amusement in the room shooting up.

Except what I was going to say next died on my tongue.

“You have something to add and now don’t want to,” Dr. James immediately noted. “You never have to worry about Ellie taking feedback as long as it’s smarter and benefits ASH.”

I nodded but still gave her a worried look.

“My pride is fine, Dr. Clark,” she promised. “This is something I pushed with the board many,manytimes and they said lots and much harsher than I know you could ever be.”

Fair enough.

I moved to the other side of her map where the legend of dates was listed and tapped on them. “You have these set and that could be a problem because—”

“Of lunar cycles,” Carla figured out. “Yes, you couldn’t have a big metropolis always be right by the full moon. You would need a rotating calendar of say seventy-five days instead of your neat sixty days.”

“Yes, but also I have a text reminder line set up for people to sign up in their area and a designated app with calendar and—I have it outlined,” I told them.

“That is an improvement on what I had,” she easily accepted, studying the slides I

pulled up next. “Yes, and—I made it too efficient and tight. That’s too much on our warlocks and the couple I added to hire. We have pretty tight hours and more already. But you’re right that I am better read in on areas and where to make the locations. Good. Well done.”

I felt way too much like a pup being praised for the first time than I should have, but... Everyone liked to have their ideas accepted and valued.

“Oh, this last idea should be a doozy if you’re the most worried about this one and you barely were about the others,” one of the department heads I didn’t know drawled. I felt bad for not knowing his name, but there were over twenty of them, and... I’d had a lot going on since the move.

I still didn’t know all the names of the doctors in my damn department.

“Yes, this one will be the most controversial or difficult to implement but has serious potential long term to change the face of medicine in our world,” I said firmly.

“You have our full attention, Clark,” Dr. Carpenter said firmly, ready with a pen and notepad even since Dr. James had hinted this was something he’d be interested in.

I let out a slow breath and changed out the presentations. “One of the greatest risks a hospital takes on is personnel. The amount of time and effort and money put into doctors is incalculable but also the greatest. And it’s also the area doctors get the laziest in because they’re tired of their hard work moving on to another hospital.

“They see that as wasted effort. Yes, it still benefits our society—I even understand it. I’ve trained or worked with people who immediately were scooped up by another hospital and I’m frustrated that I spent so much time to not reap any benefit. Yes, that sounds selfish, but—we’re only people and we want to feel our efforts valued as well.”

I was glad when the group seemed to accept that and even accepted my stance instead of lecturing that I was being petty.

“I want to have a sponsored fellowship from a location,” I told them pulling up the next slide. “I’m not saying this to benefit London—and London certainly doesn’t need it—but it’s what I know.”

“He’s actually thinking rural or underserved areas but is too polite to say so,” Dr. James cut in, giving me a look to cut the shit.

“There are some major metropolitan areas that have some of the worst healthcare and we can all name the same five,” I defended.

“Fair, very fair,” he accepted. “Yes, I just—you’re—your parents raised you well on how to not stick your foot in yourmouth in a group. Sometimes you just need to be blunt in your diagnosis so the problem can be handled.”

“I agree, but you must know your audience for that, and like Ms. Reed proved, if that attitude will be accepted,” I countered. “I don’t know the people here remotely well enough for that. And I won’t ever risk someone walking out of a meeting with me and having the opinion that I’m some elitist who looks down on rural areas.”

“Moving on to the idea and why we’re here,” Ellie interjected when it seemed a few people wanted to quip about what I’d said. “I know this is getting longer than we planned and there are more meetings than we planned. We can discuss how to handle that and not take it out on Dr. Clark.”

“Yeah, that—I want to be pleased so many signed up with ideas and took initiative, but mostly I’m disappointed that they thought our standards are so low as to what we would consider a ‘good’ idea,” Dr. Carpenter grumbled.

I wasn't touching that with a ten-meter pole, so I focused back on my presentation, speeding things up after Ellie's hint. "The idea is simple. Let an area fund a resident's training here at ASH. I would put in time to have a resident with promise under me but not have it affect my budget knowing they wouldn't stay."

"But I could give a lot to a younger doctor who could bring a lot that's useful to an area that's full of shifters not getting the care they need. They would also be the biggest advocate to get more people here when it's needed. A local or small practice to weed through small issues and tie it back to the other idea of an outreach program to educate."

"That's why you said I'd like it," Dr. Carpenter muttered, sharing a glance with Dr. James before focusing on me. "I'm a huge advocate about more training of pups even if we set them free."

"As are a lot of us, but I also don't disagree with Dr. Clark's comments—how a lot of attendings feel about their time being abused to train people when they don't get more from it," Ellie interjected. "Or hell, some have then tried to take over their practices later because doctors can be some of the biggest egotistical assholes."

She apologized when several people glanced at her in shock... But she wasn't wrong.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

“Taking outside funding is dangerous and there’s a reason we don’t allow it,” someone argued.

“Right, but that’s because people want a part of the hospital or control here,” I hurried to respond. “This is to fund their salary for the training and living expenses. And not corporate sponsorships. Towns or counties can hold fundraisers or even set aside some amount of their taxes to save up for this. It couldn’t be every area at once either.”

“No, and most wouldn’t want to be first, so we’d have to do it strategically where places have suffered because they didn’t have someone,” Ellie muttered. “It has promise and possibilities. I’d even think a loan would be better and something that could show a better commitment.”

“Now that’s a thought,” Dr. James muttered, sitting back in his seat and moving his hands behind his head. “So borrow the money from the town or city and say they have to pay it back within ten or twenty years after starting their practice?”

“How could you guarantee people would actually go to them if it’s an area that doesn’t believe in our icky science?” someone countered. “You could have locals sticking it to them that they won’t go unless they lower prices. That would lead to a disaster and screw over a promising doctor. They’d be promising if they finished a fellowship here.”

“Good, yes,” Ellie agreed, already jotting down notes. “The loan for a quarter of the amount—which won’t be that much given it’s not like fellows make that much—and to be repaid over twenty years. But they don’t have to keep a practice open there if the

locals are abusing them. Something worded better legally.”

“A commitment to donate to the program so much every year after their loan is paid back,” I added, shrugging when several of them glanced at me. “If it works and gives them a real career they should pay it forward. We are by giving our time. Yes, another resident is always helpful, but I put in more work than I get a lot of times. That’s fine but—”

“They need to promise to do the same after they received such help,” Ellie muttered. “I like it. Yes.”

Everyone agreed and praised me for being the clear diamond of ASH with four winning proposals... Even if one was the same as what Ellie already had drawn up.

I was happy with the added bonus that I would get to work with her on the project and had the excuse for another reason to be close to her. I think she seemed to realize that as we were all walking out because she kept shooting me looks. There was also a range of emotions I caught from her like she couldn’t keep up with what she was feeling.

Riding the high of that meeting, I was in a good mood all day and my staff noticed it—the mood spreading even. The win helped me find the energy to attend the Atlanta pack’s new moon gathering.

Which of course I regretted.

While the full moon brought up some issues for shifters depending on what species, their age, sex, and power level, the new moon was called the “lazy days.” We didn’t have much of a drive opposite how we were keyed up, and I could even be aggressive and hormone-driven during the full moon.

The new moon wasn't abigdeal, but we all felt it to some degree. Those of us with more power felt it more just likeanything else. I'd heard some women compare it to the low-energy phase of their menstrual cycle.

Which really sucked that they had two different forces of nature dragging them down... Because during the three or four days of the new moon, naps and more naps were the only thing that really sounded good to me.

There was a weird vibe when I arrived. An excitement that I wouldn't have thought given what Ellie had told me about her conversation with the Alpha and the fire she'd put out. I would have thought hesitation and a lot of leery pack at my being there.

It put me on edge, especially when the Alpha was one of the most excited people. His welcome was too big, clapping me on the back like we were old friends and talking up my resume like he had any reason to brag about me. I bit my tongue to keep from reminding him that I wasn't transferring packs officially.

I would now and forever be a part of my family's pack. This was a long-term guest situation which was more than allowed.

Hell, most preferred it over having a member of an Alpha family join their pack. I couldn't take over if I wasn't an official member.

I was so shocked that I didn't catch on fast enough. There was also a huge distraction in the form of his daughter who was radiating worry, disappointment, and several other negative emotions while trying to fake enthusiasm.

What was seriously going on?

"He could do way better, but it's not a bad match," someone said too loudly when the Alpha was distracted and people started to get ready to run.

And the Alpha's daughter turned away like she'd been slapped.

Yeah, the pieces fell into place and I scrubbed my hand over my face. "Let's have a chat, shall we?"

Anger filled her eyes. "I might be a broodmare to be handed off if your family wants, but I won't ever be abused, and my father won't allow that no matter your last name."

"I have never hit a woman unless she's hit me first," I told her firmly but quietly. "I get to be angry when I walk into shit blind." I thumbed over my shoulder towards the person who had just made the comment.

Confusion encircled her and she nodded, waving me to follow her.

Horror filled every inch of me as she filled me in on what she knew. I cut in when she started to nervously repeat herself, my rage making her wolf squirm given my power level. "I'm involved with someone. Someone my parents know about and that I plan to mate."

Shock made her react like a fish, opening and closing her mouth several times before blowing out a harsh breath when she couldn't seem to form words.

"Yeah, so again, I get to be pissed when I came to just run and settle my wolf after pushing this off too long because I didn't want shit like this."

“I didn’t either,” she snapped.

“Yeah, you’ve made that abundantly clear,” I drawled, trying not to be offended. Fine, it was a bit petty, but no one liked disgust being the emotion someone felt when a match between them was suggested.

“It’s not about you,” she sighed, understanding where my head was. She nodded while rubbing her shoulder. “I would feel this way if my perfect Prince Charming fucking showed up. It’s—my father took a scary, gleeful turn with whatever was said and just announced it to everyone. My mother is also furious. He announced it before talking to her—either of us.”

I snorted. “Because he thought it was a done deal then and he didn’t think you or your mother would ‘embarrass’ him by telling the truth.”

She sighed, so I knew I hit the nail on the head. “He makes Mom feel bad that she didn’t give him any sons to take over.”

“Glad he’s stupid and doesn’t know how basic biology works,” I drawled.

“Something I’ve brought up repeatedly and that I’m stronger than him and will take over as the eldest,” she said with just as much disdain.

“Well, good luck with that. I wish you the best. I’ll help if I can as a guest of the pack and only that. I will always be loyal to my family and—”

“You might want to rethink that because I’m pretty sure this was done with their

blessing.”

I wanted to tell her she was mistaken and there was no way... But I was pretty sure there was. Somehow.

I let my wolf run so he wasn't too keyed up, but honestly he was too keyed up to focus. I shifted back and went for the Alpha, glad he wasn't running yet. He was frowning when he didn't see his daughter with me.

“Let's chat and with less ears because you're not going to like what I say,” I told him bluntly.

“I'm not sure why when—”

“I'm not a fucking pup and stronger than you,” I snapped. “So fuck whatever someone said for me. The fact you didn't talk to me first before announcing whatever bullshit you did to your pack—fuck, I want to tear off your head for announcing it before you talked to your own fucking daughter. And if I had wanted her and you'd done that, I would have ended you.”

I was glad when he was smart enough to go pale. That meant he was close enough with his wolf to sense that I was telling the truth.

Yeah, I was, so good thing he was listening.

I didn't wait until people couldn't overhear because he was being childish and dragging his heels. “I should end you for trying to commit me to something you didn't hear from my own fucking lips. Something completely bullshit and—”

He grabbed my arm and tried to drag me off now that he realized that I wasn't going to play his games. He couldn't remotely move me and I gave him a look that he was

just compounding his mistakes. He let me go with a huff and jogged off towards where he'd been heading, knowing where I'd followed.

I rolled my eyes and sprinted in the direction. "Get your ass back here because I can fucking yell so everyone can hear me, fucker."

Yeah, I could be just as petty.

"Shut up," I said firmly when he arrived, putting all my power into the words and even on display. He was trembling when he felt it and showed me his throat. "You haveno excuse. Your daughter was too upset to have put the pieces together—maybe she has now. She thought it all came from me, but we both know it didn't.

"When she realized I was confused and ambushed by this—you should be in the ground for springing this on another Alpha wolf—anyfucking wolf. My wolfwants you dead for trying to force your daughter who you are supposed to protect. You don't know me. You were greedy and used her like a pawn because you're jealous a mere woman is more powerful than you."

And there it was. What this was really about. It wasn't my last name or that he was truly worried about me taking over.

No, the petty,pettyman was embarrassed that hisdaughter, who wasn't even forty, was a stronger and better wolf than him.

I got the details from him and then I had only one thing to say. "I will give youone chanceto fix this elegantly and withoutshitting on my family. You are a duffer to have believed one of mysiblingswhen everyone who knows anything knows we have issues. You have no honor and jumped at the chance to lock me in."

He tried to argue, but I blasted him with what I sensed from his wolf.

“You knew I didn’t know!” I nodded with a smirk when he froze. “I’m a wolf and Alpha like you’ve never seen. My wolf knows lots. So shut the fuck up with the half-truths and bullshit. You will gracefully fix this. You got overexcited that my sister thought a possible match. I’m involved with someone I already introduced to my parents and they adore her.”

He went pale.

“Yeah, do you want them to show up here and handle this bullshit?”

“No, no, I don’t,” he whispered, swallowing loudly.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

“Wise because my mother would make an example of you so no one ever tried ever again to trap her children into a mating. And she has done that before.” I nodded when he wobbled like he might faint. I jabbed my finger in his chest. “And you will adjust your view on your daughter.”

“I can’t. I can’t be the weak man to allow—”

I backhanded him hard enough that blood exploded from his nose and he went flying. I walked the ten feet to where he landed and squatted down. “How disappointing that you’re so shortsighted.”

“I don’t understand,” he said genuinely, spitting blood but not in an aggressive way, accepting he was beat.

I sighed, hating when I had to explain to people that the sky was blue. “You could go down in history as the Alpha who pushed for wolves to truly be as evolved as shifters say we are instead of closet sexists. You’ve done something right as apparent that your daughter is so fucking strong. Start bragging about that and how fucking amazing your genes are!”

After talking with him a bit more, I got through to the Alpha. Good because while my wolf was fine with killing threats and bad wolves, I had problems with it as a person and doctor.

I ran for a while longer and was glad that the Alpha handled it right there after most of the pack shifted back before leaving. I was still upset and took it out on Ellie.

Sexually, but... Yeah, I went way over the top.

That was going to be fun to explain.

13

Ellie

I wasn't expecting Ha-joon since he'd told me he was going to the new moon run with the Atlanta pack. He'd been in a good mood after his impressive presentations in the morning and had stunned the department heads.

Hell, I was turned on he was so damn smart having all those great ideas to help ASH.

So not only was I surprised that he showed up, but floored at the state he was in.

"I'm filthy," he growled as he crowded me against the door. "We're going to shower and I'm going to fuck you several times because you're mine. Object now if that's not what you want and I'll leave and figure out some way to get my wolf under control."

I nodded. It was some sort of nod or bobbing of my head.

I wasn't really sure of the signal I gave, but I knew there was one. That part was the shock, but I clearly was fine with his plan.

Yes, sex me up, please. Unexpected or not. Sure, fine.

It was the emotions and upsetpulsingin his aura that were making me speechless. It fucking took my breath away basically.

And fuck me he did.

He ordered me to soap him up while he fingered my pussy and made sure I was ready. I was touched that he always kept his head to remember that no matter how out of his head he was. Then he plunged into my body while I'd been washing his hair as if... Hell if I knew.

He wasn't paying attention to the shower part?

Either way, I loved it.

And somehow was still washing his hair? No, more fisting it as I held onto him, but my fingers were... It was honestly all a blur it was so good. When it was over I just had an amusing thought that his hair was clean.

Yeah, I was the weird one in all of this.

We didn't just have sex in the shower though. After the first round, he growled that I had thirty seconds to finish my shower if I wanted one. That wasn't going to be enough with all my hair and he was an idiot to think otherwise. I quickly soaped up my body and rinsed, going over his deadline, but that was all I got.

Then I was out of the shower and on all fours on my bed getting plowed. I wasn't complaining. It was glorious and overwhelming—the best type of sex.

But it was also like angry sex and I hadn't done anything wrong, so that was throwing me. A lot.

Which was why he deserved the unamused look I gave him when he finally worked out all of his demons on my body and I was back in my head.

He winced and cleared his throat before scrubbing his hand over his face. “Have you eaten? How about—”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

He didn't get to pick the food after all of that. "Mexican. I want that little place we ordered from with those burritos—the pork ones that—"

"Yesssss," he groaned, leaning over and giving me a quick peck. "Yes, that's exactly what we need. I'll get the menu and order."

I grabbed his arm before he could roll out of bed and escape. "And there better be an explanation with that food."

"Yeah, I wasn't going to hide this." He let out a slow, shaky breath. "I was going to ask your advice. My sibling—siblings maybe—went too far this time."

My heart hurt for him when I saw him blinking back tears as he left. What did those fuckers do to him now? Seriously, just when I thought nothing could be more fucked up than my situation with my sibling—no, I knew there was much worse. I just hated that he had to deal with any of it.

I got cleaned up—not even bothering with the mess my hair now was. I would have to reshower in the morning and condition it to make any sense of it. He'd run up to his condo to grab clothes, smiling when I chuckled that he'd gone up there in a towel.

"You're not in trouble," I confirmed when I realized he thought I was mad. "I agreed and nothing was too far. That's just not something you skip the explanation on."

"No, yeah—that's fair." He went to the door when the food arrived and spent the next several minutes filling me in on lots including a bit of history with his siblings so I understood the layers.

“This is escalating instead of getting better now that you’ve moved,” I told him, hoping he understood that.

He opened his mouth to say something but then seemed stumped, taking too big of a bite of his food instead. “I don’t think it’s escalating in the way you think like I’m a threat. That part has de-escalated.”

What he meant hit me. “It’s straight jealousy. The youngest of your eldest sisters is just jealous that you received any sort of recognition from your eldest sister and she wanted to make a mess for you.”

“Yes, but I think she thought it would really work and I’d be trapped.” He nodded when I couldn’t hide my shock. “I don’t make waves in my family, Ellie. I always do what’s best for them, and this could be a headache for them. Or could have been if I didn’t scare the shit out of the Alpha, but she’s never met him to know his power level.

“I’ve only dug in my heels once and that was going to med school. It was the only time my parents told me no and I told them to fuck off and I would dump the family. I have always fallen in line and been the good pup of the Clark family. I have always been apologetic for making them look bad by being special.” He snorted.

“Until recently,” I surmised, knowing he threw down with them when he’d gone home last time. I nodded when he did. “It’s not going to get better now that you’ve shown you have bite. You have to truly bite one of them, Ha-joon.”

“I know,” he whispered sadly. “And more than that, I have to do something I don’t want to and will really hurt Da. It’s to save him though because he’s in more trouble than he realizes. I just have to talk to my mates first and see if they’ll back my play.” He swallowed loudly and met my gaze. “And for you to trust me. Trust me more than I should ask you to.”

I studied his gaze and saw not only worry, but maybe the little boy Ha-joon had once been and no one had ever picked him. No one in his family had loved him how they should—even his parents who had tried to do their best. He was too special to be pushed to the side, but he had been.

“As long as you tell me the truth and we talk, I can ignore rumors and stupid just fine,” I promised him. “I have piles of my own shit and it’s hit you too. We both need to have faith in each other better.” I was glad that he took the chastising as intended and nodded. “But you’re going to have to forgive me for stepping in to protect you as well.”

He frowned and asked what that meant, but I was saved when his sister called to ask how the meeting with his new in-laws went. Ha-joon got angry so fast that my condo and the whole building probably went up ten degrees.

I was going to drain the bitch. I could hear the whole conversation and—I wasn’t sure I could be that cruel to someone I hated. Ha-joon was her baby brother and hadn’t done anything to deserve this treatment. What petty fuckers. Really. It was disgusting.

But what had I meant?

I crashed his lunch meeting the next day with his friends who had formed an American corporation at my suggestion and his eldest sister, Ha-yun. Their shock was amusing, but I only had eyes for her, seeing a predator and protector... But not evil.

“I’m not going to lie that I wasn’t already considering this and throwing my weight around so you understood the ramifications of behaving on whatever deal happens here, but yesterday solidified it,” I told her firmly. “And I’m not talking about your sister, Byeol, trying to force Ha-joon into mating the Atlanta Alpha’s eldest daughter.”

“What?” Ha-yun bit out before looking at Ha-joon. “Is this true?”

“It is and here is his number,” I told her, sliding over a folder. “There’s also some of the misdeeds of your sister that you might want to clean up.”

“It is true,” Ha-joon confirmed. “What’s in there, Ellie?”

“And when did you find it out that you’re keeping it from Ha-joon?” his friend, Matt, demanded.

Ha-yun knew the answer though, chuckling. “I would bet every penny that it was this morning. She started digging the moment her territory was threatened.” Amusement danced in her eyes. “How long have you been involved with my baby brother, Ms.—Dr. Reed?”

“Ellie is fine and yes, we are involved,” I confirmed. “Not publicly.” I held up a finger to hold her off. “But know I would do this for any of my attendings—any employee of ASH who told me they had issues or needed help. And I have.” I snorted when I saw the disbelief in her eyes. “Dr. Tai who helped show your brother the ropes has an uncle who will never be found.

“And he is not the only one I’ve made sure never came near one of mine again. I might not be an Alpha in the traditional sense, Ms. Clark, but I am the top leader of ASH, and I take my duty to protect my people seriously. And before you think I’m barking at the wind, here’s my proof.”

I slid over the second folder before finally focusing on Ha-joon.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

“I will tell you what I found on your sister. I was always going to, but that folder—not until we’re public if we get to that. She needs an overview to know—”

“I don’t need to know how much money you have, Ellie,” he said gently, understanding in his eyes. “I know Mum understands your history better and—”

“Forgive me for being blunt, but her family was like ours for vampires, but they fell,” Ha-yun mumbled. “Her father was their downfall. I did my own digging after I overheard Da say he wronged her, and it was a miracle she wasn’t out for blood but would be so good to Mum.” She glanced up at me. “It wasn’t a slight against you—”

“But you’re protective of your mother. Good. You should be. I take no issue in that or you digging into me because of that.”

“But you take issue with me,” she muttered, studying me closely.

“Because you don’t do the same for your baby brother,” I seethed. “He’s done nothing wrong other than being born special. That’s not his fault and not something he rubs in anyone’s face. Atmoshe didn’t understand it as a child and said stupid shit.

“As someone who made the same mistakes—it’s not our fault. If we’re supported the right way, it should never hurt anyone besides the lazy or jealous. You’re not completely lazy to have worked hard and found your path, but clearly you are in other areas and—”

“I’m not lazy at all, nor—” she tried to argue.

“You had a supportive family,” I cut in. “I ran for mylifewith nothing. Yes, I’m older, but look in that folder and see what real drive is, Ms. Clark. I am the Alpha you could have been instead of resenting someone like Ha-joon because he could take power from your eldest brother but doesn’t want it. You want it but don’t have the nerve totake it!”

“You are amazing; I’m looking at the proof,” she said easily, gesturing to what was in front of her. “I would have known that even if I hadn’t seen this. Everyone with a brain knows that, Dr. Reed. You are ASH and—not all of us can be as bold as you. Even if I could truly take on my brother, what would become of my family if I did?”

“That’s fair, and I’ve never had a family I’ve loved enough to care, but you also don’t protect your family you love enough,” I said firmly but easing back my tone. I nodded when she seemed confused. “Ha-joon told me about your name. You could have changed it, Ha-yun. That was my first thought—that I was disappointed in you that you didn’t and stood up for your mother.”

“It seemed a slap in the face when it was a decision she allowed,” she muttered. “Petty over something so—”

“Do not say trivial,” I interrupted. “Andpettyis your grandfather. I can even understand your stance if you ever brought it up to your mother and told her that it bothers you that you were named to be passive. That she wasn’t given the option to name you.” I saw in her aura that she hadn’t—the colors of shame telling me the truth.

“I don’t like that Ha-joon shared this with you, but I hear your words and stance,” she muttered.

“I told her that I thought my starting a problem with Grandfather was part of why you didn’t like me,” he mumbled. “That I didn’t understand the history there, or... I was

actually defending you and how often I stepped in things that weren't mine to step in or because I was so much younger and from a different generation that I brought the disdain on myself."

Hope filled me when I saw the guilty look she shot him.

"No, I was jealous that you were so bold to speak up to him so young and the consequences be damned," she admitted. She let out a shaky breath and met his gaze. "I was so angry at you that you stood up for Mum and me on the topic and I never could."

"Good on you for finally admitting that, hon," I praised her. "Stop letting that past hold you back. Stop blaming him for what others in that family have done to you or the confines a prestigious pack like London holds you to. He's not the problem." I tapped the other folders I had. "He's willing to be part of the solution. If you let him. If you be the sister he needs."

She nodded that she heard me but kept his gaze. "No matter our issue or past, Byeol went way over the line and I will handle this. Mum and Da have always, always made it clear that none of us will be backed into a corner and pushed into a mating. For one of us to try that shit and—I'm disgusted. I will handle her and smooth it over with the Alpha."

Ha-joon snorted. "He's lucky I didn't take his head. He fucking knew I was clueless and announced it to his pack to try and trap me. He's a sexist fuck who's pissed that his eldest daughter is more powerful than he is. I did my homework today and she is beloved. He's jealous and wanted to mate her off. He was ready to brag that she snagged a good mate who would—"

"I will handle it and maybe take her under my wing," Ha-yun promised. "Take that as my penance for not helping you on more." She cleared her throat and cut a quick

glance at his friends before focusing back on me. “Now, enough with the personal laundry on display for a business meeting. I assume you’re adding to the agenda if you’re attending. Your threats were received.”

I was impressed when she sent back the folder with my portfolio. I liked her. If she could pull her head out of her ass and truly treat Ha-joon as she should, we might even become friends.

Maybe. I wasn’t sure given how much damage she’d done to him.

“Yes, and while expanding too much is idiotic, you have all of the pieces here that can make the expansion I’m proposing go well with the steps,” I said firmly as I slid folders over to each of them. “It’s now out that I own several buildings of condos around Atlanta. What many at ASH have figured out is those who work in health care receive perks.”

“I heard it was more than that,” Ha-yun purred.

“You’re right, which is why the president has been pushing me to expand, but as I’ve repeatedly told him, I’m basically the mayor of Atlanta running ASH. He knows that, but he reminds me that I’ve got more staff than he does. We go back and forth because I had a useless board that hurt us more than helped until recently.

“But as your brother can tell you we’re looking to change up and expand.” I realized she and his friends had no idea. “He was the rockstar of the presentations the department heads heard. He was the only one who came in with four and all were stellar that we’re going to implement. One was an idea I’d long since been fighting for, so technically we’re accepting three.”

“Well done, mate,” his friend praised, the others reaching over and patting him on the back.

“The head of my department was a big help freshening them up and adjusting what would work for ASH,” Ha-joon muttered. “Da told me it was the right time to push them since the board was out.”

“He’s genuine in being humble and spreading around the praise,” I told Ha-yun after catching her aura. “You’ve been assessing him wrong because of your own biases.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

“So I’m learning. I’m able to accept my faults and being wrong, but I ask you not rub my nose in it.”

“That’s not my intent, especially if we’re going into business together. I simply want his family to stop hurting him. I might not be able to ever change my own, but—you know where I stand.”

“Yes, clearly with strong feelings for my brother,” she stated firmly, but moved on so I didn’t have a chance to counter her. “You also give discounts to first responders. You’ve gotten some flak for vampire discounts because you are one. You want to alleviate that because we’re wolves.”

“No, I could care less that people bitch that I’m a vampire giving vampire discounts,” I told her honestly. “I give them to EMS, law enforcement, and military because they get shit on the most like health care workers. What I can’t do is manage growth to the proposed level and not drop balls that are too important to drop.

“And I don’t manage the properties. I don’t have time to hire people and oversee them. It’s not even my field. It works as-is because it’s Atlanta and people know not to fuck with me in Atlanta. The same will not be true in other areas where people—hospitals and more—are begging me to do this. You do have the experience.”

And then I pointed in turn to the finance guy, the attorney, and his other mates to show the experience everyone else brought to the table.

“I feel like you just said I didn’t bring anything useful,” Ha-joon admitted... With an adorable pout.

I snickered but then realized he was serious. “Oh, darling, you’re the scary ass Alpha that will make people shake in their boots. You had people at ASH behaving better, and I know that wasn’t all of your power. You’re not egotistical and weren’t flexing. Now you’re going to do a bit of it and help.”

“I can be muscle as long as you think I’m hot muscle.”

Oddly enough his sister was the one who burst out laughing first.

“Talk turkey to us about numbers and how this works, love,” Russ, the money guy, pushed. He apologized when Ha-joon cleared his throat, making it clear that he wasn’t trying to steal me.

So I did. I knew the areas better, but once they were up to speed on the real estate markets and more, I would take input. I had the first six laid out in Boston where housing was desperately needed. So while they were making their moves in Florida with what their tip had already been, this would be the next step.

Because it was new construction which was what I knew.

Mostly because I also owned a construction company that no one knew about. It was vampires and a big one. The one we used for ASH and any improvements.

There would be two buildings built at the same time. I would pay for everything completely. When they were done, Ha-yun would take over. She would hire the managers and handle the part she knew. Once people started buying the condos, I would make my money back, but I would always retain one-third ownership. We would each get equal parts.

Well, I would, Ha-jun would, and the group of men would who formed their corporation. Each piece of the puzzle would have a third. Now, between them, they

could figure out more because the attorney would clearly put in more time than Ha-joon would. That was up to them.

I was fronting all of the money and handling the construction side. Yes, I kept a third forever. They all brought something to the table though while Ha-joon really brought us all together.

Still, I knew he would be invested more than that and help. He'd figure out something and do some sort of outreach at hospitals and more—probably try to set up some sort of financing with banks for doctors or nurses to get special loans for the buildings. He wouldn't just ride out and make money off our work.

He wasn't the type. The man who came in with four ideas to make ASH better and didn't care about the glory or credit wouldn't abuse this sort of deal. Not in a million years.

Which was why I was willing to do this.

“Hurt your brother over this or screw him in any way and I will leave parts of you littered all over London in warning that someone truly protects him now no matter how much I like your mother,” I warned Ha-yun under my breath as I let her feel some of my power. “And you handle Byeol or I will, and she might not survive it which is what she deserves.”

She studied my eyes for a moment. “I believe you. I believe you love my brother and will absolutely kill for him.”

“Let's not be romantic about this or go that far. I'm loyal and he deserves it. I also have a soft spot for people who have been fucked over by family, and no matter your background check on me, you don't know the half of it to understand why.”

And I was very, very sure that was the moment I jinxed myself. I involved myself in something I really shouldn't have and my own ugly, ugly past came back from the caustic darkness to come for me.

Though honestly, it was only a matter of time.

14

Ellie

"I would have thought her much better looking in person after the way you talked her up, Kenneth," a haughty female voice said from my left Tuesday morning.

I was about to turn to see who was such a bitch when I heard who responded and it froze me in my tracks.

"She's put on some weight, but she can easily lose it with whatever diet plan you put her on," he said dismissively. "Don't try and play games and act like you have the upper hand or some card to play when we both know where we stand and the resumes of our children."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

It took everything I had to send the texts I needed to, forcing myself to break past my fear and remember that I wasn't a child anymore. I didn't have to fear the bastard ever again and I was a successful woman.

More than that, he couldn't do anything to me. I had powerful friends, and he was an embarrassment who very few vampires would even acknowledge much less admit they associated with.

Luckily, I'd been speaking with the head of our security and he instantly was on alert with what he sensed from me. I nodded to his hand holding his phone when he was trying to quietly ask me what was going on. Glancing at the text, he instantly caught on, thanking me for my time and wishing me a nice day.

But I knew him well enough and trusted him to do what he needed to. He simply wasn't alerting my father that anything was amiss.

After I sent what I needed to, I remembered Ha-joon and warned him quickly before we had another issue like the Mandy situation.

Wow, we really never get a fucking break. We just worked through all of that and then it was the department heads all finding out we were involved. Then his sister trying to force him to mate. Now this bullshit. Seriously, I'm going to end up in the padded room. Maybe with him.

"Ellie, don't be a brat and keep ignoring us," my father demanded. "Come over here and greet us like you should."

I finished what I was doing and slowly raised my head, giving him a look of hate that actually made him flinch. It gave me the courage to push down my fear. “As I should? Have you had some form of brain damage since I last saw you fifty years ago? Who are you to—”

Rage quickly filled his eyes that I would embarrass him by talking back. “I am your father and you will—”

I snorted. “So?” I snorted again when the woman and the man next to her couldn’t hide their shock... And more rage filled my father’s eyes. “So what? That’s biology. The last time I saw you I promised you would regret it if you ever tried to contact me again. You slithered away and I’ve not heard from you in decades. Greet you as I should—you are so damn delusional that—”

“That’s enough, Ellie,” he snapped. “You—that’s enough of your insolence and—”

“What scam is he pulling this time?” I asked the woman, gesturing between them. I glanced at the man next to her and saw what was in his aura before snorting again. “I see.” I smirked at my father. “How many times are you seriously going to try and sell me? Is this the seventh time now? Were you stupid enough to sign the mating contracts this time too?”

He pulled the lapels of his jacket in tighter. “It is my right to mate the members of my family as the head of the family and—”

“I’m not one of your uneducated followers—not that you have any anymore,” I mocked. “Every country has a law in place making that illegal for over fifty years now, Kenneth.” I raised an eyebrow at the woman. “And anyone involved will be charged with a crime as well, so if you signed anything for my sale without my involvement—”

“Parents sign the contracts all of the time for their agreement for the children to approve,” she said a bit too fast.

“That’s not actually legal,” I drawled. “It’s still fraud. You are signing something in our names.” I looked at the man. “Were you involved?” I saw it in his aura. “Yes, you were. Clearly, you were.” I focused back on the woman. “You sexist old bat. How heinous of you to try this for another woman. Seriously, the only thing worse than—”

“Enough, Ellie,” my father seethed as he reached for me.

But I blocked him, and with a shove, pushed him while moving away from him. “Do not touch me, you monster, or I will break you.” I focused back on the woman, mostly to piss off my father that I wasn’t worried about him. “The only thing worse than family selling their own women being part of the selling of other women.

“And before you give me some bullshit that I’m a child or I don’t know what I’m talking about, we both know that’s not true. I’m also the head of Amanda’s Hope, so I know more about this than you do.” I nodded when they both flinched at the name. “Yes, so you absolutely are the fool to try this with me of all people.”

“You are a Reed and will act accordingly to—” my father tried again and stupidly reached for me.

I thrust the heel of my hand in his chest, smirking when I heard something snap and he landed hard on his ass. “I won’t act like a Reed, Father. I’m not a gambling addict. I’m certainly not a failure like you who lost leadership of the coven after—”

“Silence, Ellie!” he roared, the words echoing in the large foyer and everyone who hadn’t already been watching the altercation freezing.

I chuckled darkly and squatted down to his level. “Orwhat? You’re going to sell me?” I gestured to the people there with him for just that purpose. “What can you actually do to me? I have more power than you. I have more wealth. That’s why you’re here. It got around that I have a lot more money than you thought.

“That’s part of the deal, right? You get some sort of control of my buildings or... Probably everything. They get to brag their daughter-in-law runs ASH or...” Horror filled me when I saw what was in the mother and son’s auras, slowly standing and focusing on them. “Oh, so he promised you my job, huh?

“Buy me to restore his fallen reputation and I’ll just hand over running ASH to my forced mate?” Yes, it was all in their auras. “And he gets all my wealth and companies?” I felt ill. Yes, it was in all of their auras again. “Well, that’s not happening, not now or ever, and I’ll be pressing charges for you signing contracts that I wasn’t a part of.”

“You’re lucky we were even willing to consider you given who your family is,” the woman spat. “You’re not remotely pretty enough to mate into our family and you have a gambling father who is—”

“Oh, he’s much worse than a gambler,” I purred, deciding to throw a match on the gasoline they’d spilled all over us just... Because I’d lost my mind? The stress of too much had compounded from the moment things had blown up with Tommy?

I wasn’t really sure, but I was very certain I was mentally cracking.

“He’s a rapist.” I was glad when the woman flinched, but the man clearly didn’t care. So that was great as someone they were trying to force me to mate.

Seriously, fucking awesome.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

My father jumped to his feet. "It's not rape if I was drugged too!"

"No, it's not," I agreed, swallowing a snort when my father—no, Kenneth—gave the woman a vindicated look. "But did you report it after it happened? No, right? And one time didn't get her pregnant, did it?"

"I was—that was—"

"You knew something wasn't right," I pushed. "You might be a gambling addict, but you're not a complete fool and drunkard."

"Of course not!" he bellowed.

"Right, so you figured out that you were being drugged and given over to a woman not your mate," I said firmly, turning to the woman and smirking. "Because I'm a bastard. Did he tell you that?"

"No, no, he did not," she bit out, her jaw grinding.

"He never does because it was his wife who drugged him so he raped a maid. She didn't want her beloved daughter to be subjected to him after she was sold to him and knew Kenneth would do the same." I smacked his hand away when he reached for me and faced him. "I would rather the whole world know than you ever have a chance to sell me."

"I have never cared about such nonsense because I am my own person and what matters is who I became. The embarrassing part is being your daughter, not that I'm a

bastard. What's shameful is what was done to my mother, and you hid it. That you let me believe your wife who did this to both of us was my mother. That you believe you own me.

"I am mine, Kenneth. I have never thought for one moment I am your property. Not when I was a girl and certainly not now when I have built a life for myself after fleeing you. If you were a fraction of my intelligence, you would have done your homework better, and you are not the head of my family anymore, fool."

"That's not possible unless you're mated, girl," he hissed.

"It is because there are other unhinged assholes like you. I'm Ellie Reed-Miller," I purred. "I had myself legally removed. Centuries ago even before the laws forbidding selling family into matings." The smile I gave him wasn't all that sane. "You have nothing you can gain here but lost everything you had left poking out your damn head, you fool."

I saw a blur from my right and worried it was Ha-joon, but then I saw him coming and moving to intercept someone.

Alan.

"Unhand me," Alan snarled, his fangs out and trying to get Ha-joon off of him. "I will kill the bastard."

"Don't," Ha-joon grunted. "She has it in hand."

"Kenneth Reed, come with us," the officer said as he joined us.

I did a double take when I saw he wasn't just normal patrol but someone with rank. He dipped his head to me, making it clear that the right people received my message.

Thank. Fuck.

“I’ve broken no laws,” Kenneth argued.

I snorted. “That’s never true.”

The officer ignored me and moved to block Kenneth from me. “We were unable to locate you to serve you with the federal protection order Dr. Ellie Reed-Miller has against you after the last time you tried to illegally sell her and fraudulently speak for her. This country was the first to enact the laws preventing that and she was already a citizen here at that time.

“Given your status at the time, we were unable to press charges, but the proof was enough to get the order. We are to bring you to the station and explain the order and have you sign you understand it along with the repercussions should you contact her again. This isn’t a request, and failure to comply will result in your arrest now.”

I turned to the woman with my hand extended. “Are you going to give me the agreement you signed that’s fraud or are you going to risk he does and blames you for everything? Because I promise you that he will.”

“Don’t you dare,” Kenneth warned her.

Luckily, she was smart enough and nodded to her son.

He pulled a folder out of his briefcase but cleared his throat, focusing on the officer. “We were told she was completely aware of this agreement and everything had been processed on her end as a citizen of Europe.”

I snatched it before anything could happen to it. “Well, you’re extra stupid because there are statutes preventing foreign citizens holding positions like running hospitals.

You know, like you wanted to once you were my mate and took over.”

“What?” Alan roared, and Ha-joon was so shocked to hear that his hold slipped and Alan started to get free.

“Oh yeah, apparently, that was the deal to buy me this time,” I drawled. “That would make a respectable family look the other way that my birth father is a gambler and lost everything. Minor details if your child could just mate the person who runs ASH and take over.” I shook my head and swatted my forehead with the folder. “The world is so fucking ugly.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

“Let me go. I’m fine,” Alan muttered and then was hugging me. “I know it’s been too much, but now your father’s handled. He won’t come near you again. It’s better to just—you’ll be okay, Ellie.” He cleared his throat when it was clear I was lost in my distress. “We’ll review what this says and file additional charges. Please tell the chief to hold Mr. Reed until then.”

“Yes, Dr. Carpenter,” the officer said.

“Ellie, don’t you dare,” Kenneth growled. “Get your hands off of me. Ellie, don’t be stupid. I know things about you too! I can ruin your career and make the owner realize how stupid he was to hire you and—”

I burst out laughing. “Please, tell everyone. I’m sure they’ll believe you after you blew any last shred of credibility you had with this sad attempt. I wouldn’t enjoy seeing the show of that. Hell, I maybe could find my mother then. Assuming she’s not dead which I fully believe and that’s why you never got far using that knowledge as a bargaining chip with me and—”

I was grateful when Alan moved his hand over my mouth and turned me away from being able to see Kenneth. He undoubtedly gave some sort of signal to the police because I heard less shouting over the ringing in my ears.

However, it put me to be directly in front of the people he’d come with and they were both looking at me like I was prey they were about to pounce on.

Fools.

“Are you all right?” Alan asked me quietly, kissing my hair when I snorted. “Let’s get you out of here.”

I went to thank him when he removed his hand—for not letting me ramble on and handling things—all of it, but the woman spoke first.

“While this situation was unfortunate—how we were brought here and your station given your mother is unknown, a match could still be made. We would be willing to overlook that given how you’ve raised your—”

“Your son has nothing to bring to the table,” Ha-joon drawled. “You had to buy him a mate to steal her job because he’s a moron.”

“You better watch yourself, dog,” the man bit out.

“Oh, no, I think you better,” Ha-joon chuckled darkly as he moved in front of Alan and me, plainly making the fight now with him. “Don’t bite off more than you can chew here. You’re showing how stupid you are right now.”

“Am I? I don’t think I am,” he argued.

“I’m Dr. Ha-joon Clark.”

“So?” he pushed.

The woman cleared her throat though. “Son, he’s—”

“Quiet, Mother,” he snapped. “You’ve gotten us into enough of a mess.”

I looked at the woman. “Funny how fast it’s all your fault, right? I bet when I press charges against him for signing a fraudulent contract you will be thrown under the

bus too.” I could see enough that Ha-joon had to push the man back from trying to reach for me.

“Your mother doesn’t recognize my name specifically, but I bet she knows Clark and Korean first names to know I’m one of the children of the London Alpha,” Ha-joon told him, bringing the focus back to him.

“Their youngest is a respected doctor,” the woman said. “I know who you are, Dr. Clark.”

He nodded he heard her, his attention on the man. “So again, don’t bite off more than you can chew because it’s a fight you can’t win. You bring nothing to the table. She’s the head of ASH and you... What? Got your mommy to find a monster who was willing to help buy you a mate? You’re that pathetic? If I was that sad, I would never be able to show my face—”

I gasped when the man tried to throw a punch.

Triedbecause Ha-joon easily caught it. He crushed the man’s hand in a way that brought the man to his knees, screaming in pain as Ha-joon whispered something in his ear that I couldn’t hear.

Mostly because the ringing was still going on in my own ears, so there was that.

I felt like I blinked and I was being carried out of there.

“Are you back?” a deep voice asked. “Don’t freak. I’m helping. Trust me.”

“I know you,” I whispered, my voice sounding distant.

“Yeah, you know me, and I’m not taking advantage of the situation.”

It hit me who he was when we reached the elevator. “No, you wouldn’t, Gerald.”

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

“I was coming to help and things exploded. I realized getting you out of there with the evidence was the best plan. Alan agreed. So just hang on and breathe.”

Sounded like a good plan.

“I don’t know why I threw gas on that fire,” I admitted.

“Ellie, even I know you’ve been under crazy amounts of stress,” he said gently after we were alone in the elevator going up to my office. “I didn’t help and I’m sorry for that. I really am. I—now it’s the time for this. Just know it was unintentional. But you had to bring Beth and me in so yeah, shit was already hitting the fan all around you.

“You’re so busy being the angel who swoops in to save everyone else—you seriously have several superhero capes and I’m sure I don’t know the half of it. I think it’s a miracle you haven’t snapped before this. Not as a reflection upon you, but—you’re only one person, woman. I can handle a lot but—fuck, do I feel the need to drink for you some days.”

“Thanks.”

I was surprised to see Renee when the doors opened, blinking at her.

“Are you still in shock that he’s carrying you or are you—of course I would come, Ellie,” she said gently. “I think you need to tell us some hard truths for us to help you as we will need to. You need to end this.”

“Not as a judgment but for yourself,” Gerald clarified. “Enough and free yourself

already.”

“Yes, that’s what I meant. Sorry. I just—I’m a bit shocked at the pieces I heard,” she muttered as we hurried towards my office. “Did someone truly try to take out Clark?”

“He’s fine,” Gerald promised before I could even get worried. “Let’s get in her office.”

“Sorry, sorry. I’m not myself,” Renee mumbled. “I was already sideswiped with something else today and then—sorry.” She let out a few long breaths and seemed to have herself back to normal by the time we reached my office. “Okay, let’s take a few minutes and have you settle.”

“And you,” I hedged, thanking Gerald as he sat me on the sofa and grabbed me a bottle of water.

“Yes, sorry.” She thanked him for one too. “I got a call my daughter was seriously hurt and was coming here only to find out it was the wrong child. So relief but then extreme guilt because it’s my daughter’s best friend and she might not survive and my daughter will have to handle that. The second I found out the mistake, people came racing to fill me in—”

“What a fucking fucked day,” I chuckled darkly, scrubbing my hand over my face. I didn’t mean to be rude, but honestly I couldn’t deal with the problems of a family I didn’t know right then. I glanced at Gerald. “You grabbed the proof?”

“Yeah, I’ll read it now with your permission?” he hedged.

I nodded. “From what I caught it’s bad. Like mating me would get the guy my job. I’d just hand it over and become my worst nightmare of old-school broodmare vampire bullshit. Oh, and my father trying for all my wealth that he doesn’t even

know the half of. Fucker.” I was suddenly wiping tears. “Seriously, that fucker.”

Renee moved next to me and half hugged me as we both gave ourselves a few moments.

But honestly, I didn’t know if I could ever have enough moments to pull myself together again. This was the absolute last thing I’d needed and the fact I’d not just poured some fuel on the fire but gleefully dumped barrels of it all over it so publicly... I was pretty sure I’d cracked.

Big time.

15

Ha-joon

I fell a bit more for Ellie when she crashed my meeting and scorched the ground around me. I wasn’t sure anyone had done anything so amazing for me before. I was stunned... But honestly not surprised because it was her if that made sense.

And she made the deal a million times better. The only drawback was I didn’t bring as much to the future deal anymore. I was worried about that, but she gave me a few glances not to be silly.

Fuck, she was sexy.

Several times the wolves in the room gave me amused looks. Even Ha-yun plugged her nose and coughed while rolling her eyes at me.

Yeah, I was damn sure my pheromones were filling the room. I wanted my future mate.

Ellie just didn't know yet that it was her.

One day she would.

One day she would even accept it. I would figure out a way to make that happen.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

I had to. I couldn't be a duffer who lost a woman this amazing.

First, I had to make our relationship real. That would be enough of a challenge, but we were in no rush.

Sure, sure, I just had to figure out a way to get my wolf to chill out.

I quickly pulled Ha-yun off to the side after the meeting. "Handle Byeol however and I won't jump on whatever Ellie fills me in on, but I'll be home after I'm done seeing patients." I shook my head when she started protesting. "We both know if I don't take a stand on this and only you smack her, the next idiot will do something else—something worse and we could—"

"I understand. They did this to themselves," she accepted. She sighed when I snorted. "I may not have acted as I should have as a sister, but I have never come for you, Ha-joon. I have not instigated or taunted you. I simply didn't defend you or made petty comments. That is vastly different."

"I could argue that and how it made you culpable to stand by and watch it but fine, not being the perpetrator is different according to the law," I offered, not about to forgive her just because she didn't start it.

She also never objected. She acted like stopping it was the only other option. It wasn't. One word from her that she didn't approve or like what was happening would have done a lot. She didn't get out of it all just by saying she wasn't the reason it happened.

No, she was part of the reason it didn't stop.

I said goodbye to my mates and headed back to the hospital with Ellie, glad we could ride together. "I think we should discuss extending our contract now that we're getting into business dealings."

Her lips twitched as she drove. "Is that what you think, pup?"

"At least keep an open mind to it and give me a chance to persuade you," I replied, trying to sound easy about it. I tried another tactic when she didn't respond. "Do you have any complaints with how things have been going? I mean other than—"

"I have no complaints about last night. It was explained." She cleared her throat and adjusted how she was holding the steering wheel. "I'm glad you're not upset about today."

"'Upset' isn't the word I'd use, and I plan on showing you what I'm feeling tomorrow after I handle this shit with my family tonight."

"Or I could give you permission to use the ASH warlocks on twenty-four-hour call since this was a last-minute thing in case you want to come back. I mean, if things get too hostile there and you think it's best. I was also planning on giving you the code to my condo. If you wanted to use me as your emotional support pillow."

"I do like snuggling you," I whispered, almost like I wasn't trying to spook her into changing her mind, but also I was surprised since I didn't see this coming.

"Only Alan has the code for emergencies," she mumbled.

"I wouldn't abuse it."

“No, you’re not the type,” she accepted. She gave an awkward chuckle. “Plus, you’re not an idiot who would write it down somewhere.”

“No, never,” I agreed.

She leaned over at a stoplight a few blocks from the hospital and gave me a quick kiss and told me the code. She cleared her throat yet again and focused back on the road. “I won’t wish you luck because you don’t need it. Congrats on smacking idiots back into place and I look forward to hearing it went well. In the morning because of the time difference.”

“Thanks, Ellie,” I whispered, her faith in me meaning the world to me when so much else was a mess inside of me.

I held onto that and the step forward in our relationship that she trusted me with the code as I prepared for battle the rest of the day.

Ha-yun warned the family something was going on because it was almost eleven at night when I arrived, and not only was the immediate family all gathered, but about a dozen extended family. That shocked me and I focused on my parents, not even greeting them like normal which worried them.

“You want me to do this in front of them?”

Da just let out a long breath. “Ha-yun wouldn’t tell us what happened because it’s your story to tell and Byeol’s wrong that was committed. All we know is she’s been simmering with rage since she came home and beat the piss out of Byeol until your mum had to intercede.”

That shocked me beyond words, and I glanced at Ha-yun who intently focused on the fruit she was snacking on.

“I told you—and everyone here—that it wasn’t about you or Byeol. It was about the line crossed,” she said evenly but with a tint of anger. “We are better than ever behaving in such a way, and while we have issues, we are family. You are not some affair baby—and that’s never the child’s fault. This risked the whole family.”

“Which is why we need to know what happened,” Mum snapped.

“You do, but I knew Ha-joon was coming home and we say enough behind his back. He deserved the respect to wait a few hours to be here,” Ha-yun mumbled, clearly repeating herself.

“So now you’re in business with him and you are all up his bum to be his lackey to—” my eldest brother, Myung, started to mock.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

I was on him in a flash, laying him out before anyone could react but keeping him conscious. I moved my foot to his chest and smirked down at him, knowing he couldn't move me, before looking out at the family. "Byeol—"

"Don't you even think it, demon," she hissed.

I met her hate-filled gaze with my own. "Name one thing I have ever done to you that's valid and I won't. Anything. Anything, Byeol!"

She couldn't. We all knew it. It was all about power and me being better—the baby they thought was loved more, but it was bullshit. I was the most neglected and forgotten. I made my own path because I never felt one of them.

How funny was that?

"Byeol called Atlanta's Alpha and told him the family wanted me to mate his eldest daughter and take over the pack," I snitched. "The fucker knew I wasn't on board and had already announced it was a done deal when I showed up for the new moon run."

I had more to say but blinked and Mum was on Byeol beating her ass. We were all so shocked that none of us reacted for a good couple of minutes before Seo-yeon pulled her off of Byeol.

"A little help here," she growled, looking to Ha-yun.

Ha-yun snorted. "I did the same. Byeol is spoiled and hates Ha-joon for taking the title of 'baby of the family' from her. It's fucking stupid. Of all the stupidest stupid

we've been towards him, that takes the cake. Let her get beaten. It could have embarrassed all of us if Ha-joon hadn't handled it well."

"Stop!" Da bellowed when everyone tried to interject. "First, how did you handle it?"

I let my brother up and moved off to the side, not hiding my hurt and my lower lip even quivered. I took in a slow breath and wiped my eyes with the back of my forearm before meeting his gaze. "Fuck you, Da."

His eyes went bug wide. "Fuck me?"

"Ya, fuck you," I repeated, my voice cracking. I gestured to the room. "Any of them you would check if they're okay first. I'm always just an afterthought, not a planned kid who throws off the family. It's not my fault they're all gits and do this. Ya don't even ask how I am? Do you have any idea how horrible that was for me?"

"Your father knows it hurt, Ha-joon," Mum tried to smooth over. "Of course it did and we're both gutted. But you're strong and—"

"Don't excuse him, Mum," I rasped. "You just enable him—all of them." I met my da's gaze and let him see that I was angry. "I handled it, Alpha." He flinched and I didn't care. "I told him that if he embarrassed the family that his head would be ours."

"To handle it as jumping the gun and he shouldn't have listened to my sibling making a suggestion because he knew I didn't know. That you'd kill him just to make sure no one else tried to pull this shite on any of us. Plus, I'm involved with someone you approve of and people know that, so he better clean up the mess and take the hit or pick out a burial plot."

"Good, good," he sighed. "I'll follow up and—"

“Oh, so you don’t care about your son, but you also don’t have the faith I really can handle it?” I cut in, annoyed when he growled that I was challenging him.

Yeah, well, maybe it was time to start.

I let out my power and didn’t back down when he did the same. I glanced around at my siblings who were all staring at me with their mouths hanging open. I’d never flexed like this against my father or challenged him as Alpha, only as family to do what I wanted with my life.

“Clearly, leaving the fucking country isn’t enough for you assholes to leave me alone and realize that I’m not the problem. Clearly, my mistake was being passive about it and thinking you fucking bullies would get tired of this petty shit and grow the fuck up even if you were real adults when I was born. Apparently not.”

“Don’t throw us all in with Byeol,” Myung snapped.

I met his pissed-off gaze. “Tell me you haven’t been plotting something or plan to kick me out of the pack when you become Alpha and I’ll let it go, Brother.” I snorted, guilt filling the air. “You flinch when I refer to you that way. Pathetic. Seriously, you’re so fucking pathetic and I can’t take it anymore.”

“Oh well, letting us have it will do a lot, baby brother,” he drawled.

“You’re right, finally putting my foot down and saying something did nothing more than up the stakes for you idiots besides Ha-yun. Your laziness and jealousy make you even stupider.”

“Seo-yeon has become vocal telling the others to shut up and enough already as she promised,” Ha-yun cut in. “We kept our agreement. The others have not.”

I nodded I heard her and let out a slow breath before shooting Mum a quick, guilty look I hoped she caught. Then I focused back on Myung. “I’m not risking any of you lash out and up the ante on this fight I didn’t start. Instead, I’m going to play the hand I was given that you’re all so terrified of and you only have yourselves to blame.”

“What does that mean?” Da demanded.

I focused on him because he was the one I had to fool for this to really work. I promised my wolf we weren’t really going to do it and to behave because we were saving our family—our whole pack with this move. “I’m officially challenging Myung for his spot as your successor as is my right as your son.”

“What?” several people shouted.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

I went on as if they hadn't, keeping his gaze. "I've spoken with my partner and she supports me saying we'll figure it out if our relationship goes the distance. I'll stay at ASH for a decade and accomplish what I want with health care and train doctors who can replace me so the world doesn't lose my specialty and—"

"I will kill you!" Myung roared as he launched for me.

I easily grabbed him and threw him into the wall, using his own force and damaging it. I tilted my head and studied him, finally asking the question I'd always been too scared to. "Like you tried to when I was a baby?"

Yes. It was in his eyes.

Regret. Not that he'd done it... But that he'd failed.

I curled my lip at him in disgust. "You don't deserve to lead this pack if that was the only way you could, git. I'm better for London and we both know it." I slammed him into the wall when he opened his mouth to argue, hard enough to do more damage. "What have you done to deserve being Alpha besides being born first?"

I was shocked when Ha-yun snorted but then realized what she meant and decided to give her the point.

"And have a cock. Yeah, that's fair. Shifters are way more sexist than the world thinks. Ha-yun would make a much better Alpha than you, and all of us here think that if we're honest with ourselves. If we did a blind poll right now, we'd all vote for her over you, and how sad is that for this pack that they get the reject of you because you

have a fucking cock?”

“Fuck you, git,” he bit out.

I smirked at him, making it clear I was mocking him as I threw his words back at him. “Oh well, letting me have it will do a lot, big brother.”

That was when my second brother made a move. He came for me and I easily handled him. I let out my power, my wolf shutting him down so he couldn’t function well, and with throwing an easy elbow, his face exploded with blood.

“Yeah, not shocked you gits wouldn’t go for my back. Pathetic. Truly pathetic.” I slammed Myung into the wall again before letting him go and stepping away, staring down all of my siblings. “I could take all of you on and Da and you have no chance. I train that hard.

“More than that, I’m the Alpha people come from around the world to get help from for their animals. They don’t even realize why it’s me, but they do. I help them.” I glanced at Ha-yun. “Trust me and give me permission. Please. This is important. It’s why Dr. Reed is so protective of me more than you understand.”

“It will ruin her clothes and she loves that outfit,” Mum interjected as she stepped forward. “I will allow it, my youngest. You are right that we haven’t done more and—I’m sorry. Let me show it.”

“Don’t submit to another Alpha,” Da growled.

I spun around and grabbed him, pissed in a way I wasn’t sure I’d ever been with him. I let my wolf floor our power and let it all out as I slammed him into a wall. “You don’t deserve Mum. You haven’t from the moment you let Grandfather name Ha-yun and be so fucking sexist. You’re not Alpha over your mate, not when she’s an Alpha

wolf as well!”

I was evil and smirked when he showed me his throat, but then I toned it back and focused on Mum, telling my wolf to do his thing. She didn’t fight me, so it went well, obviously having warned her wolf that this was important.

Or her wolf knowing to trust her own damn son better than my own fucking father did.

Her clothes were trashed, but the change was almost as seamless as if she’d done it herself when her wolf was itching to come out. Definitely better than when she and her wolf were arguing.

She made a point of coming and sitting right by my feet and staring down the rest of the family.

“Thanks, Mum,” I rasped, truly touched. I stared down each of my siblings.

“That’s supposed to be a punishment,” Seo-yeon whispered. “I don’t understand. I’ve seen Mum’s da do it to punish and—”

“He rules with an iron fist and is a git,” I said firmly, not caring who heard. “Weaker Alphas or ones who haven’t been taught right bastardize things. You can’t be surprised at that, right?”

“This is why you were always so focused on the kids with rough first shifts, yeah?” Ha-yun put together. “Not just because you had a rough first shift.”

“Correct,” I confirmed. “My first shift was rough because I was more powerful than any would have expected—maybe I should have been. My wolf didn’t know how to gently come out or wasn’t scared to change forms like most. It wanted to explode out

and have its turn, but that's not how it works. This power is meant to help that.

“That's what I want to teach and help with at ASH. No more kids being looked down on because Alphas are ill-equipped. Not even blaming them. The knowledge was lost. Probably intentionally because it hides who is powerful or was hurt—traumatized, and that leads to issues that people want buried. So I will take ten years to help the medical community—”

“Our pack would never survive if you took over instead of the eldest,” Myung snapped.

I snorted. “I told Ha-yun that I thought she should, but—I didn't think she would have the support she deserves.”

“You're serious,” Ha-yun whispered. “I thought you were being flippant that I was a better option.”

I met her gaze, making it clear I was serious. “I would back you and help you train in a heartbeat. I would work with you as your trainer and help Dr. Tai get you on a program to make you twice as strong as you are.” I gestured to Myung. “You're already twenty times smarter than this dumbfuck. You're a stronger wolf, but we know to hold London—”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

“I’d have to knock everyone’s socks off,” she muttered, studying me and then Myung as if seriously considering it for the first time maybe.

“No, I won’t have a woman take my spot to—” Myung seethed.

“Your spot?” I chuckled darkly. “We’re all fucking eligible. It’s tradition that it goes to the eldest, not the rule. I’m telling you that I’m taking it, but I’m open to stepping aside for Ha-yun. That’s a real Alpha. You’re not even an Alpha wolf. I could help her become one. That’s a leader.” I moved closer to him and made it clear I was about to get violent.

And everyone there saw him take several steps back before he realized it. He stopped and fisted his hands at his side.

“Let me be clear if you try anything underhanded with her like you did with me as a baby, I will tear your guts out through your fucking nose while you’re alive. And yes, I can as a surgeon. I could make it so you live that way with your rapid healing. The only way you could take either of us would invalidate you to be Alpha.”

“And I would put any of you to death if you killed a sibling,” Da said firmly, his arms crossed over his chest, staring at his feet. “I would. Don’t test me. I told you that when you were younger, Myung. I could never let that stand and—how did we get here?”

Shit. I hadn’t expected him to—I could be mad at him, but it killed me to hurt him.

“I’m also saving his life,” I confessed when people were quiet too long.

“That’s why one of your friends was squirrely around me,” Ha-yun sighed, sharing a look with Mum. “Wait, let mum shift back.”

“I have a hoodie in the kitchen that can be a dress on you, Mum,” our youngest brother offered, going with her.

They came back a minute later and Mum nodded to Ha-yun to go ahead.

“I confessed to Mum that I was worried your mate wasn’t ready for the extra deal Dr. Reed added or—something was amiss. It made me nervous, and I was debating pulling the plug or demanding that he be booted. I asked Mum’s advice and we were going to talk to Da.”

“It was this,” I told her. “But I will confirm with each of them privately that they’re really all in because I know it’s set up as a renewable deal for each step in the plan so it’s not overwhelming—it’s just overwhelming. I was feeling it too. Plus, it’s a failsafe in case any of us drops the ball or doesn’t pull our weight.”

“It’s smart, but we haven’t signed yet and—”

“Don’t name him,” I warned, glad when she nodded. “That was his only requirement. He didn’t want to be named. Fuck, he’s going to be pissed the family knows it’s one of them.”

“Anything gossip you have on the pack would be from them,” Da muttered. “What do you mean this all to save Myung?”

“I didn’t say all to save him,” I snapped, toning it back when he nodded. “I said partially, but mostly the family.” I waited until he met my gaze. “Some of his biggest backers that are pushing for him to take over don’t want him in power. They know he’s a disaster. They want one of his mates who Myung would have as his Beta to

take over.”

“Bullshit!” Myung jumped in. “You’re so full of shit, and—this is to justify that you’re a shite brother and taking what’s mine—”

Da reacted to that and was across the room in a flash, backhanding Myung before most could gasp. “The pack is mine, you sniveling brat. You’re too big for your britches and this is what comes of that. You’ve made your bed in this from the moment you tried to smother your brother when he was a baby and I didn’t—”

“We,” Mum corrected. “We didn’t handle it better.” She let out a slow breath and met my gaze. “I didn’t. I couldn’t believe—I couldn’t have given birth to a monster. Not my firstborn who was so much pain and—my mind couldn’t make sense—it had to be a mistake. I thought—the lapse of judgment out of fear.” She wiped her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Ha-joon.”

“I believe you, Mum,” I whispered, unable to forgive her right then. I focused on Myung. “I’m the strongest adult child of Da’s. The spot is mine, but I’ve never wanted it. Now I think taking it is the only way to survive and make you all stop trying to fuck my life over because once I’m Alpha I will kick any of you gits out.

“Fuck all of you. I don’t need excuses. You have at least two snakes right at your side pumping you up constantly to push Da to give you more responsibility and power. And ya too stupid to see it’s all lies. You’re so lazy that your wolf is too weak to sense the lies. I would also bet anything that there was a huge push for it the moment I left, yeah?”

My youngest brother swore under his breath. “Because you would sense it all. I heard a few of his friends say that it was great that you left and made it clear you were stepping aside so now Myung could step up.” He glanced between us. “But no one would be stupid enough to go to one of your mates to—one of their older siblings.

They're in on it?"

"No," I said firmly. "No, none of their families, and that was the worry and why they won't go on the record. They were worried about a witch hunt and someone going half-cocked like a duffer." I pointed to Myung as if who I was talking about wasn't clear. "Their older sibling overheard something they shouldn't have and played along a bit like they didn't care because—"

"A lot of people are worried about Myung taking over but don't want the pack not to be a Clark Alpha either," Ha-yun muttered, shrugging when people gave her surprised looks. "Oh please, I have friends all the time tell me that. They ask how likely it really will be. Especially now that Ha-joon has moved. I have friends asking if they can get guest approvals and—"

"Shut it, Ha-yun," Myung seethed.

"No, no more hiding or sparing your feelings," Da snapped. "Clearly, I wasn't the only one worried about the situation. I just didn't know what to do about it because I thought I could do more damage than good. Apparently, it doesn't matter anymore because the job of shaping the next Alpha of London has been taken from me by the gods and gene mutations."

He stormed off with that parting shot at me... And for once Mum didn't defend him, looking horrified that he'd said that.

I chuckled darkly scrubbing my hands over my face before blowing out a harsh breath and looking at her. "I've always known he thinks I'm a freak, Mum. Part of it—deep down he's jealous too." I nodded when she didn't seem like she could believe that. "He is. I'm stronger than him. He's a good Alpha, but he's there's a part—he's a jealous git. He always has been."

There wasn't really anything else to say, so I just left and went home to Ellie, grateful that I could.

16

Ha-joon

“How bad?” Ellie asked as I slid in behind her.

“Mum’s on my side and I think figured out it’s all a ruse, but Da showed some of his true colors about being jealous of me,” I muttered. “Ha-yun shocked me stepping up and really—she shocked me.” I kissed her hair and snuggled closer. “Thank you for letting me use the on-call warlock. I needed to get out of there. I couldn’t be in the house where Myung tried to kill me.”

“Tonight?” she gasped as she sat up and faced me.

“No—well, yes,” I sighed and sat up too. I told her the truth and how he’d tried to kill me when I was a toddler.

She swallowed loudly and I was shocked to see a deep pain in her eyes... Of understanding.

Did Ellie have a sibling who had tried to kill her?

Wait, I couldn’t handle that at the moment.

“Tell me the rest,” she pushed.

I reached out and cupped her cheek, smiling when she rubbed her skin against mine

like it was the most natural thing in the world. “I want to tell you how beautiful you are, how perfect you are.” I chuckled when her lips slightly parted, taking advantage of her shock and kissing her. “I want to tell you how amazing you are and how much I appreciate you.”

“I do love hearing that,” she murmured before kissing me this time. She moved along my jaw, somehow taking over this seduction. “What else has been eating at you that you need to get off your chest, love?”

Oh, she was distracting me in the best way possible.

I was totally on board with this plan.

I grabbed her around the waist and chuckled at the cute yelp she let out as I moved us. I smirked at her as I moved my arm behind my head while leaning against her headboard and made it clear I was there for whatever she wanted.

Hoped for it even.

“That I love how sexy you look in heels, but I hate that you wear them all day, so I hope you’ll take Alan seriously and consider his idea,” I told her honestly.

“Bring up the man who is like an uncle to me in bed and I will stop doing dirty things to you,” she grumbled but then kissed my chest.

“Fair.” I let out a sigh as her lips teased my nipple. “That I love your lush arse in pants and skirts. Normally, I have a preference, but your arse is so damn delicious that I can’t decide and it’s not a line I’m giving you. It’s just that amazing and I’m not the only one who thinks that. The amount of men who check out your ass is fucking annoying.

“You zoom by the loaded lobby and every fucking time at least five heads turn that I see. Minimum. The pants are perfectly tailored to accentuate your bouncy bottom and the skirts—just perfection. I bet seeing you in a gown would drive me mad. It might be the only time I don’t focus on your arse.”

“Okay, that might be enough out of you,” she mumbled and moved two of her fingers over my lips before kissing more of my chest.

I just sucked on her fingers instead and then talked about other parts of her body that I adored. In between those compliments, I told her how sexy her mind was and how it flat did it for me when she tore down duffers and put assholes in their place.

A few days ago I’d seen one of the trauma surgeons bitch her out that their jobs were so much harder now that Dr. Fitz was gone and she had done that and not hired another rock star to replace him. I’d been so pissed off it had taken a lot not to lay him out, but I told her how turned on I’d been when she’d done it with just words.

She’d knocked the man down several inches just laying into him in a way that was so impressive she should honestly teach classes. I was a good speaker, but I sucked at not just telling people to sod off or go fuck themselves. She basically sympathized and was understanding that the guy was struggling because he was so lacking and needed someone to carry his ass.

She went on and on that it must be the hardest on Dr. Carpenter if the only competent person in his department was Dr. Fitz. That she would absolutely take his suggestion to heart and start looking for qualified surgeons since the department didn’t have any. She was glad he told her that they were overpaid for the experience and how Dr. Fitz had been doing all of the work.

Ellie had needed to know that after all.

She turned it all around on the fucker like he'd deserved, and steam was coming out of his ears after she walked off not even understanding in the moment how she'd smacked him around. That was talent and wordsmithing of a divine level that I wanted to learn.

I talked about her other talents and attributes as well, gushing about her now that she'd given me the green light. I really got into it, needing some positive time after all the negative of the night.

"Fuck, love," I groaned as she swallowed my cock, not having been ready for that. "Shit, I was telling the truth. All of it." I nodded when she smirked up at me.

She knew that. Right, she was able to sense lies somehow I didn't understand since vampires weren't supposed to be able to do that.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

There was no chance of me figuring it out right then as I received a world-class blow job.

“No one has ever sucked me like you have, Ellie,” I told her as I played with her hair. I snorted. “No one has ever anything the way you have. You’re the best shag. The best deep fuck. The best to ride me. The best all of it. The best kisser. The best cunt I’ve ever eaten. Fuck, I want your cunt on my tongue.”

I hissed as she tried to suck me like a damn vacuum, loving it even if it was almost too much. I growled and told her to take me deeper when I was ready to finish. She listened which made my wolf howl and then swallowed all that I gave her.

Fuck, she was so perfect. Seriously just perfect.

She chuckled when I reached for her. “No, I’m taking care of you tonight. You’ve been drilling me all over the place and—I’m in charge tonight.”

“You say that, but that’s not how it ends up,” I panted, being stupid because I was recovering and didn’t have enough working brain cells in the moment.

There was a flash of anger in her eyes before it was gone. “Well, it seems I’ve been spoiling you a bit too much then.”

I cleared my throat. “We did start this because you wanted to get some Alpha loving from me.”

“Yes, but we’re beyond that now.”

“We are,” I confirmed when she seemed hesitant.

“Then be a good pup and listen to me. You like when you do.”

“That is very,verytrue.” I moaned when she sat on my cock. “Yeah, you’re right and know exactly what I—fuck, love, so fucking good. Oh, oh, don’t tighten or I’ll blow again.”

“You would never blow that soon again,” she chuckled as she leaned her hands back on my thighs. “I’m not sure I like you calling me ‘love.’”

I didn’t catch what she said at first because again, brain cells weren’t working at the moment, but then I caught up.

And I liked what I found especially when my nostrils filled with jealousy.

I licked my lips and sat up more, reaching for her cunt. I waited until she nodded to tease her clit while she moved. “I am the only lover you’ve given the code to. I guess I shouldn’t be generic with you either.”

“I would think that appropriate,” she agreed... And whipped off her nightgown.

“Fuck, you get whatever you want when I get to see your glorious tits, Ellie,” I moaned, likemoaned. “Let me suck on one and tell me what you want me to call you. Anything.”

“Hmmm, I’ve never much liked endearments, but I do like you sucking my nipples, especially when you nibble them.”

Which was exactly what I did, holding one with my free hand and doing what she wanted.

“I do like endearments,” I told her as my tongue teased her whole areola.

“What do you want me to call you?” she gasped as she got close to her climax.

“Yours,” I purred and pinched her clit.

She screamed my name as she orgasmed and I fucking loved it. I was so completely into her that it was maddening.

Ellie was clutching me tightly as she shook from her climax, her body still riding it. She pushed off my thighs and hugged me, smothering me with her tits, but I understood her wanting to be closer.

“Let me take over?” I checked.

“Still coming,” she gasped as another wave hit her.

“I know,” I growled and rolled us. I worked my hips to draw out her pleasure, thrilled when I set off another climax for her. I glanced down at where our bodies were joined and had a flash of her stomach rounded with our pup and seriously thought I’d lost my damn mind.

My wolf needed to chill. We were making progress, but Ellie had been through too much—and recently to just jump into something serious.

And from the way she talked I wasn’t sure that she’d ever had a serious relationship.

Ever.

“I like calling you ‘my Alpha,’” she mumbled when she was back to herself. She studied me as I stared down at her. “What would you want to call me if I was okay with it?”

I opened my mouth but then closed it and frowned. “I don’t know. I’ve never much had anything other than ‘love’ for the woman I was with or chasing. I don’t use it as flippantly as other Brits, even my mates. To me, it’s for the person I give my love and attention to even if loving on her.”

“Well, maybe if you think of something else.” She shrugged. “Or Ellie is just fine.”

No, no it wasn’t. She wanted to be special.

I had a random thought and snorted, shaking my head when she raised an eyebrow. “Ignore me. My mind is a scary place.”

“Like mine isn’t? Tell me. I won’t get mad.” She poked me when I hesitated. “Quickly. I want the next round.”

Talk about the way to win me over. I sighed knowing it was probably going to get me into trouble. “We’re both such—I was thinking our jobs are stressful and we’ve had too much hard in our lives. I would want something a bit silly and cute. ‘My sweet kimchi’ just popped into my head. We both love it—like addicted to it, and watching you eat it always makes me smile.”

Nothing shocked me more maybe in my whole life than that moment when she loved the silly,sillynickname.

“Really?” I checked.

“I find it just as surprising as you do,” she mumbled. “Sparingly. Maybe only sweet times or... Sparingly.”

“Sparingly is good.” I studied her eyes. “It’s like waking up and saying it when asking for a good morning kiss so you forgive my morning breath.”

“You’re such a fucking romantic that it really makes me melt,” she whispered. “Fine, you can have a drawer or two. I like the name.” She kissed me before I could respond and made it clear that it was time to get back to the sex.

And I was never so happy to get a couple of damn drawers.

I cupped her face and took her other hand in mine, linking our fingers and moving our hands by her head. She moved her leg over my hip and I thrust forward, both of us gasping in the other’s mouth at what we felt. It was something different.

Something closer... And I didn’t mean physically.

“Don’t leave me when the contract is over, Ellie,” I breathed against her lips before moving again. I held her gaze as I made love to her, completely in tune with her and everything her body needed. If she wanted deeper, I knew it before she did. My wolf was so locked in on her, using all of his senses to give our mate what she needed, that I missed nothing.

A man worthy of her would do no less.

“Can’t,” she gasped when got close.

“Trust me,” I demanded and moved faster. “Not yet. With me. Always with me, Ellie.”

“Can’t,” she whimpered, and we both knew she wasn’t talking about our orgasms.

“You can,” I begged. “I’m worth the risk. This is.”

And again, we both knew I wasn’t talking about the sex.

A few more minutes of driving her higher and higher and I finally growled the word she wanted. “Now.”

I kissed her and swallowed her cries of pleasure, snarling almost my own climax was so unreal. It kept going and somehow I knew it was something she was doing. I would have said we’d taken a potion or maybe one of those romantic candies witches and warlocks sold for couples, but whatever it was it was fucking ridiculous.

Everything was with Ellie.

Her eyelids fluttered close when we were finished and I thought she was out, but she said something so quiet that I could barely hear it over my panting. “I want to extend the contract, but I’m scared you’ll turn away again if you learn more. I’m so much worse than being a doctor, my Alpha.”

I opened my mouth to promise her that I’d be better and it wouldn’t happen again, but a cute snore escaped her lips even as her heart still raced. Shit, I was so sunk that something this simple undid me.

Really I was.

I got us cleaned up and tucked into bed, thinking about what she'd said for way longer than I should. Then what happened with my family. All of it raced through my mind until I realized I didn't sleep at all and it was morning, Ellie stirring in my arms.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

She blinked awake slowly but then did a double take. “How long have you been awake?” She frowned when I didn’t answer. “What’s wrong, pup?”

I let out a huff and she tried to hide a smile which was too sexy.

“What’s wrong, my Alpha?” she tried instead as she pushed up.

“You didn’t feed from me,” I grumbled as if that was remotely the reason. “I’m feeling neglected.”

She gave me a look that she knew that wasn’t true. “I had bagged yesterday because I was stressed and down and you had your own shit. I wasn’t even sure you were coming.” She let her fangs slide out and licked them as the sheet dropped away showing off her glorious tits. “I could have a sip now.”

“I won’t push you away even if you told me something crazy about yourself, Ellie,” I whispered, mentally wincing when she flinched.

“What did I say last night?” she mumbled and reached for the sheet to pull it up.

I grabbed it instead and pulled her closer deciding to deal with this. “That you wanted to extend the contract, but you were scared I’d be a dipshit again. I won’t be. I’m going to be a dipshit in another way because I’m spiraling out with my family and this other shit. I feel secure with you and get it now.”

“I don’t—”

I flipped us so she was completely naked against me and she couldn't flee. "This is something real for me, and I will wait as long as you need as long as I know you're not playing with me. I'm not pushing for more. I'm not pushing you past what you need. I'm being honest and not trying to play games that the contract is all I want.

"I want you for real. All I need from you is to say you're willing to go past the contract. That's what I need to hear. I don't even need it right now. You gave me the code and drawers and that's amazing, my sweet kimchi. You were here for me ready to help when I needed you. That's what I need, and I'm not turning my back on you ever again."

I moved my fingers over her mouth and gave her a look to just accept that. I waited until she nodded and then did everything she loved. I licked, sucked, and nibbled her tits until her bedding was wet with excitement. I kissed all over her body before eating her sweet cunt for over an hour. I ate her ass too knowing she did it more for me, but she was coming around to enjoying it.

Good because I'd never wanted anal sex like I did with Ellie.

"There was something I was going to bring up before the code and drawers and it has nothing to do with starting my day off this way, but fuck do you persuade like a master," she blurted when she was recovered.

"Anything," I accepted, staring over her sated body and thinking if there was any way for me to tactfully ask for sex.

She cleared her throat and sat up and then snapped in front of my face to tell me to stop being a perv.

I met her gaze but shrugged. "You cannot blame me when you're so fucking perfect and I want to gobble you up all over again. I would do that all day if you let me."

“Okay, first, I want to work that into our schedules and see if I really could have a day like that,” she muttered, seeming adorably stunned which was a new look I wanted to see more often. She cleared her throat again. “I’ve heard other vampires talk about—a lot over the years about biting in other spots and how...”

“It’s exciting or inspires different reactions?” I offered when she seemed stuck. I nodded when she did. “Like a fetish or—I knew a mate who loved being bitten on his upper thigh during a blowjob. He would hook up with vamps just for it, but we all thought it was nuts to allow fangs near his cock.”

The look she gave me was less than friendly.

“With someone random,” I clarified. “Okay, we need coffee for this conversation because I’m not going to be eloquent.”

“I thought you were doing fine,” she forgave as I rolled out of bed and grabbed her robe. She gave me a kiss in thanks and I threw on my shorts. “But yes, you need to trust the person to do it. I do agree with that. It’s why I’ve never done it either.”

“Never?” I hedged, my wolf wagging his tail that we could have some part of Ellie no one else ever had.

“Never,” she confirmed before walking into the bathroom. She did her business and came back out. “Only the wrist if it was just blood or the neck if a lover. I thought since you’re into exploring and doing more—maybe it would—”

“Yes, I’m very interested,” I purred as I snagged her around the waist and held her against me so she felt I was hard. “Are you thinking upper thigh?”

“Yes, but don’t laugh,” she warned. She waited until I nodded. “I’ve wanted to bite your sexy ass.” She moved her hand over her face as she probably blushed in

embarrassment but was already flushed from what we'd done.

"I'm not against that. It's hot even but like..." I wasn't sure how to put what I was feeling into words. "I'm off on the logistics. Like sexy back rub and a nip before I turn over and onto a front rub?"

She moved her hand and blinked up at me. "That's it? Not teasing or telling me that—"

I moved my fingers back over her lips, understanding this was about how she'd been treated before, not anything I'd done. "You've been very accepting of my wolf and his needs. Things will probably get worse with this shit with my family. You want to explore feeding with a lover and the sexual side of being a vamp. Yes, I'm into it. Yes, I support it."

"Thanks, Ha-joon," she whispered and stood on her toes for a kiss.

One I gladly gave.

“That sounds like good logistics. Yeah, I like it. I wasn’t really sure either, but I just had dreams and that I was over you drinking from your sexy butt and you loved it. I woke up wet and—”

I swooped her up in my arms, ignoring her startled yelp. “Coffee or I’m going to fuck you over the kitchen counter.”

“While the coffee’s brewing?” she checked.

Yes, I did. It was exactly what we both needed, and the fact she stayed there while I made our coffee so I came back to see my cum dripping down her thighs was how she got fucked again.

“No,” I snarled when we were finished. “Shut up.” Horror filled me when Ellie gave me a hurt and angry look. “Not you. Sorry, my wolf—sorry, sorry. He’s being—extra doesn’t really cover it after yesterday, but you aren’t the solution to what happened. Especially when you weren’t the problem.”

“What does he want?” she asked after a few sips of her latte. She chuckled when I didn’t respond. “That bad, huh?”

“It’s over what I feel comfortable asking as not your official partner and maybe even then,” I mumbled.

She took in a slow breath and eyed me over before nodding. “Noted, but I trust

you that you'll give me something just as special in return, and now I'm very into that idea of you tending only to me tomorrow. Massages and maybe toys."

"That's not—that's a fucking gift for me, Ellie," I groaned.

"And this could be for me, Ha-joon," she challenged before taking another sip, amusement dancing in her eyes.

Fuck, she won. She always did.

"He wants—"

"You both do. Admit it," she corrected.

Fair. I nodded. "He suggested, but we both want you to take off your robe, show off your lush body and say only I can touch and have all of you and however I want today as much as I want. Then kneel before your Alpha and suck me off better than you've ever sucked any other man off, bite me where you've never bit another man before."

Interest was in her eyes and she licked her lips, seeming like she was ready to get started... But I wasn't done.

"Then ride me in your kitchen while telling me everything I've done to your body that you love—better than any man ever has and what I can do better to satisfy you. Once you gush all over me, bend over the table and beg me to eat your ass out because you liked that and promise your virgin ass to me when we become real and there's a chance for that one day."

She swallowed loudly at that last part. "Anything else?"

“Yes, we want to eat your pussy in your office when you’re having a rough day. We’re yours and you should be able to ask that of us. Tell us and I’ll come between patients and eat your sweet cunt when you’re stressed. My wolf doesn’t like that other people tend to your needs in your office and we don’t even if what they do isn’t sexual.”

She gave a slow nod that she understood and even who I was talking about probably. Though I would suspect that sometime in the ten years they were involved she’d done something with Tommy there. It wasn’t only about Gerald always running for whatever Ellie needed.

Ellie took another sip of her latte before standing and losing her robe. She let down her hair and played with her tits before touching her cunt. She turned and touched her ass—all of it. Did it all again while saying what I wanted and more.

Then she knelt before me with the confidence of a goddess and told me to fuck her mouth and grab her hair because she trusted me.

My eyes rolled up in my head as she gave me the best blow job of my life, and that was before she drank from my upper thigh by my groin and rocked my world. I blew my load all in her hair and got her face a bit which I felt bad for, but she seemed as into it as I was, climbing up on my cock and riding me with her fangs out.

What came out of her mouth was unreal and everything my wolf needed to hear. She sounded a bit high on the strength of my blood and we rocked each other’s world that time.

And for the rest of the weekend.

I would seriously go feral if she dumped me when the contract was over.

Ellie

When Alan and Ha-joon both came through the door to my office looking near panicked, I think I shocked all of us by reaching for Ha-joon. Somewhere in my mind maybe I wasn't surprised because something had changed for us over the weekend, and even if I couldn't say it, I knew it.

And with everything he'd been suffering with his own family, coming to terms with learning which of his siblings had tried to kill him as a child... He understood the pain family could bring. The altercation in the lobby was—he understood the pain.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

“I’m so proud of you for facing him and being the goddess warrior for yourself like you are for others, my sweet kimchi,” he whispered as he sat next to me and half pulled me on his lap.

It was exactly what I needed to hear, and I moved to get the rest of the way onto his lap and cried against his shoulder as he comforted me. I didn’t care who was there or what else was going on. I cried to release my emotions of that level of crazy and I cried for the girl I’d been who had never been able to let it out and feel this safe.

Finally, I did, which was a miracle in itself.

“I don’t get it,” Alan muttered. “Kimchi isn’t sweet. It’s either spicy or vinegar.”

“You are so unromantic that you need classes, you dolt,” Renee grumbled.

“Okay, who are we burying?” Carla demanded as she came bursting into my office.

“And are you okay? I heard it was your daughter who died but then not?”

“No, not mine. The girl did die?” Renee rasped.

“No, not dead,” another voice corrected. “Critical but alive. We actually need Dr. Clark since she’s a shifter and hoped he could help.”

Sean. It was Sean talking.

“Go, I’ll be fine,” I told him as I tried to move off of him.

“I fucking won’t be,” Ha-joon rasped. “Ellie, the fear coming off of you when I ran up and...”

“I know.” I gave him a soft kiss and tried to mop up my face. I saw in his eyes what part of it was. “I’ll wait for you. They need to read the contract. I won’t hide this part from you, I promise.”

“Please,” Renee added. “She’s my daughter’s best friend.”

“Yeah, of course I’d help any nipper,” Ha-joon whispered. He kissed my forehead and stood, focused on Carla. “Do not leave her side. Wolf to wolf, protect her and eat any who come for her.”

“You have my word, pup. I got her.” She shook her head when he was gone and smirked at me. “Oh boy, you’re in trouble girl. That man—”

“Not the fucking time, Carla,” Renee snapped. She apologized when we all looked at her. “Sorry. Again. I thought my daughter was dying and people play telephone like children around here with messages. Sorry.”

“You plan to press charges, right?” Gerald checked when he was done reading. He nodded when I snorted. “Yeah, glad to hear it because I heard you said you were the head of Amanda’s Hope and the foundation would take a hit if you didn’t as the head. This could get ugly, and I don’t know the family—”

I burst out laughing. I’d never asked. I hadn’t even asked who they were or bothered to—I’d been so lost in my head and the madness brought before me again that I’d just snapped.

It took me a bit to calm down and I was half hugging Carla and holding Alan’s hand when I could focus again.

“What’s the immediate concern?” Alan asked him as Ha-joon walked back in.

“The girl is critical but almost stable and I’ll check back,” Ha-joon told Renee. “She can’t shift yet, but I basically got her animal to stop trying to shift so they can try for surgery once her stats are calm for a bit longer. I’ll help her shift after surgery should she need it.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Normally, I’d be relieved, but I was too numb right then. I was just glad when he took Carla’s place and hugged me to him.

“First, it’s clear Kenneth Reed got to Ellie’s financial advisor or someone at the company who holds your portfolio,” Gerald said. “There’s no way he’d know your holdings otherwise, and the list in this contract is extensive and—”

“It might not be him but the attorney you replaced,” Alan muttered. “We had to submit a lot of our personal everything about five years back when there was a complaint of conflicts and—something ethics.”

“That’s true,” I mumbled, bobbing my head. “But yes, someone leaked something for Kenneth to know any of that. I have not been in contact with him in fifty years. The last time he tried to sell me...”

“I handled it,” Alan admitted. “I was the threat then. I got the family to want to call it off and made it clear that if they tried to push it they would live a life of regret. All while gathering the evidence of Kenneth’s harassment of Ellie to get the federal order of protection. Her name was already long changed to Reed-Miller and it took a while to all put together.”

“He didn’t leave right away after the mating talks were over,” I said, noting Ha-joon

flinched at something Alan said but didn't have it in me to figure out what. "But you figured out how to make him leave."

Alan cleared his throat. "I would prefer not to admit to my crimes. The statute is up by now."

I figured it was something like that.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

“Not everyone here needs to hear it, but I do if I’m to help you legally, and that family is connected,” Gerald said gently. “Does Alexis know?”

I sighed. “She knows enough, but not the dirty details.”

“Trust your gut on this, Ellie. I know you said you threw gas on it all, but I think just the opposite and you freed yourself,” Renee said gently. “You know the difference between now and fifty years ago.”

She was right and that helped. I gave her a grateful look because subconsciously I knew she was right.

Pompous families that still bought women like mares for their sons would care about me being a bastard, but the rest of the civilized world hadlongsince moved past that. That was the part my subconscious knew and I was missing because of the crazy.

“Strap on your daytime soaps hat,” I grumbled.

There was a knock at the door and one of my admins stuck her head in. “I apologize Ms. Reed, but there is a Mrs. Clark here and she is saying she’s here as the Alpha Mate because Dr. Clark’s life was threatened?”

“Oh shite,” Ha-joon said as he went to stand.

“Let her in,” I said at the same time. “I don’t actually know what happened when I went into shock. Let’s start there.”

Mrs. Clark breezed in with determination like she was ready to go into battle but also worry thick around her. Relief filled hereyes when she saw both of us. “Good, good, you are both fine. I apologize but when—”

“It’s fine, I’m not caught up either,” I forgave, gesturing for her to sit.

She gave a quick kiss to Ha-joon’s cheek first and then sat, still ready to battle from the determination in her eyes.

Even through my numbness, my heart hurt when Ha-joon looked at the door and back to his mother. “No Da?”

Surprise flashed in her eyes. “He said I was silly for coming and it was probably blown-up drama. If it wasn’t, you were more than capable to handle it, had good people at your back here, and were always smart enough to ask for help.”

He accepted that, knowing she wasn’t lying, and I squeezed his hand because I saw what was in her aura. I knew his father had said too much, but the man truly did love Ha-joon and I believed had faith in him.

We just weren’t perfect as people. I’d seen lots of parents be jealous of their children and vice versa. We were just people sometimes before our roles and relationships.

“It is a blowup,” Ha-joon accepted.

Alan snickered. “But like out of a damn comic or fucking clown car. I’m stealing your hidden liquor, Ellie.”

“Whichyouput there and I rarely touch,” I drawled.

“You’re welcome I get you the good stuff,” he teased bringing a bit of lightness to the

conversation... For others. I wasn't there yet.

Ha-joon said how the guy tried to punch him and he'd handled it but then vampires who knew that family were there visiting their sick patriarch and jumped in to help the guy. And that was the clown car jab because it was practically the whole fucking bloodline with extended family and more.

"He could have taken them all on," Alan bitched, gesturing to Ha-joon as he handed out drinks. "Here I'm huffing and puffing—he really just makes me feel old and lazy. He's an amazing doctor and I love that he's kicking everyone up a few levels, but I didn't need him to make me feel so lacking."

"The new structure with the department heads as the board is doing wonders for all of us," Carla cut in. "And I've seen you in actual battle, Alan. You're hot as fuck. I doubt the pup would know how not to cut himself with a sword and you're badass."

"Yeah, fair," Ha-joon accepted, holding his hands up in surrender. "And I was huffing and puffing as well." He nodded when his mother raised an eyebrow. "It was ridiculous, Mum. Like Monty Python ridiculous."

Gerald snorted. "And apparently, they're all bitching that it wasn't battery and they don't understand why they're being arrested when they were 'rescuing' a friend. They're not hearing that he threw the punch. Seriously, fucking entitled—and I say that as someone from a family with money. They're in every species but—idiots."

Yes, there were idiots in every species, race, and sex. That was for damn sure.

"Security was helping but mostly trying to block Ellie," Alan explained. "Because it was clear you went into shock and that woman tried to grab back the information. Luckily, Gerald was there, and when he started to help Clark, I realized what she was doing and told him to get you out of there with the evidence before

you both disappeared in the madness.”

“He explained you told him to,” I muttered. “Is the hospital like leveled?”

Ha-joon snorted. “We have more customers, and please bill some of them out the arse for taking cheap shots. Gits.”

“I’ll make it a priority,” I drawled before tossing back my drink. I focused on Mrs. Clark. “You weren’t there to hear what I revealed or—”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

“I’m sure I already know,” she told me gently. “While you keep many secrets and I’m sure I don’t know it all, I know what I believe you outed—what you would out to blow up an archaic family pushing fraudulent mating contracts.”

“I’m a bastard,” I confirmed.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re not the heir to the throne, love. No one gives a shit. No one ever should have even if your father was coven leader, just that he cheated on his mate.”

The sigh I let out probably was heard around the whole administrative wing. “It’s more complicated than that.”

“Start at the beginning and know it won’t leave this room and we only care so we can help protect you now,” Renee said gently.

I let out a slow breath. “My father’s mate—my stepmother technically—was sold and hated my father. Hated her family, the Reeds—all of it. My father was obsessed with having a son because he pissed off a warlock—screwed him over or something and the guy cursed him to only have daughters. It was a huge scandal because some tried to use it to remove him as coven leader.

“It was part of the excuse theydideventually use to remove him but also his gambling and bankrupting the coven. But he treated her like a true and—by all accounts he was disgusting. She wasn’t the coven leader’s wife but the cow he had to impregnate always in her suite waiting for him to stud her. He didn’t cheat thinking it beneath a coven leader.

“When she learned of the curse being real and not crap, she was terrified what he would do with her daughter. How she would be sold and—my father is a monster. She drugged a maid and my father and tricked him into screwing her too. She got pregnant first, but we were like two months apart and it wasn’t—early and late births were all of the time back then.

“A paid-off doctor and her servants and all that mattered was my father had his heir on the way.” I let out a slow breath. “I was born first and the doctor said that there were such complications with my birth that my mother needed complete seclusion to recover. They had a wet nurse ready for me and...”

“That was the only time Ellie ever spent with her actual mother,” Alan finished for me, taking the seat next to me again and squeezing my knee in support. “Mrs. Reed came back months later recovered and took over. Ellie’s mother raised her half sister in a cabin with the best of everything from money Mrs. Reed had from...”

I shrugged when he looked at me. “Selling shit? Her family was wealthy as well. Gifts from Father showing off their wealth? I have no idea. But I was raised as the legitimate daughter and the disappointment he used against her that she didn’t give him a son.” I snorted and took Alan’s drink, tossing it back. “Forget biology, he has a fucking curse and it was still her fault.”

“And you have no idea who or where your mother is?” Gerald asked gently.

“No. Apparently, I did cross paths with her several times when I was younger. She demanded it to see I was being taken care of to keep the ploy going,” I mumbled.

“Your poor mother,” Mrs. Clark whispered, sniffing and wiping her eyes. Renee had the same reaction and I assumed it was something only those with children could understand.

Fair enough.

“Why do you think she’s dead?” Gerald asked, taking notes.

“Because the moment I found out there was no need to keep her alive and my father is sadistically pragmatic like that. Hell, he’s vengeful and probably killed her so my stepmother couldn’t do it again. I would put a lot of money on him slitting her throat while all of Mrs. Reed’s servants and staff watched so they all knew the punishment for even thinking it.”

He opened his mouth and I waved him off, needing a minute. But I knew what he wanted.

“He found out first. I don’t know when or how, but it was years before I did. I do know his attitude changed with me. He was harsher and always worried about me leaving, and—clearly he thought someone would find out I was a bastard instead of his real daughter.”

“And his legitimate daughter?” Mrs. Clark asked.

“He couldn’t ever touch because my stepmother said she’d tell everyone the truth and how he couldn’t even keep his mate in line but also his shame that he was screwing lowly maids,” I answered. “No one would believe she set it all up. It’s crazy and she’s not wrong.”

“I’m going to need some basics on the other times he tried to sell you,” Gerald muttered, back to taking notes. “And if possible a way to contact your stepmother.”

“That seems overkill,” Ha-joon interjected. “You’re acting like she’s on the hook for something actually when—”

“It probably is, but there’s a clause in the contract that this is a replacement mating for the one she did sign off on,” Gerald interjected. “It’s not legally applicable and bullshit, but I still need to at least know what that’s about, and he will probably call her stepmother in to be the reference.”

I sighed but then snorted. “Yeah, except she signed it as my mother and wasn’t.” I pulled my hand from Ha-joon and scrubbed my hands over my face way too roughly. “Yes, I signed the first one, but we all know I didn’t need to. That was when I found out I wasn’t her actual daughter and I had a sister. And it was abetrothal contract, not a mating contract. I was fourteen.”

“How did you find out?” Renee asked.

“I knew something was up for a while because of how Father changed,” I mumbled, rubbing my neck until Ha-joon made me stop and held my hands. “I walked up on Mrs. Reed’s handmaidens whispering about people believing whatever they wanted to save face. That all it would take was a quick check to her family that none of them have ever had golden eyes and—”

“You don’t have—right, someone said your eyes aren’t really brown,” Gerald muttered, studying me intently. “They’re truly not a pretty caramel?”

“No,” a few people said, Ha-joon continuing. “They’re the most gorgeous deep golden with caramel flecks. They brighten when she’s happy and laughing or darken when she’s pissed. They’re more stunning than all the ways the sun can be beautiful.”

I wasn’t the only one who stared at him completely stunned at what he’d said.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

“You need to take lessons from him on how to be,” Carla told Alan. “Wow.”

“I second that,” Renee mumbled.

I squeezed his hands but focused on Gerald. “Yes, they’re golden. They were apparent when I was younger, but then I hit some level of power and they changed. Only people with a high enough power level can see them. I don’t exactly understand it since clearly it’s a quirk of my mother’s bloodline.”

He nodded that he should let it go, but I could see the questions swirling in his eyes.

Yeah, he could fucking get in line. Way,waybehind me.

“I spied on them and my stepmother until I got proof and confronted her.” I pulled my hand away from Ha-joon again to wipe tears. “I’m not sure anything ever hurt that much because I had truly loved her. She was the light that kept me going in that hellish coven with my monstrous father leading them all.”

“She was good to you?” Mrs. Clark pushed when I went quiet.

“Yes,” I rasped. “She was a doting mother. Diligent with my schooling. Some thought it was because it seemed I would be the only child—everyone remembering the problems with my birth and being early. While Father tried to blame her, even the most sexist of the coven elders would bring up his curse and that he should be grateful he had such a smart, talented child.

“She was—I got the best of everything. She sat in on classes to make sure no one was

sexist or demeaning to me. All of it. I was—she—” I broke down crying for the girl I’d been. I’d only told a few people of this, one being Amanda Hope who had saved me after I’d run and been on my own for too long. The world had almost eaten me and would have without her.

It was Mrs. Clark of all people who was hugging and comforting me. She’d taken Alan’s spot and was mothering me.

“You are such a good lass and she saw that. She realized she couldn’t stay detached and being a mother wasn’t about blood but love. You are worthy of love, my girl,” she comforted, whispering more and more kind words as I got myself together.

I nodded my head and focused on getting the rest out so I could just go home and rest. I wasn’t going to get any work done and it was better to let them handle the cleanup.

I wasn’t going to be of any use in it. It was better to admit that instead of making a mess for someone else.

“I was already having doubts because the guy was stupid. Like a fucking idiot and the deal was for him to take over the coven because there was no chance of a female coven leader hundreds of years ago. There are a handful even now and they’re from ridiculously powerful families. Most think it’s just a stunt.”

“But I heard you were to be the first,” Mrs. Clark pushed.

“That was later,” I sighed, scrubbing my neck again. “Long story short, I guilted my stepmother to help me blow it up and get me more time to settle with things after being lied to for so long. She owed me at least that, especially when I was thinking of what was best for the coven. She realized I was serious and we staged something with the elders to show the guy was truly a fucking moron.

“The whole thing fell apart fast, and unfortunately they used it to humiliate Father. He went ballistic later and then called me a useless bastard. That was how we both found out he knew. He would threaten to switch us out if I didn’t behave and marry whoever he quickly found next to clean up the mess—yeah, it was all a mess.

“But she got him to see that it was a small mess now instead of a huge mess later that he would have been trapped into. And if he ever fucking listened to us about anything, we could have gone to him instead of the elders who were the ones who embarrassed him. A miracle happened and he actually listened to reason.

“He was consumed with finding a better match for me and putting in more time, even publicly accepting the elders’ chastising. He said he was short-sighted to prioritize thinking of the glory for the coven instead of the true benefits the match would bring. He came out looking like a better leader and... At least it only got me one real beating. He’d never hit me before and then...”

I shook my head, comforted when Ha-joon kissed my hair.

“I’m so sorry, my sweet kimchi,” he murmured in my ear.

“She nursed me the whole time I healed,” I rasped. “She apologized again and again for me being hurt but not what else she did. I think in her mind she still saw being raised a coven leader’s daughter instead of a maid’s a blessing and didn’t understand what she’d really done. To her, maids were raped all of the time and at least this was useful and my mother protected after.”

“She was twisted by her own fears and how you’ve seen so many vampires be brainwashed,” Renee muttered. “You can’t forgive it—it’s unforgivable. But you better than most understand it.”

“Now. It’s taken along time to get here.” I sighed. “She also was too selfish with it all.

She could act like it helped me too, but it was all for her real daughter. She might have loved me who she raised and knew better, but when it came down to it, she picked that fucking cunt. Again and again. She always will.”

“Yes, well, not to excuse her, but a mother can only—” Mrs. Clark started to say.

I said the words that I knew would shut her up and maybe pour some salt she deserved in her current wounds. It was mean because she’d been comforting me and was there to help.

But I did it for Ha-joon.

“Even after my sister tried to kill me.”

18

Ha-joon

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

My heart beat in my ears at Ellie's words.

I forgot how to breathe as I blinked at our joined hands.

"There's no excusing when someone goes that far," she said firmly even as her voice cracked. "There's no justifying it or trying to understand it. All the 'parent' does is pick a side and not the side of the child who was the victim. Fine, I wasn't her biological child, but she raised me and didn't raise her. And I did nothing wrong. I was better.

"That wasn't my fault. That's genetics. That's chance. That's the gods' choice. I also worked harder to make her proud and her biological daughter was jealous of that. She was jealous she wouldn't have the mating prospects I did and the power of being a coven leader's wife. There is no forgiving attempting to kill a sibling out of jealousy. Ever."

"Walk us through it," Dr. Bass cut in, clearly understanding there was more to all of this but wanting to move things along. Probably so she could rest.

Which was also why I'd asked Dr. James to cover my patients for the day. He'd been shocked, but I didn't have anyone on my calendar who needed me specifically and... Seriously, Ellie needed me more. When I put it like that he said he'd make it work.

Good man.

Ellie sighed. "It took a couple of years, but Father found someone he said was perfect on paper and invited him to stay with the coven. He said that was what was missing

and how his wise mate and daughter could see through the cracks with the help of the elders. So do it better and invite him out.” She let out a stressed giggle.

“This is like a telenovela where your half sister met him on his journey somehow and fell madly in love, right?” Carla drawled.

Ellie giggled again and tapped her nose before pointing at her. “Oh yeah. Broken carriage wheel and everything. I mean... My life is like a shitty period cliché that—whatever. She didn’t know until he was here a few weeks that it was so we might be mated. I still wasn’t on board and threatened not to go through with it if they didn’t tell me about my birth mother.

“Father laughed and said he thought it was hysterical that I thought I got a choice, but I had cards to play too. I was ready to tell the coven I was a bastard instead of living with that threat over my head later. It was—you can imagine. Long story short, she found out and went apeshit. I don’t know how long she knew about the switch but...” She shrugged.

“She escaped her arrangements and somehow got into the coven?” Gerald pushed, looking a bit too engaged in her backstory.

“I don’t really know,” Ellie sighed. “I don’t know how much freedom she had.” She grabbed my bottle of water that I’d left on the coffee table and took a swig. “I never knew all that much and it’s hundreds of years later. All I do know is I wasn’t the pampered princess she’d assumed I’d be as a coven leader’s daughter.

“I trained hard because life was hard, and several of the elders instilled it in my head that if Father should fall I would be the acting coven leader with my stepmother until—I had to be ready. I have no idea if it was real advice or more elder mischief, but I took it to heart.” She angrily wiped tears that broke my heart. “That’s how I met my younger sister.

“With a dagger trying to kill me in my bedchambers. She’s fucking lucky I recognized her even in the moonlight coming through the window. She’s lucky that it was almost a full moon and the moonlight would come in. It was a warmer night and I had the window and curtains open for the breeze.”

“She looked like your stepmother,” Carla put together.

“Spitting image but younger,” Ellie confirmed. “I disarmed and knocked her out only before waking my servant in the connecting room to get my stepmother immediately. I made up some excuse of—I forget. I was in shock, but she saw it was important enough and then my stepmother came and found her real daughter knocked out.”

“Her reaction?” Dr. Bass hedged.

“Grateful,” Ellie admitted. “She confessed Theresa was jealous of me and the life I ‘took’ from her. Everything from my position to my damn name. Apparently, Ellie was a much more graceful name.” She snorted.

“What?” I whispered.

“I was cruel. She was grateful I didn’t kill her daughter but not apologetic that she came to fucking kill me when I didn’t do anything other than what she and my father ever asked of me. I didn’t even know the woman’s name until she said it in that moment. I told her that I hoped Theresa ended up hating her as much as I did if not more once she saw it wasn’t my fault but hers.”

“I don’t think that cruel but fucking justified,” Carla mumbled. “I want a piece of the fucking bitch. If you don’t want your child born of a man you’re forced to mate, you fucking run. You don’t go Machiavellian with all this other shit and other people’s lives like you own them and are the puppet master. You—children aren’t possessions. She was just as bad as her parents.”

Ellie looked at her like she'd never seen her before and let out a shuttering breath. "Thank you. Seriously, thank you. I think all of this crazy was worth it for me to hear that, like that, and articulate what I've always felt and..."

"Couldn't ever form into words when so much wanted to come out with the madness," I finished for her, nodding when she did. "Yeah, I've felt the same a lot. You build it up in your head that you're being too sensitive or blowing it up. People convince you that it's not as big of a deal, so you keep it in or—Dr. Carpenter has helped me a lot saying several things."

"I have?" he asked, his eyes bug wide.

"Another time," I brushed off but then sighed when I saw everyone curious, even Mum. "You're very accepting and excited to correct the medical misconceptions about what I can do. You've seen it now, and—my last hospital and so many were excited to save lives but wanted the treatment hidden. They wanted—"

"It to be a dirty secret. They made you feel that, pup," Alan said gently. "They made you feel embarrassed about what you could do instead of accepted and special."

"Yeah, they really did," I confessed for the first time.

"Not here. We won't ever do that to you here. We have a lot of faults. A lot of them, but not that."

I snorted. "Like you keep calling me 'pup,' you git."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

“Sorry to bring the conversation back, but I need to handle this and get charges filed with Ellie’s permission,” Gerald interjected.

She sighed. “Theresa blew that proposed mating up. Kenneth counted it, but it never even got to being signed. The guy liked me and the coven—he was tolerable, but when she found out it was still going on after their whatever, she got to him and told him the truth. Things spun out from there. I physically looked like him then, so clearly I was his child.

“She looked like her mother. Kenneth was even worse when it fell through and the guy promised to keep the secret. He didn’t believe him and wanted me mated. He wanted it all settled and no more upset. He thought it would all be resolved then except Theresa trying to kill me and the stress of it all triggered whatever makes me different.”

“Different how?” Gerald asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Alan interjected. “No, it doesn’t. Clark has different gifts than other shifters. I have abilities over some vamps and so does Ellie. We all know people of our species with this or that gift because of interspecies mating. It happens.”

“Fair. Okay, sorry.” He met my gaze. “Sorry. I know this seems like prying and—my mind immediately went to Kenneth trying to say you’re dangerous or the arguments he could try to throw at me.”

I gave a half shrug. “He probably will and more. He will tell all kinds of lies and wild

stories—shit I don't even know or anything he thinks he can get away with. It's who he is. I heard him tell someone once that I had angel blood. He's a compulsive liar and gambler—not someone remotely reliable.”

“And no matter what he throws out, he hasn't been in contact with Ellie in fifty years. He wouldn't have any sort of idea of her control,” Carla interjected. “That's your defense. One conversation with several of us who have worked with her for longer than her father has seen her and that's it.”

“Yes, good, okay, so that's how long she has roots here,” Gerald muttered, jotting down more notes. Okay, so he really was focused on the picture he was building to help Ellie, not just fishing for information.

Fine, he was a good attorney.

“Then Kenneth wanted to make me the coven leader and announce to everyone his daughter was special and—he'd go back and forth,” Ellie whispered. “He was all over. Constantly. Then there was talk of mating me to one of the elders of the coven since I would need the guidance as the first female coven leader.”

“What was the tipping point that made you run?” Dr. Bass asked when Ellie went quiet. “I think that's what we really need to know to protect you and you're so scared about.”

Dr. Carpenter cleared his throat when she simply covered her face. “She overheard her father yelling at her stepmother that he was going to impregnate Ellie. That she had denied him a son and the curse didn't say anything about male grandchildren. That was the answer since Ellie was a bastard and someday it would get out and he would lose the coven.”

“Is that true?” Dr. Bass pushed for some reason I didn't understand. “You believed it

and not just one of his wild manic swings?”

“Yes,” Ellie choked out. “The pieces fit of things he was doing behind the scenes. He’d lost his grip on everything and—I think he was already losing money too fast then and my mating was supposed to repay the debts, but then he wanted me to take over—it all spun out on him. I packed that night, and my stepmother clearly believed him too because she gave me gold.”

“She helped you escape?” Gerald asked.

Ellie met his gaze, tears streaming down her cheeks. “No, and she made it clear to say she never did. I gave my word. She did not help me that night.”

Pride filled me when my wolf sensed that Ellie was lying. Her stepmother had helped her that night, and all these years later she kept her word.

She really was an amazing woman.

Ellie went over the other times her father had found her and tried to force her to mate to benefit him. Even after he’d lost the coven and been kicked out. Her sister had found her once and demanded everything for stealing her life and Ellie had let her have it that she’d had to run, so what life? Plus, she’d spared Theresa’s life, and that was a greater kindness than she deserved.

I wholeheartedly agreed.

Ellie looked so lost when she gathered her things to leave. She wouldn’t meet my gaze when I moved over by her. “I’m fine. You have patients and—”

“Dr. James is covering for me,” I promised her.

“You still have the little girl and...” She let out a long breath. “I’d like some space to settle with this. I’ll be fine.”

I swallowed loudly, pain slicing my heart that she was pushing me away at such a time. But it wasn’t about me. “Whatever you need. Do you want me to bring dinner or just let me know if you need anything?”

The latter. That was what she wasn’t willing to say.

“Clark, I’ll take Ellie home,” Dr. Carpenter called over.

“No, you both need to get to the police station with me,” Gerald corrected, looking at his phone again. “Or if you have that pressing patient to check on first, but then we have to go. They also need the security footage of the brawl to figure out how to book people with what.”

I sighed. That was fair, but also I would have thought just hitting them all with battery and disturbing the peace or some shit. Clearly, I was well-versed in that kind of thing.

Or some had their fangs out and tried to bite. That was a different crime over a punch.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

“I will drive Ellie home,” Dr. Bass said. “I already told my attendings to handle my day. I want to check on my daughter and the situation.”

“Good, let us know how she is,” Dr. Carpenter accepted.

And that was it. Ellie was gone before I could even get a kiss goodbye or check with her again that this was what she wanted. It felt like whiplash from her practically on my lap and holding onto me for dear life not minutes ago.

The girl was doing well in surgery when we checked in. I promised to be on call just in case but let them know that I had a pressing issue so to please let me know the moment I was off the hook. To say they all gave me weird looks was an understatement.

But when I quietly explained to Dr. Carpenter that I would try to get Ellie to have some funny brownie if she let me, he fully understood. I wanted to basically clock out with her and be whatever she needed me to be.

And if that was a high buddy with munchies and binge-watching anything to take her mind off what happened, all the better.

The police station was a madhouse, and vampires all over lost their minds when we showed up. Some were threatening to kill us if we didn’t drop the charges, and others were accusing us of unplugging their family member in retaliation.

“Shut it!” Gerald roared, showing he was a lion shifter for sure. “Dr. Clark and Dr. Carpenter aren’t in charge of his care, nor have they been near his room. Norin contact

with his doctors. I checked.”

“I don’t even know who you people are,” I grumbled, crossing my arms over my chest as I stared them down.

“Bad move,” Dr. Carpenter sighed, and Gerald had about the same reaction.

But I thought it was smart because they blew up all over again, pissed that I didn’t. It showed this was all about their egos and being pompous assholes, not us. I met the gaze of the officer who screamed he was in charge, and he gave me a slight nod that he was on the same page as me.

Lovely.

I did a double take when Mum walked in, having thought she’d gone back to London.

“This is a situation with a patient’s family misunderstanding a situation and attacking a doctor, but if you want a problem with your family and the Clark pack of London, you have it,” she said loudly, authority in her voice. “I can be here to check on my son who was hurt or as the Alpha Mate of London. Your choice.”

People slowly went silent. Unlike wealthy, old-school vampire families, being the mate of a powerful shifter means something.

Something big.

And more importantly, they obviously believed Mum from the way the eldest of the family fell in line. They realized they couldn’t use their money and privilege because someone had a bigger card to play on that than they did.

She seemed content and nodded to Dr. Carpenter and Gerald. “I apologize for

interjecting, but I realized a bit more here could alleviate stress on your day. Let me play nice with the head office and I will get out of your way.”

““Out of our way?”” Gerald chuckled. “I’m about to construct a shrine to you, Alpha Mate. This isn’t my field of law, so I appreciate the backup.”

“It is ours,” the woman I’d seen with Ellie a few times said. Alexis? Yes, Alexis Gomez who was the head attorney for Amanda’s Hope. She dipped her head to Mum before focusing on Gerald. “Ellie asked me to tag in since I handle these sorts of things better and it all centers on her anyways. She said you could handle billing since—”

Understanding immediately filled his eyes. “Of course. The hospital will pay the tab so it doesn’t cut into the non-profit funds.”

I snorted. “I’ll throw in some funds as well. The hospital probably would want most of this dismissed and not raise a fuss.”

“On the contrary, Clark,” Dr. Carpenter cut in. “We make a stink about these sorts of things more than any other hospital. And because of that we have less staff hurt over any other hospital.” He waited until I met his gaze. “If you excuse bad behavior, you set the precedent for more of it.

“The fact UPS prosecutes people who clock delivery drivers and hospitals don’t do the same to those who hurt their emergency department staff is sickening. In pain or not, people are responsible for their actions. Being drunk doesn’t forgive someone tearing up a bar and it shouldn’t an ED. Medication interactions are the only ones we let go with an agreement of treatment.”

Wow, that was much, much better than any hospital I’d ever worked for.

Or heard of. It was just expected we accepted it as part of the job and I wasn't even in the emergency department. But I'd helped out in between patients for more than my fair share of staff with bloody noses or beaten faces.

Glad there was at least one place that protected their staff.

I thanked Mum again and again, glad when the ranking officer was polite and thanked her as well before she headed out. I promised to update her and that I was fine.

But was she?

No. It was very clear that she wasn't.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

Which was why I walked her out.

“Mum, I don’t want to ever downplay how important you are to all of us or... You gave us life; you aren’t responsible for what we’ve done with that,” I told her gently. “They’ve made their choices and decisions. It’s not on you. Dad’s emotions and words aren’t on you either.”

“I know. If my heart could now understand that, it would be wonderful,” she accepted. “But I also struggle with the way I have failed you, my youngest. I should have been better and not forgiven him so much. You were valid and I’m forever sorry.” She reached up and cupped my cheek. “I never picked him over you. I saw his remorse and fear. I thought...”

What she was trying to say hit me hard. “You thought you stopped him just before he would stop himself.”

“Yes. Yes, I swear it to you. I smelled the regret and—details will haunt you more than knowing who it was but...” She shook her head. “I realize I’m not an accurate witness to that night. I was so traumatized by it. I was sleep-deprived since you were still breastfeeding and needing more because you were so strong. I... I don’t know anything anymore it seems.”

I gave her a hug and let her leave, understanding that before being our mum she was just a person and struggled too.

I could let go of my anger and resentment at not handling things better when it came to her. My da was a different story though.

Maybe one day. I thought I had, but I wasn't perfect either.

The police station took hours and hours. I gave Dr. Carpenter an annoyed look when he was done much sooner. He teased me that he'd had less altercations because he wasn't as good of a fighter as I was.

Security from the hospital showed up after their shifts to give their statements as well. One was kind and gave me a message from the surgeon working on the young female shifter. She was out of danger and I wasn't needed. I spent the time getting to know the security well, impressed with them and how loyal they were to Ellie.

Then I realized they were mostly "misfits." They were people who'd left bad circumstances or shitty families like her. She's found them—or vice versa—and now they protected others like she did.

"Hey, you can't influence the police like this," one of the vampires bitched when the pizzas I ordered arrived.

I gave the duffer the look he deserved. "They don't handle if the charges stick or not. Even I know that about your justice system and I'm from London. The DA and others will manage your plea deals. Let them get some damn fuel for all the extra writing, typing, and dealing with your stupid arses."

"Dr. Clark, thank you, but I think we're done with you," one of the higher-ranked officers cut in before their family members exploded again.

I gave him an apologetic look, but he was understanding. It was clear that I was on my last leg of energy and wiped as well.

Plus, they'd all seen the footage of how many vamps I'd seriously laid out.

Still, I was thrilled I got to leave and took the man at his word... Or before someone changed their mind or needed me for anything else. Yeah, I got the fuck out of there.

Nothing surprised me more than finding Ellie sitting in my condo and with tons of food. She seemed unable to think of what to say and simply stared at me.

“I’m starving,” I offered. “I was in the mood for the pizzas I ordered for the police, but I thought it smarter to leave when they said I could. Dr. James said he had my patients and to just go home.”

She nodded and gestured to the food. “I can reheat whatever. Please, help yourself.” It wasn’t until I’d made a plate that she finally managed to get out what was going on with her... And loudly. “I’m sorry!”

It had been a couple minutes of silence, so it startled me and I almost dropped my plate but managed to set it by the seat next to her. “You don’t have anything to be sorry for.”

“No, I do, and I’m really sorry,” she rasped. She’d changed and was in casual clothes. Pulling her knee to her chest, her foot was on my chair and she hugged her leg, unable to look at me. “It was automatic to push you away, but I regretted it the moment I said it. I wanted to take it back and be selfish and ask you to stay and comfort me.”

“But you didn’t know how?” I pushed when she seemed lost again.

“But I didn’t know how,” she confirmed. “To accept the comfort, ask for what I really wanted, or take it back. I got home and realized I didn’t want space. I realized I didn’t even want to be there. That I wanted to be here with you. So I’m sorry that I just used the code and let myself in.”

“It’s fine. That’s why I gave it to you. Use it whenever,” I told her, reaching over and rubbing her back. “I’m thrilled you’re here.”

“Yeah?” she whispered.

I decided to be a bit cheeky. “Yeah, there’s tons of food now. I’m a wolf and—” I chuckled when she reached over and smacked me. I grabbed her hand and brought it to my lips. “You found comfort in my den, Ellie. Come here whenever you need it. Always. You are always welcome here or wherever I am.”

She swallowed loudly. “I’ve never found always to really mean that. I loved my stepmother so,so much and it was all just ripped away by her lies.” She let out a shaky breath. “Amanda saved me and I loved her too. Then she was gone.”

“Dr. Carpenter’s love for you is real. I’ve seen it. He hasn’t left you. Not everyone will leave,” I told her firmly.

Ellie

“Who are you trying to convince there?” I asked gently, seeing the pain of his wounds as well.

He sighed before kissing my hand again and focusing on his food. “It’s not so much people leave me but fail me. But I’ve had awesome mates since I was a pup. I’m set on trusting friends or having that part of my life. They—we saved each other that way.”

“So it’s family,” I muttered, accepting that. He was more well-rounded than I was on that.

“No, work,” he corrected, intently focused on his food. “I was so used and abused for my talents and powers—Dr. Carpenter hit the nail on the head pretty well about how things went. But also just getting dumped on all over in London or England because I was the youngest Clark. People were jealous or were wolves and knew the truth about my family.”

“You needed this job to work to heal,” I surmised, reaching over and rubbing his arm.

“My da was right and cleaning off those ideas to present was the right move, especially since Dr. James backed them,” he whispered. “But it brought up a lot of my past that I wasn’t ready for. I feel...”

“Shaky?”

“Yes.” He cleared his throat and gave me a smile. “But this isn’t about me. What do you want to do? What can help you feel better?”

Right, my mess. I’d been so focused on trying to explain why I was in his condo and had mishandled everything that I hadn’t thought past that. Of course Ha-joon had made apologizing and getting past it easy on me.

I swallowed a snort. It had to be an Alpha wolf or shifter thing that one minute he was overreacting and the next making things too easy on me.

But then I thought about his question and came up blank. Right then I just snuck some fried chicken off his plate, smiling when he nudged it closer. It was cute and we needed more cute.

“If I was the boss of your relaxing, I was thinking funny brownie and food, so you’re halfway to my plan,” he suggested quietly.

“Throw in a soak with those bath salts I found and left here for us and yeah, that sounds about heaven,” I agreed.

“Yessss,” he groaned. “I hid them so I wasn’t tempted to use them without you. Those have magic in them, right? Something about them is just too good.”

I chuckled but wouldn’t tell him even when he threatened me with a good time that I was pretty sure was supposed to be a punishment. The fact he’d wrapped the same pot brownies from our first time and kept them in his freezer just for us was so adorable.

Ha-joon was just adorable which didn’t seem fair when he was so fucking sexy.

And smart.

And handsome.

And just awesome.

It was time to stop being so afraid of being with him and start appreciating how lucky I was that a man like him wanted me.

I snorted and chuckled when Ha-joon raised an eyebrow at me. “I realized brownie kicked in because my thoughts went from dark and numb to happier and grateful.”

“Do they involve me now?” he teased.

“Yes.” I smiled when he did a double take, not having expected that as the answer. He didn’t push it though, and we both got lost in our thoughts and food.

“Bath time?” he asked, sounding lighter and relaxed as well.

“If you can roll me there,” I replied with a happy sigh. “I’m in a bit of a food coma here. At least I picked really good food if I was going to crash your condo.”

“Stop talking like it’s an imposition. I told you it’s not.” He reached over and flicked my forehead as he stood. “You promised me naked Ellie and I want naked Ellie. You put the food away and I’ll get the bath going. We can food coma in there.”

I blinked after him. Since when was he the boss of me?

Oh right, I’d actually signed a contract to those terms... Sort of.

Whatever.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

We handled our jobs and then soaked in the tub. About five minutes in Ha-joon sighed and asked me to lean forward. I did and was treated to a view of his naked wet body.

Oh, he'd heard his phone and hadn't brought it to the tub.

"Yeah, I'm really high," I muttered. I'd taken a bigger piece than when I'd done this with Ha-joon before. Or even the brownie I'd kept at my place and nibbled on now and again.

"Why is this duffer calling me?" he mumbled as he walked back fully naked and without a care.

I was affected. My damn tongue was practically hanging out wanting to lick up all the water off of him even if I knew it would taste icky from the bath salts.

It was worth it to lick Ha-joon Clark.

"I cannot think of a single reason for you to call me," he growled with the phone to his ear, obviously having answered.

My eyes went wide when I recognized the voice and all thoughts of gobbling up Ha-joon fled my mind.

"Ellie still has me blocked. Rightfully, but Alan—Dr. Carpenter wouldn't pick up my call for personal either. I knew you'd be looped in," Tommy said from Ha-joon's phone.

I couldn't even hide my shock.

"You don't get to know anything about her anymore," Ha-joon snapped... Without much force since he was high. Even his growl sounded more playful.

Oh dear, my Alpha was more like a barking pup instead of a ferocious wolf.

He was so fucking adorable.

"I know, I know," Tommy sighed. "Just tell me she's okay. Please?"

That made me frown and my mouth worked faster than my mind. "What does he know?"

"Oh, thank the gods she's there and not hidden alone," Tommy whispered. "Someone called me from ASH. One of my few remaining friends. It wasn't mean, it was more—"

"They gave you a heads-up that someone you said you truly cared for had shit go down," Ha-joon cut in and surmised before Tommy accidentally said too much. Which I appreciated.

"Yes," Tommy sighed. "Just tell me she's okay. Did her dad really come to mate her off and take over ASH?"

"She'll be fine," he answered, growling when Tommy pushed. "She's not even your friend. You don't get the details. You're fucking lucky I even bothered to answer. Now I want to get back to comforting her, yeah?"

"Instead of me," Tommy grumbled.

I snorted, reaching for my water. “He wouldn’t have comforted me. He would have fished for gossip, gotten pissy when I didn’t give it, and made sure to slip in insults. ‘I’m shocked you let it get so out of control. I wouldn’t have thought you’d allow that, Ellie. I know it’s shocking, but next time you have to react better so ASH isn’t embarrassed.’”

“You are a bigger asshole than I realized,” Ha-joon bit out. “Did you just undermine her at every turn so she didn’t have the self-confidence to fight against the board sooner? That’s how you were allowed to be a whore forever?”

“Ouch,” Tommy and I both answered, but he went on. “I didn’t realize—some of that wasn’t meant as harsh as I said it. Sometimes I did mean to comfort her. Saying I’m shocked she—okay, I said it badly, but specifically I’m thinking of—she’s right, I did say something almost exactly like that once. I meant it—it came out wrong and—”

The sigh Ha-joon let out was almost comical, his gaze locked with mine. “I cannot believe I’m interpreting for this duffer, but know I’m doing it so you don’t hurt so much and move on.” He waited until I nodded. “If you shut him down from getting details, he wasn’t trying to knock you down a peg. He was struggling to ask how bad the situation was that it blew up.

“He did it like a duffer instead of communicating better and just being blunt that he wasn’t trying to gossip but see if you were okay. But I’ve done the same where I don’t know how to not step in it worse and I say shit wrong dancing around. He was dancing around trying to figure out how bad things got saying he was shocked you’re aces and it got away even from you.”

“Yes, yes, that,” Tommy yelled loudly enough that Ha-joon pulled the phone away. “Fine, yes, I’m a cad and want the dirt, but I never, not ever broke her confidence about behind-the-scenes shit. Hell, I told her about a lot of the shit going on so she wasn’t ever blindsided. I wasn’t just a random gossip.”

I opened my mouth and then closed it. “That might be fair, and maybe one day this is a conversation to truly have if we both want better closure. However, today is not that day, and certainly not when I’m riding the brownie.” I gestured to the control panel. “I forgot how this thing works and I don’t want to ruin your fancy tub. It’s getting cold and I want the jets.”

“Mean, love,” Ha-joon chuckled but came over to adjust the temperature. “As you heard, we’re enjoying a bath. She’ll be fine and ASH is still in the right hands. Now thank you for caring, but she blocked you for a reason. I’ll even be kind and say to stay safe on your training tour there.” He hung up and set the phone within reach before getting back in behind me.

It didn’t hit me what he’d meant about being mean until we were relaxing with the jets for a few minutes. Whoops! I honestly hadn’t even thought—I wasn’t the type to rub things like that in people’s faces.

Well... Mostly. We all had our petty moments after all.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

It was another ten minutes at least until I could answer his original question. “I want to take time off. The rest of the week.”

“Can you?” he hedged, sounding a bit too relaxed to really comprehend what I was saying.

I snorted. I was the boss. I could do whatever the fuck I wanted. I glanced around and sighed. “Do you love me enough to go get my phone now?” I didn’t realize what I’d said again until he went rigid behind me. “I didn’t mean likethat. I meant—I make more of a mess with all the wet hair than—never mind.”

“I got you, my sweet kimchi,” he whispered, kissing my temple and getting back out before I could pull myself out.

“I really want to take a bite out of your fucking fantastic ass,” I said as he walked away. I smiled when his laugh filled his bedroom. Well, that was nice to hear. I thanked him with a kiss when he brought back my phone.

“I’m getting more water on the floor than in the tub,” he chuckled when he started to get back in.

“Are we done?”

“Five more minutes, Mum,” he teased and slid in.

Yeah, five more minutes for sure. The bath was like perfect.

I snuggled back against him and sent a few emails and messages basically telling the correct people that I wouldn't be in the office until Monday. Almost immediately I had responses from people asking what they should do about this or that.

I snorted, and in the most polite way possible, I told them to handle it. I didn't need to be there for the employee presentations. Most of them were a joke or fucking annoyed me. Honestly, the non-doctor ones were the only worthwhile ones besides Ha-joon's.

There was nothing on my calendar that was pressing for me to be there. Honestly, I'd spoiled a bit too many people taking on so much that they were confused as to what to do if I didn't handle it for them.

And I'd run myself into the ground that way. Like what did I pay them for if I had to hold their hand every step of the fucking way? Or comfort them when they got yelled at for fucking up? I got a few messages asking if I was mad at them.

For wanting them to do their jobs? I was a bit pissed I had to waste time responding and they were so tone-deaf they didn't understand their reactions were the problem. I was having to put too much time and effort in to cover for the job they were paid to be done.

The question was more—why hadn't I been pissed sooner?

So a few people got responses saying if they were confused how to handle what was in their job descriptions and I'd been covering for them, then their job roles and compensation packages needed to be reevaluated. I also included the head of HR on those emails.

That was about the nicest way to say if I had to double check your work to that point then you didn't deserve what you were getting paid.

There were a few meetings that I said I'd listen in on from my laptop. I got pissed when I got some pushback from the department heads saying it wasn't the time for this. I reminded them of vacations they took or family emergencies they had no matter what was going on at the hospital.

Things I never had... Ever. I didn't even take fucking sick days.

Sometimes I didn't work Saturdays and/or Sundays, which I wasn't supposed to anyways.

I was glad when Alan jumped in and told people to shut it. It was three fucking weekdays and to grow up already. They ran directly to me with everything way too often and that had to stop too. He was one of the people always bitching at me to delegate, but the department heads got bitchy when they had to deal with anyone but me.

Any of the doctors actually which honestly summed up my job in a nutshell and why I was so burnt out.

Alan did message me on the side and asked if I needed anything. What I was going to be doing with my time off?

Shockingly, I knew right away. The best I'd felt in recent months was when I went through that section of my closet after things ended with Tommy. It wasn't just about the breakup, but—I never had a chance to just reflect on my life and where I was at.

Okay, fine, the best I'd felt besides having sex with Ha-joon. And not just sex. Spending time with him. I enjoyed... The best I'd felt adulting and like I was handling my life. I wanted more of that.

Hell, I wanted to do my whole condo.

“Do what to your whole condo?” Ha-joon asked, sounding half asleep.

“What I did to my closet,” I answered, wondering how he knew what was going on. Right, I’d probably said something out loud or mumbling while typing. “Yeah, that’s what I want to do.”

“Good for you. You should.”

Yeah, I should. I pushed to stand and set my phone to the side so I could finish up in the shower.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

“Oh, like now? We’re doing this now?”

“You don’t have to,” I told him as I turned on the shower. “You asked—everyone’s pushing me for what I want or need. This is it. I want to get shit done in my own life instead of always for the hospital.”

“I thought were relaxing and maybe having sex though,” Ha-joon whined as he shut everything off for the tub and got out.

“You don’t have to help,” I repeated.

“No, I want to spend time with you,” he said firmly as he joined me at the shower. “I just wanted to spend time with you and my cock inside your cunt. Not—are we cleaning? That’s what you did to your closet, right? You cleaned it out? Will you do it naked?”

I burst out laughing. “Tell me I’m half as fun high as you are.”

“You’re adorably sexy when you partake in the funny brownie, my sweet kimchi,” he muttered as he backed me under the warm water. “I get a bit whiny. Mostly petulant and annoying. My mates make baby noises and cut me off.”

“I think you’re adorbs,” I admitted. “As long as you don’t ask me to change your diapie.”

“That’s enough out of you,” he growled playfully before kissing me.

He got his wish of putting his cock inside of me, but then we really showered and got to work. We were totally high after more brownie, but we were still productive. I was. He basically was the muscle who helped and brought up food which made it all go easier.

Which was why he got a blow job and more sex.

I bolted up in bed, my heart beating in my ears and sweat covering me.

“You okay?” Ha-joon asked, his voice heavy with sleep. “Nightmare?”

I swallowed a sob and started to nod but then stopped. “Is it a nightmare if it really happened?”

“Yes, because it’s while you slept and haunts you,” he answered gently and sat up as well. “Can I touch you or do you need space.”

“I’m sweaty,” I mumbled even as I leaned into him.

“I’ll live,” he promised as he moved his arm around me and kissed my hair. “What haunts you, my sweet kimchi?”

If he had asked it any other way, I probably would have brushed him off. But I’d already made the mistake of pushing aside his comfort and offer to help and regretted it.

Maybe it was time to be more vulnerable with him when he offered?

“When we were outed, before the real wars started, monsters took advantage of the situation,” I told him.

“I’ve heard a lot about that from my family. Mum’s parents go on and on, but they’re human haters. I get it because of the way wolves—natural and supe—were hunted in Asia, but—they’re extra on a lot.”

I nodded. “After running—Amanda Hope was about as close as a woman could get to being a doctor. She taught me a lot. When she died—”

“How did she die? I looked into the foundation more and you guys just have it listed that she died protecting a woman she...”

“Yeah, it was me,” I rasped, pulling my knees to my chest and wiping my eyes. I swallowed a yelp when he moved me between his legs and cuddled me closer.

“So you taught others medicine? I wish I had known you back then. I bet you were just as badass.”

I snorted. If only he knew. I was so much more badass then. Now... I felt weak now. I felt like the paper pushing admin too many thought me.

Maybe it was time to really change that? If not for myself, to honor Amanda and what she sacrificed for me.

I told him about the woman I’d been teaching to be a nurse and how the local sheriff wanted her and used all the rumors to his advantage. He told her to marry him or he’d have her named a witch and her whole family burned. She was going to do it, but her father couldn’t even hear of selling her to such a horrible man.

Her father had faith in the people of their town. That they were good people and could see through the lies and corruption and stand up for them.

Fools and their hope in people got more killed than evil sometimes.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

He was wrong and no one was willing to be named a witch next or get on the wrong side of the “law.”

I sighed when he flinched. “Yes, I’ve killed. I’ve killed many, but I’m not—”

“I know. I know, Ellie,” he whispered, kissing my hair. “I’m not judging. I know you did it for the right reasons and when you had to.”

“You’re just realizing how old I am?”

“And how hard your life has been. You talk like Mum and Da about the tough choices they had to make before we were out. I’ve not had much interaction—my mates are all my age.”

Fair enough.

“What I arrived to was monstrous,” I whispered, still feeling the fires that night the “good” people of that town set. “People were watching with awe like it was an air show or something cool instead of people about to be burned alive.”

“So you rescued them and killed the bad guys?” he checked.

Yes, yes, I had. One of my biggest regrets was leaving after I was outed and trusting they had the situation in hand. I told Ha-joon that and what happened after when I came back and found the family dead, nailed to crosses and clearly having been left there to die that way. There was nothing to show they had been stabbed or killed then hanged.

No, the monsters of that town had mounted a family often onto crosses to die of dehydration while people went on with their lives. The girl was seventeen, but she had younger siblings who were killed. The children would have died first, and the rest would have had their last moments filled with agony because of that.

“What did you do?” Ha-joon whispered when I stopped talking.

“Something just as monstrous,” I confessed. “I found some other vampires I’d come across who were fighting and told them the truth. We handled it.” I scrubbed my hands over my face and snorted. “That was how ASH came about. The founder was part of that.”

“It’s nice something good came from something horrific,” he whispered, his voice sounding hollow.

Yeah, it was a horrible story and it gutted me as well.

I wondered how people would feel if they knew the actual site of the massacre we unleashed on those evil humans was actually the center of ASH? That was why it was built in Atlanta of all places. That girl and her family were buried deep under the atrium garden of the main, original building of ASH.

After her torturous death, she fulfilled her wish of bringing comfort to those in pain. I saw more patients and staff enjoy that garden and haven over the years than I could count.

And it was time to get back to those roots.

It was time to get back to being the woman who was brave enough to found ASH even if I originally fought for it to be for humans too and failed. I wanted it to be a haven from evil, a place for healing that saved those worth saving.

Yeah, it was definitely time to get back to that.

20

Ha-joon

My lover was the founder of ASH.

Just thinking it sounded insane... But I knew it was true. I knew it in my soul more than the clues I'd gotten from Da. He said he thought that the founder's last name was Miller.

Fine, Ellie was Reed-Miller, but she didn't go by that, and I would bet anything that Da wasn't the only one who might remember the name of the founder. They'd probably doubt it was Ellie, but too many people were stupid.

And I wasn't.

Then when she told me the heartbreaking story she lived—I knew. It was the story Da had said about how ASH came about. It was more than that though. It was the haunted and disappointed look Ellie had as she finished and talked about other things.

Like she wasn't living up to being the founder.

I'm in love with my idol. How about that turn of events to fuck with a man's mind?

"Can I make a recommendation?" I checked when we were done with breakfast and I was heading out to get ready for work.

"Of course," she said with a smile and looked up from her tablet. "You've been a huge help already."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

That was good to hear because I felt useless as she seemed to need some sort of life cleansing yesterday. All I'd done was drag bags to the garbage chute or load some up in my SUV to donate. Or fetch what she needed.

I hadn't felt like that was much help.

I leaned in and gave her a soft kiss. "Get new bedding. I always feel like that's the start of a reset. I did every time I moved onto a new stage or switched hospitals. The next chapter of me because our tastes change."

Her eyes sparkled. "I love it. Yes, that's—thank you." She gave me a much deeper kiss. "Thanks for supporting this. I don't feel so silly or all over hearing that this is okay—healthy even."

"I envy you because I have boxes that I don't have the energy to sort through or handle. I think if anyone says it's a waste of your time or silly, they're just jealous you have the energy for this that most of us lack."

She beamed at me and everything was right in the world when those bright golden eyes shined at me. "You'll come over after work?"

"I've got a light day, so I'm going to hit the gym if you want to join me?" I hedged.

She seemed to consider that and nodded. "I could use a swim. I need to get back to that and stop running myself into the ground."

Perfect.

What wasn't perfect?

The rumors all over the hospital. By lunch, I'd heard everything from Ellie being out because the owner was embarrassed by another blowup with her to her being in prison for breaking a mating contract.

"People really are fucking stupid and I'm getting tired of it," Dr. Joyce Tai grumbled.

"I'm handling as much of the guys as I can if you could smack around the women," I offered.

"As much as I would love that, I'm not sure if it would help or make things worse," she admitted.

Fair enough.

It got better when Ellie video conferenced into an afternoon meeting and that flew around the hospital. Also, the email from Dr. James saying that he was over the gossip and for people to grow up. That Ellie wasn't out, and people had family issues because we were people.

As the head of the hospital, Ellie was doing the wise thing to take a step back and some time for herself. That he could easily name a dozen of our department who had done the same. And for people in such a compassionate field, he was disappointed at the lack of compassion for one of our own who went through something upsetting.

Also, that it wouldn't be forgotten because he was tired of feeling like a vice principal handling little kids instead of a department head managing adults.

Damn. Like...Wow!

But good. Seriously, it was perfect.

He also wasn't the only one. I had a feeling that the department heads got together or at least talked about how to handle things because I heard every department received a similar email. I hoped they'd let it go on that long because they were taking names and paying attention to the problems, not just because things fell through the cracks or they didn't care about Ellie.

And I came home to an excited Ellie. Technically, it was her condo to pick her up to go to the gym... But yeah, it was coming home to her.

"Do you have any idea how awesome Amazon is?" she asked me with a bright smile, waving something in front of her. "I gotto the deep cleaning part and—it's like the best forty bucks I've ever spent."

"What is it?" I chuckled, taking it from her. "A mini vacuum?"

"Yes, but super powerful," she said dragging me along to the kitchen. She pulled a bunch of everything out of the drawer and then used it to easily vacuum out the drawer. "I tried to clean out the drawers in my closet with my Dyson and hated life. Do you know there are whole social media pages for cleaning? Organizing? It wasso helpfulwhen I got overwhelmed."

"I mean some of them were overwhelming and obviously just trying to sell product, but a lot were helpful. I used the affiliate links so they got credit and Amazon had it delivered a few hours after lunch. I have more coming later and..." She let out a heavy breath. "I really needed this."

"Not the vacuum?" I checked.

"No, decluttering and seriously just handling my home," she answered, gesturing

around. “I think a few days getting my room and office together was smart. Everything is out of the master bathroom now—I had creams that expired ten years ago. That’s how long it’s been since I’ve gone through the shit in my bathroom. Even I feel like a monster.”

“I have no idea what my stuff all is,” I admitted, taking the little vacuum back and checking it out. “Oh, this does air blowing too. Yeah, I want this. Just to clean my electronics in my study. The compressed air cans—I feel like a duffer using them.”

“Yeah, that—I’ll have to read the instructions for that part when I get there.” She stood on her toes for a kiss, smiling when I gave it to her. “Do you mind taking some boxes of files to Alan tomorrow? He knows how to properly dispose of them. I have patient files and insurance claims that we had to go to court over from—it’s ridiculous.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

I slid my arm around her waist and gave her another kiss. “As long as you promise me you’re really this good and not just diving into a project to hide.”

She was a brat and kissed my nose. “It’s a bit of that, but it’s really helped. I talked to Gerald a bit and I have to go into the police station tomorrow and sign the reports against Kenneth and that family. I’m sure they’ll get off with a fine—I don’t know, but I want it over. I don’t care if he gets prison as long as he understands this was the last time he contacts me.”

Which meant having a private chat with Kenneth Reed was just added to my calendar.

We had fun at the gym. I ended up swimming with her and she did some machines for lifting while I did free weights. The tension between us was so intense that it was good nothing too flammable was around us.

The sex we had after was all I wanted for fire and then we had fun eating.

Everything was more fun with Ellie. Even opening her damn packages full of bins and organization stuff. Honestly, I got some really good ideas for my own condo and asked for her to send me a few links which tickled her.

She cleared her throat when we were finished with her closet. There was a small hanging section above two drawers and a few shelves. “I hoped this was enough along with a shelf and drawer in the new bathroom.”

I beamed at her. “It’s perfect. Your bed is much nicer than mine, so I like staying

here.”

She frowned. “I like your bed better. Mine’s like fifteen years old. I was going to ask where you got yours.”

“Yes, mine’s newer and more comfortable, but yours has you in it, and that’s most important and makes it better.”

She blinked at me for a full minute “You are too fucking smooth. Seriously, it’s—you need to come with a warning for the hearts of women.”

I laughed so hard my side hurt. She was just too perfect.

Her master suite looked like a completely different room after her time off. Her home office was pristine and organized in a way I was jealous of. How had she seriously managed that in a handful of days? We’d been to the gym a few times, gone shopping for some new clothes for her, and I knew she’d been to the police station.

Plus, she’d been on several video calls for work. She really was on a level we mere mortals couldn’t catch.

She seemed extra determined Sunday but also a bit nervous. I didn’t pry, but I told her that she’d made it as far in life as she had by trusting her gut. That I trusted her and her decisions, so I knew she would make the right ones. It seemed to really help, and I was relieved because I wanted to be the one she turned to when she needed help.

Just like she always helped me even when I didn’t ask for it.

When I didn’t even know I needed it.

“Can you believe she went on TV and actually said that?” one of my staff whispered when I was between patients to update a chart.

“Good for her. I’m glad Ms. Reed is drawing a line in the sand. Too many think this will blow over and it will be back to the bullshit it was before,” one of the nurses replied as she typed in something. “I agree with her that it needs to go further. I like working for a doctor who doesn’t see me as a conquest.

“I like that we have fun but work hard. Hell, I’m thrilled HR isn’t a bunch of petty children anymore and will protect the hospital and help us. I had to talk about my leave and changing some things around for my kid’s break after getting reassigned here and the new team is awesome. I want to do my job and then live my life.”

“That’s how it should be,” I agreed, letting them know I was there. I ignored when they both jumped but then glanced between them. “Did everything get resolved with HR?”

“Yes, Dr. Clark,” she assured me. “When I got transferred here, they put me at the wrong level given how long I’ve worked here, and then I wouldn’t get top pick of time off. I waited to have kids until I had that because I—it’s hard being a mom and not getting to enjoy breaks with your kids. My mom struggled with that, and I don’t want that with my kids.”

“I’m glad it worked out. If it ever doesn’t or—I’ll make sure it does with HR.”

The other woman smiled at me. “We know. Working for you is so much better than the last office I was with.”

The nurse cleared her throat. “It would be almost perfect if we could get rid of one or two problems.”

“I know, but we need replacements or I’m not sure the extra workload that will be put on you will be worth it,” I told them. “But I’m working on it, not blind to it.”

“We know,” they said together.

“What did you mean about Ms. Reed on an interview?” I asked, dying to know what they were talking about but not seem like it.

“She held a press conference about the changes to ASH and the path we’re on,” the nurse told me. “It was seriously impressive. She’s going to piss a lot of people off.”

“Can you text me the link?” I asked.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

The first woman pulled out her phone and nodded. “Done. You’ve got about five minutes until your next appointment.” She shrugged when the nurse chuckled. “I couldn’t wait to see it when someone mentioned it. It affects all of us.”

Yes, it did, but she also gave me good cover.

Shock rocked me at what I saw. Not that Ellie was commanding and made it clear she was the boss of ASH. No, it was what she said, and... Yeah, she was drawing a line all right. She made it clear that there had been some changes to ASH, but it was just the start.

And she didn’t hold back, properly outlining that the former board held ASH back and allowed too much bad behavior. She also made sure to point out that the hospital was looked at poorly when first started because it was doctors trying to run a business, but the board had tried to use her not being a doctor to toss her out.

While ignoring that they weren’t doctors either. She totally spilled the tea that they were too lazy to do their homework because dozens and dozens of people in the hospital had worked there long enough to remember when she was a practicing doctor. People got hung up on that, too big of egos that lost focus, and so when she acted as an administrator, she was Ms. Reed.

When she did—and had—jumped in to help since all of her certifications were current, she was the patients’ doctor. That was all that mattered, and hopefully she now cleared up that very simple practice.

Wooooowwwwww.

“ASH has and always will be different than other hospitals because we understand we can never be perfect and accept our flaws,” she said firmly. “We strive to do better and already have since implementing the new policies. We’ve started to cut out the toxic cancer that was eating away at this place. Unfortunately, there’s more to do.

“There are still too many who forgot their purpose here, and we’ve had several hospitals try to offload their problems to us. That is—it’s not easy running any hospital. And burning bridges normally leaves you with lasting scars. However, a hospital is supposed to be about patient care and forwarding medicine.

“So to break the cycle of passing inferior staff around to the next unsuspecting hospital, going forward, ASH will confirm employment but also whether or not the individual would ever be allowed to apply here for employment again. I think stating clearly that a doctor or nurse is not welcome back at ASH if their circumstances changed says all that’s needed.

“That is the professional way to handle issues without this childish behavior of rumor spreading or disclosing opinions instead of facts. The fact is they are welcome back here or not. ASH was not a fit for them and we won’t be giving a referral if they weren’t. Anything beyond that is personal unless a legal issue and we report those. Immediately. Always.

“I hope others adopt this process and we can start cutting dead weight instead of passing on problems that hurt our medical community. On the idea of getting in new blood and cutting out toxic, with the full support of the department heads, we’re changing our hiring process. No longer will positions be posted after someone leaves.

“We won’t ignore applications or resumes unless we have open attending spots. No, we’re wiping our system clean and starting over. As of midnight, we are taking applications and resumes at all levels from entry-level maintenance and cafeteria all the way to my job. If you think you are better suited to run ASH and you can back

that up, then the job should be yours.

“It’s what’s best for ASH and our patients. That’s the focus going forward. Do I think there’s anyone out there better than some of our department heads? No, but I’ve been wrong before. We’re also planning a massive expansion and some new specialized departments. We all know some departments are too broad and the emergency department is one of them.

“We’re working on reconfiguring it to be more efficient so when the next natural disaster strikes, we’ll be even better prepared than we were last time. Things need to be shaken up from time to time as Dr. Carla Greer has shown us as the head of the dermatology department. Now, instead of being so top-heavy, we have more room for younger doctors to learn and shine.

“Our support staff no longer hassled under lazy doctors who forgot why they’re here instead of filling hours until their next tee time. How nice for them while the rest of us kill ourselves running this place and making it all work. No more of that. And it can be done. I know several practices that the attendings are one of the last to leave.

“Those are leaders. Those are the people staff like to work for. That is a place that is enjoyable to work at. That is what ASH is returning to. Patient care and caring for our own people. I don’t care if I have to fire an entire department to make it happen. I will.

“I will fire as many as I need to because I fully believe there are a lot of people out there who feel as I do. They want to come to a safe and respectful work environment where they’re not just a number or disposable, but a person. Not have to endure gossip or catty behavior because someone is the favorite of a board member or attending, so they get away with it.

“They won’t anymore. They will be shown the door. You have my word on that. Our

overhauled HR department knows that and we will start handling conflicts as supes. We're not humans who have to guess what happened and it's idiocy to try when we're busy professionals here."

"You can't think that will go over well," someone called out and interrupted what Ellie was going to say next.

She glanced around and met the gaze of someone, smirking. "And? This isn't high school and I'm not here to win a popularity contest. I'm here to run this hospital as it should be now that the shackles have been taken off of me. If the adults who work here don't want to be called out by HR for causing problems, then don't cause them. That simple."

There was some more back and forth before she reminded people that if they thought they could do a better job than what she had laid out and planned, that they would be free to apply at midnight for the owner to consider. I swallowed a snort. Talk about rigging the game, but this wasn't a game to her and that was how people were acting.

It definitely turned up the temperature at the hospital and got people talking about something other than what happened to Ellie the week before. I knew that wasn't why she'd done it, but it worked out nicely. I had people asking me left and right what I thought about it and I backed her.

And not just because I was in love with her. I reminded them I was an Alpha wolf and it was in a shifter's nature to always keep pushing for their spot or to be at the top.

Why should it be any different to deserve a practice at the best hospital in the world?

Several people were less than thrilled with my opinion and let me know it.

I let them know that I didn't care. A few were in ortho, and I made sure to mention that I had a few ortho contacts I'd worked with and recommended they put in resumes at the hospital.

They wanted to play around and try to push me to try to get on their side? Fuck no. I was going to push back and hopefully push them out of the hospital.

Toxic fucks.

There was more and I even saw Ellie in some interviews saying that hospitals weren't treating their people well enough and ASH had been guilty of that past. It wouldn't happen anymore, and she was willing to put the hospital's money on the line, several offers including relocation costs and help getting children set up in the school system next year.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

I heard a few of my nurses call friends or people they knew after that interview came out.

Then there was the one where she finally stepped forward as the head of Amanda's Hope, explaining who Amanda Hope was. It was a brilliant interview that included Alexis Gomez who was just as amazing on camera.

"Look, we realize that not every hospital is set up or has the backing to handle the legal battles that can come up with the situations of domestic abuse," Ellie said firmly. "They rely on donations and complications that ASH doesn't have. I have some of the best attorneys in-house and on speed dial."

"We simply ask they be strong enough to kick the punt to us," Alexis took over. "ASH has warlocks on staff 24-7 and permission to open a portal for these exact situations, hospital to hospital. So please do. Please let us take the heat and pressure because we can. Just do what's right and save your patients suffering domestic violence."

"She's good," Gerald said as he sat down next to me while I was watching the interview at lunch. "She's really impressive and I rarely say that about other attorneys."

I was about to snap at him until he clarified he meant Alexis. "She really cares. You can feel it and the drive. It's inspiring."

He watched the rest over my shoulder while we ate, and Ellie actually admitted she finally thought it was time to come out as the head of Amanda's Hope because she'd

recently handled her own family situation. Finally. Completely.

“Really?” I hedged. “She’s been so busy—I knew she still had to handle a few things.”

“She said you could be looped in,” he said under his breath, making it clear he wasn’t gossiping. He waited until I nodded. “Kenneth Reed is fairly spineless, and after he realized he could actually face jail time here, agreed to renounce any family relation to Ellie if he could leave. He’s not allowed back in the US or to contact her again or he goes away for—”

I snorted. “He contacts her again and he won’t ever be found. Fuck being arrested.”

He was quiet a moment as the interview ended and I tucked my phone away. “That’s darker than I thought you’d go, pup.”

I met his curious gaze. “You didn’t see the aftermath or hear her crying in her sleep. You didn’t hear her whimpering in fear in her sleep that she would have to admit to the world that her father was planning to breed her for a male heir. I want him dead. My wolf wants something worse.”

“Yeah, that’s... Vamps are just as fucked up as we are.”

That was for damn sure. Maybe even worse most days. “I’m asking a favor.”

“Don’t ask me. I won’t tell you and I won’t be involved,” he said, shutting me down hard which pissed me the fuck off.

Until he was done eating and left and I noticed a slip of paper under my tray. It was the details of when and where Kenneth Reed was being sent back to Europe via portal. Apparently, he didn’t know he was being handed over to some law

enforcement who had beef with him there, but it gave me what I needed.

Fine, I maybe didn't hate the lion as long as he stopped lusting after Ellie.

I personally called to reschedule my last two patients so I could sneak out early. I apologized but explained I had a short window to handle something I couldn't normally because I was at the hospital. Both were understanding and could make it work which was lovely.

So I was there when the officers escorted Kenneth Reed out of the central police station of Atlanta to transfer him via portal.

I nodded to one of the officers I recognized and went for him because I thought he was the highest rank of the group.

"The lion said to expect you," the officer said as we shook hands. "You're lucky that was damn good pizza."

"Appreciate it," I sighed. "Really."

"Just take care of Ms. Reed. She does a lot for all of us, and from what I heard, that last fucker should be skinned."

I decided to give Fitz a solid since I'd heard the genuine worry for Ellie in his voice. "Apparently, his parents fucked him up so good that he didn't understand what he was doing. Doesn't make it okay or something to forgive but..."

"Yeah, as long as he gets help and doesn't fuck someone else over." The guy let out a harsh breath. "Fucking families do more damage than good most days."

"Amen, mate." I had a thought and pulled out my phone and unlocked it. "Are you a

poker man? I'm thinking of getting a monthly game together with some of the non-douche attendings. Some officers would be fun—mix it up so there's always a group or two. My condo has a nice party room we can use.”

“I know a few good guys who would love that,” he accepted and took my phone to put in his number. He snorted. “As long as you guys don't have bets for doc salaries we can't keep up with. Or could get us in trouble.”

“Naw, I tend to fifty in for the same chips and they land where they land. Not high stakes or too serious, just easier than beers at the pub. Plus, we can all hear each other.”

“Sounds good.” He handed me back my phone. “You got five minutes until the portal opens.”

“Don't need even that, but warn your guys I'm gonna flex in power. I swear to you that I won't touch him.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

He swallowed loudly. “It would be my job if you did. I need this job.”

Yeah, fair. I promised him again and tucked my phone away before he gave a nod to the officer holding Kenneth.

The vampire gave me a bored look, but my wolf sensed more than most. The man was curious—too curious why I was there.

I let out all my power, everything extra over other Alphas and whatever made me different being an actual combination of two types of wolves. People shivered or stepped away.

Yeah, it was a lot, but it was focused on one fucker.

“What do you see in my eyes, Kenneth Reed?” I asked him.

He swallowed loudly. “My death.”

“You think you could take me?” I asked with a smirk, not making him say it. He ground his jaw which was enough. “You know my family?”

“I’ve been made aware,” he sneered.

“Think you could take them on because no matter the discord with my siblings, my parents do love me.”

“Your mother made that clear when she threatened my internal organs and eternal

soul if I came near either of you again,” he snapped.

I didn’t hide my shock. Well, Mum really did like Ellie as much as I sensed because that was a threat she normally saved only for family and she knew Kenneth Reed wasn’t a threat for me. “So you understand that it’s more than the local police or federal government you’d have to deal with if you go near her again.”

He bared his teeth at me. “I have no daughter. I didn’t need the threats. That bitch would put her own family in jail and she’s dead to me.”

It wasreallyhard not to deck this git.

He seemed to understand that his words were affecting me, smirking. “My only regret was not drugging her so she was forced to mate that abusive one. I hadn’t counted on her growing a spine and—”

“You’re disgusting,” I growled.

“Actually, I regret not smothering both my worthless daughters,” he continued. “I should have killed them when I’d had the chance and forced that traitorous bitch I mated to give me real children who are obedient.”

I had to take a step back when my wolf lurched to take a swing at him.

He snorted. “This last one was so much better than she deserved and instead she’s fucking a dog. None of you are worth shit.” He winked at me. “Good luck having anything real with her when she’s so fucked up after all she’s—”

“You knownothingabout your daughter,” I chuckled darkly, my wolf chilling. “You haven’t even spoken to her in fifty years.”

He rolled his eyes. “She’s the whore of ASH’s founder and got what she has just like any other bitch does by—”

I burst out laughing. So he was clueless that his daughter was the founder. Oh, this git was pathetic. “I get why you lost your coven. Seriously, you’re so fucking stupid it’s hard not to pity you, but you’re too big a git. You’re dripping with jealousy that your daughter is better and just spewing shit. We both know it.”

I might have said more, but a portal opened at the designated spot and that meant we were out of time. The officer came back to reclaim Kenneth to hand over.

He frowned at that. “Take the blasted cuffs off me already. The portal’s open, you dense child.”

The officer completely ignored it and was focused on the people who came through the portal... And then smirked.

Kenneth caught it and followed his gaze, frowning when he saw official uniforms and more people than either of us expected. “What is this shit? You were sending me back to Europe. That was the deal.”

“Yes, we are, Mr. Reed,” the officer whose number I got said with a chuckle. He winked at the vampire still in handcuffs. “We also did our jobs and alerted the people we should.” He gestured to the people still coming out of the portal. “Apparently, there are several parties in Europe who have wanted to have a chat with you as well. We’re handing you over to them.”

“That wasn’t the deal!” Kenneth blasted.

“Actually, it was, Mr. Reed,” the man who came through the portal first and was probably in charge said. He held up some papers. “You signed it. It says right here in

black and white that you will be handed over through proper channels. We are the proper channels. And when everything was filed and your name hit the system, others were alerted.”

A woman behind him snorted. “So many colorful warnings it was like a rainbow of agencies and areas coming together for rare fun.” She looked at the officer holding him. “Thank you for your service and well done to your department. I understand his punishment here is just not to come back, and I can promise you that he won’t.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

A man further back sounded like he coughed to cover a laugh. “Not for at least a hundred years by my calculations of all the charges.”

Ohshittttt! This was getting better and better. I hurried to interject while I had the chance. “Is there a contact or a way the victim with the restraining order he did this all to could follow up and confirm when and where he’s in prison?”

“Are you her attorney?” she asked me, eyeing me over.

“No, but I’m here on her behalf to make sure this git didn’t pull a fast one and was really shipped off,” I answered.

“Funny, because I came to see to that for myself,” Ellie said from behind me.

Fuck me. I was in deep shit now.

21

Ellie

Seeing Ha-joon at the police station to make sure my father was handed off the right way shocked me. When I heard him threatening the man I was still—and maybe forever—afraid of made me feel safe in a way I couldn’t describe.

And then he tried to get me a way to have even more closure which thawed my icy heart and fear of being with him.

But it was time to step in and not act like a scared daughter. I moved closer to the woman and extended my hand. “Ellie Reed-Miller. Biologically his daughter, but now he’s legally renounced me. Given the bile he was just spewing, there’s concern he won’t try to sell me but get revenge.”

“You’re not worth revenge,” Kenneth snapped.

“Anything from your mouth isn’t to be trusted and you’re out of your head,” I drawled. “That was clear from the moment I heard you were planning an incestuous relationship with me to get around your curse to only have daughters.” I raised an eyebrow at his shocked face. “I’m not hiding why I ran from your madness anymore, Kenneth. The shame isn’t mine.”

“Certainly not, and clearly getting away from this scum was the best thing for you and our world given how much we need ASH,” the woman said before pulling out a card and handing it to me. “If you give that to your attorney, I can touch base with them and provide updates. I’m taking lead on all of the coordinating and prosecutions. Where he’ll be serving time first especially.”

I took the card and nodded that I understood. She didn’t deal with the victims nor wanted to so she could focus on her part of the job. “So it will be a lot of prison time? The crimes aren’t just his normal gambling and drunken antics?”

“No, he has much more than that.” She nodded to someone else and I was handed a file. “That’s what we were going to share with Atlanta PD for the pat on the back of the criminal they caught. I’m sure they’re fine with making a copy for you. I hate to be curt, but our warlock has been opening a lot of portals today.”

“Yes, of course. I apologize for the delay. I needed to see myself that he was gone.” I thanked them again and stepped over by Ha-joon while the handoff was finished. He seemed surprised that I reached for his hand and then accepted mine, kissing my hair.

I let out a shaky breath when Kenneth was gone and the portal was closed. I turned to the officer who seemed to be in charge.

He didn't even make me ask. "Let me get a copy of all of that for you, Ms. Reed. You might not want to read it today."

"Wondering might keep me up but maybe not all of it," I accepted, handing him the folder.

Ha-joon came with me inside and it wasn't even five minutes until I had my own copy. We both thanked them and then he talked me into taking his vehicle home and we could get mine in the morning. He'd already checked with the station and they were fine with me parking there overnight.

Wonderful. I was feeling shakier than I'd like to admit.

We got closer that night. Not physically, but... Ha-joon was deeper in my life and heart. Maybe I'd been fooling myself that he hadn't been and just this new explosion in my life made it glaringly obvious.

Either way, it was clear that I needed him in my life. I wanted him there. I couldn't picture him not there.

And with so much else going on, I was appreciating how amazing he was. How he was really there for me and I could rely on him.

Which was maybe why my jealousy kicked up a notch? Or it felt like now that I needed him, he could be taken away from me at any moment?

Or stress. I could have just been stressed and I was losing my ever-loving mind. Who the fuck really knew?

All I did know was that his fan club was getting on my nerves even more than normal. We were becoming closer and closer, and they needed to seriously back the fuck off before I drained too many women in my hospital.

I didn't blame them for drooling when he came in shirtless from his running club all the fucking time. He looked delicious especially when the guards now got them with the hose when they ran by since it was so hot out even in the mornings. Like...I got it. I knew he was even hotter naked and doing dirty, naughty everything.

But he was mine.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:15 am

Drool from a fucking distance.

Friday morning I'd had enough of it and his normal groupies tripping over themselves to offer him a bottle of water or whatever they made for his breakfast this time. There were ten of them who didn't even go on the run and just waited for him.

So yeah, I snapped.

Again.

Well, almost.

I was walking over to him to make it clear who he belonged to and swat flies away, but at the last second I stopped, realizing what I'd almost done.

Without his consent.

At work.

He'd turned towards me when I was still ten feet away with an array of emotions in his eyes, on his face, and in his aura. He frowned when I froze and took the last step towards me. "Tell me what I'm scenting is real."

"I think I just almost lost my mind and did something unforgivable," I mumbled, blinking up at him and wondering what happened to the Ellie who never cracked. The one who had iron armor and steel in her veins.

Him. Part of it was him and being supported instead of always pushing it down or pushing it to the side.

“I consent,” he whispered, catching on where my head was. His gaze darted from my eyes to my lips. “I consent. Yes, please—you were going to, right?”

“Yes,” I breathed, unable to lie or brush him off.

“But you stopped,” he hedged. “You changed your mind?”

I wasn’t sure how he meant that, my brain a bit of static that I’d been about to throw a fit. “Yes, I can’t just—jealousy isn’t the reason to do it.” I frowned. “You deserve better than—”

“No, I don’t,” he interrupted, moving a bit closer. “Do it because of whatever, just do it.” He seemed to think better of that. “Do it and don’t regret me.”

That broke through my swirling everything. “I wouldn’t regret you. I just—this wasn’t the way.” I looked past him at the women giving me death stares to leave him alone so they could keep flirting.

“I think it’s bloody perfect,” he argued, but then seemed to realize that I wasn’t going to. “Do you give me permission?”

My gaze snapped back to him. “What?”

“Give me permission, Ellie,” he breathed, his voice laced with a begging tone that broke me. “Say yes and let me finish what you started.”

“Yes.”

His arm moved around me, and right there in the huge main atrium, the damn wolf

gave me a kiss in greeting. It was soft and quick, but clearly a damn kiss. He moved his forehead to mine. “Best Friday morning ever. What should we have for dinner?”

The whispers were already starting and I swallowed loudly. “I think I’m going to need that funny brownie in your freezer after the bomb we just set off.”

The damn wolf just laughed. He threw back his head and laughed before kissing me again.

Well, we were out and official now. Not sure it was the right way to do it, but at least now he might have fewer annoyances throwing themselves at him.

Probably not.

The End