



# His Lycan Luna Queen

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Queen Azalea, once known as Ivy, has emerged from the secrets of a past she didn't know was hers. As she embraces her true heritage and the staggering powers of the Landeena bloodline, the dynamics of her relationship with King Kyson shift. No longer just his Luna, she is now a sovereign in her own right—a queen with a will that bends to no one, not even to the king who once ruled over her heart.

As external threats multiply, with old enemies emerging from the darkness to challenge the Valkyrie throne, Azalea's leadership is tested, and so is the mate bond.

Azalea was born in Landeena and lost but was later found and reawakened in Valkyrie. As she faces the hunters who threaten their kingdom. Their aim was to overpower a king, but they overlooked his Queen. They believed Valkyrie would fall easily, but little did they know that a king's strength is measured by the woman who stands at his side.

Azalea may now be Valkyrie, but they'll meet the power of the Landeena. When the hunters face her wrath, they do not just meet a Queen but the Empress of Lycania, ruler of the five kingdoms. And she's a force to be reckoned with.

**Total Pages (Source):** 102

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Chapter

One

KYSON

I clench my teeth, my gaze fixed on Cedric as he rises to his feet, offering a respectful bow. I had been anticipating this moment, knowing with absolute certainty that it would come to pass. Landeena guards are unwaveringly loyal to the empress or emperor, just as my own men serve me.

“We heard of her return, my King, and we mean no disrespect. We appreciate your generosity in accepting the Landeena people. However, our loyalty has always been to Landeena. We needed to be certain, and when her power resonated through our bloodlines, we knew she was indeed a true Landeena empress,” Cedric explains, his head bowed. I furrow my brows at his words and glance at Trey, who nods in agreement. It makes me wonder about the history between Cedric and Trey, their connection shrouded in mystery.

“Keep her guardian close, my King. Trey is your greatest asset. There is a reason Tatiana compelled Garret to sire Trey with their daughter,” Cedric adds before presenting me with the Landeena sword. Trey extends his arms to receive Azalea, and though I hesitate for a moment, I reluctantly hand her over.

“You will come to me as soon as Liam returns to resume guard duty,” I instruct Trey, reclaiming the sword. Surprisingly, it feels light in my grip. The Landeena crest and markings adorn its length.

“No need, My King. I have returned,” Liam’s voice echoes from somewhere in the crowd of Landeena people. I lift my eyes from the sword and scan the faces before me. Trey halts in his steps and turns towards me as Liam pushes through the throng, firmly holding Peter’s arm and Ester’s.

Cedric growls at Ester, causing her to flinch away as he steps in Liam’s path. “How dare you tarnish the Landeena name with your offspring,” Cedric snarls, though he ultimately defers her fate to me. I glance at Trey, but Cedric is the one who clarifies. “Trey came to me searching for Ester’s parents. I was the one who escorted the woman home,” Cedric explains, Trey growling softly as Liam shoves Ester towards me. I press my lips together, casting a stern gaze at Cedric.

“Is this the sire of your people?” I ask curiously.

“The sire to the firstborn Landeena, the rightful heir. Not an illegitimate child. I should have killed her when Trey asked me to,” Cedric says, nodding towards Trey before leading his people away from the castle grounds.

‘Alive and delivered, My King,’ Liam informs me, his voice ringing through our mindlink. He swiftly removes his shirt and tosses it to Ester, who crouches at my feet. I sneer at her, wanting her far away from me.

“Cover yourself!” Liam snarls at her, striding towards Trey. He extends his arms, ready to receive Azalea while Trey hands him her limp body.

“My office, now, Trey. And someone find Damian for me,” I command, turning on my heel and making my way towards my office. I know Ester will follow; it would be foolish for her to attempt an escape with the presence of the Landeenaguard surrounding us. I have no doubt that Cedric would not hesitate to end her life if their paths were to cross again. His disgusted snarl reveals his true feelings towards her. But there are questions that need answers, and I intend to get them.

Upon reaching my office, I find Damian leaning against the door, appearing disheveled and exhausted. He rubs his eyes, as if he had only just woken up and was forcibly dragged out of bed. Pushing open the door, he steps aside to let me enter, followed by Ester and Peter. Trey follows behind them. Collapsing into my chair, I call out to Clarice, knowing she would be lurking nearby. She peeks her head in the door, acknowledging my unspoken request before wandering off.

‘I am stationed outside her room. The Queen is safely tucked in bed,’ Liam informs me through our mindlink.

‘Bring Azalea to me when she wakes,’ I instruct him before severing the connection. Scanning the room, I notice Peter moving towards the window on the far wall, his mother standing beside him. I motion towards the chair next to Trey, positioned across from me. He growls softly but remains silent, only averting his gaze when she takes her seat beside him.

Damian flops onto the chaise near the window, where Peter stands nervously, his complexion pale as a ghost. The desire to punish him fiercely burns within me, but Azalea had shown mercy for some reason.

“Someone better start talking. And quickly,” I demand, reclining in my chair. Yet none of them speak until Damian breaks the silence.

“I will extract fingernails and teeth if necessary. Speak up!” Damian growls from behind them. Trey glances over his shoulder at him before directing his attention to his sister.

“Start from the beginning,” I prompt her, eager to hear her side of the story. She looks away guiltily, but something nags at my mind. If she was in the Landeena Kingdom, how could she not have recognized Marrissa when she was here? They worked closely together. Trey wasn’t present during that time, and we found evidence

supporting his alibi – he was indeed hunting Marrissa with the Landeena guard and was hospitalized. But Ester was here, which meant she should have recognized her.

As the room remains silent, I am about to press further when Clarice knocks on the door, holding a tray of coffee in her hands. Damian immediately rises, snatching a cup for himself. I feel a pang of guilt; he has been shouldering a tremendous burden, and it's taking a toll on him. I will need to send him away for a break soon; otherwise, he'll be drained and exhausted.

I take my cup and express gratitude towards Clarice, who lingers nervously, her eyes darting towards Peter as if expecting me to unleash my wrath upon him. As tempting as it may be, I won't do it – not without Azalea here. I can't risk damaging our bond. She holds all the power now, and I know she will question everything, so I need answers to satisfy her inquiries.

Nodding at Clarice, she takes a seat beside Damian. "Now, speak," I urge Ester, but she remains silent. Trey sighs and leans forward, resting his arms on the desk.

"Tatiana was supposed to marry Garret to forge an alliance. It was a strategic marriage," Trey begins with a low growl.

"So, where do you fit into all of this?" I inquire.

"I was originally one of Garret's guards. It was only when we visited Tatiana's Kingdom that we discovered she was my mate," Trey explains.

"And Garret allowed you to live?" I ask incredulously.

"He didn't know at first. We kept it hidden from him. It took twenty years before he figured it out. But Tatiana knew that divorcing him would put me in danger. Garret could have chosen any of her sisters, but he only wanted her. He rejected her sisters'

advances, despite Tatiana's efforts to convince him otherwise," Trey reveals.

"How did Garret eventually find out?" I press further.

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“Cedric overheard Tatiana and me a few years before Azalea was conceived. Tatiana struggled to conceive, and they believed it was due to our bond. She agreed to the marriage, but she refused to let him mark her until Garret left her with no choice: either kill me and claim her by force or allow him to mark her while I remained as her personal guard,” Trey clarifies.

“There shouldn’t have been a bond once she was married and marked,” I interject, to which Trey sighs.

“Wrong. Azure and Landeena are blessed by the moon. They can still recognize their mates even after being marked by another. She never stopped loving me, and I never stopped loving her. They could choose to reject their mates, but Tatiana couldn’t go through with it. We believed rejecting me would sever the bond on her end, not mine, and possibly kill me,” Trey explains.

“But Garret killed his human mate for her?” I state, seeking confirmation. Trey nods, but Ester interrupts.

“No, he didn’t,” Ester interjects softly.

“You are not his mate,” Trey growls at her.

“I’m well aware of that. But she didn’t die. Garret turned her,” Ester retorts.

“No. Tatiana would have known,” Trey insists, his gaze fixed on his sister as they exchange heated words.

“She knew. She found out before she died. She was furious that Garret wouldn’t allow her to be with you while he had his own mate,” Ester reveals, causing Damian to rise from his seat. He retrieves a chair from beside the bookcase and positions it next to the desk, taking a seat.

“Garret killed his mate. That’s what ignited the war among the hunters,” Damian declares, but Ester shakes her head. Damian and I exchange a glance, both intrigued by her contradiction. Trey stares at his sister as if he no longer recognizes her.

## Chapter

### Two

#### KYSON

I am taken aback, unsure if I truly recognize the strangers sitting across from me. “Wait a minute. First, explain this sire bond of yours. Then we can address Ester,” I say, feeling myself lose track of the unfolding situation.

“When Garret discovered my existence, he wanted me dead. Tatiana used his infidelity against him, leveraging the threat of divorce and returning to Azure, even though it was just a bluff. Azure had already fallen, and there was no one left there. But she would have walked away, knowing that she held control over the council, which meant she now held control over Garret as well. He wanted to overthrow all the Kingdoms and needed an heir. So they compromised. Tatiana would carry his child and turn a blind eye to his infidelity,” Trey explains, his voice filled with a mix of bitterness and resignation.

“And what about her infidelity? Did he turn a blind eye to Tatiana’s actions?” I inquire, attempting to unravel the complexities of their relationship. Trey shakes his head.



“No, he did not allow us to be together. Not once Azalea came into the picture, Garret became paranoid that I would harm his only heir. So he sired me to Azalea, as a means of ensuring her safety. Not that I would ever harm her intentionally. She was Tatiana’s daughter, and I would never do anything to hurt her, knowing it would devastate my mate. I loved Azalea as if she were my own child. For nearly four years, I watched her grow and cared for her deeply,” Trey answers with genuine emotion in his voice.

“And then what happened?” I press further, noticing Trey’s discomfort as he leans back in his chair and looks away. His arms fold protectively across his chest.

“You don’t want me to answer that, my King,” Trey replies, and a growl escapes my lips.

“But you will answer. I am in no mood for games, Trey. So answer truthfully. I need to determine whether you pose a risk to my mate, despite the sire bond,” I snarl at him.

“Tatiana was off-limits,” Trey responds, and I glance at Ester, who displays equal curiosity.

“But Garret allowed you to remain after discovering the affair? Even after Azalea was born?” Damian chimes in, his confusion mirroring my own.

“Part of the sire agreement that Garret made was that Azalea would be promised to me once she came of age,” Trey explains, causing my inner beast to stir at his words. The desk suddenly soars towards the ceiling, narrowly missing Trey as he moves aside just in time. Damian swiftly pulls Ester away from the chaos as the room descends into disarray. Within seconds, my hands are wrapped around Trey’s throat, his defiant glare meeting mine. My Lycan side surges forward as I shift, claws slicing through his skin while I tighten my grip.

“I warned you that you didn’t want to know!” Trey snarls. “That’s why Garret cheated in the games! He needed his daughter’s hand back!” he reveals through clenched teeth, his anger matching mine as he remains steadfast and unyielding even in the face of imminent danger. Peter whimpers from the corner of the room, hiding behind Clarice, who has risen to her feet.

“Kyson, release him,” Damian’s whispered plea reaches my ears, but my Lycan side can’t see reason past Trey trying to take my mate away from me. That was all my mind could register. Azalea is mine, and I won’t allow anyone else to have her.

“Kyson, think clearly. We need answers that only he possesses,” Damian reasons, his grip tightening on my shoulder. A shudder courses through me, but I reluctantly let Trey go with a growl, shoving Damian away. Ester and Clarice quickly attended to the scattered papers while Trey rights the desk. I struggle to regain control of my shifted form, and Damian hands me a bottle of whiskey, which I snatch from him and gulp down, attempting to suppress the raging anger that threatens to consume me.

“I will fetch more coffee,” Clarice offers, sensing the tension in the room.

“And I will get a mop,” Ester adds, prompting another growl from me.

“Peter stays! I want to ensure your return. If you attempt to flee, I will have Liam track you down and force you to watch as I kill your son!” I snarl at Ester, my gaze piercing her in place. Her eyes dart towards Peter, who is about to follow her. She points him back towards the chaise, and though he glances at me with fear-filled eyes, he obediently returns to his seat.

“I will wait with him until you return,” Clarice assures Ester, who hurries off. Gannon arrives shortly after, with clothes in hand that Damian must have summoned him to bring.

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I quickly dress while keeping a watchful eye on Trey, who has resumed his seat. When Ester returns with a mop and broom, my office suddenly feels crowded. Clarice leaves to retrieve the coffee, and Peter takes up the task of cleaning under Gannon's watchful gaze.

Damian clears his throat, signaling that it is his turn to take charge. My mind is still reeling from the information that had been revealed.

"So you were promised Azalea?" Damian prompts Trey, who shifts his attention towards my Beta.

"Yes, but I had no intention of acting on that promise. Knowing that she was Tatiana's daughter, I couldn't even fathom looking at her in that way. Besides, I was not sired in the same manner as you may think, if the King had allowed me to explain. In the end, Azalea would have had the ultimate choice. But that's why Garret tried to cheat you out of the games for years before Tatiana conceived Azalea," Trey explains.

"And what did Garret gain from this arrangement?" Damian probes further.

"In return for my loyalty, Garret agreed not to pursue Tatiana and allowed me to remain by her side. My devotion was never to Garret himself; it was always to my mate and Azalea. Garret simply wanted to ensure the survival of his heir. So Tatiana suggested the sire bond as a means of protecting me when Garret's paranoia resurfaced after Azalea's birth," Trey clarifies.

"So your allegiance was never truly with Garret?" Damian sought confirmation, to

which Trey shakes his head.

“No, it was always with my mate and Azalea. Garret wanted to ensure the safety of his child, and Tatiana understood that. Hence, she proposed the sire bond to protect me from him should he decide to kill me,” Trey answers honestly.

“And where does Ester fit into all of this?” Damian turns his attention towards Ester.

“My mother revealed that I had brothers. When I asked about them, my father and I had a heated argument. He disowned me and insisted that my mother’s past should remain buried, claiming that those boys were not my brothers,” Ester shares, her voice laced with a hint of pain.

“So you went searching for them?” I interject, trying to grasp the full extent of what happened.

“Yes. After my father disowned me, I moved in with my grandparents,” Ester explains.

“My grandmother helped me locate them, so I left to find them,” she adds.

“And why did your father disown you?” I probe further.

“He discovered that I was secretly searching for my brothers. We were already at odds, as my father could be quite strict. He accused me of destroying his relationship with my mother and kicked me out. So I went to live with my grandparents, who supported me,” Ester recounts her tumultuous past.

“My father eventually took me back in when he learned that I had found Trey and was returned. He managed to secure a position for me as a cleaner at the castle,” Ester continues, her tone flat as she glances towards Trey, who meets her gaze with a glare.

Ester lowered her head. “You knew she was my mate,” Trey growls, and Ester purses her lips in response.

“So you and Garret became involved?” Damian directs his question towards Ester.

“Yes. I left when Ivy was almost four after Tatiana discovered that I had been sleeping with her husband. I had been serving as one of his personal servants,” Ester confesses.

“How did Tatiana find out it was you?” I ask, struggling to make sense of the situation.

“Marissa caught us together. She tried to kill me. Marissa threatened Garret, saying that he needed to get rid of me, or she would expose the affair to Tatiana. She claimed to understand the alliance, but she refused to share Garret with anyone else,” Ester reveals bitterly.

“Marissa told Tatiana?” Trey interjects, clearly taken aback by this revelation.

“Yes, Marissa was also sired to Azalea. That’s why she took her,” Ester sneers at Trey’s disbelief.

“What? That’s bullshit! You’re not sired to Azalea!” Trey protests vehemently.

“No, I’m not. But Marissa was. That’s why she took her,” Ester repeats.

“How did Marissa come into the picture?” Damian questions, his confusion mirroring my own.

“Marissa was Garret’s human mate. Tatiana was allowed to keep you. Did you truly believe that Garret would kill his mate and allow her to keep you?” Ester asks, her

voice dripping with disdain.

“Wait, so Marissa was Garret’s mate?” I ask, struggling to process this new information. Ester nods in confirmation.

“That’s why Garret refused to let her go when Tatiana raised concerns about her,” Ester explains.

“Then Marissa’s husband?” Damian inquires.

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“Jordan was not Marissa’s husband. He was her assigned guard, tasked by Garret to keep a close watch on her. He was a werewolf from the pack where Garret had hidden her,” Ester clarifies, revealing another layer of deception.

“But Marissa was a werewolf,” Damian argues, shaking his head. We had thoroughly researched her background, or so we thought.

“No, she was the daughter of a hunter. Garret took her and turned her into a Lycan. That’s what ignited the war. Her father disapproved of his daughter being involved with a Lycan, so Garret kidnapped her, turned her, and staged her death. After he married Tatiana and conceived Azalea, he introduced Marissa to Tatiana as a servant seeking employment,” Ester discloses, dispelling the previous assumptions we had made about Marissa.

“Marissa’s true identity remained hidden from us,” I state incredulously, trying to come to terms with the web of lies that had been spun around us.

“Yes, she wanted me gone when she found out about our affair. Marissa threatened to expose me and contacted the hunters, intending for them to kill both Tatiana and me. Fortunately, I had already left by the time they decided to strike, and Marissa was powerless to stop them. So she went along with their plan and kidnapped Azalea, claiming that she was all she had left of Garret. I never anticipated that she would target your sister when she arrived here,” Ester confesses, her voice heavy with remorse. My hands tremble with rage, and I clench them tightly to restrain myself from lashing out or succumbing to my violent instincts.

My sister’s death could have been prevented if only Ester had spoken up. I had

wrongly let Azalea take blame for Marrissa and for the tragedy, unaware that the woman sitting across from me held the key to averting it.

“Azalea has awakened,” Liam’s voice enters my mind through the pack link.

“Shall I bring her to you?” he asks, and I press my lips together in a firm line.

“No. I will go to her,” I reply before turning to Damian.

“Azzy is awake,” I inform him, and he nods in understanding.

“So, what do we do now?” he inquires, his gaze shifting between Peter and Ester.

“I am going to see my mate,” I state firmly.

“And them?” Damian gestures towards Peter and Ester.

“I can’t kill Peter,” I growl, not now he has been openly claimed as a Landeena. I stand about to walk out the door when I pause.

“Your mother will take your punishment,” I say, turning back to the room. Peter whimpers and Clarice gasps.

“You want me to kill her?” Gannon offers and Peter screams, rushing toward his mother, only for Gannon to rip him backward and knock his feet out from under him. He lands on his ass and sobs while Ester looks resigned to her fate.

“No. 500 lashes,” I tell Gannon, only to pause and my eyes fall on Peter.

“And you will do 250 of them. I see one piece of her back unmarred when I return. Not only will you receive the same, but I will also then make you kill her by the time



I am done with her,” I tell Peter. Peter whimpers, and tears brim in Ester’s eyes. Her lips quiver, but she only speaks when Peter begs not to do it.

She looks over her shoulder at him. “A punishment must be served.”

“Mum, please! I can’t.”

“But you will, or The King kills me. So choose Peter, which is it you prefer?” she snaps at him. He drops his head.

“Count everyone, and call me down when he is done. I will deliver the last 250. Which will be silver and wolfsbane dipped,” I tell her, and she sucks in a shuddering breath before swallowing and looking away. She bobs her head once, accepting her punishment. Trey just stares with eyes ahead at the wall.

“You will watch her receive her punishment. If you make a move to stop it, you will be pulled from my guard and Azalea’s,” I warn him.

“No issue, My King. I told you that already. My loyalty is with Azalea,” Trey answers, and I nod before walking out and heading up to find my mate.

Chapter

Three

AZALEA

Rolling over, I press my face into the soft pillow. It feels like I’m nursing a hangover. My head pounds, everything appears too bright, and my brain sluggishly processes the events from earlier that are slowly coming back to me. An odd sensation makes my skin prickle with goosebumps.

‘My Queen, I sense you are awake,’a stranger’s voice announces inside my head.‘Don’t be alarmed. My name is Cedric. I am part of the Landeena guard and I was your father’s Beta. I have been waiting for you to wake,’his calming voice reassures me.

How do I use this mindlink?I wonder with a sigh while trying to figure out how to operate this newfound mindlink.

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‘You are using it, My Queen,’ Cedric chuckles.

‘You can hear me?’

‘Yes, and know that your powers have awakened. You should be able to reach all of us, command all of us and find all of us through this link. You’ll get the hang of it.’

‘I remember hearing you even when I passed out. You revoked your pledge to my mate,’ I remind him. The tingling sensation as their tethers linked to me is still fresh in my memory.

‘We were and always will belong to the Landeena Kingdom. Landeena is our home. You are home for your people, My Queen.’

‘And the guards, they all agree?’ I question him, unsure about this new tether.

‘Yes. All 71 of your guards will fight, kill and die for you.’

‘I don’t want anyone dying for me.’

‘But we will and you’ll understand soon enough,’ he assures me patiently. ‘Your powers are awake now; you just need to learn how to use them. So feel free to call on Trey or me or any of us anytime. We are your people, and you are ours. You have no idea how happy I am to know the bloodline lives on, and what a bloodline. I can’t wait to see you at full strength. See what you can do.’

I ponder over his words for a second when the door opens. Liam steps in.

‘My guard is here. I need to go find my mate,’ I say to Cedric as Liam halts, scrutinizing me.

‘Very well, My Queen. We’re posted around the castle. Call on me through here if you need me.’

‘Wait. Umm, how do I call you through here?’

‘Just think of my voice. You’ll figure it out. Trey will show you. Stick close to Trey. Trust no one, My Queen, not until you know for sure they can be trusted. Landeena has many enemies.’

‘So I shouldn’t trust you.’

‘No. But I will earn it. But I assure you, we can be trusted. We didn’t just pledge to you, My Queen. Your father assures your safety, us guards are personally picked and set aside for you. We were given no ties, just a command when we pledged. We didn’t just pledge, we tied our lives to you. Not only that, but we all thought Trey was mad when he said you survived. He kept insisting we look for you. We did for years.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘He is your sire, and we figured he had it wrong. We even convinced him of it after a few years. Trey insists that you are alive because he is,’ Cedric tells me before cutting the link. My brows furrow in confusion.

“The King is on his way,” Liam tells me, and I nod, swinging my legs over the side of the bed.

“Who are you talking to?” Liam asks curiously, and I startle.

“You knew I was talking to someone?”

“Yes. Your eyes turned white,” he says.

“Cedric,” I answer, and he nods.

“Where is Kyson?” I ask Liam. He bites his lip before sighing.

“He’s organizing the punishment for Ester and Peter.”

“Punishment?”

“Yes. Punishment,” Kyson says behind him, making me jump, having not heard him. I look over at him to see him standing just inside the door.

“Leave us,” Kyson says, strolling over to me and Liam quickly does as he is told. He closes the door behind him.

“You challenge me.”

“You were going to kill him. He’s a boy,” I tell him because I can’t bring myself to say he’s my brother, not yet.

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“What punishment did you give him?”

“Not the one I want, but I kept my word. I won’t kill him.”

“And Ester?”

“Alive.”

I let out a breath. I don’t like the woman, but I don’t believe she deserves death for sleeping with my father. Just like I don’t believe Peter deserves death even after everything he did.

“What else?”

“What else?” Kyson echoes, coming to sit beside me on the edge of the bed.

He pulls me across his lap, turning me to face him, so my legs straddle his waist. “We’re finding out some information about your family. I’m sure that Trey will fill you in more. And since I’ve commanded him, you’ll have to listen as well. However, Ester is being quite forthcoming with information.”

“And you commanded her?” I ask, and he nods.

“Yes, of course. She didn’t resist it, so I know she’s telling the truth, or at least her version of it. But I need to ask.”

“Ask what?”

“Do you remember Marrissa ever shifting?” he questions, his voice filled with a mix of curiosity and concern. My brows crease in thought as I try to recall any such memory, but those memories are like wisps of smoke, grainy and fragmented.

“No, I don’t think so,” I reply, my words trailing off as the past pulls me back into its grip. That night remains vivid in my mind, etched into my very being. The night I witnessed them murder her. We had been running for hours, our hearts pounding in our chests when they surrounded us. We had stumbled into another pack’s territory by then, unaware of the danger we were stepping into.

Abbie and I found refuge inside a hollow tree, our small hands clinging to each other tightly. We tried to remain silent, but the fear coursing through our veins made it nearly impossible. Through the cracks in the tree trunk, we watched as Marrissa stood before them, defiant in her human form. Even then, she didn’t shift.

My father, Jordan, moved with a blur of speed, his wolf instincts taking over. He fought relentlessly, refusing to yield until Marrissa called out to him. Her words always seemed strange to me, whispered with a mix of desperation and determination.

“It’s the only way to keep her safe,” she said, her voice trembling as she fell to her knees. Abbie’s parents continued their savage fight against Alpha Dean and his warriors, their wolves torn apart ruthlessly. The echoes of Abbie’s screams pierced through my ears, blending with Marrissa’s final words. She glanced towards our hiding spot, her eyes filled with love and sacrifice.

“Don’t fight them. Don’t run,” she pleaded, her voice carrying the weight of a mother’s love. “Remember, mummy loves you.” And with those haunting words, she let them slaughter her as if accepting her fate, her lifeblood staining the earth.

Only moments later, Alpha Dean and his warriors tore the tree trunk apart, their eyes

filled with a mix of satisfaction and hunger. We were trapped, vulnerable.

“Azalea?” Kyson’s voice jolts me back to reality, breaking the chains of the past. I blink away the remnants of my memories, shaking off their haunting presence.

Chapter

Four

AZALEA

“No, no, I never saw her shift,” I answer him, my voice trembling with a mix of fear and sadness. Memories of my childhood flood my mind, the moments spent with the woman who raised me, the woman I still struggle to reconcile as both a monster and a mother.

Tears burn my eyes as I shake my head again, trying to push down the overwhelming emotions that threaten to consume me. A lump forms in my throat, making it difficult to swallow. How can I still love the person who is responsible for my real mother’s death? Perhaps it’s because I’ve always seen her as a mother, someone who loved and cared for me. Or maybe it’s because she overshadowed any memories I had of my true family, making it difficult to differentiate between the two.

Kyson’s voice breaks through my thoughts, his concern evident as he calls my name. It’s only then that I realize I’m shaking uncontrollably. His hands slide up my arms, a gentle touch meant to soothe me. My whole body trembles, but I allow myself to lean into his presence, finding solace in the familiar sound of his calling as it washes over me, calming my frayed nerves.

“Why do you ask?” I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper. Deep down, I know that he must have a reason for bringing up these painful memories.



“Ester told us that Marrissa was your father’s mate and a Lycan, just like Trey was your mother’s,” Kyson says, his words hitting me like a sudden gust of wind. Confusion swirls within me, making it hard to make sense of everything that has been revealed.

“What?” I manage to utter, feeling overwhelmed by this newfound knowledge. The world of titles and bloodlines and kingdoms is still so foreign to me. I was never taught how to navigate this realm or understand its rules, yet now I’m expected to bear the weight of it all.

I know nothing of this world, or any world for that matter. Mate bonds and alliances are concepts that elude my understanding. And the thought of watching from the sidelines as my mate is with someone else, it’s almost unbearable. How would that affect my soul? My heart? To have four broken souls and four broken hearts, all forced to witness each other’s attempts at finding happiness with another. The torment of such a bond is unimaginable.

There is so much to figure out, but for now, I need to focus on the punishment that has been bestowed upon Peter and Ester.

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“What punishment did you give my... brother?” I force the word out, bitterness coating my tongue.

“500 lashes,” Kyson answers, his words landing like a heavy blow. My eyes widen in shock, and his grip tightens on my arms.

“Not Peter,” he quickly clarifies, sensing my panic. “Let me explain.”

My heart pounds in my chest as I nod, desperate to understand the reasoning behind this brutal punishment.

“Ester knew who Marrissa was and could have prevented my sister’s death. She needs to be punished for that,” Kyson explains, his voice filled with a mix of anger and frustration.

“But Peter can’t heal. He hasn’t shifted yet,” I interject, a pang of worry coursing through me. It’s clear to me that there’s no way he could survive such a merciless beating.

“Ester will receive the lashes. And Peter will administer half of them. The other half, I will,” Kyson states matter-of-factly. I shake my head in disbelief. How can he expect Peter to whip his own mother? It sounds barbaric and cruel.

Kyson growls at me when he notices my glare. “You won’t let me kill him, and I can’t without breaking the law! You will go along with this, Azalea. You don’t have to like the ruling, but you will stand by it. Or I will kill Ester. If you don’t want me to kill them, you will agree,” he snaps, his frustration palpable.

“You can’t kill Peter,” I assert, my voice filled with determination.

“No, by law I can’t. But that won’t stop me from breaking that law if you disagree. So either you agree to their punishment or...” Kyson’s voice trails off, leaving the threat hanging in the air.

I growl in defiance, refusing to let him harm Peter. He’s just a child, caught in the crossfire of this complicated situation.

“He killed our baby!” Kyson’s voice rises, his pain and anger intertwining.

“And Ester could have prevented my sister’s death! They need to be punished. And if you won’t let me kill them, then this is it. What they did is punishable by death. And I will not be seen as weak because my mate is too soft,” he growls.

“Soft? You are the only one who sees mercy as soft, My King. Mercy is not weakness; there is strength within it. It takes a stronger person to forgive than it does to punish another,” I retort, my words laced with conviction.

Kyson laughs bitterly, pushing me off his lap and standing up. I turn on the bed, watching him walk over to his bar with a mix of apprehension and concern.

“They don’t deserve forgiveness. Not even this is enough. Mercy is for the weak. Forgiveness? They will find none from me,” he snarls, tipping the bottle to his lips and taking a long swig. I despise when he drinks, knowing that it only fuels his anger.

“Then you truly are the weak one,” I sneer, rising to my feet as the bottle shatters against the wall, causing me to flinch. He moves so swiftly that I barely have time to steady myself before his hands grip my arms tightly, his growls reverberating in the room.

“You are weak! Falling to your knees to save an enemy. Forgiveness gets you killed. It gets you nothing!” Kyson roars, his grip tightening.

“No! You’re wrong,” I growl back, mustering all the strength I can find as I grip his wrists firmly. Anger courses through my veins, and he eventually releases his hold, glaring down at me with a mixture of frustration and confusion.

“You know nothing!” he growls, turning away from me in an attempt to regain control of his emotions.

“I know I forgave you!” I assert, my voice filled with determination.

“Forgave me? I never did anything to warrant needing forgiveness!” Kyson protests, his voice laced with incredulity.

“No? You nearly killed me when you destroyed our bond!” I spit out, the pain of that betrayal still fresh in my mind. “Yet I forgave you for it. I forgave you for using the calling on me to manipulate me. I forgave your punishments, no matter how misguided they were. I forgave you! So if that makes me weak, then what does it make you for accepting it?” My words hang in the air, a challenge directed at him.

Kyson growls in response but remains silent, his anger consuming him.

“I am not changing the punishment, and you will not ask me to. They need to be punished for what they did,” he snaps, his tone filled with fury.

“I agree,” I concede, my voice softening. “But you won’t kill them,” I assert, refusing to let violence be the solution. There has to be another way, a path that allows for redemption and growth.

Kyson seems taken aback by my words, his eyes searching mine for any sign of

wavering.

“As you said, I don’t have to like the punishment, but one must be given. But once it’s done, it is done, Kyson. I won’t allow you to continue punishing him,” I declare firmly, my resolve unwavering.

“And you won’t interfere?” he asks cautiously, uncertainty in his voice.

I swallow hard, knowing the weight of this decision. I understand Kyson’s need for vengeance, but harboring such hate is not something I can bear.

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“Afterward, you let them go,” I tell him, my voice filled with a mix of compassion and determination. “No more punishment, no more suffering. It ends there.”

Kyson growls and clenches his jaw, clearly struggling with this compromise.

“Only if you stand by your word and don’t interfere or try to stop it,” he finally concedes, his voice filled with a mixture of resignation and frustration.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself. “Just don’t kill them,” I remind him firmly before storming past him and out the door.

“Where are you going?” he calls after me, his voice laced with concern.

“To find Abbie!” I snap back, not bothering to turn around. I know he’s following me, but right now, I need to focus on finding her. Liam falls into step beside me, remaining silent as we search for her.

“Azalea!” Kyson’s voice calls out again, interrupting the tense silence.

“What?” I reply sharply, my patience wearing thin.

“You said you would stand by my decision. That means you come with me,” he says firmly, grabbing hold of my arm.

“You want me to watch as you whip someone?... No!” I protest, the thought of witnessing such brutality sending shivers down my spine.

“You said you would stand by it,” Kyson insists, his grip tightening.

I press my lips into a thin line, glaring at him. Is he punishing me for challenging him? The thought lingers in my mind, but I refuse to let it distract me.

“Fine then,” I relent, motioning for him to lead the way. “Lead the way, My King,” I say with a hint of sarcasm, my tone dripping with defiance.

He growls in response but grips my hand, tugging me along after him.

Chapter

Five

AZALEA

We step into a courtyard bathed in an eerie silence, its atmosphere heavy. My heart nearly stopped in my chest as my eyes landed on Ester, her slender figure bound and helpless, hands chained above her head to the cold stone wall. Her torn clothes revealed the aftermath of merciless lashes that had once marred her delicate flesh, but now only faint scars remained as she healed quickly, leaving her panting for breath.

Kyson growls, and anger courses through the bond. Peter, his face etched with guilt and regret, stands before us, his trembling hands releasing the whip he had wielded moments ago. He looks at Kyson with pleading eyes, silently begging for mercy. Clarice, standing off to the side, nervously nibbles on her fingernails, tears streaming down her face, leaving trails of despair in their wake.

But it is Trey’s expressionless face that shocked me the most. A sneer twists his lips as he looks at Peter, and his own sister, showing no trace of care or compassion. The callousness in his gaze is truly shocking.

“Again! You have twenty more lashes to deliver, Peter,” Trey snarls, his voice dripping with sadistic anger. He stalks towards Peter and snatches the whip from the ground, thrusting it at him. Peter flinches away, fear etched deep into his eyes. Bile rises in my throat as I tighten my grip on Kyson’s hand. He turns his head to meet my gaze.

“It’s only twenty lashes,” I whisper to him, hoping he would let her go and Ester glances over her shoulder at me. Her face is flushed red, and she panting before looking at Kyson.

“Hurry up, Peter. Finish it,” Kyson snaps, his tone laced with impatience and a cruel edge.

“Prick,” I hiss under my breath, my frustration and disgust seeping through. Kyson growls in response, leaning down to whisper in my ear.

“Watch your tone,” he warns, his voice a low rumble.

“Watch yours,” I retort, ripping my arm from his grip. I make my way over to Clarice, who explains that Ester is surprisingly enduring the punishment rather well. Kyson overhears our conversation, his displeasure evident in the sharpness of his growl.

He walks over to Liam, engaging in a conversation before Liam walks away, his expression etched with concern. I am taken aback by how quickly Ester’s wounds seemed to heal. As soon as the whip is removed, her skin closes, leaving behind angry red marks. Witnessing someone else being whipped sent shivers down my spine and made my skin crawl. The sound of the whip cracking through the air, tearing flesh apart, brought back painful memories that I desperately tried to suppress. All I want is to run away from this nightmare.



I can't stand the sound of the crack through the air, the sound of ripping flesh. Flashbacks creep into my mind as I try and block them out.

Yet, as Peter finishes delivering the lashes, Ester's back remains red and inflamed, but no longer bleeding. This seems to bother Kyson. He craves bloodshed and violence; the stains on the stone ground are not enough to satiate his hunger for revenge. Lost in my thoughts, I stared at the rose bushes, blocking out the horrifying scene unfolding before me until Ester's piercing shriek pierced through the air. My attention snaps back to reality as Liam enters with a bucket, its pungent scent of Wolfsbane assaulting my senses. Clarice whimpers beside me, her fear palpable. I straighten up, my body tensing.

"Kyson!" I hiss urgently. He growls in response, his face contorted with anger. This is excessive, even for him. Horror washes over me as I watched him dip the whip into the bucket, my heart lodged in my throat. Tears well up in my eyes as he pulls it out, the cracking sound filling the air, splattering droplets everywhere. Ester's agonized scream reverberates through my core.

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That single scream transports me back to a dark place, a place I never thought I would be trapped in again. The flashbacks assault my mind, threatening to drown me. I despise Kyson at that moment, despise the monster he is becoming before my eyes.

Peter's blood-curdling scream echoes through the courtyard, sending shivers down my spine and causing my ears to ring. I twist to look around, my stomach lurching as its contents spill out onto the ground, sending a searing pain into my tender knife wound. Kyson, however, pays no attention to my sickness, consumed by his own rage

Unfazed by Ester's screams or Peter's desperate pleas, Kyson's rage blinds him to his surroundings. Even as Ester hangs limply in her chains after countless lashes, he doesn't stop. I find myself trapped in the darkest recesses of my mind, a place I thought I had escaped forever. But this time, it is Kyson's actions that hold me captive there until Clarice's piercing cry echoes through the chaos.

Her hands grip me tighter and Peter's reverberating screams make goosebumps rise. My ears ring loudly, ripping me out of my own head.

Peter lays crumpled on the ground, and Kyson stands over him, whip still in hand. Ester, a bloody mess, struggles to lift her head, her voice barely a whisper.

"Leave him," she breathes, her words filled with desperation. But she can't move, her strength drained from her battered body. I stare at the horrifying scene before me, Peter clutching his bleeding face, Kyson seething with rage. And then, Trey clenching his jaw and looking away, a silent admission of his disagreement with Kyson's actions.

I swallow as he breathes heavily. Nearby, the gardener looks pale as a ghost as he looks at Peter and Ester. He reaches forward, gripping Peter's arms.

"Please, no more! She can't take it anymore! Let me take her place." Peter pleads.

"No!" Clarice shrieks.

Kyson snarls, his upper lip pulling back over his teeth, and a sinister glint reflects in his black obsidian eyes. He tilts his head to the side.

"I'll allow it."

"He is just a boy!" Tanner the gardener interjects, his voice filled with righteous indignation. Whoever he is, he cares deeply for Peter.

"He can't even heal!" Kyson shrugs dismissively, his attention fixed on Ester. The whip cracks through the air once again, and her agonizing scream tears at my heart when Peter breaks free from the gardener's grasp and throws himself in front of his mother. I see Kyson raise the whip, and without hesitation, I dash forward, throwing myself in front of my brother once more.

Peter won't be able to heal. I can't stand by and allow Kyson to kill them. The punishment Kyson had sentenced Ester to had already become a death sentence when he introduced Wolfsbane into the equation. Enough was enough.

The sharp tendrils of fiery pain rip through my back, tearing through my dress and shoulder. I grit my teeth, feeling my back arch in response, but I hold onto Peter tightly, determined to shield him from harm. My own scream reverberates through the courtyard, mingling with Ester's agonized cries.

Pain courses through every fiber of my being as I lock eyes with Kyson, his face

contorts with fury and shock. He reaches out towards me, his hands trembling, but then shakes his head.

“Move!” he commands, his voice strained with conflicting emotions.

“She has suffered enough!” I seethe through clenched teeth, my voice filled with an indomitable resolve.

“When I say she has,” Kyson growled, his voice a low rumble. But I refuse to move, standing my ground against the man I love yet hate in this moment.

I gesture towards the gardener, who hurriedly approaches and takes hold of Peter, dragging him away from the unfolding nightmare. As I undo the front of my dress, preparing to take Ester’s place, Kyson’s voice, laced with desperation, cuts through the tense air.

“No!” he snarls, his eyes filled with anguish and fear.

“You would have allowed Peter to take her place, but I won’t allow that. Therefore, he takes his mother’s place, and I take his. So which is it, Kyson?” I demand, my voice steady and resolute. With each button that pops open, my dress falls to the ground, leaving me standing in nothing but my undergarments. The onlookers avert their gazes, a silent acknowledgement of the vulnerability and strength that lay before them. Ester groans, her flesh sizzling from the Wolfsbane’s touch. My own back stings, sending waves of searing pain up and down my spine. I long for water to douse the flames that consume me.

“Azalea!” Kyson snarls, his voice filled with rage and desperation. He comes up behind me, his long fingers wrapping tightly around my arm as he spun me to face him.

“What is it, Kyson? Can’t bear to see your mark on my flesh while reveling in hers? No! I won’t allow it!” I declare, my voice filled with defiance and determination.

“Then I kill her,” he sneers, his words dripping with malice.

“You said lashes! You’re already killing her. Look at her!” I scream furiously, my words laced with a mix of anger and despair. He seems taken aback, finally looking at Ester’s ravaged back, the blood pooling at her feet.

“Enough,” I repeat firmly. “Or I take her place.” My voice resonates with unwavering resolve. He locked eyes with me, his narrowed gaze filled with fury. The tension between us grows palpable as we stand there, neither willing to bow down to the other’s will.

“Know your place, My King. Landeena’s word is final,” I assert, my voice dripping with authority.

“Not over me it’s not, My Queen,” he snarls back, his voice laced with defiance. “You may be Landeena, but I am your mate. The Alpha hierarchy still holds weight.”

“Do you want to test that theory?” I challenge, my voice steady and unwavering. It’s a test, and deep down, I know he will back down when faced with the power of my title. He seems surprised, his eyebrows raising in realization. And just like that, my assumption is confirmed. In the hierarchy of the Alpha and Landeena, the Alpha is always the most assertive, the most dominant in the mate bond. But against a Landeena, a Landeena power is unparalleled. This newfound understanding surged through me, filling me with strength as Kyson took a step back, his eyes wide with a mix of surprise and submission.

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“Just remember,” he growls, his voice laced with a mix of resignation and defiance, “you may have power now, but that doesn’t mean you know how to use it.”

“Yet, Kyson. Not yet,” I reply firmly, my voice filled with determination. “But I think you and I both know you’re dreading the day when I do.” His growl echoes through the courtyard as he turns away from me, storming off in frustration.

I release Peter from my grip, turning to face Ester once more. Her body hangs limply from the chains, her breathing shallow and weak.

“Release her!” He snaps before turning his gaze back to me. “Cover up!” he snaps, turning on his heel and storming off.

Chapter

Six

KYSON

Fury simmers within me, threatening to spill over. Azalea’s audacity to assert her authority, even if technically she has none over me, sends a surge of anger coursing through my veins. The implications of her actions weigh heavily on my mind as I storm towards my office, frustration gnawing at me. How can I always come second to her? I’ve dedicated weeks to caring for her, and yet she defends the very person responsible for putting her in such a state. For killing our child.

Damian is waiting in my office for me when I open the door, engrossed in the

paperwork strewn across my desk. He glances up as I enter, his disapproving gaze as I move toward my bar and pour myself a drink.

“What’s that look for?” I demand, my voice tinged with irritation.

“Do I really have to spell it out?” he retorts, leaning back in his chair. I hand him his drink and he takes it, savoring the taste as he takes a sip.

“Azalea?” he ventures, and a growl escapes my throat. My Lycan side ripples beneath my skin, still restless from the recent shift.

“Don’t!” I warn him sharply, the warning clear in my eyes.

Damian clicks his tongue.

“Your anger and your drinking,” he holds his glass up. “Is getting the better of you!” he snaps at me as I take my seat.

I sink into my seat with a heavy sigh, and Damian rises from his chair, moving around the room to retrieve a pair of black shorts from the closet behind the door. He tosses them to me, and I snatch them from the air before setting down my glass of whiskey.

“How did you go?” I ask him while pushing out my chair so that I can pull them up my legs.

“I’m thinking of sending someone to Crux. Perhaps they can gather some information by visiting the brothels,” Damian suggests, just as Liam saunters into the room. I slump further in my chair, feeling the weight of my responsibilities pressing down on me.

“Ah, you should be with Azalea,” I remark to Liam, who shrugs nonchalantly.

“Well, I’m here. And Trey is with her,” he responds casually, making his way towards the bar area. Instead of grabbing a glass, he grabs the entire bottle, topping up my glass before taking a swig for himself as he tips the bottle to his lips.

“Saving that liver of yours my King,” he says while sending me a wink. I pick up my glass and sip it, turning my attention back to Damian who I send off to look into the council finances along with Alpha Deans and Alpha Brock’s pack finances.

“Do you still think they have something to do with the missing children?” I inquire, sharing his suspicions. Our doubts about that particular pack have lingered for quite some time, but we are still in need of concrete evidence.

“Yes. Well, I don’t believe Ester is going around killing children. But even after you commanded her the other day ...”

“Half commanded her. I wouldn’t call it a full command,” Liam chuckles as we both look at him.

“What? Gannon said she didn’t even break out in a sweat. So I would hardly call that a command,” Liam says, making my brows pinch because he is right. She put up no fight at all to my persuasion when I questioned her.

“Hmm...interesting,” I mull over the thought. Liam is right; her lack of resistance during my questioning raises questions of its own.

“Interesting? I don’t trust the bitch. Too much doesn’t add up,” Liam says and he is right. We are barely at the tip of the iceberg.

“What do you think of Trey?” I ask him.



“Ferret Face Fuck? I will admit that I had him pegged wrong but Ester...” He shakes his head.

“Too much doesn’t add up. And did you see Trey’s reaction when he learned about Marrissa? That was a genuine surprise, he wasn’t aware.”

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“Yes, the whole Marrissa situation is baffling. Why didn’t she come forward? It defies logic. If Peter is Landeena, she would know that we would protect him. So why the secrecy?” Damian questions, shrugging his shoulders. His point is valid – Landeena’s have immunity, so who is Ester hiding Peter from?

“Do you think Ester is lying?” I probe further, and both Damian and Liam nod in agreement.

“Not entirely, but there are half-truths woven into her narrative. Marrissa had been working here for years and hadn’t made a move against Claire. She started in the gardens with Tanner before moving to the castle, yet she still had ample opportunity to strike at the kingdom. So why did it take her twoyears to act, Kyson? That’s what I find strange,” Liam points out, his words resonating with me.

“Hmm, you’re right,” I concede. “That does sound suspicious. Make sure someone is constantly with Ester and Peter, keeping them off castle grounds and under guard until we can resolve this situation.”

“And what about Crux? Can I send a few men to investigate these places?” Damian inquires, picking up a piece of paper from the pile.

“Deluxe Night and Midnight Tricks Gentleman’s Club?” Liam plucks the paper from Damian’s hand.

“I volunteer myself, my King,” he declares confidently. “I’ll test out the girls for surveillance purposes, don’t worry.”

“Surveillance - not a test run,” Damian corrects him sternly.

“Scratch and sniff; taste and whiff - whatever it is, I volunteer my time and pecker for the task,” Liam declares as Damian shakes his head.

“The sacrifices I am willing to make for you, my King,” he continues unabatedly. “I’ve got this one handled - Dustin can come along...” He ponders for a few minutes.

“Damian, you should come too. It could be a boys’ night out – you might finally get lucky. It might help with that stick you have shoved up your ass. What do you say?” Liam suggests, nudging Damian playfully. Damian growls in response.

“And what exactly is Dustin going to do at a brothel?” Damian questions, his tone laced with frustration.

“He can handle the surveillance while I test out the girls. Duh!” I give Damian a pointed look, silently urging him to accompany Liam to ensure no trouble arises. Liam has a knack for bringing women home with him, and Damian’s presence would serve as a deterrent. Damian groans, running a hand over his face.

“Fuck! Fine,” he concedes with a defeated shake of his head.

“I need to find some appropriate attire for our outing,” Liam exclaims excitedly before taking another swig from the bottle of whiskey. He lets out a loud burp. “You’ll have to drive though,” he informs Damian, holding up the bottle. “I’ve already had a few; don’t tell the boss man,” he whispers, though I raise an eyebrow at his comment, considering the boss man just watched him down his liquor.

“He’s going to be the death of me,” Damian laments, and I chuckle.

“That’s Liam for you,” I assure him, and he nods in agreement.

“Yeah, if he weren’t so damn reliable, and trustworthy, I’d kill him myself,” Damian jokes as he stands up from his seat.

“I’ll be back in three days then - will you be alright here?” His words are more statement than question as I wave him off, telling him to go ahead. Damian needs a few days off - not that they’re really taking time off - but it’s good for him to leave the castle grounds for once. And Liam will force him to relax which is why I don’t protest his desire to accompany them.

“If you need me, just call, and I’ll come back,” Damian offers before making his way towards the door.

“I’ll be fine; I just need to get Azalea in line,” I reply, my words more determined than convincing.

“She’s not a pet, Kyson. And if you want her to listen to you, treat her as an equal,” Damian retorts.

“I do treat her as an equal!” I protest defensively.

“Only when it suits you. I heard about Ester and Peter. Yes, they deserved punishment, but dragging Azalea along and forcing her to witness it? Who were you really punishing, Kyson? Peter or her? Because it seemed like both,” Damian admonishes incredulously, shaking his head as he slips on his coat.

“She needs to understand how things work. She needs to learn to lead,” I argue, my voice tinged with stubbornness.

“Yes, alongside you – but every time she tries, you shut her down or exploit her vulnerabilities. If you want her to learn to rule beside you, show her how and stop forcing her. She did what any woman in her position would have done – anyone who

knows the pain of that damn whip. Azalea understands that pain, and yet you made her watch?" Damian rebukes, his tone filled with frustration.

"They needed punishment, Damian," I insist stubbornly but he shakes his head in dissent.

"You're never going to learn, Kyson. If you want respect from her, then show some too! I'm sick and tired of...you know what? If you want to help while I'm gone: teach her how to un-command Dustin and Gannon, so I can have a damn night off!" Damian snaps before turning on his heel and walking out.

I huff as the door clicks shut behind him. Deep down, I know he's right. In a way, I punished Azalea for not allowing me to exact my own form of justice. Shame washes over me as I realize the truth in Damian's words. My anger and jealousy have clouded my judgment and tainted my actions. Damian is right; if I want respect from Azalea, I must show her the same. I am sickened by my own behavior; my anger and jealousy have gotten the better of me.

Chapter

Seven

AZALEA

I watch Kyson storm off, his anger palpable in every stride, before turning my attention back to Ester. Carefully, I pull my clothes back on, my movements quick and efficient. I untie her hand, and Peter rushes to grab his mother around the waist, concern etched on his face. Taking a moment to survey the scene, I spot Trey and Clarice nearby.

“Get some rags and herbs,” I instruct them, urgency clear in my voice. They nod in understanding, swiftly hurrying off to fulfill my request. As they scurry away, I unclip Ester’s other wrist, preparing to help her sit down. But before I can reach out to assist her, she slaps my hand away.

“Mum! She’s trying to help!” Peter’s voice cuts through the tension, his frustration evident. I stare at Ester, stunned by her rejection.

“She has helped enough,” she growls, her words laced with bitterness.

“I could have let him fucking kill you! Would you prefer I did?” My anger rises to meet hers, my words sharp and biting. She glares back at me, undeterred. “I am the only thing standing between you and my mate,” I assert fiercely.

Ester laughs derisively, shaking her head in disbelief. “You are exactly like your mother! A gutless whore who doesn’t like a little competition,” she spits at me with venom. Without even registering my actions, my claws slip out instinctively, slashing

across her face as I deliver a resounding slap. At the same moment, Clarice rushes out with Trey close behind, carrying a bucket. They freeze in their tracks upon hearing the sound of my palm connecting with Ester's cheek.

A shocked gasp escapes Clarice's lips while Peter's expression mirrors her astonishment. I, too, am taken aback by my own actions, but my anger overrides any concern. How dare she insult my mother, regardless of whom her words were intended for? Especially after I just saved her from a brutal fate?

I had the power to let him kill her, but I didn't. I was willing to endure my mate's wrath to protect her, even after her son had taken the life of my unborn child. And yet, she throws it all back in my face. As a stinging sensation courses through my hand, tears threaten to spill from my eyes.

Kyson is furious with me for defending Ester, and now she has repaid my loyalty with a cruel tongue. Swallowing down the bubbling emotions and the hurt caused by her words, I turn to Clarice and Trey.

"Clean her up and ensure she leaves the castle grounds," I instruct them firmly, my voice steadier than I feel inside. Brushing past their shocked faces, I feel Trey's grip on my arm. "Are you okay? What did she do?" he asks, concern etched on his features. I shake my head, not wanting both of us to be consumed by anger. All I want is to escape this situation.

"Where is Kyson?" I inquire urgently.

"I'm not sure. He might be in his office or maybe his old quarters," Trey replies uncertainly.

"I'll mindlink him myself," Trey offers, but I shake my head.

“No, just make sure they are both gone before I return,” I request firmly.

“Azalea, Kyson doesn’t want you to be alone,” Trey persists.

“I’m fine. I’m going to find him anyway,” I assure him, though Trey purses his lips in concern. “Fine, but stay on this side and don’t wander too far. If he’s not in his office, come back here,” he cautions. I nod in acknowledgment, eager to leave the tense atmosphere behind. I make my way to Kyson’s office first, only to find it empty. The guard informs me that Kyson went to find Dustin with Liam and Damian because Damian is leaving sometime tonight.

Letting out a weary sigh, I ascend the stairs, hoping to find Abbie and distract myself from the recent events.

I locate Abbie in her quarters, greeted by Gannon who answers the door. Abbie tries to move toward me, but freezes mid-step, frustration etched on her face. She groans, expressing her desire to have the command removed.

“Man, you need to find a way to remove the command,” she exclaims, flopping back onto the floor next to Tyson, who is engrossed in playing with wooden blocks. I lean down, pressing a kiss to Tyson’s head and tousling his hair before settling beside him.

“I heard the King made you watch?” Abbie chews on her lip, concern evident in her eyes. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t bear to watch that. I could kill him for putting you through that!” Abbie growls, her protective instincts flaring up. Gannon growls softly at her words.

“Mind your tongue, Love,” he warns gently, settling back on their bed.

We engage in conversation for a while longer, but it’s clear that Abbie’s inability to move freely is straining her. Every movement must be calculated and deliberate,



considering her intentions when navigating her own room.

“Can you go into town for me?” Abbie eventually asks Gannon, her tone hopeful. Gannon sighs and sits up.

“He needs to learn to sleep without it.” Abbie shoots him a look of frustration, but I can tell it relates to Tyson.

“Gannon!”

“Fine,” he growls, leaning down to pick up Tyson. I’m surprised to see Tyson willingly reaching his arms up, allowing Gannon to hold him.

“What’s in town?” I inquire, curious about Abbie’s request.

“That microfiber blanket. It tore in the wash,” Abbie explains. Tyson has sensory issues, and certain materials irritate him, so Abbie’s concern is justified. He likely won’t be able to sleep without it, as it provides him comfort.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:45 am*

“I think there’s one in the room Kyson set up for the baby, across from his old quarters,” I suggest, recalling glimpsing a folded blanket on the end of the cot. Before I can offer to go and check, we hear a knock on the door. All heads turn towards it as Kyson steps inside.

“So this is where you disappeared to,” he remarks, his earlier anger dissipating. He stands behind me, reaching down to offer me his hand. I accept it gratefully, allowing him to pull me to my feet.

“Are you okay?” he whispers, burying his face in my neck. I sigh, feeling a wave of relief wash over me in his presence.

“Yes, now that you’re here,” I reply honestly, and he presses a gentle kiss to the side of my neck.

“Where are you headed?” he asks, glancing over at Gannon.

“He was going into town to get Tyson a blanket, but I mentioned there might be a microfiber one in the room across from your old quarters,” I inform him, turning my head to meet Kyson’s gaze.

“No, it’s fine. Gannon can buy one,” Abbie quickly interjects, and Gannon hums in agreement.

“No, it’s fine. I think Azalea is right,” Kyson decides, his lips brushing against my cheek. “I’ll ask Matt to bring it over,” he offers, and Gannon places Tyson on the bed.

“Are you sure?” Gannon asks, seeking confirmation.

“Yeah, nothing in there is getting used anyway,” Kyson replies, his words tinged with a hint of sadness that reverberates through our bond. Leaning into his embrace, I notice the faint tremor in his hand resting on my waist.

“Come on, let’s go. Besides, I’m sure that Abbie is tired of tiptoeing around her own room just to avoid accidentally walking toward me,” I chuckle lightly.

“Or I could show you how to remove the command,” Kyson whispers behind me, and I look up at him with a mixture of curiosity and hope.

Chapter

Eight

AZALEA

“You’ll show me?” I ask, my voice tinged with anticipation. Kyson leans down, his breath warm against my face as he playfully bumps his nose against mine. A surge of electricity courses through me, heightening my excitement. He brushes his lips against mine, a soft and gentle touch that sends shivers down my spine.

“Yeah. I think if I don’t, my Beta may quit,” Kyson chuckles, his voice filled with amusement. The corners of my mouth lift into a smile at his lightheartedness.

“About bloody time!” Abbie exclaims, her voice brimming with excitement. I can’t help but share in her enthusiasm.

“I can only use it when I’m angry,” I explain, nervously chewing on my lip. Kyson takes a seat, pulling me onto his lap on the floor. Abbie settles herself across from us,

her eyes fixed on the scene unfolding before her.

“I can explain it to you, but I know you will hate it. However, I can also command you to drop it. That might be easier, and you’ll feel the pressure behind it,” Kyson offers, his voice filled with sincerity. My heart skips a beat at the thought of him commanding me.

“If it works, I’ll try anything. I would like a proper hug,” I chuckle, glancing at Abbie with excitement dancing in my eyes.

“And I would like to walk toward you without having to do the one, two-step,” Gannon adds with a laugh.

“So, it’s similar to a command. A command where you add pressure and forcefully impose your will upon them,” Kyson explains, his words slipping out slowly and deliberately. Surprisingly, I find his aura less discomforting than expected as it rolls over me, perhaps because he didn’t intend for it to be unsettling.

“To rescind the command, you pull it back into yourself. Reabsorb your aura and command.”

I feel him drop the command behind me, and my body, which had been unknowingly tense, relaxes.

“So, you can try it yourself, or if you prefer, I can attempt to command you to drop the command. Although, I’m not sure if I can actually command you now,” Kyson suggests.

“What do you mean?” I inquire, turning to look at him over my shoulder.

Kyson sighs, his gaze shifting to Gannon, who raises an eyebrow in response.

“Landeena command can kill. Your command is more potent than mine. I just know how to use mine. You don’t,” he reveals, leaving me stunned. Kyson had just disclosed a truth that horrified me even more knowing that I could have unintentionally harmed them.

“Wait! I could have hurt all of them?” I stammer, sudden fear gripping me like a vice. The thought of wielding such power without control terrifies me.

“Yes, but not before you had awakened your gifts,” Kyson assures me.

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“Cedric mentioned something about awakening my gifts,” I confess, my mind drifting back to my recent encounter with Cedric.

“He was showing me how to use the mindlink,” I admit. Kyson presses his lips together tightly, refraining from commenting on the matter.

“Here, feel for my aura. Push on it and force it back. If you can do that, you’ll be able to un-command them,” Kyson instructs, his voice gentle yet firm.

“Yeah, but I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You can control it, Azzy. How much force you put behind it is something you can feel. You will know when to stop or if I am resisting it,” Kyson says. I let out a breath because I needed to do this. It was getting annoying.

We practice several times, and eventually, I grasp the technique, successfully lifting the command without succumbing to anger. A surge of giddiness fills me as I realize the progress I’ve made, and Kyson’s arms tighten around my waist as I release Gannon from my command.

“With enough practice, you’ll be able to do it through a mind link without needing to be physically present,” Kyson informs me.

As Kyson and I prepare to leave, a knock echoes through the room. A man hands Kyson a blanket, but he shakes his head, gesturing towards Tyson, who eagerly reaches out for it. I move towards Tyson, pressing a tender kiss on his little head before embracing Abbie. Her embrace is so tight that I worry she might crush me.

“More than my life,” she whispers, her hands cradling my face as she kisses my cheek.

“Always, more than my life,” I respond.

“Come see me tomorrow, or I can come to see you now,” she laughs, and I nod, looking at Kyson, who nodded his head to me before talking to Gannon about where Liam and Damian went. When he is done, we say goodbye before walking back toward our quarters. However, we take a shortcut through Kyson’s old quarters, and I notice the door to the room across from his is open.

I catch a glimpse of baby items inside – toys, plushies, and a cot. It resembles a toddler’s room, and a pang of longing washes over me as I imagine what could have been. Kyson growls in anger, searching for the guard responsible, but I quickly move to close the door before his frustration escalates. However, as my trembling hand clutches the door handle, my breath catches in my throat.

Tears well up in my eyes as I gaze through the open door, taking in the sight of the baby’s room. My hand trembles uncontrollably, overwhelmed by a flood of emotions. I find myself frozen, lost in a sea of thoughts and regrets. Sensing my distress, Kyson’s hand glides down my arm from behind as he presses his chest against my back.

“I know, Love,” he whispers tenderly into my ear, his voice filled with understanding and empathy.

“We could have had a room for our baby like this,” I murmur, my voice quivering with sorrow. I ponder what our child would have looked like, his or her unique features and personality. A profound sadness envelops me as I take in the toys and plushies that will forever remain untouched.

“And one day we will, I promise. When you’re ready, we can try again,” Kyson vows softly, his grip on mine tightening as he pulls the door shut. My lip quivers, and I turn away from the closed door just as the guard appears, his wide eyes meeting Kyson’s gaze.

“I’m sorry, I forgot,” Kyson dismisses him with a shake of his head, causing the guard to scurry away hastily.

“It’s not his fault,” I interject, sensing Kyson’s lingering anger.

“I’m sorry I made you witness Ester’s lashings,” Kyson apologizes sincerely, lifting his gaze to meet mine.

“Yeah, well, I may have slapped her and kicked her off castle grounds,” I confess with a hint of defiance. Kyson tilts his head, his curiosity piqued. “She said something. It doesn’t matter, but I don’t want her back in the castle,” I assert firmly. Kyson growls softly, his protective instincts flaring.

“I still don’t want her dead, though,” I add, my voice tinged with compassion. Ester may have caused me pain, but I couldn’t bring myself to wish more harm upon her. I couldn’t ignore her suffering, even if her words were hurtful. As long as she stays away, I will find a way to move past it.

“Come on, I should feed you,” Kyson suggests, lifting my hand to his lips. He drapes his arm across my shoulders, pulling me closer to him as we walk side by side.

“So, where did Damian and Liam go?” I ask.

“To a brothel. They’re trying to gather information about the dead children,” Kyson answers, his voice filled with determination. “We found proof Crux was trafficking girls.”



“And what are you going to do about it?” I ask, curious about their plans of action.

“We’ll present the evidence before the council. We’ll teach you how to use your command so that you can order Crux’s removal and ensure he faces punishment if necessary,” Kyson explains confidently.

“Why do I have to do it?” I question, feeling a mix of apprehension and responsibility.

“Because your command is stronger than mine, and because their annual consumption of my blood prevents my command from affecting them,” Kyson reveals. The realization dawns on me that my status as a Landeena and Azure grants me immense power – power that I’m not sure that I’m ready to wield. The weight and significance of this responsibility make me feel inadequate, unworthy of such authority. I doubt my ability to rule and navigate the complex world of werewolf and Lycan laws and councils.

“But Crux is part Landeena,” Kyson nods.

“Yes, but you’re Landeena and Azure, you are stronger than any King or Queen Azalea, you are an empress of Kings and Queens, and your blood makes you part deity,” Kyson says.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:45 am*

“I don’t understand, how can I be an empress of Kings and Queens?” I ask, confused.

“Because a child born from their union, was said to have unparalleled power and was destined to rise above kings and queens to claim the title of Empress. This child, inheriting the combined might of her parents, represents the embodiment of balance and unity, holding the potential to either mend a fractured world or bring it to its knees. Your very existence challenges the established orders in place. You are not merely a part of your parents but a whole. Your parents were two halves to a whole that was never supposed to be melded together. You being their daughter are them at their full potential,” Kyson explains, yet it makes little sense to me still.

“So, since you’re my mate, what does that make you?” I inquire playfully, hoping to lighten the mood.

“Screwed if you turn your command on me,” Kyson responds with a laugh, leaning down to press a gentle kiss on my head.

Chapter

Nine

DAMIAN

Two days later

Two days had passed since our ill-fated visit to the gentlemen’s club, and it had turned out to be nothing but a disappointing façade, a mere strip club with no trace of

the rogue workers we were hoping to find. The dancers were all officially employed, none of them willing to venture outside the boundaries set by their contracts. Everything seemed legal and legit.

“Liam, can you please get out? I’m sure you can save your stories for later,” I growl, exasperated by his presence. However, he remains unresponsive, yapping away like an incessant chihuahua. He had discovered a few rogue girls at the brothel, and now Kyson is insisting we investigate further. But all Liam can talk about is his own exploits with the girls who worked there.

Emerging from the shower, I reach for a towel, only to have Liam snatch it off the hook beside the sink. Suppressing my irritation, I press my lips together as this behemoth of a man shamelessly examines me with hungry eyes, his tongue licking his lips as if I am a bone he wants to gnaw on.

“Liam!” I snarl at him, snatching my towel from his grip.

“Can I watch you fuck her with that?” he says as I wrap the towel around my waist.

“I’m not sleeping with anyone. Now get out and go bother Dustin,” I instruct him firmly.

“No way; Damian loves it when you irritate him. It really gets him going,” Dustin chimes in from the living room of the hotel suite. I growl under my breath, pushing past Liam and retreating into my own room. It is beyond comprehension why he insists on lingering in my personal space when he has his own bathroom and area. I hastily put on my jeans, black shirt, and boots, eager to escape his presence.

“Oh, you will love her. Don’t worry, I tried her out for you last night; amazing! She has a nice rack too, fucked the brains right out of her” Liam tells me rather enthusiastically.

“Liam, enough!” I snap at him. “We’re here to work, not sleep with the victims,” I remind him sternly, but he simply shrugs.

“You’re all work and no play, but don’t worry, Liam took care of you. I booked you a few hours with her. And man, can she suck cock? I thought she was going to suck my nuts right out my dick hole. She’s like a damn vacuum,” he adds.

“You better not have booked me in for sloppy seconds!” I retort sharply. Liam nonchalantly shrugs, batting his eyelashes at me. It’s a wonder how Dustin tolerates his antics. I have half a mind to strangle him with my bare hands.

“She was hot, right Dustin?” Liam called out to him. Dustin peered over the back of the couch and raised an eyebrow at Liam.

“You do realize that I’m gay, right? One hundred percent gay. As in, I only like men,” Dustin clarified dryly. Liam clicked his tongue in response.

“That doesn’t mean you can’t appreciate how hot she is! Who knows, maybe I’ll go for another round when you’re done. I don’t mind sloppy seconds. Besides, I stretched her out really good for you. She should be able to accommodate that weapon of yours easily. I wonder if she could handle both of us at once,” Liam muses, a disturbingly thoughtful expression on his face. Disgusted, I shoot him a disdainful look. Liam has an uncanny knack for expressing himself in the most vulgar manner possible, devoid of any filter.

Throughout the drive to our destination, Liam continues his relentless monologue about his latest escapades. It makes me wonder if he even realizes that she is a prostitute and that her affections are purely transactional. I highly doubt any of the girls genuinely enjoy their encounters with clients.

“I wonder if she’d be up for a threesome? Maybe even anal? She had the perfect

peachy ass. I wanted to take a bite out of it,” Liam rambles on, oblivious to my growing annoyance. I focus on the road, attempting to drown out his explicit fantasies. Liam squeals like a girl when we get there and is first out of the car.

“Oh, you can see the mark I left on her,” he exclaims animatedly, practically bouncing on the spot.

“Mark? You marked her, and you want me to fuck her?” I ask incredulously.

“No, I paid extra so I could carve a little ‘L’ on the inside of her thigh. Who would’ve thought a beauty like her would be into knife play? It cost me a pretty penny, but now anyone who sleeps with her will see the scar and know that I was there first,” Liam proudly proclaims.

“She works in a brothel, Liam. I highly doubt you were the first,” I scoff, shaking my head in disbelief.

“Don’t ruin the mood; I can’t wait for you to meet her,” Liam says, rushing ahead and opening the door.

We enter the establishment, and Dustin nods, silently slipping out the back of the staff area while Liam walks over and sets his arm across the counter. Did this fool not realize that he only has to pay them, not pick them up? It’s not a damn date. The feral growl that leaves me has the girl behind the counter jump when I learn that he had, in fact, booked me with this girl he used and abused the night before.

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“Don’t mind him, love. He’s a little uptight. On another note, is she up for a threesome or just watching? He’s a bit shy and needs me to hold his hand. You know how virgins are,” Liam inquires casually, and I press my lips together tightly. A fucking virgin? I’ve had more sexual encounters than Liam has had hot meals, I just don’t need to pay for them! I am sorely tempted to strangle him with his own dick before we leave this place.

The first floor resembles the gentleman’s club I had visited the previous evening. However, behind a black curtain, I assume, lay the rooms where all the action took place. Glancing around, I took mental note of my surroundings. The woman in pink lingerie greets us and leads us upstairs, Liam leaning casually against the counter as if he were flirting with her. Little does he realize that all he needs to do is pay for her services, not engage in unnecessary small talk like he is trying to pick her up. An annoyed growl escapes me at his antics. I peek into the offices and move around the place silently while he distracts her. I nod to him, and he turns the girl away, chatting her up and pinning her against the wall while I sneak into a nearby room filled with filing cabinets and a computer. I quickly take some photos before mindlinking Dustin.

‘Third floor, fourth door on your right,’ I tell him, and he hums through the mindlink before answering.

‘On it, just get Liam to keep her distracted, so I can slip upstairs.’

Yep, I slipped back out to find Liam making out with the girl and all but dry humping her against the wall. I clear my throat, and she blushes, pulling away.

“Right, sorry. Your friend distracted me,” she says.

“Clearly, can we get this over with?” I ask her, motioning for her to lead us to the room and to this mystery woman Liam kept talking about that was apparently a rogue. She shows us down a few more corridors.

‘Dustin is checking out the office,’ I mindlink Liam.

‘Yeah, he messaged me too. I’ll handle this one,’ Liam responds as we stop in front of a door. A feminine voice from within grants us entry.

“Come in.” Liam practically skips into the room while the woman who had escorted us silently slips after being called by another staff member. I shake my head in disbelief and step into the room, immediately assaulted by a familiar scent that makes my heart race.

Liam rushes to the woman’s side, introducing her as Tandi. She greets him with the practiced smile and bright eyes I had come to expect from the workers in this establishment. As I enter the room, Liam spins her around, his hands greedily grasping at her ample breasts. My gaze travels the length of her hourglass figure, finally locking onto her chocolate brown eyes that widen in shock as she gasps.

“Tandi, this is my friend Damian, the one I was telling you about,” Liam introduces me cheerfully, spinning her towards me. But before I can utter a word, her lips part, and she takes a step back, bumping into Liam. Her petite frame quivers with fear, and it is then that I realize with a surge of possessive anger that Liam had slept with my mate.

“Damian?” Liam asks, alarmed by my reaction as my claws instinctively slip out. His gaze darts to my lethal appendages as I take a menacing step towards him. “Mate!” I growl, my voicedripping with fury. Liam lets out a terrified shriek as I lunge at him.

“It was Dustin! It was Dustin! He fucked her brains out, not me!” Liam screams desperately as I crash into him, delivering a punch that sends him reeling. The woman in the room lets out a blood-curdling scream, her eyes wide with terror.

## Chapter

## Ten

## DAMIAN

With a fierce strike, my clenched fist connects with his face, sending him reeling backward. Liam grunts in pain as I continue to pummel him. Surprisingly, the fool makes no move to defend himself, merely attempting to shield his face as sparks of anger surge through my entire being. Suddenly, a jolt of electricity courses through me, snapping me out of my blind rage as my mate desperately tries to pull me away from him. Liam’s eyes glaze over, and within moments, the door buckles and nearly flies off its hinges from Dustin’s powerful kick.

The piercing scream of my mate reverberates off the walls as Dustin forcefully yanks me back, causing me to topple over him. Liam groans, slowly sitting up with a split lip and blood streaming from his nose. Yet, despite the visible injuries, an ominous growl escapes my chest uncontrollably. I yearn to end him.

Liam wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, panting heavily. Suddenly, a startled squeak echoes from the door. Dustin swiftly moves past me, seizing the girl who had escorted us here and muffling her cry before she can alert security.

Dustin shoves her toward Liam who clamps a hand over her mouth. Liam drags the struggling girl into the room and shuts the door with a forceful kick.

“Misunderstanding love, nothing to worry about, shh,” he breathes, letting her go and



shoving her toward my mate.

Trembling, my mate clasps her hands over her mouth, her eyes filled with horror as she gazes at me.

Still consumed by anger, I growl menacingly at her. Deep down, I know it isn't Liam's fault. How could he have known? But my wild raging Lycan side thirsts for his blood, furious that he slept with her and that my mate turned out to be involved in such a profession.

"Calm down, Damian. We can't draw attention here," Dustin urges, his hands gripping my shirt tightly as I attempt to rise. "I need to get out of here," I seethe through gritted teeth, every instinct urging me to tear the place apart and eliminate anyone who laid a hand on her.

The two women take fearful steps backward as I regain my footing, my gaze flicking briefly to my half-naked mate huddled beside them. Sneering involuntarily, I can't help myself. "Put some damn clothes on. We're leaving," I snarl at her, and she glances at the terrified woman beside her. Clutching her arm, she turns to face Dustin.

"Tell me you've obtained what we needed," I snap at Liam, who retrieves some rolled-up files from inside his denim jacket. "It's all here," he replies, catching his breath now that I'm no longer crushing him. His gaze shifts past me, fixating on my mate standing behind me.

"What do we do about her?" Liam interjects, pointing towards the other woman who stands frozen with fear beside my mate. Frustration courses through me, knowing that this was not part of our plan. If I take her with us, our presence will be discovered. Yet, abandoning her is not an option either.

I clutch my hair in frustration. Fuck! This was not part of the damn plan.

Kyson is going to lose his damn mind over this, “Command her to remain silent,” I instruct Liam, while Dustin rises to his feet. Extending his hand toward the terrified girl, he offers reassurance amidst her overpowering fear that fills the room. “I won’t harm you, but you must come with me,” Dustin says, his hand hovering in the air as she hesitates, eyeing my mate who is yet to utter a word since screaming during my assault. Ignoring her presence, for fear of losing control once again, I issue a cold warning.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:45 am*

“Go. I’ll be fine,” my mate whispers, nudging the girl forward despite the trembling in her own hands. Reluctantly, the girl takes a tentative step forward, but refrains from accepting Dustin’s hand. Desperate to escape the room, she is suddenly intercepted by Liam, who drapes his arm around her shoulders, ensuring she doesn’t flee. Together, they exit the room, swiftly closing the door behind them.

Turning away from the closed door, I focus my attention on my mate. Her body language betrays her vulnerability as she hurriedly covers herself with a blue silk robe. I observe her silently as she slips it on, deftly tying the silk belt around her waist.

“What’s your name?” I inquire, vaguely recalling that it begins with a T. Advancing towards her, I reach out to grab her, but she leaps onto the bed, eluding my grasp. She scurries across it, attempting to create distance between us. My growl freezes her in place, her eyes darting towards the door.

“Run, and you will regret it,” I warn her, noticing her gaze lingering on the door. “I asked for your name. Answer me,” I snap impatiently.

“Tandi. It’s fucking Tandi,” she retorts defiantly, surprising me with the fire in her eyes as she glares back at me.

It irks me because it isn’t like she caught me fucking whoring myself out.

Some logical part of me knows I should ask questions, but my Lycan side is pissed that she is a prostitute, which only overshadows any common sense.

“Just reject me and be done with it,” she snaps, her tone laced with bitterness. Arched brows betray my surprise at her words. Ignoring her harshness, I sigh heavily.

“I’m Damian,” I inform her, to which she simply nods without offering any further response. Pressing my lips together tightly, I issue a command.

“Retrieve your belongings. We are leaving,” I tell her, but she shakes her head in defiance. My jaw clenches, and a snarl escapes me. “It’s not up for discussion,” I grit out.

“I can’t leave, so either reject me or I will reject you,” she declares, and I laugh incredulously. Would she truly reject her own mate? Someone willing to rescue her from this wretched place?

“If you do that, I will mark you on the spot. I am a Lycan. I cannot reject my mate, no matter how much I may want to,” I inform her, regretting my words instantly as I witness the hurt in her eyes. I know that my anger has clouded my judgment, leading me to speak recklessly in the face of discovering her circumstances.

She swallows, looking at the wall and nodding her head. Despite her wanting me to reject her, I notice the way her eyes turn glassy, as if my words hurt her more than she was willing to admit.

‘Done, Beta. We can leave when you’re ready,’ Dustin mindlinks.

‘Meet me at the car,’ I instruct them, moving towards my mate. Her eyes widen, and she bolts towards the door. My arm snakes around her waist as she grips the door handle.

“Believe me, you don’t want me. Just let me go,” she growls defiantly.

“It’s not my choice. We are leaving,” I snap back, and she tosses her head back in frustration. In her haste, her head collides with my nose, causing me to release her as pain shoots through me. Blood spurts from my nose, and I groan while she flings the door open, attempting to escape.

I give chase. My fingers tear at the back of her robe, pulling her back as she swiftly pivots. The fabric rips as my claws emerge, and she strikes my face with her palm, causing my head to snap back with the force of the blow. Then, she delivers a knee to my groin. Despite her petite stature, she defends herself admirably. I suppose one would learn a thing or two working in such an establishment.

My breathing hitches and my nuts feel like they are suddenly lodged in my damn throat as I try to breathe around the pain.

She races out the door, and I clutch onto a nearby dresser, hauling myself upright before sprinting after her. Looking up the stairs, I see her making her way towards the third floor.

I lunge for her grabbing hold of her ankle on the stairs. She swiftly pivots, delivering a powerful kick to my shoulder that propels me backward, granting her the opportunity to continue her escape.

“Stop!” I order, and she freezes as my command rolls over. Yet I can tell she is trying her darndest to fight against.

Sweat drips down her forehead as she grits her teeth, clenching her fists by her sides and gasping for breath.

Ascending the stairs, I release my command and grasp her wrist firmly, forcefully pulling her back down the steps. “I can’t go with you. You don’t understand. I have a...” Her sentence is cut short by a noise emanating from the corridor below, causing

her to gasp. Security personnel begin to stroll down the red hallway.

Their eyes lock onto me, dragging my mate into their line of sight before they launch an attack before I can issue any commands. Reacting swiftly, I dodge an incoming blow, but in doing so, I am forced to release my hold on my mate to prevent any harm to her.

Yet, she can be heard racing up the stairs behind me while I find myself locked in combat with the two guards who dare challenge a Lycan. I shrug off my frustration. Perhaps this is an opportunity to release some of the anger coursing through my veins.

Chapter

Eleven

DAMIAN

Unfortunately for my anger, the guards were not much of a challenge. With one swift kick to the head, the first man went down, collapsing in a heap. A throat punch and a quick jab has the second man sprawled over his buddy. I can't help but scoff at their lack of skill. These supposed security guards are nothing more than amateurs. Even a child would put up a better fight and withstand hits better than these men with their glass jaws.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:45 am*

Shaking my head in disbelief, I climb the steps, following the intoxicating scent of peaches and cream that lingers in the air. But with each step I take, my frustration grows. Why is she making me hunt her down? The pent-up rage within me intensifies with every passing moment.

“I’m fine, Stacey. Just go,” her voice echoes through the thin walls as I make my way through the halls.

Up on this level, the atmosphere is less refined than the floor below, indicating that this might be where the women live. The paint on the walls flaking and peeling away, giving an air of neglect. The floors beg for a thorough polishing. Above me, the old-style lights flicker and sway, casting an eerie glow as I move down the corridor.

A door creaks open, drawing my attention. A woman steps out of a room and quickly closes it behind her as she spins around and catches sight of me. Her gaze drops to the floor, and she hurriedly makes her way to a neighboring room. However, that brief moment when the door was ajar allowed me to catch a strong whiff of my mate’s scent wafting out from within.

Approaching the door, I grasp the locked handle and twist it until it crumbles in my hand, disintegrating into pieces. I stare at the broken brass doorknob in disdain. Their security system is a joke - incompetent officers and flimsy locks that crumble under the slightest pressure.

Shoving the door inward, I hear shuffling inside. My eyes scan the sparsely furnished room until they land on her, standing in the corner next to a tiny bathroom. She is near a crib, where a child wriggles and sucks on a bottle as she rocks him in her arms.

I watch as she runs her fingers through his dark black curls, I know she can sense me in the room with her, but she doesn't turn straight away, she continues to settle her child before turning her attention to me.

"I told you, you don't want me. Just let me set my son down so I don't drop him when you reject me," she pleads, stunning me with her words. She gently places him in the crib, which holds only a few toys and a fraying blanket.

But I can't tear my gaze away from the child she places in the crib. I blink in shock. A child, no older than two years old, his innocent eyes peering through the wooden bars as he watches his mother.

"The boy is yours?" I ask, feeling my luck plummet even further. My mate is not only entangled in this wretched place but also has a child.

"As I said, get it over with," she replies with a sad smile, her voice trembling as she takes a step to the side, using her body to shield the child from my view.

I stare at the woman, contemplating the implications of this new revelation. Who would have thought that my mate would be a whore and have a child? I can't help it; disgust churns within me.

"I'm Lycan, I can't reject my mate," I tell her.

"We can't leave with you. I've already lost my daughter. I won't risk losing my son, so you need to leave before they catch you here," she says urgently, her breath catching as her heartbeat quickens.

"You have another child?" I demand, appalled that someone would harm an innocent life. She watches me for a second and then answers while turning slightly to gaze down at her son.



“They killed her when she was four. I tried to escape with her. I won’t make that mistake again,” she murmurs, her eyes welling up with tears as she plays with her son’s hair.

“Who killed her?” I ask.

“Her father did,” she says with the most subtle sniffle that I almost miss it.

I glance at the crib and nod, a surge of anger coursing through me. “Pack your things. We are leaving,” I demand.

“Did you not hear what I just said? I am not risking my son,” she growls, her protective instincts kicking in. Yet, her instincts are wrong, I am her mate and I won’t allow harm to come to her or her kid, despite him not being mine.

“You can bring him. He will be safe at the castle. You’ll be safe with me, and so will your son,” I assure her, trying to reason with her.

She scoffs. “Nowhere is safe,” she mutters, swiping a stray tear while shaking her head. “Safe doesn’t exist for those like us,” she whispers, her voice trailing off and growing smaller.

“What could be safer than being with a Lycan?” I snap, frustrated by her resistance and her thinking I’m incapable of protecting her.

“His father is one!” she retorts, and I blink in astonishment. My eyes dart back to the crib where the boy lies. Though he is still too young to distinguish scents, his is mingled with hers, masking any trace of his true lineage.

“Who is the father?” I ask, and she shakes her head, too afraid to mention his name.

“His father doesn’t matter, what matters is you leaving before he catches you here.”

“Who is the father, Tandi?” I repeat. “I’m not leaving without you, or without knowing, so answer, or I will sit and wait for him,” I warn her. She grits her teeth and curses under her breath.

“Council Elder Larkin. Elder Larkin is Hunter’s father,” she replies, her words hitting me like a bolt of lightning. My eyebrows shoot up so high they almost disappear into my hairline.

“Still believe we are safe with you?” she dares to question, and this time I scoff.

“He killed his daughter?” I question, disbelief dripping from every word. If that is true, it will be a surefire way to bring down the council.

“No, Alpha Brock killed her. Paige was Alpha Brock’s daughter from Shadow Pack,” Tandi explains, her voice tinged with sadness and anger.

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“I’m well aware of who Alpha Brock is. He’s half the reason I’m here. We’re investigating the rogue murders and searching for trafficked rogues,” I respond firmly.

“Well, you’re looking at one. I was from Alpha Brock’s pack. I lived in the orphanage run by Mrs. Daley,” Tandi reveals, shocking me further.

“You were from the orphanage?” I ask, my voice filled with a mix of surprise and concern.

“Yes, I was sold to Crux when I was 16 and have worked here ever since,” she confesses, swallowing hard. Despite her youthful appearance, she has endured years of suffering in this place since she was just a child herself.

“I know you’re frightened, but grab your son. I will keep both of you safe. Larkin won’t lay a finger on him once the King deals with the council,” I reassure her, determined to protect her and her child.

“You know the King?” she asks, her voice filled with hope and curiosity.

“I’m his Beta. You’ll like the King, he is good. He won’t allow any harm to come to you. But you may just be the key we need to bring down the council and the Alphas helping them,” I explain confidently.

“Will he stop Larkin from taking my son? He can do that?” she whispers, her eyes fixed on her son as he struggles to stand.

“Yes,” I reply firmly.

“But the council holds power over the King,” she murmurs, her gaze shifting to me.

“They don’t hold power over the Empress though. The King, yes. But they can’t resist the Landeena Empress,” I tell her, and her brows furrow.

“Landeena? I’ve heard that name before,” she ponders, her brows furrowing in thought.

“Well, you should have. The Landeena family is mentioned in every history book,” I reply matter-of-factly.

“No, I mean here. Mr. Crux, he is a Landeena,” she states, but I am well aware of this fact already.

“Yes, but he doesn’t carry the name nor inherit the power that comes with it. He was an illegitimate child of Garret’s brother,” I clarify, realizing that time is of the essence. We need to leave before the security guards downstairs wake up or more come.

“But he is a Landeena, nonetheless,” she states.

“Yes, but Garret’s brother was never blessed the way Garret was. Only the firstborn of each bloodline, and Garret was the first Lycan created along with Azure the Princess Tatiana. That bloodline is powerful but only those born from Garret and Tatiana. Crux doesn’t carry the name because he didn’t inherit the power that came with it, he just likes to throw it around like it will make him more important, but legally he goes by his mother’s bloodline name,” I explain, not that I have time, we need to leave, preferably now.

Unable to wait for her decision, I walk over to Tandi, gently pushing her aside and scooping up her son. She shrieks and attacks me momentarily, fearing for her child's safety as I grab him. However, I pull away, placing him on my hip.

"If you want your son, get dressed and follow me. I'm heading to the castle whether you come or not. Either way your son is coming with me," I declare firmly, knowing that she will follow if not for herself, then for the sake of her child. Tandi glances around the room anxiously, reaching out for her son. But I pull away slightly before leaning into his crib and grabbing his bottle and blanket.

"Just get changed; I can arrange everything else you need," I instruct her calmly. Tandi wastes no time, hastily throwing on a sweater and jeans before stuffing a bag full of essential baby items which isn't much, but her son has more than she does.

"Please," she pleads, her hands outstretched for her son. I pass him into her waiting arms, and she clutches him close like he is her lifeline.

"Stay close," I say gently, opening the door and checking the hall. I feel her small hands grip the back of my shirt, and without hesitation, I reach down and hold her hand firmly. Together, we hurry towards the stairs leading to the ground floor.

However, the moment we step onto the staircase, the piercing sound of gunfire shatters the air. Instinctively, I push Tandi back behind a wall, pain sears through my shoulder as a bullet strikes me.

"Stay down and stay hidden," I growl, my voice filled with urgency. My clothes tear as I shift, my body transforming into that of my Lycan. I launch myself down the steps, attacking with ferocity as the mindlink opens up.

"We heard shots," Dustin's voice echoes in my mind.

“Get Liam in here,” I command, slashing my claws across the throat of one of our assailants. Blood sprays across the walls as another gunshot finds its mark, hitting me in the hip. With the adrenaline pumping through my veins, I barely feel it and rush through the closest door, as gunshots suddenly ring out.

‘Liam!’ I scream desperately through the mindlink, knowing that I can’t take on all of them when they are armed and I can’t see them all. Panic surges within me as I duck behind a bed, bullets whistling above my head as they tear through the walls. And then I hear him.

“Yoo-hoo, Ladies,” Liam’s voice calls out from the hallway, his tone oddly playful. I lift my head slightly, peering through the half-blown-out wall. From the gaps, I can see around four or five men in the hall holding guns.

“Get out of here, you’ll be refunded,” one of the security guards says.

“But I’m not here for the girls,” Liam responds, his voice filled with mischief. It almost sounds as if he is pouting. The guards point their guns in his direction, ready to aim. Sensing an opportunity, I get onto my hands and knees, waiting for the guard closest to the door to turn fully towards Liam. What the fuck is Liam up to?

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“State your business! Why are you here?” a gruff voice demands.

“For you, of course,” Liam chuckles, his voice carrying a devilish undertone. Suddenly, the guard nearest to the door drops to the ground, a knife lodged in his throat and he gurgles a breath. Chaos erupts, and in the midst of it all, Liam’s laughter echoes through the air. Seizing the moment, I lunge at the guards, crashing through the wall and tackling one.

“She’s upstairs, Dustin!” I call out urgently, my fists connecting with another guard’s face as Dustin blurs past me, effortlessly leaping over my hulking form. Gripping the man’s head between my hands, I twist with a swift motion, snapping his neck before pouncing on another. “Find them!” Liam yells over the noise as I take down the man.

With Liam keeping them busy, I hunt for Dustin and my mate, only to find them upstairs trying to find another way down.

“Clear,” Dustin yells, storming into the room, his gun at the ready and I duck just as he fires at me, not hearing me come through the side door of the room they’re in. He lets out a breath. “Warning next time, I nearly fuck shot you,” Dustin growls.

“We need to go, now!” I growl, shifting back to my human form. Bullets riddled Lycan form, but none had penetrated my organs thankfully, though I can feel some in me, my body healing before I can remove them.

‘Lamby, we got company!’ Liam warns through the mindlink.

‘Don’t call me Lamby!’ I growl, hating that nickname, I had a stuffed lamb plushie as

a kid that I still have, and Liam likes to taunt me for it, like I don't know if he still has Dustin's stuffed teddy from when he found Dustin as a kid. I grab Tandi's hand.

"Move!" I yell at her, not bothering with niceties as I limp down the staircase from the bullet still lodged in my hip grinding against bone.

"You good?" Liam asks, wiping the blood from his knife as he peers up the stairs where I can hear footsteps rushing toward us from some higher up levels.

"They're from next door, there is a bridge that links the two buildings," Tandi says, peering up at the roof.

"Fuck, let's go," I grunt.

Liam's eyes drop to us and his eyes widen at the sight of us as he takes us in but wisely says nothing as he jerks his head towards the door. But I see the worry on his face as he glances at the kid in Tandi's arms.

"Go, I'll distract them," Liam announces, racing past us and down the stairs.

"Liam!" I roar after him but he merely waves a hand over his shoulder before disappearing.

"We need to go," Dustin urges, shoving me out the door first before ushering Tandi and her son out next. Damian hesitates, and I know he wants to help Liam.

"Now Damian, Liam will kill me if I let you run in after him, he can handle himself," I remind him, and he nods rushing out too.

Bullets whiz past us, as we rush across the parking lot, only to hear someone hit the ground, causing us to glance up at the shooters on the roof. Liam has their attention as



he tosses one off the roof. Dustin and I don't break stride, reaching the car while simultaneously using our bodies to shield Tandi and her son. "Black one," Dustin tells her, hitting the key fob. I open the rear door, shoving her in, and Dustin jumps in the front. He revs the engine to life as I climb before peeling away from the brothel.

"What about Liam?" Tandi asks, and I growl when I catch her staring out the rear window.

"He'll be fine, the prick has nine lives, stay down!" I tell her before digging my claws into my shoulder, trying to remove the bullet lodged there.

"Yeah I swear that man was supposed to be a cat," Dustin chuckles when Tandi shrieks, seeing blood spurt from my shoulder as I remove it. Then, I twist, looking for the one buried in my ribs making them throb.

"You're bleeding!" she panics.

"Stay down," I growl, shoving her body back down. "I'll heal, keep him covered," I mutter.

"But!"

I glare at her over my shoulder. "Not the time," I growl as the bullet finally gives way between my fingers, it pops, making me gasp. Before I can say anything else, my vision blurs, and the world tilts and then goes black.

I wake up Goddess only knows how long later with Liam peering over the top of me, his knife digging the bullets out of me. I hear a clink of metal on metal. "Fuck, another," Liam says to someone.

"Try not to break it," Dustin says, as my eyes open to see him peering over Liam's

shoulder.

“Fuck, you took some metal,” Liam laughs, and Dustin lets out a breath. Sitting up, I peer around trying to remember what happened, when I’m suddenly on my feet looking for my mate. Dustin wanders to the couch, falling on it.

“Where is she?” I panic.

“Tandi’s in the shower,” Dustin says, pointing to the bathroom door.

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“Where are we?” I ask, clutching my head, not recognizing the room.

“Not far from home, we drove through most of the night, only stopping for gas and now to get the rest of those bullets out of you,” Dustin explains.

“You aren’t as bulletproof as you thought. Your Lycan took a lot, but you healed too quickly, leaving half these fuckers in ya.” Liam holds up a bullet and then shows me another. I realize they are wolfsbane pellets. Fuck.

Leaning back against the headboard, my eyes move to Dustin.

“We can’t stay long, we need to get back home,” I tell him, and he nods when Hunter stirs. He cries out, making us all jump. Dustin peers over his shoulder, and I notice the boy sitting up on the bed, rubbing his eyes.

Hunter peers around at us, all staring at him before opening his mouth and screaming for his mother. I force myself up and grab him only for him to let out an ear-piercing scream just as I hear the water cut off. “Shh, she’ll be back, I won’t hurt you,” I tell the kid, sitting him on my hip as I hunt for his bottle in the blankets. Liam finds and snatches it, rushing off.

“See, Uncle Liam will make you another one,” I tell him, and he calms down just as Tandi comes bursting through the bathroom door in a panic.

“What did you do to him!?” she shrieks, rushing over to take him. Maybe it’s the fact that I took several bullets, or perhaps it’s because I’ve had a long day but I don’t like her tone or her implication that I was hurting her son. She snatches him from me, and

I am about to protest when she suddenly slaps my face. Blood fills my mouth as my head whips to the side, and I hear Dustin gasp at what she did just. Just then, I see Liam stop at the door in shock with a bottle in his hand.

“You don’t touch my son,” Tandi sneers at me before turning her attention to her son and checking him over like she seriously thought I hurt him. I grit my teeth.

“Liam!” I force out between my teeth, and he rushes forward with Hunter’s bottle.

“How about Uncle Liam take the brat,” Liam says, not giving her a choice when he plucks him out of her arms.

“Hey, what do you...” her words cut off, and Liam rushes out of the room with him as I grab her.

“You dare fucking hit! What the fuck,” I growl in her face. “I was trying to comfort him, what is your freaking problem?”

“He’s not yours to comfort!” she snaps, yanking out of my grip, but my arm wraps around her waist, crushing her against me. She thrashes.

“Damian?” Dustin asks, and I cut a glare at him. He lifts his hand, backing out of the room as I start walking her backward toward the bed.

He knows I won’t hurt her but I also won’t tolerate her hitting me. I slam her down on the bed as she tries to cover herself. She whimpers as I tower over her.

“You can’t just...ouch,” she whimpers as I push her wrists above her head with one hand and squeeze her thigh to keep her in place.

“You better fucking apologize for that,” I growl in her face as she cowers back as my

grip on her wrists tightens.

“Ow, you’re hurting me,” she whines and I squeeze a little harder before growling.

“Apologize!”

She whimpers but meets my glare with her own. “I’ll apologize when you stop manhandling me,” she snaps back and I let go of her wrists, grabbing her chin instead between my fingers.

“I said apologize!”

“How was I supposed to know you weren’t hurting him, he was crying, and I came out to find you holding him!”

“That is not an apology!”

“Fine, fuck you! Now get off me!” she spits in my face.

I clench my teeth. Suddenly, my senses are filled with the taste of her saliva as it mixes with my blood.

I feel the warm fluid of her spit on my face and growl, earning a wide-eyed and petrified stare from her. Yet, that doesn’t stop the fact that I somehow feel turned on by her defiance. I wipe my face with my hand and she uses that slight movement to try to escape and scramble out from under me, but I’m faster. I grab her ankle, only she kicks at me, making me grunt. I reach out, only managing to grab and tear the towel from her body.

“Fine, you want to play it this way!” I snarl, reaching for her, dragging her closer, and pressing my weight down on her. She thrashes beneath me, trying to toss me off

before exhausting herself when she realizes it is pointless fighting me.

Yet the feel of her naked skin touching my bare chest makes me look down, taking in the way her breasts heave with every breath she takes, the flush on her cheeks from both arousal and anger as sparks course all over where her skin touches mine.

She looks away from me, biting her lower lip as she tries to hide how affected she is by this situation. But I can see it all over her body language - the quickened breathing, the dilated pupils, the way she's attempting to hide from me, she may hate me but she feels the bond as strongly as I do. She squirms under my gaze, and I can almost taste her desperation to escape in the air.

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My teeth elongate as a snarl tears from me. I notice the tears pricking her eyes before she clenches them shut with a whimper.

Her body tenses underneath mine, bracing for something she doesn't want but believes is inevitable.

“You can fight it all you want, but that won't change the fact that we are destined to be together, I can smell your arousal just as clearly as I can smell your fear. So, shall we stop fighting or do I really have to make you submit?”

“If you are going to mate me, do it. Stop playing around and get it over with!” she hisses, causing me to growl again, this time in frustration. I lean close to her ear and whisper.

“I am not a mindless beast to mate you for the sake of the bond, you may think it but I won't force myself on you.”

She turns her gaze to meet mine, and I thrust my hips against her heat, she gasps.

“Not that I couldn't if I wanted to,” I warn her. Her lip quivers and she nods once averting her gaze. “However, I am not a monster,” I tell her.

But I can't help myself, lowering my head I lick the blood from her neck where I accidentally scratched her, and she tastes even better than I imagined. My body comes to life against her thigh and she moans at the feel of my tongue on her body. Pulling back, I watch her neck heal, her eyes glazed over in lust from the endorphins in my saliva healing her.

“Never slap me again, or I won’t be held responsible for my actions. Understood?”

“Y-yes,” she stutters, her voice breathy from the lust coursing through her veins. I could have taken her right then and there, but I don’t want it like this.

“If you ever question my intentions again, I won’t be so nice,” I growl, her breathing heavy as she pants.

“Fine, I apologize for accusing you of hurting him...” she stammers out, and I can tell she doesn’t mean it, but a small part of me still accepts it, knowing she probably knows nothing but cruelty. Pulling back, I stare at her for a second, then let her go. She scurries off the bed, grabbing her discarded towel and wrapping it around her naked figure.

“Get dressed, we are leaving soon,” I tell her, and she storms off to the bathroom, slamming the door.

Chapter

Twelve

AZALEA

Kyson tends to the crackling fire while I sit at the table, engrossed in trying to read the ancient maps set in front of me. His voice fills the room as he passionately explains each Kingdom’s significance, history, and intricate relationships. To my untrained ears, it all sounds like a foreign language, but I am determined to try and understand and follow what he is explaining.

He also unpacks the tangled relationships between Ester and Trey, and how Marrissa was my father’s mate. That piece of information explained why I never saw her shift,



although I can't fathom why Marrissa and Jordan didn't make an effort to save themselves. They could have easily overpowered Alpha Dean's Pack, given their Lycan status. There are also gaps in his explanations that puzzle me. He walks back to join me on the sofa. Kyson starts idly braiding my hair. The atmosphere is comfortable; Kyson appears almost lobotomized. Whatever Damian had said to him has transformed his demeanor entirely.

His fingers brushing against the back of my neck sends a shiver down my spine and causes me to cringe slightly at the ticklish sensation. I know I'm treading dangerously, but something has been playing on my mind all afternoon. So I decide to ask.

"Can I ask you something?" I inquire, leaning back and resting my head on his thigh.

"Hmm," he hums noncommittally, tipping my head forward so he can finish braiding my hair.

"You mentioned you commanded Ester, right?"

He grunts in agreement again, and I furrow my brows in thought. Through our bond, it's clear he isn't fond of this line of questioning.

"How strongly did you command her?"

"Quite firmly; enough for her to collapse if she lied," he replies casually. "Why do you ask?"

"Just some things aren't adding up for me," I confess.

"Like what?"

"For starters, why didn't Marrissa shift when Alpha Dean's men attacked? If she was

a Lycan, she should have been able to kill them with ease,” I point out. He falls silent for a moment, clearly deep in thought.

“I’ve wondered about that too. But Garret died; that might have affected her Lycan side. Lycans weaken drastically after their mate dies. Most don’t survive the loss, and if she had sired you, that could have been the only reason she was still alive,” Kyson suggests, and I sigh in frustration.

“But what about Ester not recognizing her?”

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“She did recognize her. Marrissa threatened to expose the truth about Peter if Ester betrayed her.”

“That doesn’t make sense, though. Landeenas have immunity; you would’ve had to protect Peter regardless. Marrissa must’ve known this; it doesn’t seem like a credible threat,” I argue, and his fingers pause again.

“I found that odd, too. Maybe Ester didn’t want Peter to become a target for hunters?”

I shake my head in disagreement. “What safer place than being protected by the King’s guard? Is that why Marrissa refused to fight for me? She mentioned as much, but if so, why didn’t she leave me with Kyson? She must’ve known he was looking for her and the council.”

“I think you’re overthinking it,” Kyson says dismissively. “Ester was under my command; she couldn’t resist it.”

“Unless she drank Landeenas blood?” I suggest tentatively, but Kyson shakes his head in denial.

“Peter hasn’t shifted yet; it doesn’t work like that. His Alpha aura is missing, too, because his bloodline is diluted. His blood wouldn’t affect her against my command,” he explains patiently while I nibble on my lip in thought. The answer is on the tip of my tongue; something isn’t right, and I can almost feel it in my bones.

“Stress is making you overthink,” Kyson suggests, tipping my head back. But one

thing continues to replay in my mind, and I'm almost certain of it. "I think Marrissa was framed," I whisper, and Kyson tips my head back again, forcing me to look up at him.

"You're not defending that woman!"

"What if I am? It feels wrong. I know Marrissa, and she loved me. She would never hurt me like that."

"She's sired to you. Of course, she loves you. You kept her alive," Kyson growls, dipping his face and nipping at my lips, but I turn my face before he can deepen it. Kyson sighs.

"I don't want to fight over this, Azzy. Please. We're having a great afternoon. Don't ruin it," he says, and I swallow hard. Despite that, my mind is made up now more than ever before. Marrissa didn't do it; now the challenge is finding a way to prove it because Kyson refuses to believe he has been wrong all these years—that they got it wrong—but how do I explain her killing all those children or his sister?

"I get it—you want to see good in the woman who raised you, but ..."

"No! It's not that! The more I think about it, little things keep popping up, and now I regret not questioning Ester myself."

"You don't trust what she said under my command?" Kyson asks incredulously.

My brows furrow.

"And are you sure you commanded her, and she couldn't have resisted? No doubt?" I ask him; he falls quiet.

“I am sure Azzy—please no more talking about it tonight, let’s just enjoy the evening without worrying about the drama in our lives.” He gets up, muttering to himself walking toward his bar in the corner.

“I hate when you drink,” I tell him, and he stops, glancing at me over his shoulder.

“I’m only having one.”

“It’s never just one—you know that. You think I don’t notice how much you drank after the—” I trail off, shaking my head. Don’t go there, Azalea, I scold myself.

“It helps.”

“Helps get you drunk and turn into an asshole,” I retort, turning back to the maps that are hard for me to read but which I have a general understanding of by their mountains. When I look up at him again, he’s shaking his head, pouring himself a glass—I lick my tongue.

“I won’t mention anything else tonight if you put the glass down,” I suggest, tilting my head to the side watching him.

“And if I drink it?” he asks, turning with the glass in his hands. But I know he drinks because it numbs him and also helps dampen his urges—still, it isn’t a permanent solution. Glancing around the room, my eyes land on a bookshelf.

“Read to me?”

“You want me to read?” he wonders aloud as he wanders over to the bookcase—but then puts down his glass on the coffee table as he picks out a book.

“Rapunzel?”

I shake my head.

“Prince and the Pauper?”

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I shrug—he pulls it down before retrieving his glass, and I press my lips together in disapproval. He moves over to the bed, propping pillows up before sitting down—only then does he see me glaring at him from across the room.

“It’s one glass!” he growls, patting his chest—I raise an eyebrow at him, moving toward the bed and climbing into his lap. When he picks up his glass again, I snatch it from him, gulping down its contents, fighting back an urge to spit out the burning liquid onto his face—it tastes like jet fuel. It’s absolutely disgusting. So disgusting that it must not be whiskey, but something much stronger.

“Well, that’s what you get for stealing my drink,” he says as I cough and sputter. He deposits me beside him, getting up to take the glass back to the bar. Jumping off the bed, I swipe the bottle before he grabs it.

“Azalea, you can’t drink all of that! You’ll be on the floor after barely a quarter!” he growls angrily.

I tip the bottle to my lips already cringing from its strong smell.

“Go on then—I’ll grab it when you pass out,” he says, folding his arms across his chest. I suck in a deep breath, wondering if holding my breath will make it not burn or taste so bad—I chug some down, feeling like I’m drinking lava, and my eyes water before I gasp for air, choking and coughing—it could definitely be used as some kind of fuel. Kyson reaches for the bottle. I snatch it away, and he growls at me, but I growl back at him.

Thirteen

AZALEA

“Nope! Every drink you drink, I drink then,” I tell him, a mischievous glint in my eye. In response, he snarls, his canines slipping out.

“And according to my calculations, it will take your entire bar for me to catch up with what you’ve drunk in the last week,” I tell him, a smirk playing on my lips.

“Azalea Ivy-Rose Landeena, give me the damn bottle!” Kyson scolds me like I’m a child, his voice laced with frustration.

“Make me!” I challenge, defiantly swallowing another mouthful of the liquid in question. Surprisingly, it doesn’t burn this time. Maybe I scorched my throat and tongue so badly that it killed the nerves? Nevertheless, the more I drink of it, the easier it goes down until it’s like drinking water. As I reach the quarter mark, as Kyson had mentioned, the room begins to sway slightly. My belly feels queasy, and a wave of heat washes over me. I stumble towards the window, desperate for some fresh air. The fire in my veins makes me feel like I’m overheating.

But the movement is not in my best interest. I stumble, feeling as if my body is weighed down by lead.

“What is this stuff?” I manage to slur out, my words barely coherent.

“Sunset Rum and it is 85% alcohol. You usually mix it. You’re lucky to be standing still with how much you’ve drunk. If you weren’t Lycan, you would be on the floor,” Kyson growls at me, his frustration evident as he reaches for the bottle. But I pull it back before he can snatch it from my grasp.



“Well, on the floor I go!” I retort stubbornly, taking another swig of the potent liquid before he manages to wrestle it away from me. As I sway backward, I don’t even realize I am falling until his strong arms catch me around the waist.

“No more!” he growls, nipping at my neck in a mix of anger and concern.

“I don’t like it when you drink!” I slur, my words muddled by the alcohol coursing through my veins.

“And I don’t like you drinking!” he snaps back, his voice filled with worry. But then, his tone softens. “Fine, I won’t drink, but you don’t either. That was stupid,” he says, placing the bottle on the bar before scooping me up effortlessly. My senses are hazy, and I can’t feel my face or my tongue as I try to feel it between my teeth.

“Azalea, you’ll bite your tongue off!” Kyson snaps, panic lacing his voice as he jams his fingers into my mouth to prevent me from hurting myself.

“What?” I try to speak around his finger, but it invades my mouth. My speech is slurred and incomprehensible. He growls in frustration before suddenly jerking back, sucking on his index finger, which is now bleeding. Confusion washes over me until I see my own teeth marks on his finger.

“I did that?” I manage to utter in disbelief.

“You think?” he retorts sarcastically, shaking his head before guiding me towards the bed. He lays me down gently, but I feel so heavy, weighed down by the effects of the potent drink. How could anyone enjoy feeling like this? It’s so disorienting. Kyson moves away from me momentarily, and I struggle to keep my eyes open as darkness threatens to swallow me whole.

“Kyson,” I slur, attempting to roll my head, which feels like a bowling ball on my

shoulders.

“I’m just going to chuck another log on the fire.”

I watch him, waiting for him to sneak back to his bar. Surprisingly, he doesn’t. Instead, he climbs back into bed beside me, and I retrieve the book we had been reading earlier. He drags my dead-weight body on top of him before opening the book.

“Don’t do that again,” he whispers, his lips brushing against my forehead. My eyelids feel impossibly heavy as I struggle to stay awake while he reads, but darkness engulfs me after just a few minutes.

The following morning, I am abruptly woken by the mindlink. Damian is trying to wake Kyson, and my head pounds mercilessly. Groggily sitting up, I find Kyson still dead to the world when a knock on the door startles me. Dragging myself from the bed, I answer the door with groggy confusion.

Trey stands on the other side, and I blink up at him, trying to make sense of the situation.

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“What’s wrong?” I ask before quickly mindlinking Damian.

‘Damian, stop. I’m up. I’ll wake him, but stop yelling,’ I tell him, my thoughts filled with a mix of annoyance and exhaustion.

‘I’m not yelling. Wake him up. I’m downstairs, and we have an issue,’ Damian mindlinks back sternly. I refocus my attention on Trey.

Trey sniffs me suspiciously. “You’ve been drinking?” he asks, his voice tinged with concern.

“Stupidly, yes. Help me wake Kyson. Damian was mindlinking,” I admit, feeling a sense of guilt wash over me. Pushing the door open wider, I let Trey inside. He moves towards the bed and shakes Kyson awake while I quickly retrieve my robe. But Trey’s sudden shriek catches my attention, and I glance at him in surprise as Kyson hugs him tightly, almost crushing Trey against his chest. Trey manages to push himself free from Kyson’s grip, clearly bewildered.

“Stop, Azzy,” Kyson mumbles, his voice filled with sleep and confusion. I can’t help but laugh at the absurdity of the situation as Kyson suddenly sniffs Trey’s hair, causing Trey to recoil. Kyson’s eyes fly open, and Trey goes flying as panic courses through the bond as he lurches upright. His eyes go to me, and he lets out a breath, noticing I am fine, before glaring at Trey.

“Why the fuck were you in my bed?!” Kyson snaps, rubbing his eyes.

“I was waking you up, not climbing into bloody bed with you!” Trey retorts, his

frustration evident as he gets to his feet. He shakes his head, muttering under his breath about Alpha Kings being idiots. Kyson glares at Trey's retreating figure before turning his attention back to me.

"What's going on?"

"Damian needs you downstairs," I inform Kyson, my own headache intensifying with each passing moment.

"He's back?" Kyson asks, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

"You were drinking?"

Kyson shakes his head in disbelief.

"No. You did enough of that to affect my damn bond. Thanks for the headache," Kyson says sarcastically, getting to his feet. He grabs a shirt and quickly pulls it on before walking over to me. He kisses my head tenderly before tying my robe together.

"Are you coming?"

"I'm allowed? I thought I would have to fight you to go down there," I reply, my voice laced with a mixture of surprise and relief.

"You wouldn't win," he chuckles softly.

"Really?" I challenge playfully.

"Mm," he hums, grabbing my hand gently.

“I reckon I could take you,” I tease, a smirk playing on my lips.

“I reckon you could try,” he laughs, leading me out of the room.

He kisses the back of my hand before leading me downstairs.

He yawns and shakes his head. “I was actually having a good sleep until Trey climbed into my damn bed to snuggle with me!” he growls, his annoyance evident.

“I did no such thing! And you’re a terrible hugger,” Trey retorts.

“Azalea doesn’t mind,” Kyson says, his voice filled with affection.

“Yeah, probably because you didn’t crush her in your armpit like you did to me,” Trey interjects, causing both of us to chuckle as they continue to bicker. When we hear a commotion outside.

I can see cars lined up, and the sound of Damian arguing with someone reaches my ears.

Stepping outside, I find Damian engaged in a heated argument with a woman, the car door blocking my view of her face, but for some reason, her voice is familiar.

“Bloody hell, woman! How many times do I have to tell you? I am the King’s beta! I live here! What do you think? I would bring you here if I didn’t?” Damian snaps angrily. Suddenly, the sound of a crying child fills the air.

“Great! Now you woke him,” Damian mutters, standing upright and revealing the toddler in his arms.

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“Give him here! Give me my son!” the woman demands, her voice filled with desperation and anger.

“No! Do you want him? Then get out of the damn car!” Damian retorts firmly, his frustration palpable.

“Man, they have done nothing but bitch and fight the entire way back,” Liam groans, clearly exasperated by the situation.

“Fine! But if your King abuses me for trespassing, you can bet your damn ass I will whoop his!” the feisty woman warns defiantly.

“Good! Whoop his ass! He is right behind you. Let’s see what you got, short stuff!” Damian challenges her, his voice dripping with sarcasm. The woman turns around suddenly, her movements swift and fierce. I gasp and rock back on my heels as recognition washes over me. She still has the same face, though she has aged, she is more womanly than scrawny like she was at the orphanage.

“What is going on?” Kyson growls, his tone filled with both confusion and concern. Damian rubs a hand down his face wearily, looking both exhausted and defeated.

“Kyson, this is Tandi. Tandi, this is his royal highness, King Kyson, the one you want to beat,” Damian mocks, but my attention is fixated on the woman before me. Our eyes meet, and her mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water.

“Taylor?” I choke out, barely able to believe my own words.

“Ivy?” she stammers in shock.

“Taylor?” Damian says, taken aback. But my feet are already moving as I race towards her.

“Oh my gosh, it’s really you!” I shriek with joy, throwing my arms around her in a tight embrace.

“What are you doing here?” Taylor cries, clutching me just as tightly. Tears stream down both of our faces as we hold each other tightly.

“Wait! What about Abbie?” she asks, holding me at arm’s length to search my face for answers.

“She’s here. I can’t believe you’re alive!” I cry, my voice filled with a mixture of disbelief and overwhelming happiness. I cup Taylor’s face in my hands, cherishing this long-awaited reunion.

“Hang on, what is going on? Who is Taylor?” Damian interrupts, his confusion evident in his voice. I tear my gaze away from Taylor to look at Damian, a smile still plastered on my face.

Chapter

Fourteen

AZALEA

Damian stares at me, his brow furrow in confusion, mirroring my own bewilderment. What does he mean? Who is Taylor? She is standing right in front of him, so why does he seem so perplexed?

“Hello, can someone tell me what the fuck is going on? Did you give me your whore name?” Damian demands, his voice laced with frustration. My breath hitches at the derogatory term he used for her, and yet she doesn’t back down from him. In fact, she snarls, spinning on her heel to meet his gaze with a fiery glare.

“I’m Taylor,” she snaps, her words dripping with defiance. “It’s my birth name. The name I go by now is my middle name.”

Damian takes an involuntary step back, his expression pained, as if her words had struck a nerve.

“And I want you to hand over my son before you drop him,” Taylor growls, extending her arms toward the air, a desperate plea in her voice.

“Not until I know you’re not going to run off on me again,” Damian retorts, his tone laced with caution. As I glance at the bundled-up toddler sleeping peacefully in Damian’s arms, I notice a smirk forming on Liam’s face. He exchanges glances with Dustin before chuckling under his breath.

“Give me my son, you prick, before I cut your balls off,” she snarls at him, pulling my attention away from Dustin, who I am still yet to release from my command. Using the mindlink, I send Trey a message telling him to get to Abbie and bring her here as soon as possible. A few seconds later, he darts back inside the castle as he rushes away from beside me.

“Whoa, whoa, hold on a minute. What the fuck is happening? Who is she? Why is she here?” Kyson interjects, his voice filled with confusion. Damian is the one to respond, his weariness evident in his voice.

“Tandi, Taylor, whatever you want to call her, she used to be one of the girls from the brothel,” Damian sighs, rubbing a hand across his face while still cradling the child.



He winces as he rocks the toddler as if experiencing physical pain.

Damian huffs and looks rather exhausted, as if he has tried to explain this story to everyone a thousand times. “She is also my mate,” Damian says, scrubbing a hand down his face while holding the child closer and rocking him with one arm, wincing as he does so.

“Tandi, I don’t go by Taylor anymore. She died a long time ago,” Taylor says, and I get that. To me, Ivy feels dead, too. I understand that feeling all too well. Ivy, the person I used to be, is like a distant memory. I no longer identify with that name or the person I once was. The experiences of the past few months have transformed me into someone entirely different. Having experienced so much in the past few months, I don’t believe it will ever be possible for me to relate to the person I once was.

Kyson gapes at Damian in disbelief, his shock impossible to conceal. Yet, it is less surprising to me that Taylor is Damian’s mate than it is to discover she is still alive after all this time. Mrs.Daley had told us she was dead, so learning she had been forced into a brothel is horrifying.

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“What the heck is going on around here? Seems like everyone is finding their damn mates these days. So much for it being a rare occurrence,” Kyson mutters, nudging me playfully.

“Yeah, I sure as shit don’t want to be catching that damn disease. I will need to get me some mate repellent. Ain’t that right, Dusty poo,” Liam chimes in, joining our conversation. Dustin clearly doesn’t appreciate the nickname Liam threw his way and retaliates by flipping him off while Damian glares at him. I wonder what Liam said to make Damian so upset.

“Well, Tandi, I’m Azalea. Nice to see you again,” I smile. Her brows furrow in confusion, and she looks at me oddly.

“Why does that name sound so familiar to me?” she ponders. “And what are you doing here, and where is Abbie?” she asks, trying to take her son from Damian, but Damian holds him higher, not allowing it.

“It’s a long story, and Abbie?” I smile to myself as I hear her coming up behind us. The sound of hurried footsteps catches my attention, and I turn to see Abbie stopping in her tracks as she stumbles out of the door. In a state of shock, Trey grips her arm to keep her steady as her mouth opens and closes in shock. As Abbie looks at me with the same shock that I felt upon seeing Taylor, I find myself sputtering as I see the look on her face. She looks at me for confirmation, as if she doesn’t believe what she’s seeing.

Several steps behind her, Gannon and Tyson emerge from the castle. I watch as Abbie’s lip quivers when I nod to her, telling her that Taylor is here before her feet

are moving quickly, and she collides with Tandi. There is barely enough time for Tandi to catch her before Abbie's legs and arms are wrapped around her.

"I thought you were dead," Abbie gushes, squeezing her tight, and I move closer. Taylor, who is now Tandi, reaches over, squishing us together as she embraces us. "How, how are you here?" Abbie says, placing her feet down as tears stream down her face. Kyson, Gannon, and Damian all just stand there gawking at us while we fuss over each other when Tandi turns to Damian and pins him with her glare.

"My son— now. I did what you asked," she says, earning a look from Damian. But it is Gannon who nudges Damian to hand her son back.

"Give her son back. She looks like she bites, like an angry gremlin," Gannon mumbles.

"She fucking does. She's already bitten me twice while throwing a fit," Damian growls irritably as he reluctantly relinquishes the child.

"You have a child?" Abbie gasps, peering into the blankets to catch a glimpse of the sleeping toddler in Tandi's arms. Turning towards Gannon, she extends her arms, silently indicating that she wants to hold Tyson.

As Gannon passes Tyson to Abbie, the little boy squirms and reaches out for her. The sight of Abbie cradling her son, reunited with our long-lost friend, fills me with both relief for Tandi and Abbie and longing for the life I lost.

Chapter

Fifteen

AZALEA

“Who is this little one?” Tandi asks while reaching out and gripping Tyson’s little fingers as Abbie holds him. I swallow; in their joyful chatter about their little ones, I stand on the outskirts. Tandi’s grip on Tyson’s tiny fingers feels like a reminder of what I have lost, the little fingers I will never get to touch. The warmth of Kyson’s chest against my back only amplifies the ache in my heart, his breath on my neck a bittersweet caress.

“One day, my love,” he says, and I nod at his words. He pulls me closer as if he can shield me from the heartache I feel right now. Yet as Kyson holds me close, his touch tracing the outline of where my belly used to be round with life, I can’t help but feel the emptiness within me grow. His arms around me are both comforting and suffocating, my own hands now cradling nothing but a hollow space beneath my clothes.

His arms circle my waist, his hands sliding over the backs of my hands as he laces his fingers through mine. I let out a breath, looking up at him as he leans down and rests his chin on my shoulder. He pecks my cheek, and I turn my attention away from them to Damian, who is watching his newfound mate worriedly. I focus on him, not wanting to see them bond over their babies while my arms lay empty. While happiness for them brims in my heart, it is overshadowed by the raw grief that engulfs me. Their world of baby coos and parental bliss feels distant and unreachable as I grapple with the void left by my own loss.

“What’s wrong?” I ask Damian, who snaps himself out of his thoughts, to look at me.

“Gannon, Abbie, take Tandi to my quarters and help her settle in, please. I need a word with the King and Queen,” Damian says, and Tandi’s head whips to the side to stare at me. Her eyes widen when recognition hits her at what Damian called me like it escaped her earlier when I mentioned it.

“Azalea, Queen Azalea Landeena, I knew I heard that name,” she exclaims.

“You have heard of the Landeena’s?” I ask her, shocked, because I know she can’t read like us unless she has since learned.

“Yes, of course,” she says when Kyson huffs behind me.

“Everyone has. It is in every history book, love. You and Abbie were the only ones oblivious to who they were, who you are,” he purrs beside my ear when Tandi speaks up while shaking her head.

“No, I can’t read. No, I heard the name at the brothel when hunters come in sometimes. Amazing the things you hear when you aren’t supposed to be listening,” she says, blowing out a breath.

“Hunters?” Kyson asks her, lifting his head to look at her.

“Yeah, the ones that work for the council, Larkin, introduced me to a couple of them, and they creeped me out,” she says with a shrug.

“You know Larkin?” Kyson asks her.

“Yes, she does, and that is what I need to speak with you both about. Because I just stole his son,” Damian says behind me. Kyson straightens at his words, and I look at Tandi’s son in her arms, knowing this is going to cause issues, yet I am still stuck on the hunters working with the council, and clearly, that is where Kyson’s thoughts are as well.

“You said the hunters work with the council?” Kyson asks Tandi. She nods her head and shrugs.

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“Yeah, I have seen them a few times. Larkin and Crux seem pretty buddy, buddy with them. They hold meetings at the brothel. They all wear patches and call themselves the rebels.” Her brows furrow as if she is thinking hard, trying to remember some detail.

“Mr Crux holds the meetings. He has worked with them for years, and they have meetings yearly for some blood ceremony or some crap. Bloody freaks always drinking each other’s blood from a cup, and they call me diseased since I am rogue, those fuckers sitting around drinking blood as if they think they are bloodsuckers,” she says with a swift shake of her head.

“Did you say blood?” I ask, a little shocked by her words. Why would the hunter be drinking blood?

Tandi nods. “Yep, like clockwork. Every February, the first day of the month is the annual meeting. They talk shit and spout changes within the council. Dawning their stupid insignia about how Crux will take over once the royals are dead,” she says with a shrug as if we should know this already.

Turning my head, I look up at Kyson, confused, but I have a feeling they aren’t drinking each other’s blood, but Kyson’s. By the look on his face, he has drawn the same conclusion.

“Dustin has some documents you will want to see, too. We got Alpha Brock and Dean. They have been trafficking rogues for years,” Damian says before turning to look at Gannon, who walks over to escort Abbie and Tandi inside the castle.

I want to go with them, but now I have more pressing matters that I refuse to be left out of, and for once, Kyson lets me join him, grabbing my hand and leading us back inside toward his office. Even so, as Damian scrambles up the two measly stairs, he hisses, grasping his side, and Kyson reaches out to steady him as he is clearly in pain.

“I’m fine, bastards shot me. Liam got most out, but I still have a bullet lodged in my shoulder, but fuck, it still kills,” Damian groans.

“Why didn’t you let Liam dig it out?” he asks, and Damian glares at him in response.

“No way is that fool coming near me with a knife while I am awake! It was bad enough he had his knife digging ways with me while I was unconscious. I am not going to watch him get his jollies off while carving me up,” Damian groans again as Liam flies past, gripping his shoulder and causing Damian to growl as his back arches in pain.

“He is just upset I tried out his mate before him, or maybe he is upset he didn’t get a piece of the Liam sausage,” Liam taunts, and my eyes widen. Damian swings at him, Kyson steps in his path and absorbs the brunt of what Damian hurls at him and narrowly misses Liam.

“Liam, go!” Kyson orders, and Liam quickly saunters off, chuckling to himself as he does so.

“Permission to kill the bastard,” Damian growls.

“Permission denied. Come on, let’s get you cleaned up, and I will deal with Liam later,” Kyson says, helping haul Damian toward the office.

“Azzy, are you coming with us, or are you going to see your friend?” Kyson asks over his shoulder. I rush ahead and open the office door.

“I’m coming with you,” I answer, and he nods, assisting Damian inside.

## Chapter

### Sixteen

#### AZALEA

The gravity of our predicament hangs heavy in the air, casting a shadow over our every move. Damian has committed a crime, snatching the child of a council elder, and now we are left to grapple with the consequences.

“Larkin will come searching for his son,” Damian remarks. “Tandi mentioned that he visits every weekend. Unless news of our actions has already spread.”

“I will handle Larkin. From the information I’ve gathered, it seems he isn’t involved in this scheme. Crux, on the other hand, is deeply entrenched. But curiously, I couldn’t find any trace of Larkin’s name in any of the documents.”

Yet despite that, the council now had some answering to do. What were these secret meetings held for? And now, it was painfully evident that the council had some connection to the missing children and women that continue to be discovered. Kyson has more than enough reason to initiate a thorough investigation into the council elders themselves.

“So, if the council is involved in trafficking rogues alongside Alpha Brock, what does that have to do with the hunters?” Damian ponders aloud, genuine confusion etching across his face. The notion that the council would share the King’s blood with those responsible for hunting their own kind seems absurd.

“I don’t know,” Kyson replies, his brow furrowing in frustration. “It defies all logic.



The very purpose of the council is to unite us against the hunters, to ensure the relationships between us and the packs remain strong and protected.”

“Tandi told me they killed her daughter when she tried to run. Alpha Brock killed his own daughter and drowned her in front of Tandi. I want to go over the rogue children later to see if I can match any of the children to her daughter,” Damian tells us.

Kyson nods to him, and I feel my heart break for Tandi. The mere thought of witnessing such a horrifying act sends shivers down my spine.

“So, you think that is how they kept the rogues they trafficked in line? They used their children. But how does that explain the women we have found?” I ask, and my brows furrow, remembering all the trafficked rogue women Kyson had on his computer.

“Probably didn’t come quietly, so they killed them,” Damian offers, wiping a hand down his face.

I listen to them discuss everything and Gannon comes to join them along with Liam, who Damian seems to get along with for the most part. Yet I notice Gannon remains between them both as they go over everything they know. Yet Tandi’s words kept replaying in my head. Talking about how Crux would take over once the royals are dead. Crux technically has Landeena blood.

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Hearing a knock on the door, I glance around to see Kyson get up and answer it. When he opens the door, I see Dustin standing there, completely still in the doorway.

“I release you from my command,” I say before waving my hand at him to come in, still lost in my troubled thoughts of Tandi’s words. Had he not crushed me in his hug, I would not have recognized I even released him yet.

“Thank god! Do you have any idea how annoying it is not being able to touch you?” Dustin growls as he crashes on top of me. I let out a breath and hug him back when Kyson clears his throat.

“Gay or not, get off my mate!” Kyson growls, wiggling his fingers at me to come to him. I roll my eyes, feeling his jealousy burn hot through the bond. Dustin chuckles but climbs off me, where I am pinned beneath him on the armchair. He kisses my forehead but lets me stand, and I wander over to Kyson, who is seated at his desk. He swivels in his chair before pulling me on his lap.

Dustin moves to Liam’s side, and both have their heads bowed down. They go over the documents Dustin had with him that he gave to Gannon earlier.

“You’ve been quiet,” Kyson murmurs next to my ear. I have been stuck in my mind on one thing Tandi said, but there was something that didn’t make sense. The only part of the entire thing, and that is Claire, Kyson’s sister.

“What are you thinking?” he purrs, tucking me closer to him as I stare at the Kingdoms on the map. More importantly, my parents’ Kingdom.

“I want to go home,” I tell him, and everyone in the room falls silent to look at me.

“You are home,” Kyson growls as worry bleeds into the bond, but I shake my head. Something is pulling me back to where it started, as if it would somehow make sense if I did.

“The answer is at home. I know we are missing something,” I tell him.

“There is nothing there for you anymore, Azalea.”

“You’re wrong. My family’s history is there. My history is there,” I tell him, turning on his lap to look at him.

“It’s out of the question. Do you have any idea how much work goes into rebuilding a kingdom? Getting the security and everything sorted? I can’t leave here, Azalea,” he snaps, clearly not wanting to debate this.

“I don’t mean to live there, Kyson. But the answers are there. We are missing something. So much isn’t adding up. Crux’s involvement doesn’t make sense.”

“Yes, and as Damian and I were discussing earlier, we will go to the council and present our case. At the very least, we need to make sure Tandi’s son is kept with her and Brock’s pack is dismantled. At least then, we can find out what Crux’s involvement with the hunters is. There has to be a reason, or Tandi is wrong, and they were newer council members. The council was built to protect the werewolf and Lycan way of life. They are bound to the pact they swore to,” Kyson explains.

“When did you take over the council?” I ask.

“After your parents were killed. The council went to the next in-line Kingdom, or the next Kingdom of reigning power,” but see, that is where I am struggling to keep up.

If the council is bound to their holder, why would Marrissa kill Claire? She worked for the hunters, or supposedly did.

## Chapter

### Seventeen

#### AZALEA

The emotion coursing through the bond tells me Kyson is convinced it's nothing but a coincidence, his mind rejecting the notion that the woman who raised me could be innocent. He needs to pin the blame on her, but after everything, I'm uncertain. Doubt lingers like a fog in my mind, obscuring the truth. I need something - a piece of the puzzle, a key to unlock my memory of that night.

Fragments and flashes flicker in my mind's eye. I see Marrissa, her figure adorned in the hunter's uniform, the insignia on her chest. But why do I sense that she didn't call the hunters in?

How does this all connect to the missing rogue women and children? So many questions remain unanswered or shrouded in doubt. The threads of Ester and Trey's story intertwine with Tandi's, creating a web of intrigue and confusion. As they discuss what to do next, my eyes meet Trey's, a flicker of understanding passing between us. His gaze shifts back to the box of documents he's rummaging through, as if searching for a hidden truth he feels too.

"How did you know I'm alive?" My question hangs in the air, drawing everyone's attention like a magnet.

"The sire bond. I still feel it. I was sired to you when you were born. It wasn't until years later when it went dormant that I truly believed you were dead, like everyone

else, the bond is always there but i've learned to shut it out, or it would have driven me insane,” Trey answers.

The weight of his words settles upon us all before fading into the background. Yet, for some reason, they sit oddly with me.

“What if that is the link to the dead children and rogue women?” The thought escapes my lips before I realize it, causing everyone to stop once more. Kyson leans forward from where we sit together, his lips grazing my shoulder.

“What are you talking about?” His question echoes the curiosity burning in the eyes of the others, while Trey seems lost in the depths of his thoughts.

“When did the children start going missing and turning up dead?” My words hang heavy in the air.

“After your parents’ murders,” Kyson and Damian respond simultaneously, their voices overlapping as they respond simultaneously.

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“Do you have a list of the approximate ages of those children?” Dustin clears his throat at my next question.

“The archives hold lists of those found and locations, but not all of them were identified,” he admits.

“And the rogue women? When did they start getting killed?”

“Sporadically. Sometimes entire rogue camps are found dead,” Gannon adds, prompting me to bite my lip in thought. “We didn’t really see a pattern to it.”

“What are you thinking?” Kyson’s voice rumbles from behind me as I turn on his lap, facing him directly.

“A pattern.” My response is met with skepticism, doubt etched into the lines on their faces.

“There is no pattern. If it were a serial killer, there would be a pattern, but there isn’t. No preference for type or ages, nothing. The only link is they were rogue and spanned half the countryside,” Damian counters, his words laced with frustration and confusion.

“That’s because the hunters aren’t killing them just to kill them,” I retort, my voice growing stronger as conviction takes hold. Trey gasps beside me, his eyes widening with realization.

“They’re hunting you! They know you’re alive!” His revelation sends him rushing

out the door before anyone can stop him. Kyson leans back heavily in his chair as silence descends once more, the weight of the truth sinking into our bones. I know I'm onto something.

"If that's true, they would have had to know you exist. Which I suppose Marrissa could have told them, but what she just had a sudden change of heart and couldn't go through with it?" Kyson questions.

Damian scoffs dismissively, at Kyson's words.

"Unless she was never part of it," I counter, my words tinged with desperation. Kyson growls behind me, the anger simmering just beneath the surface. How can he not see what I'm seeing?

"Just hear me out. What if she didn't have anything to do with it? If what Ester says is true, then Marrissa was sired to me. She wouldn't let them kill me. So if she were part of it, why wouldn't she just hand me over to the hunters or tell the hunters that I am here? Why would she run with me?" I can feel doubt swirling around them as I pose these questions.

"Okay, say it's true. Why do you remember her wearing the hunter's uniform that night? And why would she kill my sister? And who else could have been their inside person?" Kyson's voice is sharp with frustration, his words a shield against the unsettling truth. I know I'm right, the more I think about it, the more it makes sense.

"What if she didn't kill Claire? I know you want to believe it was my mother, but why would she wait years, working here and not just help the hunters get inside the castle grounds again?"

"Because she's working her damn way up the ladder, that's why!" he snaps, his voice echoing with anger and disbelief.

“Or maybe you don’t want to face the fact that there was a mole among your people! I don’t believe she killed Claire. I think she’s been framed!” I snap back.

“And what purpose does framing her serve? If she’s innocent, why would she come to my kingdom if not to kill us too?” he retorts, standing up so abruptly that I have to catch myself on his desk to avoid slipping off his lap.

“You’re wrong!” he declares before storming out of his office, his footsteps echoing in the empty corridor. Damian growls and clicks his tongue before following him, their departure leaving a void in the room. But nothing I say seems to make him see reason. He needs a villain, and my mother, or the woman who raised me, fits the bill perfectly. He doesn’t want to acknowledge any fault within his own Kingdom. He is too caught up in finding it in mine.

“I know I’m right. I need to go home. I need to remember,” I breathe.

“Azalea, he won’t let you leave here,” Gannon warns.

“Good thing it isn’t up to him then. He can join me or not, but either way, I’m going home,” I assure him.

“For what? You can’t just leave,” Gannon protests.

“The Kingdom remains as it was left, untouched. We need answers, and the only way to get them is by starting from scratch,” I explain, my voice steady and resolute.

Gannon clutches at his hair anxiously, his face etched with conflicting emotions. “And if you’re wrong? We’ve been investigating this since the first kingdom fell - the first Kingdom, Azalea! We would have found proof by now! We know the hunters are involved; we know Marrissa was their leader.”



“No, you think you know,” I correct him gently as we both exit together, stepping into the unknown. “And what reason did she have for keeping me alive?”

They don’t want to see any fault in their investigations, but they are ruled by fear and anger that has been simmering for years. As for me, being an outsider gives me a different perspective, a fresh pair of eyes unclouded by preconceived notions. If only they would listen... I knew Marrissa, and one thing I’m certain of is that she loved me as if I was her own. I have no idea why she ran from Trey and the Landeena guard, but I know she must have had a reason.

All I need now is to get Kyson to start thinking with his head instead of letting the vendetta he holds against the woman who raised me cloud his judgment. The bond between us throbs with his implosive nature, his frustration and anger threatening to consume us both. As I reach out through our bond, what catches me off guard is the knowing that he is in his old quarters.

Chapter

Eighteen

### AZALEA

The room is dimly lit, the only light coming from a small window casting a beam on the figure sitting on the floor. He is hunched over with his head in his hands, his fingers gripping tightly on the photograph. Taking a look at the guard that followed, I shake my head, warning them to leave me with him. Closing the door and turning around, I approach him.

The room is heavy with the weight of his sorrow, a thick fog that clings to every surface and has left traces of anguish in its wake. His gaze is distant and haunted as he holds the photo, the only connection to the sister he had lost. As I approach, I can feel the intensity of his emotions through our bond, a storm of sadness and anger swirling within him. Yet, all of my own anger dissipates when I look at him, lost in his grief. His eyes meet mine for a fleeting moment before returning to the photo, a reminder of the void in his life since he lost her.

His anger had forced him to shift, yet now all I feel through the bond is immense sadness. Soul-crushing pain courses through the bond and inward pent-up rage.

As I stop in front of him, his voice hushed, he utters, "This picture was taken a week before she was tragically taken from us." Intrigued, I pause by his side, drawn in by the weight of his emotions. His arms open wide, inviting me to sit on his lap, and I nestle into his comforting embrace.

"She was going to name her son after our father. They decided on Valor. That was my father's name," Kyson tells me, and I take the photo from his hands and look at it.

“You and Claire were close,” I state. Kyson nods slowly, his face hidden against my neck as he breathes in my familiar scent.

“She was my best friend. And I couldn’t save her,” he murmurs softly, his words laden with a mix of affection and regret. A pang of empathy courses through me, mirroring the pain that reverberates within him.

Recalling the events that unfolded, Kyson’s voice trembles as he continues, “When I returned home that day, Clarice asked about Claire’s whereabouts. She mentioned that she hadn’t seen her all day, and her quarters were locked. Worried, I used my master key to gain entry, assuming she must be asleep and unaware of our return through mindlink.” His memory hangs heavy in the air, each word laced with a sense of helplessness.

“You found her, didn’t you?” I ask him, my voice trembling with a mix of dread and curiosity.

“Yes. She didn’t come down for dinner, so I used the key to get in. I wish I could erase that day from my mind, but no matter how much I try to, I can only remember how I found her,” Kyson says while wrapping his arms around my chest.

“She was only a week out from giving birth. I saw her that morning, and she insisted I go. Claire refused to come with me and refused my offer to stay. Said she had something to take care of,” Kyson tells me, and I swallow. The lump in my throat grows larger as he speaks, as if each word carries the weight of the tragedy that unfolded before him.

“She was still in her pajamas, as if she went back to bed after I left. Her mate was dead beside her, his throat was cut, and a dagger was in his chest.”

I can almost feel the sharp pang of anguish that grips Kyson’s heart as he recounts the

horrifying scene. It's as if he's transported back to that fateful day, reliving every moment that shattered his world.

"Claire, I could tell she fought. She had stab wounds on her hands, one of her fingers was sliced off. Yet it was pointless; she ultimately suffered the same fate as her mate. We found copious amounts of wolfsbane and silver in her blood work from the autopsy report. She had needle marks on her neck and thighs. The wolfsbane weakened her. Yet, it was not enough to kill her before Valor was cut from her. I believe she gave up after that. She didn't care to fight once she lost him. She never even shifted. It was as if she accepted her death and no longer wanted to live without her son," Kyson tells me.

The room falls silent, the weight of his words hanging heavily in the air. In that moment, I understand the depth of Kyson's pain and the scars that will forever mark his soul.

"Kyson, I'm...."

"I should have saved her," Kyson's voice trembles with regret, his words hanging heavy in the air. "I should have been here. I could have saved my nephew," he continues, his voice choked with anguish. "Just as I should have saved our daughter." The weight of his words settles upon me, causing my brows to furrow, my heart to ache.

"But I am always late. Always, too late," Kyson says, and I stop.

"Our daughter?" I whisper, my voice barely audible as I struggle to comprehend his revelation.

The room falls silent, the gravity of his confession enveloping us both. Kyson's voice breaks through the stillness, his pain palpable. "Another person I failed," he murmurs,

his voice heavy with self-condemnation. “The most important of them all, and I wasn’t here.”

His words pierce through me like a dagger, leaving me breathless and desperate for reassurance. Without hesitation, I reach out and grip his trembling fingers, seeking solace in our shared grief. Kyson’s tears mingle with the anguish in his voice as he continues to speak, revealing a truth that shatters me.

“No, I was too early,” I protest, my voice shaky but refusing to believe he could know the gender. “You don’t know that.”

A bitter smile tugs at the corners of his lips as he meets my gaze, his eyes filled with a mixture of sadness and acceptance. “I do know that, Azzy,” he whispers, his voice heavy with emotion. “I had Doc check.” With a gentle movement, he reaches into the bedside drawer and retrieves a leather box. Placing it delicately on my lap, he waits for me to open it.

My hands tremble as I grasp the box, feeling its weight in my trembling palms. Reluctantly, I lift the lid, afraid of what I might find within. As I peer inside, my breath catches in my throat. A tiny pink teddy bear urn rests within the confines of the box, its delicate form a painful reminder of what should have been.

“I had her cremated,” Kyson’s voice quivers, his words dripping with anguish. “I didn’t want her little body rotting in a box for the worms to eat.” The tears well up in my eyes as I gaze upon the heartbreaking urn no bigger than my palm, that holds the remains of our daughter. In that moment, the weight of our loss crashes over me, threatening to drown me in a sea of sorrow.

The room seems to close in around us as we sit there, bound by grief and haunted by what could have been. The silence is suffocating, broken only by the sound of our shattered hearts.

Kyson gently untangles the chain wrapped around the bear's throat, carefully pulling it out and revealing a gleaming crystal pendant. Holding the teddy bear in his hand, he places it delicately into my open palm. Instantly, a wave of sadness crashes over me, crushing my heart into a million shattered fragments once again.

Kyson sweeps my hair to the side before kissing my neck and placing the chain around my neck. I lift the cerulean blue stone closer to my eyes, its vibrant hue captivating me in its ethereal glow. "Same color as your eyes," Kyson whispers, as he does up the clasp.

"I had some of her ashes placed inside, so she would always be with us. Wherever we went, she would always be a part of us. I wanted to give it to you when I brought her home, but I didn't want to upset you," Kyson murmurs as I brush my thumb over the face of the teddy. I nod because it is all I can do, words failing me. I can feel his heartache as if he screams it out at our loss.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:45 am*

“I won’t fail you again. So if you want to go home, I will take you. I’m sorry I yelled at you. You have no idea how hard it is to believe one thing for years, only to find out I was chasing a ghost all that time,” Kyson whispers while tugging me closer. Kyson buries his face in my neck and nips at my jaw. Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, mirroring the ache within his soul.

“She didn’t do it,” I whisper.

“I’m starting to believe you are right. I believe I have spent the last decade chasing a phantom,” Kyson says.

“But if I am right, Kyson. That means someone on your guard or staff did it,” I tell him, and he nods against my shoulder.

“And if you are wrong?” he asks in return.

“Then I will drop it. But I need to be sure. I know Marrissa could have panicked and did it. I am not ruling that out, but with the evidence, it doesn’t make sense why she would wait so long.”

“Because she wasn’t in the castle. She was a gardener and a stable hand before that. She had no access to my sister or me for the first two years,” Kyson says, and I chew my lip. Now I am questioning everything again, yet the pull to find answers is more vital than ever. But how did Marrissa tie into everything? Because if she was part of it, why would she sacrifice herself to save me?

I turn on his lap, so I can face him, and Kyson grips my face in his hands when I stare

down at the small urn in my hands. “Thank you,” I whisper when he tilts my face back up to his. He lets out a breath before pressing his forehead against mine.

“All is not lost as long as we have each other,” he says, pressing his lips to my forehead.

“Come on. We should make arrangements to leave and prepare for the council. I have no doubt that they will be on our doorstep soon. I want to be prepared for when they get here. I don’t want to be surprised again,” Kyson tells me.

“And what of Larkin? Will Damian be punished?”

“No because I am going to show you how to use that voice of yours.”

“How? They have your blood in their system. And what, I just command them to accept that Tandi is to remain here and for him to forget his son?” I ask.

“Well, first you learn how to command me, then once you have mastered that, you show the council who the ruling family is. Who you are,” Kyson tells me.

“You’re going to let me command you?” I laugh, trying to picture him kissing my feet or quacking like a duck.

“Well, when you say it like that, I am not so sure whether I want you commanding me,” he laughs.

“I think I like the sound of making you my bitch,” I laugh, and he growls, snapping and gnashing his teeth at me.

“We’ll see, but first, I want to shower. Then I need to feed you. In case you are right, I don’t want you accepting help from anyone of my guard, only Trey and the



Landeena guard, Damian, Liam or me.”

“And Abbie? Though out of all those names, I’m surprised that Liam, your most unhinged guard, is on it.”

“Yes, and Abbie, just until we know who can be trusted, and Liam can be trusted that much I do know because no one loved Claire more than Liam,” Kyson says, and I nod knowing that, but I am surprised he would trust Liam over Dustin when he stands abruptly and his words register.

“Liam loved Claire?”

“Claire was the only woman he loved. Her death broke him, he’s always been crazy, but her death broke something in that man. He was her guard and lover.”

“Wait, what do you mean?” I ask hesitantly, unsure if I can take more pieces to this puzzle.

“Another time, that is not a memory you ask him about either, Azzy, promise. If he wants you to know, he’d tell you, but there is a reason we tolerate Liam’s craziness,” Kyson adds, and I drop the subject, knowing some things aren’t any of my business.

I clutch him tighter, wrapping my legs around his waist and gripping his shoulder with my free hand.

“Come, my Queen. We have a kingdom to raise from the dead.”

“And a council to burn the ground,” I tell him, and he growls.

Chapter

Nineteen

AZALEA

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:45 am*

For the first time in ages, I wake up feeling wide awake. My mind is running a million miles a minute. Kyson is asleep beside me, his breath moving across the back of my neck, where his face is buried in my hair. The room is still a little dark, though, despite some light filtering through the drapes from the rising sun. It must be quite early, as I don't hear any workers or movement about the castle.

Moving under the blankets, Kyson's heavy arm draped over my waist tucks me closer, rolling me over to face him. "Where are you sneaking off to?" he purrs with closed eyes. He snuggles closer.

"Nowhere. I just woke," I tell him, and he yawns, nodding his head before kissing my collarbone.

"I don't want to get up yet," he mumbles before skimming his nose across the column of my throat and forcing me to tilt my head back as he scented my skin, his whiskers tickling as he nips at my neck. His calling slips out as he kisses and sucks the skin.

"Kyson, we have things to do today," I tell him, and he nips at my jaw.

"The only thing I want to do is you," he says, and I roll my eyes, and he rubs his stubble across my skin, making me cringe.

"I thought you were going to teach me to command you," I ask him, and he hums before moving and pushing me back onto the bed and looming over me. He presses his knees between my thighs before climbing between them and settling his weight above me.

“Command me to stop then,” he laughs before nibbling my lips, and I chuckle at his playfulness. It reminds me of when I first met him. It also makes me realize how much I miss that person. So much has happened since then, life has become more intense, more serious. We had both changed. Our relationship had changed. It seemed so long ago and so much simpler back then.

“You’re meant to be commanding me,” he growls, nipping my lips before kissing me. My lips tingle as the bond flares to life.

“No?” he purrs, nibbling on my bottom lip before his tongue pushes between them. His scent overwhelms me, and I kiss him back. Our tongues tangle as he fights for dominance, tasting every inch of my mouth.

“You’re meant to be commanding me, Azzy,” he laughs against my lips, making me realize I am getting carried away by the feelings he is invoking.

“Stop,” I laugh as he attacks my neck with his lips, his stubble tickling.

“Real convincing,” he chuckles while moving lower before growling when the shirt I am wearing gets in the way of his traveling lips.

Kyson rocks his hips against me, his hand moving down my side to grip the hem of my shirt. He pushes it up, his hands leaving goosebumps along my flesh as he pushes the shirt up, and I sit up a little, letting him peel it off. He tosses it aside before growling when he dips his head down, sucking my nipple into his mouth, and I grip his hair, tugging his head back.

“Stop!” I command, and his eyes flash black, and I smile as my command comes out, thinking it worked when he smirks.

“Make me,” he purrs, and I huff.

“Why doesn’t it work on you?” I growl, knowing I used it.

“Because you don’t want to hurt me for one. Also because you don’t really want me to stop,” he laughs, biting down on the hardened bud. “You have to mean it, you know.” I hiss and grip his hair, jerking his head back.

“That hurt!” I growl at him, and he gnashes his teeth at me before pecking my lips, and my lips part as I kiss him back before biting his lip hard. He growls, jerking back.

“See. Bloody hurts,” I chuckle before sitting up on my elbows. He watches me pulling away briefly before sighing when I run my tongue across his bottom lip, sealing the bite mark I left when he laughs, gripping the back of my neck. He kissed me harder, deeper. His tongue invades my mouth and steals my breath before he shoves me back on the bed. I wrap my legs around his waist as he rocks his hips rubbing his growing erection against me.

His lips move south, teasing my flesh, and slick dampens my thighs as desire courses through me, making my skin heat and my breathing grows harsher as he moves lower while unwrapping my legs from around his waist and settling between my thighs. His breath sweeps over my core, making me shiver, and my hips lift invitingly before his tongue flattens, moving across my wet pussy, making me groan and grip his hair as he runs his tongue between my folds before sucking hard on my clit.

I moan as lightning heat rushes through every nerve ending and makes my toes curl. He growls, making me look down at him to find his onyx eyes watching me when he sits up on one elbow, and I glare at him for teasing me.

“Ah, what are you doing? I didn’t say stop,” I whine at him, and in return, he gives me a seductive smile before leaning down and breathing his warm breath against my lower lips. He smiles before sucking the inside of my thigh, and my hips bump against his face.

“Kyson!” I growl, and he laughs before dipping his face between my legs only to let his warm breath tickle my skin. I sit up on my elbows and glare down at him.

“Kyson, I swear to god, if you leave me like this, I will ...”

“Order me!” he growls, running his tongue over my lower lips again, and I drop back onto the bed only for him to stop and his words finally register. My face heats up, I couldn’t, I wouldn’t demand such a thing! Kyson chuckles before lifting my legs over his shoulders and dragging me closer, yet his lips tease my thighs and everywhere else but where I want his mouth.

“Kyson!” I snarl.

“Yes, my Queen,” he laughs, brushing his stubble across my thighs before nipping at my clit with his teeth and making me groan. He sucks on it, and I sigh, melting against the soft mattress as he sucks and licks my flesh, turning me into a writhing mess as I climbed higher and closer to my climax. My skin prickles with heat, and I move my hips against his face.

His tongue dips inside me before he licks every crease and every inch in slow, teasing strokes. My walls flutter, and my clit pulsates as I get lost in the feeling, only for him to stop once again. My eyes open, and I can feel his amusement at my frustration. I growl in annoyance, staring at the ceiling.

“Kyson!”

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“Yes? What is it?” he purrs, blowing on my heated flesh.

“You know what!”

“I don’t think I do,” he laughs. I clamp my knees on either side of his head. He laughs, gripping my knees and pulling my legs apart.

“You could always command me,” he says, but I don’t think I can speak such vulgar words. It is one thing wanting something, another demanding it.

“No,” I whine, mortified when I glance down at him. His eyes glaze over when someone goes to open the door. My heart lurches in my chest, knowing what they would see, and I squirm, yet Kyson held my thighs and my eyes widened in horror. Does he not hear the door?

“Shut the door!” I command in a panic. No way did I want to get caught in this position.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Kyson chuckles, and I glare at him.

“Who was that?” I demand.

“Dustin. Though you probably would have scarred him for life if he walked in, good thing you commanded him,” Kyson chuckles, and I glare at him, but he smiles before looking down between my legs.

“Hmm, what to do?” he purrs, gripping my thighs and pulling my legs further apart.

“Fucking eat it, is what!” I snap at him, my annoyance and desire intermingling.

“Hmm, someone is cranky when she doesn’t get her way. Though love, I would be more careful when throwing words out like that. What if I bit you or actually ate it?” he says, and my eyes widen in horror. He’s right. Thank god I didn’t actually command that one.

“Well, there is one way to kill the mood,” I tell him when his calling slips out with the force of a freight train, making my hips buck against his face. I moan as he awakens the bond, forcing it back and amplifying my desire ten-fold.

“Kyson,” I whine, my voice a breathy moan when he still does nothing but uses his calling on me. He chuckles before his tongue returns to his teasing and draws me closer, only to stop again. I grip his hair, jerking his head back.

“DON’T STOP!” I growl at him, feeling my aura slip out, and he smirks before I let him go, and his tongue moves back between folds before he sucks on my clit, and my eyes open. Wait, I just commanded him.

## Chapter

### Twenty

#### AZALEA

Kyson chuckles, pushing my leg higher and forcing his tongue inside me before trailing it back up and flicking over my clit, making me moan. I roll my hips against his face, and he growls, pinning my legs to the bed while his tongue swirls around my clit and my stomach tenses. My back arches as he continues his assault, sucking it hard into his mouth and shoving me into bliss as I peak and fall blindly. My vision goes white as I ride out my orgasm, my stomach fluttering and my inner walls



clenching. I fall against the bed in a breathless heap.

But he doesn't stop, intent on torturing me further. I squirm as he laps at my oversensitive clit; the sensations are becoming too much when I realize I told him not to stop. My eyes widen, and I push up the bed, only for him to grip my hips and drag me back.

"Kyson!" I hiss before moaning when he sucks on my lower lips. He laughs yet doesn't stop because he can't.

"Kyson!" I moan, my hips jerking away from him, only for him to drag me back.

"Stop. Stop. Stop," I plead, unable to take anymore. I want to go back to sleep.

"Kyson, Stop!" I moan, clenching my eyes shut, and he does, and I let out a breath.

"That is why I said be careful with your words, though I would have happily stayed down there forever," he snickers, kissing my sensitive skin.

I lie back on the bed, and Kyson crawls up the bed towards me. He hovers above me for a second, dipping his head and kissing me. He forces his tongue into my mouth, making me taste myself on his lips.

My skin comes alive, and I want more. Those kisses move to trail down towards my breasts, his tongue circling around my nipples. My breasts have never felt so sensitive before. The flick of his tongue against my nipple makes me shudder. His teasing kisses then move higher to my collarbone and neck. Kyson sucks on my mark, making tingles spread all over as he settles his weight between my legs.

I see the burning desire that is flaring up in them. I see how much Kyson wants me and wonder if he can see how much I want him in return. The soft way that his lips touch me makes me shudder and long for more. Yet fear also lingers, although I

know I have nothing to fear with Kyson.

It starts with a kiss. Then another, leaving me breathless, when he pulls back and looks down at me. “What’s wrong?” he asks, but I shake my head.

“Nothing.” It’s silly, yet the last time we had sex, it led to a baby. A baby we lost.

Kyson kisses me gently, and I watch him sit up on his elbows and he sighs. “Azalea?” he murmurs, and I know he can feel my indecision through the bond, and my hands tremble as I try to push his shorts down, knowing he wants this, which only makes me feel guilty that I even thought to deny him.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:45 am*

I can feel the outline of his hard cock straining against the fabric. I know what to expect, yet his hand grips mine, stopping me.

“No. Not unless you tell me why your mood changed?” he says.

“It’s fine,” I reply, hearing how small my voice sounds.

“I want you to be sure,” he says, cupping my face in his hand.

“I’m sure,” I lie.

“And I don’t believe you,” he growls, leaning down and nipping at my lips and making me hiss.

He looms over and stares at me, concern etched into his face. He watches me and then looks down his body to where his cock is inches away from my core. My core flutters with need for him as the bond flares wildly, feeling his body pressing against mine. It is frightening to have my body control me like this, but there is something very freeing about it, too.

He kisses my cheek, though now he is far more attentive to how I am feeling.

“We don’t have to, Azzy,” he whispers softly, feeling my worry, but he has it wrong. I am not worried about having sex with him. I am concerned about getting pregnant. I know I am not ready for that again.

“No, I want to,” I tell him, pulling my lip between my teeth. Not knowing how to say

to him I don't want to risk falling pregnant again.

"You don't want me to knot you?" he says. My face heats, and I glance away but also nod. However, Kyson doesn't seem mad. The feeling through the bond is understanding.

"We can use protection, or we can wait. It's up to you," Kyson says, kissing my cheek.

I nod, surprised a little by how gentle and understanding he is being. He rocks his hips against me, and I gasp. Gosh, how I want him, and I can feel he needs this, needs some connection.

My hand moves to his hip, and I push down on the waistband of his pants.

"Azzzy?" he purrs.

"We can use protection," I tell him, and he smiles playfully, his eyes flashing black with excitement.

"Really?"

I nod, biting my lip. He pecks my lips before moving them and reaching into the drawer beside the bed. I watch as he tears the condom between his teeth before pushing his pants down. He slips it on and then settles back between my legs.

I wrap my arms around his neck, tugging him closer so I can kiss him, and he obliges, smiling against my lips as he kisses me back.

When the tip of his cock first touches my entrance, I feel a shudder of pleasure return through my body, removing the tension I felt moments ago.

His thick cock slips inside me, inch after inch, moving inside and filling me, stretching me around his girth. Every little movement that he makes sends shudders of pleasure through me. My body has never felt that sensitive before, and it is overwhelming.

I relax and let my body take the lead, kissing his chest; Kyson lets his calling slip out, knowing what I want. Euphoria washes over me, and a calmness at his tenderness.

He rocks his hips back and forth. He starts out so slowly and so gently at first, but every time he picks up the pace and goes a little harder, I start to moan louder and cry out. Which must make him realize I'm okay because he picks up his pace and fucks me harder.

With every little increase in pace, my body shudders with pleasure as I give myself over to my senses, giving myself over to him.

Before I know it, my inner walls clench tight as an almost violent orgasm rips through me. I see stars and moan as the waves continue to ebb and flow through me. Still, he keeps thrusting in and out of me while kissing me, his lips devouring mine. His thrusts become harder, brutal as he pounds into me, chasing his own orgasm. Leaning up, I kiss him harder, moaning into his mouth while my walls grip him. He groans into my mouth, and I feel him losing control, his eyes darkening impossibly more.

His entire body trembles as he thrusts deeper into me a few more times with a jagged and desperate rhythm when I feel his cock twitch inside, and the base of his cock swells as he comes. I moan as his knot forces its way inside me before becoming lodged, and he stills, falling heavily on me. I shudder with aftershocks, trying to catch my breath when he rolls, pulling me on top of him. My body is alive in a way it hadn't been before.

“I love you,” Kyson whispers, kissing my temple as his fingers trail up my side.

“I love you too,” I tell him while turning my face and kissing his chest. For once, it seems we are in the same place, not separated by command or tension or either of us fighting our bond. We are both present and enjoying each other’s embrace instead of being at war and ruled by angered emotion.

Chapter

Twenty-One

### AZALEA

As the nothingness creeps through me, I surrender myself to the oblivion of sleep. Little do I expect to wake up in a different reality, or perhaps a nightmare. The air feels off, surreal and out of place, as if I've been transported to another world. Confusion envelops me as I struggle to make sense of my surroundings. I find myself placed down on something soft, my body sinking into the comfort beneath me, as a woman walks away, her lavender-colored robe trailing behind her like an ethereal veil. With dark hair braided down her back, she stands by the door, peering out through the crack.

At first, it feels like I'm trapped in a dream, a haunting vision of losing my child. The room is dimly lit, casting shadows on the walls with its orange hues. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust, and as they do, I realize that I am in what appears to be a nursery. Soft beige and pink colors adorn the crib I am sitting in, while the distant cries of people echo through the darkness of the corridor.

The room itself is adorned with breathtaking scenes of sloping mountains covered in snow and skies as blue as sapphires. Forests fill the walls with their lush greenery, creating a sense of serenity amidst the chaos outside. But the chaos is undeniable, as loud noises reverberate from beyond the door, causing me to clutch my ears and scream in response. And then it hits me - this place feels familiar because it is none other than Landeena Castle, my home. This is not a nightmare; it is a memory, one that I find myself trapped in.

The banging outside grows louder, causing the woman to rush back into the room and hastily shut the door. My screams mingle with the silence that follows as the banging

stops in the corridor. The woman turns, her back pressed against the door, her arms bracing against the wall. In her eyes, I see the fear of a mother, my mother, Queen Tatiana.

“Tatty, it’s me. Open up,” a voice I’ve grown up with calls out from outside. My mother steps aside, allowing the woman to enter. She bursts into the room, brandishing a sword in her hand.

“We are under attack. Garret, where is Garret?” the woman, Marissa, asks, clutching my mother’s arms.

“I don’t know. He was in bed. I heard her wake up and came to check, then as I was leaving I heard gunfire,” my mother explains, her gaze shifting to me. Marissa’s eyes also flicker towards me before she rushes to the wardrobe, grabbing blankets and revealing her blood-stained maid’s uniform. She thrusts a pink blanket into my mother’s hands.

“Go. Take her out the window. I will find Garret,” Marissa instructs, her voice filled with urgency.

“I can’t leave you,” my mother protests, but Marissa shakes her head, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“You need to run,” Marissa insists, attempting to pass me off to my mother. But my mother backs away from me.

“Who are they?” my mother asks her, and Marissa shakes her head.

“You need to run,” Marissa tells her, but my mother shakes her head and grits her teeth.



“Who are they, Marissa?”

Marissa whimpers and tears flood down her cheeks, my tiny hands wipe her face before patting her cheek.

“Ma Ma, don’t cry,” I tell her. She smiles sadly at me when I realize something. My mother knew I called Marrissa Ma ma, but Tatiana, my true mother, was Mummy.

“Marrissa answer me! Have they come for us?” my mother asks, and Marrissa sniffles.

“You need to run,” Marissa insists, attempting to pass me off to my mother. But my mother backs away from me.

“They don’t know she exists. If I run, they will hunt me and find her. Go, I will hold them off,” my mother declares with determination.

“Tatty, no!” Marissa cries out, grabbing hold of my mother’s robe as she tries to flee. Yet my mother spins swiftly grabbing Marrissa’s face in both her hands, her eyes blazing a storm and I can sense her aura even in this dream state, wild, furious and explosive.

“Take her to the Valkyrie Kingdom. If it is safe, give her to her mate,” my mother commands before rushing out of the door. But just before she disappears completely, she turns back and stops, casting a forlorn look in my direction. “Keep her safe.”

“Tatty, no!” Marrissa pleads.

“Keep her safe,” my mother says, and Marrissa jolts as my mother’s command rolls over her once again.

“Don’t you fight it. You owe me this much,” my mother says, and Marrissa shakes her head. Tears stream down her face and she halts in her efforts to stop my mother.

“What about Trey? Our sire bonds!” Marrissa asks, and my mother freezes. She looks over her shoulder and smiles sadly.

“You’re both sired to her, your bonds will break, but her tether to you will keep you alive. Trey will look for you. He will find her, you make sure you keep her alive until then,” my mother says.

“What are you going to do?” Marrissa asked her.

“I need to get to Garret and the Eclipsarion,” my mother answers just as her aura erupts with power. It’s as though the very room around us starts to shake.

“You’ll never make it, Tatty,” Marrissa pleads, a violent desperation in her voice.

“I have to try, but if I don’t, the ballerina is the key,” she tells Marrissa, still emanating that incredible power. Suddenly, I can feel the vibrations in the floor beneath my feet, see the cracks forming in the walls as if they were made of porcelain, and hear the rumble of thunder as her magic explodes from within her. Her aura pulsates around her like a living thing, wild and untamed, crackling with energy that seems to dance across her skin.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:45 am*

With one swift motion, she pulls out a hairpin from her hair, letting it cascade down past her shoulders in a waterfall of silk. The hairpin doesn't stop there though; it transforms into something marvelous - vines that wrap tightly around her wrist before elongating into the thinnest sword I've ever seen.

The air fills with the metallic scent of bloodlust as my mother opens the door to the corridor, as Marissa's face pales beneath my mother's commanding gaze. In one swift movement, my mother grabs Marrissa, draws me close and kisses my forehead gently.

"Now run," she whispers fiercely to Marrissa. Then she pulls away swiftly, leaving us alone with only her words echoing in our ears. The door crashes against the wall behind her as she disappears into the chaos without a trace. The room shakes with every step she takes, like an earthquake is about to hit us any second.

"Mummy! Mummy!" I scream, watching her leave me when Marrissa hushes me, trying to quiet my cries for my mother. She sets me back down in my crib. Marrissa grabs a small bag of items and quickly stuffed them into the bag before tying it around her shoulder before tossing the window open.

As she does, the door bursts open and a hunter rushes in. Marrissa and him square off when she dives for her sword, and slashes through the air. The sword bites into the man's shoulder and he falls to the ground before she brings the sword down again, spraying the room in blood. When she is done, she drops the sword before rushing over to me where I stood clutching the railing of my crib screaming.

"Hush, Ivy. Hush," she murmurs, and I quiet down watching as she goes to the

window before cursing and slamming it shut, she looks around nervously before looking at the man on the floor. She quickly rushes over, shutting the door before ripping at his clothes and pulling them on, before she tugs my nightie off before putting new clothes on me and wrapping my tiny body in a blanket.

“Ma Ma, where is mummy?” I whine. My little hands shake as I grip her shoulders.

“She went to get daddy, my love. She’ll be okay. Daddy is strong. Daddy will protect her,” she whispers, her lips pressing a tender kiss against my cheek. With caution, she opens the door, peering out into the blood-stained hallway strewn with lifeless bodies, a haunting testament to the brutality that has unfolded.

“Close your eyes, my princess, and cover your ears,” she instructs in a hushed tone, her voice tinged with an undercurrent of urgency. I obediently nod, burying my face in the crook of her neck and pressing my hands firmly over my ears.

Darkness engulfs me, muffling the sounds of my own sobs as I cling desperately to the hope that this nightmare will soon fade away. But the anguished screams that reverberate through the castle halls only intensify when Marissa starts running.

She dashes forward, her shoes screeching against the polished tiles, causing me to bounce in her arms. With trepidation, I open my eyes and peer over her shoulder as she deftly turns a corner, only to come to an abrupt halt once more. Men emerge from behind her, their sinister intentions evident in their menacing gazes. Simultaneously, more men appear at the other end of the corridor, closing in on us from both directions.

In a desperate attempt to outmaneuver our pursuers, Marissa twists and turns, her body contorting looking for an escape. With unwavering determination etched across her features, she makes a split-second decision and leaps off the balcony, clutching me tightly against her chest. The impact jars the breath from her lungs and a cry

escapes her lips before she quickly regains her composure.

For a few heart-stopping moments, she struggles to rise, clutching onto anything within reach to steady herself. Her eyes scan the chaos unfolding below us as men clash in a brutal display of violence and death. And then, with a fierce resolve, she turns her attention elsewhere.

“I need you to be absolutely silent, my darling,” she implores, her voice threaded with urgency. I nod in understanding, my wide-eyed gaze locked onto hers with unwavering trust. With a swift movement, she locates a hidden laundry chute within the wall. Without hesitation, she stuffs me inside, cocooning me in darkness and safety as she prepares to face the horrors that lie ahead.

“Close your eyes Ivy, hands over your ears. Ma ma will be back,” she says before shutting the door. I stare into the darkness of the laundry shoot before hearing Marrissa’s voice.

“Cedric, it’s not what you think. Listen to me,” Marrissa pleaded.

“You killed the Queen! My Queen!” he roars.

“No! Listen to me,” Marrissa says, and I clench my eyes shut when I hear the fighting begin. The snarls and growls are horrendous.

Time slips by, I don’t know how long passes, but the noises grow louder, the screams more tortured when finally the door opens and Marrissa is reaching in for me. My heart lurched in my chest and my breathing sounded loud to my ears. Marrissa was covered in blood, even her face, and I backed away into the corner scared of her.

“Come on, it’s me,” she coaxes.

## Chapter

### Twenty-Two

#### KYSON

I question everything, absolutely everything, except one thing. She is not broken. No, my Queen is resilient, maybe more so than me. She wears her trauma like jeweled armor and camouflage, yet I see her. See her determination and strength and at first I thought that would be our downfall. Yet watching her as she sleeps, I realize how wrong I am. I am so used to being the Alpha King, yet with her I can be Kyson and nothing more, and she would have me. Even after what I put her through.

No matter how many times I tore her down wanting her to submit to the bond, and to me, she came back more determined to prove I couldn't break her. She has more scars than men of war and she wears them as if they are jewels of her mercy, which is something I saw as weak. Even now, it angers me that she can forgive Ester and her son, that she can set them free despite what they took from us. Despite how they nearly killed her and us. Azalea is able to forgive the unforgivable and remain pure of heart despite hers being broken repeatedly, so harshly I'm surprised it still beats. My Queen saw past her anger and chose forgiveness and understanding while I only craved blood and revenge.

Yet looking at her now, I realize it doesn't make her weak; it makes her strong because it shows her capacity to forgive and keep going while I have been stuck in a past I no longer want part of. Seeking vengeance, yet seeking that, I became as lost as the dead, stumbling blindly in an abyss and living in limbo. It's me who's weak here, not Azalea.

It was never about setting them free; she set a piece of herself that was broken free too - allowing herself to move on from the torture - showing them she isn't a monster

like them. She isn't a jealous, vengeful cold-hearted killer; no - she is far more than that - she is a Queen. And a Queen is someone who puts her own desires and wants behind her to protect her people, despite them almost ruining her, she saved them because they are her people. Ester is a mother, and having had her own child ripped from her, she wouldn't wish that pain on anyone, not even her enemy.

Azalea breaks, then picks herself back up and keeps going. I guess that is one thing I can thank Mrs. Daley for; she made my Queen indestructible and I am beginning to realize I don't need to covet her away to keep her safe. What I need is to unleash her, stand beside her, and watch as she brings our enemies to their knees. And she will, for she is a Landeena; she is the Empress of Lycarnia. She's my biggest contender; she's also my redemption, and she's mine to cherish. I brush back Azalea's hair as she sleeps - a whimper escapes from her lips and a tear slips down her cheek.

"Hush, my love," I whisper tenderly, brushing a gentle finger against her cheek as I marvel at her grace as she sleeps. Curiosity tugs at my mind, wondering what dreams plague her subconscious. What fears haunt her even in sleep? Does she not realize that I would willingly lay down my life for her without a second thought? That I would protect her at any cost? As Azalea stirs restlessly, her heart rate quickening, her fingers digging into my ribs where she seeks the bond, I can't help but feel a pang of concern.

Leaning closer, I press my lips against hers in a feather-light kiss, smoothing her tousled hair with gentle fingertips. Just as I am about to rouse her from the clutches of her nightmare, she gasps, clutching her chest and frantically scanning the room. My gaze follows hers, searching for the invisible enemy that seems to torment her. Her claws extend and a low growl reverberates through her as I pull her closer, cradling her against my chest. She is still trapped within the confines of her dream; not fully awake.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:45 am*

Allowing my calling to seep into our bond, I urge her to wake. And she melts against me, finding relief in the safety of my embrace. “What is it, my love? What has frightened you?” I purr softly; my voice laced with the desire to calm her as she sobs in my arms.

“She didn’t do it,” she whispers, and a wave of relief floods our bond alongside profound sadness. With heavy breaths filling the room around us, I listen intently as she continues speaking.

“She didn’t Kyson...I saw it clearly...She didn’t do it...You have to believe me,” she pleads, attempting to free herself from my grasp and sit upright.

Gently cupping her face in my hands, I meet her gaze. “I believe you, my love. I believe that you believe your words. We will find a way to uncover the truth.” Drawing her closer once more, I hold her tight against my chest, offering reassurance amidst the storm of emotions that threatens to engulf us.

“I can prove it...Cedric was there...I heard him,” she reveals; her voice filled with a mixture of grief and vulnerability.

My brow furrows in confusion. Cedric? Why is she dreaming about him? “Heard what?” I ask, needing clarity from the tangle of her nightmares.

“I heard Cedric...She was trying to tell him something...I remembered...I remembered that night,” she confesses; her voice cracking.

“It’s okay. It’s okay,” I murmur soothingly, my fingertips gently wiping away the



traces of tears that stain her cheeks. But before we can delve deeper into the revelation, the door bursts open, causing both of us to startle.

Azalea jolts upright, her eyes wide while I slide her off me and rise to my feet; a growl rumbling forth at the intrusion. It is unlike Dustin to barge in without permission, and his presence only adds to the tension that hangs in the air.

“My King,” Dustin begins urgently; his voice laced with urgency, “Elder Larkin has arrived. He demands the return of his son.”

Anger simmers within Azalea palpable even as she hastily wipes away tears and stands up; dream-induced fury fueling resolve. Oblivious to lack of clothing, she storms towards the door leaving poor Dustin momentarily stunned as he averts gaze; eyes fixed on ceiling.

“Azzy, my love,” I call out to her drawing her attention as she glances back over shoulder.

“You need to put on some clothes before you confront him. I won’t allow you to face Larkin in such a state unless you want me to remove his eyes from his sockets,” I chuckle softly; a hint of amusement coloring my voice. She looks down, realization dawning upon her as eyes widen and with a hurried squeak, she rushes towards the closet. I can’t help but laugh softly at her flustered state reaching for my pants as she calls out to Dustin.

“Dustin?”

“Yes, Azalea,” he responds promptly; his eyes still on the ceiling.

“Have someone find Cedric while we deal with Larkin,” she commands, determination shining through her words. Dustin glances at me for confirmation, and

I nod in agreement.

“You heard your Queen,” I tell him, a smile tugging at the corners of my lips before he hurries off to carry out orders.

Chapter

Twenty-Three

AZALEA

It takes me only a few minutes to dress before following Kyson out of our bedroom and down the stairs. Our ears are alerted to the commotion as soon as we enter the corridor on the bottom floor of the castle. I know what Kyson is going to say before he says it. I’m prepared for his words as I hear him growl furiously. A sigh escapes my lips as Kyson stops in front of me.

“You want me to wait here until you see what is going on?” I tell him before I exhale. I hear a loud bang from the end of the corridor to the main doors as voices from the end of the corridor begin to grow louder. When Kyson glances over his shoulder, I recognize one of the angry voices instantly as Damian, who can be heard shouting in frustration.

“Just let me go ahead; you can...” he growls before letting out a big sigh. “You can come with me, but stay back with Dustin until I know it is safe. Please,” he says, almost pleading with me. It is not until I look past him to the doors that I see guards rushing out of those doors. When I nod my head, he lets out a sigh and grabs my face in his hands, kissing the top of my head as he lets out a breath.

“I’m trying not to be controlling. I just don’t want to put you in unnecessary danger,” Kyson whispers as he lets me go and turns on his heel, stalking toward the main

doors. He snarls, stalking after the guards rushing out the doors. As they flatten themselves against the walls to get out of his way, I watch him slip outside, and I turn to Dustin, who twists his arm and extends it to me.

“You did the right thing. I know technically you overrule him, but you have powers that are only just awakening, and you aren’t sure how to use them yet,” Dustin tells me, and I sigh heavily.

“Kyson has been ruling for decades. He is a good King, and you can learn a lot from him, Azzy, if you pay attention. I know you are done being a pushover; that much is apparent, but he is your mate and a King,” Dustin reminds me. However, I am done arguing with Kyson. We will be fine if he sticks to his word and gives me the same trust I give him.

“I know, and I don’t want to overrule him. I rather have him in charge because I don’t know what I am doing, but I don’t want to be shut out either. I can’t learn if he doesn’t let me,” I tell Dustin.

“He is trying,” Dustin says, and I nod in agreement, and so am I.

“And that is why I agreed. It would be foolish if I ran through those doors and into an ambush,” I tell him, and Dustin smiles. I am so glad to finally have Dustin back by my side. Gosh, how I have missed him.

“I sent Liam to get Cedric for you,” Dustin tells me, and the arguing outside goes quiet when I hear a feral growl tear out of my mate, his aura rippling through the air, almost vibrating with his fury.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:45 am*

‘Kyson?’ I mindlink, not wanting to step out there without letting him know.

“You can come out. He is alone,” he replies, and Dustin and I step outside the doors. Larkin is at the King’s feet. His lip is bleeding, his clothes all wrinkled, and a cut below his left eye is healing, and his face is swollen. In addition, Damian has a split eyebrow, and it can be seen by the marks on his uniform that they had had a scuffle before.

“The only thing I want to do is see my son! You can’t just fucking take him!” Larkin snarls at Damian.

“No! You don’t deserve him. And you aren’t going near my fucking mate,” Damian snaps at him.

“He’s my son! I’m a good father,” Larkin growls, and Damian steps toward him. When Kyson raises his hand, Damian stops, and his fist clenches tight by his sides.

“Stand down. You, shut up,” Kyson snaps at him as Larkin sits up, leaning against his car tire. My brows furrow when Kyson turns to Dustin behind me. “Aren’t you supposed to be getting Cedric?”

“I sent Liam,” he says just as Trey comes out the door and steps in front of me, his shoulder brushing mine. I feel Kyson relax a little more with Trey nearby with Dustin. Though jealousy courses through Kyson as Trey brushes against me.

“Dustin, go get Tandi,” Kyson orders.

“What? No. Definitely not!” Damian snaps.

“Yes, get Tandi. She will tell you I am a good father. I would never hurt my son,” Larkin snarls.

“Damian! I want to sort this out,” Kyson tells Damian before glaring at Larkin, “and you will cooperate. Larkin, Tandi had some fascinating information about the council cooperating with the hunters!” Kyson snaps at him, yet Larkin genuinely looks confused by Kyson’s words.

“Hunters? The council has never worked with the hunters,” Larkin states smugly. “I hate them more than anyone. You should know this, Kyson. They wiped out my home Kingdom! Killed my parents! No way am I working with fucking putrid hunters!” he snarls, the words leaving his lips venomously. He looks outraged by the accusation.

Kyson looks at me, and I watch Larkin for a second, whose gaze settles on me; Larkin bares his neck to me. “Sorry, my Queen. I never wished to disturb you,” he says, dropping his gaze to the ground.

“Which was your home Kingdom?” I ask him, curious and also trying to break the strange tension. I hated the man, but I would not solely base his character on past behaviors. He isn’t the ringleader; that much is obvious. Or maybe I am being naïve and too complacent. Kyson would let me know his thoughts or, no doubt, step in if he believes he needs to refute anything.

Chapter

Twenty-Four

AZALEA

“The Credence Kingdom, my Queen. It was one of the first to fall. I know my brother did some despicable things but had we known who you were, we never would have come here. Landeena’s have immunity. The council knows this, but honestly, we thought besides Elder Crux, none existed. They are the creators of Lycan law. We live by that law,” he says when I hear footsteps coming up behind us.

“Apparently, live by that law. The council has some serious allegations against them, especially how the council could be behind the rogue murders or the murder of Tandi’s daughter,” Damian snarls.

“Rogue murders? And Alpha Brock took his daughter,” Larkin says, “I am not Alpha Brock!” he adds, though it is clear he thinks very little of the Alpha.

“He drowned her when he tossed her off the cliff; Tandi saw him do it. She said she heard the splash, and Crux just stood there and let him,” Damian snarls.

“No, no, the council wouldn’t kill children,” Larkin defends his eyes, going to the doors behind us.

Dustin emerges first through the huge castle doors before Tandi steps out, tears streaking down her face as she clutches her son. Larkin tries to get to his feet in a blur of motion. Defensively, Damian charges at him, only for Larkin to stop just before Tandi. To everyone’s surprise, Larkin doesn’t snatch his son. He merely holds his hands out for him. The toddler babbles, fisting the air.

“You’re not taking him, Larkin. I won’t lose another child,” Tandi snarls, pulling her son away, and for the first time, I witness her step behind her mate, relying on him to protect her. And Damian has no such qualms about doing so.

“You left abruptly. I told you I would never take him from you. I am not that bastard, Alpha,” he pleads, and I truly believe I am seeing a different side of this ruthless man.

He makes cooing noises at his son, smiling brightly at him and holding his hands out to him. It's clear he's fond of the boy.

Damian shoves him back, and Larkin snarls but stops when his eyes go to his son.

"Tandi, please, tell them. I have been good to you, haven't I?" Larkin says, staring at her.

"Good to her? She lives in a whore-house!" Damian growls at him.

"I tried to get her out! Crux wouldn't allow it, said it would taint the fucking council! Do you think I wanted my son there? I couldn't rip him out of her arms either," Larkin bellows at him, causing Hunter to start wailing at the sound of the fighting.

"Hey, Bubba boy, Daddy didn't mean to yell," Larkin says, and Kyson rubs his temples. Tandi sniffles, her eyes bloodshot from crying, and her nose is red. She clutches her son, but it is clear he wants to go to his father. Reluctantly, she looks at me.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:45 am*

“You won’t let him take my boy?” Tandi asks me.

“Never. And if he tries, he won’t leave here alive,” I tell her, half to reassure her and half to warn Larkin. He nods, and Tandi hands him over, kissing his cheek.

Kyson sighs, yet it is the longing through the bond that has me look at Kyson beside me to find him watching Larkin cuddle and kiss his son. I grab his hand and give it a squeeze, and he returns it, shaking his head and clearing his throat.

“It is much too cold out here for a baby. Dustin, take Hunter to Abbie to look after or ask Clarice. Tandi, Larkin, Damian, my office now,” Kyson says, leaving no room for argument.

Dustin moves to take the baby, but Larkin pulls away. “You’ll let me see him again?” he asks, almost pleading with Kyson. Kyson looks at Damian, which makes Larkin turn his gaze toward Damian.

“I mean her no harm. I just don’t want to be cut out of my son’s life,” Larkin tells him while Hunter smacks his father’s face, trying to get his attention.

“Depending on what information you’re willing to give, I will think about it. But if I believe you are a threat to my mate or your son.” Dustin takes the boy, and Damian steps closer to him.

“It won’t be Gannon and Liam you’ll fear, Larkin. Elder or not, you’ll wish they were the ones to kill you,” Damian sneers, and I see Larkin swallow. I am a little shocked how much fear Gannon and Liam’s names instilled, but the look on Larkin’s face as



he stares at Damian has him turn white as a sheet, and he nods quickly.

“I just want to see my son. I am not a monster,” Larkin says.

“We’ll see,” Damian says before reaching for Tandi. Damian tucks her closer, under his arm, and walks inside with her. Larkin looks as if he wants to say something but must have decided against it because he closes his mouth and follows obediently. I raise an eyebrow at this entire fiasco, yet maybe we will get some answers. I know Tandi is telling the truth. She has no reason to lie. Larkin, though, looks confused by the allegations against him and the other council elders.

“Come on, let’s sort this mess out and then speak with Cedric when Liam brings him,” Kyson says.

“How will we know if he is telling the truth? Can I?” I look to Kyson, wanting permission to command him; either way, I would. It would just be better if we are on the same side when I do.

“You can, and I will help you,” Kyson murmurs, and I feel myself relax, knowing we will at least for sure know the truth. Hopefully, I have faith that Kyson can indeed help me if it is required. We follow them through the halls toward the office while Dustin disappears up the stairs with Hunter.

“Liam found Cedric and is on his way back to the castle with him,” Kyson tells me as we reach the door to his office, which is open. Larkin glances around nervously while Tandi moves toward the chaise by the window. Damian pulls a chair out before pointing at it.

“Sit!” Damian tells him. Larkin presses his lips in a line yet obeys.

Chapter

AZALEA

Larkin seems to relax a little once everyone is seated, though Damian lingers behind him and remains standing, keeping himself between Larkin and Tandi. I move to sit beside Larkin in the spare chair when Kyson growls, and I fight the urge to roll my eyes but move to sit in a chair off the other side of his desk by the bookcases. Kyson reaches over and drags it beside him, and I sigh. At least he didn't want me sitting on his lap. That always feels awkward in the presence of other people. Larkin smooths his suit out best he can and undoes his cufflinks.

"So, you're from the Credence Kingdom?" I ask him, taking my seat. Kyson drapes his arm over the back of it, his fingers fiddling with my hair.

"Yes, elders used to comprise a member of every Kingdom, except the human one, of course. They are long dead," Larkin answers.

"My mother's Kingdom?" I ask when the door opens, and Liam and Cedric walk in. Cedric, with an arm full of old leather-bound books, takes in the scene in front of him, moving into the room while glaring at Larkin, sensing the obvious tension in the room.

Trey and Liam walk back out when they see there are no chairs, dragging in two from the corridor before closing the door behind them. Thank god Kyson's office is huge because there are so many of us here.

"No. Queen Tatiana was from Azure," Larkin says, and I nod.

"I meant my other mother, Marissa," I tell him as Cedric drags a chair from beside Larkin and sits down, placing the books on the edge of the desk.

“Marissa, I’m not sure. I know she was part of the hunters,” Larkin answers, turning his head to look at Kyson.

“She was King Garret’s mate. We found out recently, and Garret kept her on the side like Tatiana kept Trey, who was the Queen’s mate. Garret turned Marissa,” Kyson clarifies for him, and Larkin genuinely looks confused by that information.

He glances at Trey, who neither agrees nor denies. He just glares daggers at Larkin.

“I didn’t know any of that. Queen Tatiana and King Garret were very secretive people and paranoid. The only person allowed in from the Council was Crux since he was Garret’s nephew.” Larkin states.

“That is true, and half the Kingdom didn’t even know of your existence, my Queen. Only those inside the castle walls did,” Cedric says. I cast a sidelong look at Cedric, who nods.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:45 am*

“Not even my twin knew you existed. It was kept secret. He didn’t know until I raced back to get to you and Tatty,” Trey says. My head perks up, recognizing the same nickname I heard in my dream.

“Tatty?” I whisper. Cedric chuckles.

“Yes, it was her nickname. Garret used to call her it, and she hated it until most referred to her by it, and she got used to it,” Cedric laughs. Trey smiles sadly and looks away, but we are getting off-topic, so I turn back to Larkin.

“Tandi said you held council meetings at the brothel? That you drank blood at these meetings?” I ask him when I feel a nudge through the bond. Kyson’s aura slips over me, and I blink, shocked at the sensation rippling through me.

‘Don’t fight it. I am your mate. I can push your aura just as you can push and pull on mine if you let me,’ Kyson mindlinks me, and I sigh, letting him use it. Larkin suddenly grits his teeth, and the veins in his neck bulge when his body tenses. He gives me a pained look.

‘You’ll learn to do it yourself, but our bond is strengthening. I can feel it, can’t you?’ Kyson mindlinks, and I look at him, nodding slightly. I can feel him with every fiber of my being, like he is a part of me, attached and running through my blood just as strongly as my blood is flowing through my veins. Maybe it is because we are no longer in a battle with each other, accepting and trusting each other. And I do trust him, trusting him not to control or fight me unless he deems something unsafe. He drops my aura, but I know why he did it, to show me how to handle it, how much to use. Kyson’s finger strokes the back of my neck softly, and I fight the urge to shiver

as tingles spread over me.

“I won’t lie to you, my Queen. It isn’t necessary,” Larkin breathes, catching his breath. Which makes me realize he has no idea it was Kyson’s doing, not me.

“Regardless, I want to be sure, and you will accept it or accept never seeing your son again,” I tell him, and he swallows nervously. “Now answer the question,” I tell him, forcing my aura out.

“Yes, annually,” Larkin grits out when Kyson yanks my aura back when I use too much, and Larkin’s nose starts bleeding. I gasp and look at Kyson and Cedric, who are smirking next to him. I have so many questions for him and Trey, but it will have to wait. Clearly, this is no shock to them.

‘Help me. I don’t want to kill him,’ I mindlink Kyson, who I feel tugging on our bond. It is a weird sensation almost like a psychic connection or frequency, and I wonder why he had never done it before, or maybe he wants me to learn myself.

“Sorry, I am still learning how to use it,” I tell Larkin as he wipes his nose on the back of his hand. His eyes widen, and he gapes at me before turning to Kyson.

“Can you do it? I would like to live,” Larkin says, horrified. Kyson waves his hand at him from behind the back of my head, making me glance over at it, only for his fingers to go back to the nape of my neck.

“It only works if he is touching you. And only if your bond feels safe in his hands,” Cedric answers the question I am thinking.

“You were drinking Kyson’s blood?” I ask, allowing Kyson to hold control of my aura. It will be safest that way. It would suck if I killed him before we got answers, plus, I really don’t want anyone’s blood on my hands.

“Yes, this is the only Lycan Kingdom left,” Larkin answers. My brows furrow at his words.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“The Council is supposed to be unbiased. One from each Kingdom but never our own. We would share blood, so we couldn’t be commanded. Except for Landeena royalty, Landeena was like the wild card. They pulled rank even over the Council. Which is why you have immunity.”

“What about Crux?”

“Crux is a bastard child, an illegitimate, he has some immunity to an extent, but he never inherited the Landeena traits. Only the firstborn child of each generation holds Landeena rein. Your father was the first born and now you are.”

“I still don’t get how he isn’t part of it.”

“Think of it like, your mother and father were the Adam and Eve of Lycans, Moon blessed and cursed,” Cedric answers.

“Cursed how?”

“Because power like that puts a target on your back. Azures and Landeena hated each other for centuries, the two oldest rival kingdoms, which is why your father demanded his biggest contender’s hand in marriage for the treaty between kingdoms, a treaty that created you, a moon child,” Cedric explains.

“Not that it did much once the hunters got into the kingdoms,” Trey adds.

But I was caught up on what Cedric said. “Moon Child?” I ask, and I can see Kyson

listening beside me intently.

## Chapter

### Twenty-Six

#### AZALEA

Cedric nods and pats the books. “When the Moon Goddess created Landeena and Azure, they were each other’s weaknesses. Two halves of a whole. Neither could outweigh the other. But both were destined for others. Fire and ice. Opposites, yet magnificently the same. Both will burn you if you endure it too long,” Cedric says.

My brows pinch in the middle as his words sink in. So what does that make me? What was I destined for if not for the King beside me?

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“And that made them exempt from having to hand their blood to the council?”

“Well, I sure as hell wasn’t going to demand King Garret to hand over his blood,” Larkin snorts.

“Who was an elder from your Kingdom?” I ask, turning to Kyson.

“My father was, and sister for the Valkyrie Kingdom,” Kyson answers when Larkin speaks.

“Crux represents Landeena now since he is the only one left, or so we assumed. Myself and my brother, Denali, for Credence. Your mother’s sister, Emilia, and your mother were Azure representatives, but Emilia died in the attack on Azure, and your mother quit after that and was later killed,” Larkin explains while looking at Kyson when he mentions his brother’s name.

“It’s also why I know you’re wrong about the Council. We all lost our Kingdoms and our families to the hunters. No way would we work with them,” Larkin says, and Kyson opens a drawer in his desk.

He pulls out a sandwich bag, dropping it on the desk.

“Tandi?” he says, motioning for her to come to him. She glances at him before nervously walking over to the desk. Kyson taps the insignia in the small bag.

“Is this the insignia you saw?” he asks when I feel his own aura slip out over her. She grips the desk, her knuckles turning white, and Damian growls and steps forward



before freezing when Kyson looks at him. He nods once and turns his gaze away from his mate.

“Yes. Crux was wearing one,” Tandi answers, but Larkin shakes his head.

“No, he wouldn’t betray us. You saw the annual meetings. I brought you to a couple of them. No way would you catch me around anyone that wore that!” Larkin says.

Tandi glares at him. “I know what I saw, Larkin. Crux and those strange men were always in the VIP function room,” she growls.

“You saw them with me?” he demands. Tandi shakes her head, and his brows furrow.

“No, after the meetings. You were at the meetings. Some of the other men you work with, the ones you introduced me to, and others. And that woman, you know, the one I said, called me a slut and spat on me,” Tandi says, her eyes darkening in her anger.

“Ah, what’s her name... she is one of Crux’s mistresses,” Larkin asks, and Tandi nods.

“Crux’s mistress was part of the ceremony?” Kyson growls, but Larkin shakes his head.

“No, of course not. Never. She just came to watch,” Larkin states, but Tandi contradicts him.

“No, she always attends the after-party. I have seen her drink the same thing. She wore the patch on her sleeve,” Tandi states.

“Do you know the name of the mistress?” I ask Larkin.

“I only met her once or twice, and I couldn’t stand the woman. Crux usually left the Council quarters to meet her after Denali scolded her one night when she tried to overstep him. After that, she was banished from the Council, but he brought her to a couple of the functions.”

“So you have never met with the hunters or worked with them?” I ask, feeling Kyson use my aura harder this time. Larkin answers immediately.

“Never. And I would kill anyone on the Council who would,” he answers, and I look at Kyson.

“Did you know about Alpha Brock killing Tandi’s daughter?” I demand, and he shakes his head.

“No, he didn’t kill her. I know because I have seen her,” Larkin says.

“Liar!” Tandi snarls.

“He’s not lying, Tandi. He can’t,” Damian says, motioning to me, and Tandi blinks back tears.

“Then where is she? I heard him chuck her over. I heard her scream.”

“He chucked a rock. Crux was on the ledge beneath. He grabbed her. Do you think we would let him kill a child? I was told not to tell you, but I tried, I tried telling you. I kept telling you to run home!” Larkin snaps when Tandi’s hand moves with blinding speed, and she punches him.

He goes flying back in his chair, clutching his face, when Damian grabs her around the waist before she can pounce on him and rips her backward.

“Fuck Tandi!” Larkin shrieks, his nose bleeding for the second time.

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“Where is she? Where’s my baby?” she snarls, thrashing in Damian’s arms.

“The orphanage! You crazy...” he stops when Damian growls at whatever he is about to call her. I look at Kyson and gulp.

“The orphanage?” Tandi whispers. “Go home,” she breathes like those words finally made sense, yet for rogues and for those of us from the orphanage, home was death, and Tandi clearly believed the same. Home wasn’t a place.

It was the feeling of setting one’s tortured soul free. Home was death, and death was freedom if you grew up rogue in that place while under Mrs. Daley’s care.

“Yes, the one he got you from! The one in Alpha Brock’s pack,” Larkin hisses, getting up off the floor. I gasp, wondering which child she is because we adopted them all but a handful to Lycan homes.

“We’ll find her. We’ll find her,” Damian whispers, trying to soothe his mate.

“Alpha Brock has her,” Tandi sobs.

“No, we do. I took all the orphan children,” I tell her, and her head whips to the side to look at me, and I swallow hard.

“Where?” she says, her hands trembling as she tries to get Damian to loosen his hold.

“Most were adopted by the other Lycans in town. We will find her. They will give her back if she is here,” Damian assures her.

“She was adopted? But she is alive?” Tandi asks, turning her gaze to Larkin, who nods.

“A few are still here. Clarice watches over them with Abbie. Abbie will take you to see if she is amongst the ones still here,” I assure her.

“Either way, my people would have looked after her. We’ll find her, Tandi,” Kyson assures her, and she looks at Damian over her shoulder, and he nods, pressing his head against hers.

“If she is alive, I’ll get her back,” he whispers, and she lets out a breath, squeezing her eyes shut.

“So, can I sit, or are you going to punch me again?” Larkin asks, fixing the chair. Tandi’s eyes fly open and she glares at him.

## Chapter

### Twenty-Seven

#### KYSON

I am beginning to get a headache from all this drama. But watching Azalea, I see she isn’t fearful or hesitant about asking questions. In fact, she demands them with my help. I am shocked to find I can actually touch her aura. I expected it to recoil and force me out.

If it did, I wouldn’t have been able to touch it, let alone manipulate it. She is a Landeena, and I may have some resistance to her being that I am her mate, but overall, she can make me beg at her feet once she is capable of controlling it. So I am ecstatic because it means her bond feels safe with me, that she trusts me entirely. It

also means she must have forgiven me. Our bond is solid, and now it has let me in. I can feel her as if she is an extra limb.

“Take Tandi to Abbie,” I tell Damian, and he nods before I watch him wander out with her. She is no longer needed here. Yet as I turn my gaze back to Larkin, he watches her go as if he wants to follow. He remains seated and rubs a hand down his face, looking as tired as I feel.

“The missing rogue children? The ones that turned up dead?” Azalea asks, her sadness bleeding into me through the bond for them.

“I swear I had nothing to do with it or the Council that I know of. Whatever Crux was up to with the secret meetings. I was kept out of it. I had no idea,” Larkin says.

“What do you think of Crux?” Azalea asks. Larkin grits his teeth, resisting her command, and I force it over him harder, his eyes bulging from his head.

“Answer me!” Azalea demands.

“I can’t stand him! He is power hungry, and I don’t like how he handles the rogue women. I don’t like his side dealings. We are supposed to uphold the law, not dabble in the shady parts of it,” he growls, making my brows raise.

“So you know he is trafficking rogues?”

“Yes, that isn’t illegal under the Lycan laws. You said the packs decided. That doesn’t mean I like what he does with them.”

“That law will be changing,” Azalea growls, her anger blistering hot as she glares at me. It is my fault. I never should have given them a choice, yet I didn’t think the Council would abuse it. I nod, telling her I agree.

“Do you believe Crux is helping the hunters?” Azalea asks him.

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“No! He is a council member,” Larkin answers quickly.

“Is that the only reason you believe that? Because he is a council member?” Azalea asks.

“Well, yes. He would be breaking the law we promised to protect.”

“Is there a chance you could be wrong?” she asks, changing the question slightly.

“Well, yeah, a chance. But he wouldn’t. I don’t have to like him, but he is a good council member,” Larkin says.

“He knows nothing,” I breathe out, annoyed. Whatever is going on with Crux and the hunters. Larkin isn’t a part of it. That much is clear. That doesn’t rule out Crux, though.

“So I can see my son?” Larkin asks.

“I’m leaving that decision to my Beta,” I tell him. Tandi is his mate, although I don’t think he is a threat to her or her son. Larkin nods and sighs, folding his arms across his chest and staring up at the ceiling.

“This is ridiculous,” he mutters to himself.

“The council keeps track of the missing rogue children, right?” Azalea asks, and Larkin nods, turning his attention to her again.



“We have those files here,” I tell Azalea.

“And there were no patterns in any of the deaths?” she continues. Larkin shrugs.

“None we could find. Only that it was mostly females, but the ages ranged, and sometimes entire families,” Larkin says.

Azalea, I can tell, is thinking hard about something, something that is really bothering her, and I know she is eager to speak to Cedric about whatever it was she dreamed.

“Can you get a diary or something of Crux’s track records?”

“Of course, we have to log everything, even the kilometers on the cars. They have GPS built into them. They track our every move,” Larkin says.

“Wait, so Crux knows you’re here?” I ask him.

“If he looked into it, well, yes, he could track me here. My brother set it up. He didn’t trust the newer council members Crux was recruiting. They handle the smaller packs, about five or six of them.”

“Can you get Crux’s records?”

“If you have a computer. I can log in and do it now, but it will only go back since technology advanced, not back to yourparent’s deaths, my Queen. Tech wasn’t that advanced back then,” he says.

“I don’t need it to go back that far. I want to cross-reference it with the missing rogue children.”

“What about my parent’s records? Did the Council keep tabs on them?”

“No, we couldn’t get close to the Kingdom, only Crux. Your father had a soft spot for him. He felt bad that his father wanted nothing to do with him,” Larkin says with a shrug.

“Did Crux know of my existence?” Azalea asks Larkin.

“No one did, not even Crux,” Cedric answers.

“You never left the castle or stepped out of the castle walls. Only a select few knew of you until after their deaths,” Cedric adds.

“So there is no chance Crux knew of my existence?” Azalea asks. My brows furrow at her question.

“Not unless someone inside told him,” Cedric answers. “Why?”

“It’s probably nothing,” she says, though I can tell it really bothers her.

“Speak,” I whisper, nudging her.

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“What if the children are dead because of me? Most of the women who have been killed recently are around my age. What if the children were just caught up in it, and saw too much?”

“Larkin sometimes said, entire families. What if the recent missing children weren’t the targets but their mothers or sisters? They only had an approximate age, right?” Azalea asks.

“But the hunters never knew of your existence. Everyone thought you were dead,” Cedric says.

“But what if they knew I was alive when I was a kid? My mother, I mean Marrissa, was on the run. She was hiding from something. It is obvious to me now with how we never stayed in one place long, and that leads me back to my dream.”

“Your dream?” Cedric answers.

“Yes, my mother told Marrissa to run with me, to give me to my mate,” Azalea says, looking at me.

“But I didn’t know you were my mate back then. I didn’t even know you existed,” I tell her.

“Doesn’t mean Queen Tatiana didn’t know. Your mother sometimes saw things and got strange senses. Your father tried to say she dabbled in the dark arts and banned her from using some of her particular gifts,” Cedric explains, and Trey nods behind him.

“Yeah, gifts that would catch him out cheating, not that she couldn’t feel his infidelity, the prick,” Trey growls. I smile sadly, knowing that it must have been terrible to watch his mate in agony because her husband was unfaithful.

“So my mother could see the future?” Azalea asks Cedric.

“Not exactly, more like intuition. Sometimes when she touches someone or first meets them. She didn’t have full visions,” Trey says.

I hum thoughtfully, thinking back to all the times I had met Tatiana and how she was always so welcoming. Was that why? “Although that would explain when King Garret always tried to sabotage the trials, why your mother always made me sabotage him,” Cedric says.

“My mother sabotaged him?” Azalea asks.

“Yeah, he would try to cheat, poison the water to make those competing sick. A couple of times, she had me switch the bottle over with his own or empty the vials and refill them with herbs. Another was when he attempted to use his powers to command everyone to fail; Tatty asked me to slip him wolfsbane and water hemlock so he couldn’t, so I did,” he chuckles.

“At first, I believed it was her revenge for his infidelity. Everyone knew the king was unfaithful, and it shamed your mother. None of us were blind to it,” Cedric says softly.

“Anyway, I thought your father hated King Kyson at first, but it turns out he was trying to win your hand back because he promised it to another,” Cedric answers. I glance at Trey, who looks away.

“And just for the record, Cedric. When you caught Marrissa on the ground floor that

night, Marrissa didn't betray my mother. My mother told her to run with me, that the hunters would discover me if she ran with me. She asked Marrissa to run. She was never a traitor," Azalea tells him, and Cedric bows his head in shame.

"When I saw her in the hunter uniform—"

"You were wrong, but your Kingdom was under attack. So I understand," Azalea says.

"But who let the hunters in if Marissa didn't let them in?" Cedric asks.

"Someone else on the inside," Azalea answers.

"But the King's sister, same thing on their anniversary. I'm sorry, my Queen, but you have to admit Marrissa looks guilty. Two castles she was working in, both attacked by hunters," Cedric says.

"But Crux also had access to both kingdoms. I know it wasn't my mother, the dream I had. Marrissa and my mother almost seemed like friends. She trusted Marrissa with me. I know what I saw, and Marrissa tried to get my mother to run with me." Cedric's brows furrow while Trey rubs his temples. Larkin just sits quietly, listening to everything, though he seemed deep in thought as well.

"I can get Crux travel records. I will also question those in the brothel too, see what I can find out," Larkin says.

"You would go against Crux?" Azalea asks him.

"If he is helping the hunters, then yes. But everything you have said is now making me question everything. You're right. It doesn't make sense. Too much doesn't add up, and Tandiverified the insignia patches. I'll check it out," he says, and I nod to

him.

Larkin leaves, followed by Damian, leaving just Trey and Cedric. They turn to Azalea, who speaks again. “Wait, I want to ask you something,” Azalea asks, and I stare at her. Instead, she reaches for the books Cedric placed on the desk when he entered my office. They are books about Landeena and Azure history. Azalea drags one closer and Cedric retakes his seat. And so does Trey.

“I dreamt of the attack the other night,” she starts, and I feel her grief through the bond, longing for the mother who raised her and the mother who sacrificed herself, the mother she never got to know. She pauses for a second, her brows furrowing as if she is trying to make sense of her own dreams. “My mother, before she left, she pulled her hair pin out, it turned into some sword like thing?” she asks, and Cedric and Trey look at each other.

Cedric leans forward and opens up one of the books and turns to a page before turning the book to show her. Azalea’s fingers brush over the page. “Yes, what is this?” she asks, but I notice how Cedric and Trey look at me nervously.

Cedric gathers his thoughts before explaining. “The Astral Tendril Pin, as it’s called, isn’t just any pendant. It’s said to have been born from a clash of celestial forces, a literal storm brewed by the power of both Garret and Tatiana. This pendant is essentially a product of that fierce confrontation.”

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He traces a finger over the pendant. “When Garret attempted to overthrow the Azure kingdom, aiming to seize the Eclipsarian, he underestimated Tatiana’s power and strength. When his guard raided her kingdom, initially she was forced to hide until they seized the kingdom, her sisters were dragged out along with the mother. Tatiana watched Garret behead her father then lined up the sisters and mother. Then, Tatiana broke free of her guards who were trying to hide her. She was no coward, she would readily stand on the front lines with her guard if needed, and the moment she broke free of her guard that’s precisely what she did, she came out and waged war. But Garret and Tatiana were not just enemies but forces of nature. As they fought, their powers clashed in the skies above, summoning a storm of raw, untamed magic.”

Pausing, Cedric’s voice deepens, “In the eye of this storm, amidst lightning and thunder, the Astral Tendril Pin was forged. It’s rumored that the pin is woven from the very essence of that storm—strands of astral energy solidified into a tangible form. This artifact is no mere ornament; it embodies the raw power of the storm they evoked that flattened lands outside the kingdoms, it was when the first 100 year flood, it wasn’t a flood that wiped out the human villages, it was Tatiana and Garret’s anger.”

He leans closer, lowering his voice to a whisper. “Garret, realizing he could not defeat Tatiana by force, shifted his strategy. He presented her with the pin, not out of affection but as a strategic maneuver. He hoped it would soften her, make her reconsider her protection of the Eclipsarian. It was a token, a supposed olive branch, but laden with the expectation of surrender.”

“The Eclipsarian...” Azalea murmurs the words she was going to speak, trailing off as she becomes swept up in some memory of her dream, I assume.

Straightening up, Cedric's expression turns solemn. "Tatiana accepted the pendant, yes, but she did so under duress. She agreed to marry Garret, not out of love but to save her family and kingdom from destruction. That pendant, while a symbol of their initial union, was also a constant reminder of the coercion she faced—a reminder of her sacrifice and the fierce protection she had for her Kingdom."

He finishes, his words hanging in the air, "So you see, Azalea, this pin is much more than it appears. It's a symbol of power, sacrifice, and the spirit of your mother."

Azalea falls quiet for a second, yet now, I have my own questions.

"So when Landeena fell you didn't think to mention any of this, and where is the pendant now?" I demand.

"You think we are just sired to Azalea, no we are sired to protect everything about her, from her enemies, from the world, it's why their power was always rumored, unless you witness it for yourself it's all it would ever be. We are sworn to protect the Azure and Landeena history," Trey adds.

"And what about the pendant?" I ask, slightly annoyed that they've been sitting on information.

"Died with Tatiana, Garret tied its power to her, when she died so did its power," Trey answers when Azalea speaks.

"The ballerina is key," she whispers, and we all look at her when her gaze lifts to mine. "In my dream, my mother was going to try to save my father and retrieve the Eclipsarian. She told Marrissa that if she didn't return the ballerina was the key," Azalea seems thoughtful for a second.

Her words hang in the air, drawing confused glances from everyone present.



“What do you mean, ‘the ballerina is key’?” I ask, my curiosity piqued.

Azalea lifts her gaze to meet mine, her expression one of sudden clarity. “In my dream... my mother said if she didn’t return, the ballerina was the key. I....,” she trails off for a second when I feel clarity wash over her and excite her through the bond while I remain confused still about what it is she is talking about. “The jewelry box,” she gasps.

I waste no time. Concentrating, I mindlink Damian. ‘Bring the Landeena jewelry box from our room, now,’ I command. Minutes later, Damian enters, carrying the small, ornate box. He sets it on the desk with care.

Azalea reaches for the box, her hands trembling slightly. She lifts the lid, and the tiny silver ballerina twirls gracefully, a haunting melody filling the room. Her fingers hover over it, then gently she presses down on the ballerina and twists and at first I think she breaks it. Suddenly the music cuts off and a soft click sounds, causing a false bottom to pop open, revealing what lies beneath.

Inside, nestled within a velvet lining, is an oversized pendant. To the untrained eye, it appears to be a simple Moonstone, but as Azalea lifts it to the light, a crest of vines becomes visible within its crystalline depths. Cedric gasps and Trey leans forward. The room falls silent as she slips the chain around her neck, the pendant resting against her heart.

Cedric steps forward, his voice filled with awe. “That Azalea, is the Azure Eclipsarian. A fragment of the original sword, used to forge the Lycan bloodlines. It represents the gifts of your mother and the strength of your father. Separately, they maintain balance—truth against deceit, love against war. Together, they hold infinite power.”

“Power?” I question.

“Yes, which is why Tatiana kept it hidden. No one knows the strength it has when reunited with the sword.”

Azalea’s fingers trace the vines within the talisman, her eyes wide with realization. “So, this was what my father was searching for. He believed it was with my mother... and he was right.”

Cedric clears his throat, capturing everyone’s attention in the room. He motions towards the pendant now resting against Azalea’s chest.

“The Eclipsarian you hold is not merely an artifact; it is a relic of profound power,” he begins, his voice imbued with a reverence that silences the room. “Forged from the celestial storm unleashed by the moon goddess herself when creating the Lycan race, this talisman embodies the core essence of the goddess herself.”

He leans forward, pointing gently towards the pendant. “This talisman—Eclipsarian as we’ve come to call it—holds within it the potential to balance the intrinsic forces of nature that govern our world. Its creation marked a pivotal moment in Lycan creation.”

Cedric pauses, ensuring Azalea understands the gravity of his words. “When your parents’ powers collided, it wasn’t just a battle of two Lycans; it was a convergence of their deepest strengths. The Azure and Landeena bloodlines were fierce, each capable of immense destruction and profound creation. The Eclipsarian was born from that paradox.”

He looks intently at Azalea, ensuring she grasps the full scope of the talisman’s significance. “It is said that whoever wields the Eclipsarian not only holds the power to summon the protective energies of the moon, but also the raw force of the earth itself. It can bring forth the most nurturing calm or unleash the most destructive storm, mirroring the emotional state of its bearer.”

Drawing a deep breath, Cedric continues, “Garret knew of its potential, which is why he so desperately sought it. He believed that with the Eclipsarian, he could dominate not just the Landeena and Azure kingdoms but all kingdoms. Your mother, Tatiana, understood this. She hid it, not just to protect the talisman, but to preserve the balance it was meant to uphold.”

“Then why didn’t my mother use it to protect her kingdom?”

This time Trey answers. “Because it scared her, I knew of it, but this is the first time I’ve laid eyes on it.” he admits. “Your mother told me that it has to merge with her for her to use it, but her power had already awoken since she was moon blessedtherefore made it hard for her to control.” Trey tells us, causing Azalea to shiver where she sits.

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“The Eclipsarion is not simply a talisman; it’s said to be crafted from a fragment of the moon itself, its core is made of a rare mineral known as the Lunaris Heart,” Cedric explains with a tone of awe. “This core emits an enchanting azure light, akin to the tranquil glow of our moon on a clear, starlit night when the stone is awoken.”

He carefully leans forward and adjusts the talisman, allowing the light to catch its intricate designs. “This heart is encased in a frame crafted from the same heavenly material, forming a perfect circle that symbolizes unity and the endless cycle of life. The surface of the Eclipsarion is adorned with patterns made of stardust, which trace ancient symbols representing the elements and the cosmic balance they maintain and also the Azure emblem.”

Cedric’s voice deepens, reflecting the profound power of the talisman. “Upon wearing it, the Eclipsarion pulses softly with the wearer’s heartbeat, as if it’s alive and responsive to their emotions once merged. In moments of intense feelings, such as deep rage or immense love, the Lunaris Heart awakens, intensifying its glow and enveloping the bearer in a serene yet powerful light.”

He leans in closer, ensuring each word carries its full weight. “This talisman holds the power to command the elements in their most fundamental form. It can communicate directly with the forces of nature and enhance the wearer’s inherent abilities to levels far beyond the ordinary.”

Pausing, Cedric’s eyes sweep across the faces before him, ensuring they grasp the significance. “Its protective power can forge shields as steadfast as the night sky itself. Moreover, it serves as a conduit for the bearer’s will, allowing them to unleash the elements’ wrath upon their adversaries.”

“That’s why my mother was trying to get to it, she was going to try to use it to shield everyone,” Azalea murmurs, and Cedric peers down at the desk.

Trey’s eyes turn glassy as he looks away. “She was selfless, she sacrificed everything for everyone, yet he couldn’t even sacrifice his whores for her,” Trey says bitterly.

“She died trying to save the very kingdom that enslaved her.” Trey swallows thickly and lets those words sink in before he gets up and so does Cedric. Azalea peers down at the pendant around her neck.

Finally, Cedric concludes with a solemn nod, “This talisman, Azalea, is not just a link to your past but a key to the future. In the right hands, it can restore balance and peace; in the wrong ones, it could bring about an era of ruin. The weight of this legacy is now yours to bear, not just as a keeper but as that stone’s guardian.”

## Chapter

### Twenty-Eight

#### KYSON

We’re planning to meet with Larkin at Landeena castle in a few days, and Cedric is going to try to see if he can find out more about the Eclipsarian. He’s bringing the records, and we’ll see what we can unearth from our end. Once everyone departs, I pull Azzy onto my lap as she stares at the illustrations in the books Cedric left her.

“Can you read this to me?” she queries, and I lean over her shoulder, resting my chin on her. She squirms as my stubble tickles her.

“It’s myths and legends about what historians believe the Azure’s and Landeena’s were blessed with,” I explain to her, and she nods in understanding, her fingers

tracing over the aged pages.

“When do you want to leave for Landeena?” I question, aware that I need to coordinate everything with my men.

“Cedric said he can leave not tomorrow but the day after. He mentioned if I am returning home, the guards would want to accompany us,” she informs me. My lips tighten into a thin line.

“You don’t seem thrilled about that?” she observes, turning her face towards mine.

“I’m not upset about it; their lack of faith in me protecting my own mate grates on me and feels quite insulting.”

“I think they merely wish to go home,” she suggests.

“This is home. We can’t govern two kingdoms, and there isn’t much left of yours,” I point out bluntly. She swallows hard at this reality check.

“I wouldn’t even know how to rule,” she admits wistfully, gaze fixated on the window across from us.

“In time, you will,” I reassure her. She sighs deeply then attempts to extricate herself from my lap but I hold fast onto her.

“Come on! We have things to sort out and also check if Abbie wants to join us,” she urges.

“Just a little longer,” I plead, reluctant to release her. She exhales, then pivots on my lap, her knees straddling my hips and her hands gliding up my chest.

“You are rather clingy for a King,” she teases.

“Only with you,” I confess, leaning in to plant a soft kiss on her lips. “I don’t enjoy sharing your attention,” I murmur while nipping at her lips. My fingers curl around the back of her neck, drawing her closer still. My mouth descends on hers and I groan at the sweet taste of her on my tongue.

“Kyson!” she squeals into our kiss, and I grin against her lips, deepening the kiss further.

“What if someone comes in?” she protests in between giggles.

“Let them! I want you,” I declare boldly, reaching for the buttons obstructing me from getting to her skin. One by one they pop open under my deft touch revealing the lacy bra beneath.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:45 am*

“Kyson,” she warns me as she pulls away slightly. She glances nervously at the door.

“I’ll lock it,” I growl as I rise to my feet with Azzy’s legs locked around my waist.

Pressing her against the door, I fumble with the lock while peppering kisses along her neck. The heat emanating from her seeps into my shirt as arousal courses through both of us.

She growls in response, tightening her grip around me before pushing my face away from her neck only to attack mine with fervor. Her teeth rake down my skin causing me to gasp and turn towards my desk where she bites down hard enough to break skin just as I swipe everything off its surface.

“Kyson! My books!”

“They’re okay,” I assure her, watching them land on the chair tucked under the desk. God, I could never grow tired of her. I desire her, yearn to bury myself deep within her. Yet, as she toys with my pants’ waistband, a knock at the door interrupts us. A groan escapes me while she snickers, hiding her face in my neck and covering her mouth with her hands to stifle her laughter. The knock echoes again, eliciting a growl from me as I glare over my shoulder.

‘Trey, who’s the idiot at my door?’ I mindlink.

‘That idiot would be me, my King,’ he responds, amusement evident in his voice.

‘What do you want?’



‘Gannon is asking if the Queen can help him find Abbie.’

‘Tell him we’re busy,’ I snap back.

‘I did tell him that, my King. He said he wouldn’t have asked unless it was necessary - but Abbie left Tyson and disappeared. He can’t find her.’

‘She left Tyson?’ The question slips out before I can stop it.

‘Yes, my King,’ Trey confirms and adds, ‘Gannon said...’

‘That she would never leave him behind,’ I finish for him and sigh heavily. There’s no way I can keep this from Azalea; she needs to know and undoubtedly will want to join the search for Abbie.

‘We’ll be right there,’ I tell Trey before turning to a confused-looking Azalea.

“What’s wrong?” she asks anxiously.

“Abbie is missing. Gannon wants your help finding her,” I relay the message, earning a gasp from Azalea’s lips. Her legs drop from around my waist as she scrambles to redo the buttons of her dress before flinging open our door and rushing out after Abbie.

Every single time we get some alone time together, it gets interrupted. I sigh and follow after Azalea.

We end up with every guard on the lookout for Abbie when Gannon announces he’s found her, but she refuses to come out. He claims that she’s hiding in our quarters so we head there to try to coax her out of her hiding spot.

Gannon is beside himself, Tyson crying in his arms, his shirt stained with blood. The sight stops Azalea in her tracks and her shock hits me through our bond.

“What did you do?” she demands.

“I didn’t mean to, but she tried to leave,” Gannon stammers without finishing his sentence. My heart thuds heavily in my chest at seeing him in such a distressed state while Tyson wails loudly.

Azalea rushes over and yanks Tyson from Gannon’s arms who growls at her as he tries to reach for Tyson. But the poor kid is too terrified of whatever he just witnessed and clings tightly onto Azalea.

“Stand down!” Azalea orders Gannon, who freezes just as Damian comes rushing around the corner with Clarice and Liam. Everyone halts, staring at Gannon while Azalea attempts to soothe Tyson.

“Where is she?” she demands again, fury blazing in her eyes.

Gannon’s eyes dart towards our bedroom door which causes me to look behind before turning back towards him. A gasp escapes Azalea as a realization dawns upon her - something terrible must have happened for Abbie to run into our room.

“I didn’t mean it... I would never hurt her... She tried to leave me,” Gannon pleads, clutching his hair desperately.

Azalea’s gaze remains fixed on the door before she finally moves towards it, passing Tyson over to me as she does so. She pauses next to the door handle before noticing that her hand is covered in blood. The sight horrifies her and she looks at me before her gaze shifts to Gannon. She growls, shoving the door open and disappearing into the room.



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:45 am*

I turn my head back towards Gannon.

“What did you do?” I demand again.

“I tried to change her,” he confesses, dropping to the ground and fisting his hair in despair. My lungs compress in my chest as I take in his confession.

“Gannon!” Clarice whispers, horror-stricken as she realizes exactly what that means. “There is no way Abbie would have been ready for that after everything she has been through!” Clarice scolds him.

“She wouldn’t stop fighting me,” Gannon murmurs defensively.

“Because you tried to bloody kill her!” I yell at him, but his response leaves me speechless.

“No, she was trying to kill herself!” Gannon whispers as he clutches his hair, rocking back and forth on his heels.

Chapter

Twenty-Nine

AZALEA

Each heartbeat resonates through me, pulsating in my veins and echoing in my ears. The tangy scent of her blood saturates the air, guiding me to the bathroom. Stepping

into the bathroom, water splatters on the floor, and that is where I discover Abbie. She sprawls out on the cold tiles, her ear pressed against them as if trying to hear something from below. Her vacant gaze is fixed on the bottom of the sink basin.

“Abbie?” I whisper, a lump forming in my throat at the sight of her so shattered. It’s been years since she was this way - not since those horrific days following her return from Kade and before that being violated by the butcher. She doesn’t respond; only a solitary tear escapes her eye and slides down her cheek. She has been through so much, and everyone breaks, though I didn’t think it would ever be Gannon that would cause her to snap.

I initially think Gannon is responsible for this state – that he has hurt her physically. But as I take in the scene before me, it dawns upon me that Abbie has inflicted this pain onto herself. She’s been drowning in torment for a while now, but we all have different ways of showing it. Kyson drowns his sorrows in alcohol while Liam seeks solace in his twisted games of torture and the copious amounts of booze he consumes, Damian with his need for control, and Dustin by overworking.

As for me? I internalize everything until it threatens to consume me whole. And then there’s Abbie – Abbie always fights hers because there is no comeback from the sort of vice she fights, and that is death.

Carefully, I kneel beside her before sitting down on the frosty tiles next to her, our heads resting side by side. The emptiness in her eyes tells me she isn’t really here with me; she’s lost somewhere within herself – trapped within a past that continues to haunt and destroy her.

Slowly moving my hand towards her, I gently stroke her icy cheek with my thumb, catching another tear as it falls from her eye.

“I can still feel it,” she murmurs softly.

“Feel what, Ab’s?” I whisper back.

“The noose. It’s still there... so tightly wound I can’t breathe,” she confesses, her voice barely audible. My fingers trace the scar behind her ear – a mark that mirrors mine, a reminder of the death we narrowly escaped.

Her words continue in a hushed whisper, “I can feel it growing tighter, digging into my skin and burning through my flesh. I can feel the way it slides over my skin, growing tighter and tighter. Feel my blood rushing in my ears. I don’t want to feel it anymore.”

“What happened?” The question slips from my lips before I can stop myself. If I’m to help her navigate out of this darkness, I need to know what has pushed her back into it.

“I can’t be what he needs me to be,” she admits with a sniffle, wiping away tears with the back of her sleeve. “He shouldn’t be punished because I am broken.”

“You’re not broken, Abbie,” I counter softly.

“But I’m not whole either. He deserves better than that. He deserves better than what I can give him. So does Tyson,” she concludes with a sigh.

“What does Gannon need, Abbie?” I ask. Her brows knit together in thought.

“A mate. Someone to love him, who won’t hurt him like she did,” Abbie whispers, her voice barely audible.

“Who hurt Gannon?”

“She did. She didn’t want him, and I can’t have him. It’s the same.” Her words are a

cryptic puzzle, one that I can't solve yet because I don't know of the woman she speaks of.

"Gannon wants you, Abbie. Tyson wants you. And me? I want you too," I tell her. But as if my words are a trigger, she retreats into some dark recess of her mind while I struggle to pull her back to reality.

When there's movement behind me, my eyes dart toward the door just in time to see Gannon silently entering the room. He moves behind her and perches on the edge of the bathtub. Abbie doesn't notice him; she isn't here with us in the present moment.

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‘I don’t know how to help her,’ he admits through the mindlink. But his confusion mirrors mine - I’m not a doctor or a psychologist, and knowing Abbie’s reluctance to share her secrets with strangers makes me realize we won’t get far with that approach.

I turn my attention back to Abbie. She shivers violently; her teeth chatter so loudly it echoes around the bathroom walls. She is drenched from head to toe and laying beside her has soaked me as well – my clothes now heavy with her blood despite no visible wounds on her body.

Lifting up her shirt slightly elicits no reaction from her when suddenly Gannon’s voice fills my mind again, “She slit her wrists in the bathtub. I found a bottle of wolfsbane beside her.”

“Wolfsbane? Where would she get that?” My question hangs unanswered as Gannon merely shrugs. “I never got a chance to ask her.”

My gaze returns to Abbie’s distant eyes and I grab her wrists, now noticing the long thick scars running up each one. They are closed, but by their thickness, I can tell they were deep.

“Come back to me, Abbie,” I urge her softly. But she just blinks in response. So instead, I lay beside her on the cold floor, holding her hand and recounting every good memory we’ve shared together – just so she knows that I’m here with her.

Hours pass as we lay there together; Gannon remains next to the bathtub, while Kyson hovers nearby. Tyson is absent and I suspect Clarice or Liam has him.



“Abbie?” My whisper breaks the silence, and for the first time today, she reacts - her eyes move to look at me.

“We made a pact. You need to come back to me, Abbie, or I will follow you wherever you go.”

She shakes her head at my words.

“You don’t want to go where I have been. The things they did...” Her voice trails off into a whimper.

“What they did can’t hurt you anymore,” I assure her firmly. “I won’t let them hurt you again. Neither will Gannon.”

But Abbie interrupts me before I can continue, sitting up abruptly as rage burns in her eyes.

“I don’t want them to live with it!” she screams at me before breaking down completely in front of us. She claws at herself, ripping her own skin apart and tearing out chunks of her hair. Abbie is losing it.

She’s breaking down, and it’s shattering me to see her give up because that’s what she’s doing. Rage bubbles within me, as hot as hers, while Gannon tries to restrain her. But she screams - blood-curdling screams that ricochet off the tiled walls as her anger escalates. She starts attacking Gannon in retaliation as he attempts to prevent her from self-destruction.

“More than my life, Abbie! You promised!” I shout at her just as hands grab me from behind, attempting to drag me away. Sparks race across my arms and I feel Kyson holding me back.

“Let me go!”

“She will hurt you,” he warns, but I wrench myself free from his grip.

“Seeing her like this hurts me,” I retort and scramble towards Abbie who is thrashing violently now. She kicks out at me while Gannon manages to pin down her arms by her sides. He grunts when she throws back her head but his grip doesn’t falter even when the back of her skull connects with his nose.

“Stop! We are trying to help you!” I plead with her, but she continues to struggle, this time landing a kick in my chest that sends me sprawling backwards into Kyson.

Anger and grief surge through my veins at the sight of Abbie in such a state. The emotions burn hotter than the sun, causing my skin to prickle with their intensity. Ignoring the heat searing through me, I lunge towards Abbie again and clamp my hands on either side of her head.

“Stop!” I command, and she freezes instantly. It isn’t so much her obedience that shocks me though; rather it’s the strange glow emanating from my hands before I’m suddenly immersed in memories that aren’t my own. Memories I know belong to Abbie.

I blink, my surroundings dissolving as new ones take shape - nightmares, horrific images I wish I could unsee. But I can’t pull myself out of her mind. I’m trapped in a past darker than the abyss, tortured and broken just like she is.

Voices sound distorted, as if they’re speaking underwater, but I recognize them as Kyson’s and Gannon’s. A tingling sensation rushes up my arms and it feels like an out-of-body experience. Instead of observing myself though, I’m looking down at Abbie in the tub where she’s trying to end her life.

Her wrists are slashed open and she truly believes that her presence is causing them pain. The sight of Gannon finding her tells a different story; he's desperate to save her life.

As I watch her bleed out, the bathroom walls transform from tiled surfaces into a canvas of painful memories. Every cruel word ever spoken to her, every traumatic event is etched onto these walls, exposing her tortured soul for me to see.

The urge to escape these memories overwhelms me even though they aren't mine. The horror she lives with each day is unimaginable, and the longer I remain here, the more entangled I become in her consciousness.

I feel trapped and am drowning in despair. It's too much pain for one soul to endure; too much suffering for anyone to bear alone. My heart shatters repeatedly for Abbie until there is nothing left inside me but emptiness.

Inwardly screaming and writhing in agony, I struggle unsuccessfully to free myself from this mental prison.

"Kyson!" My shout echoes through the void, whether aloud or only in my head isn't clear, but sparks ripple violently over my skin before his voice resonates within my mind.

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“Give me control of our bond,” he repeats insistently while attempting to manipulate it as he does my aura. But this is different; our bond is fraying, the feelings swirling inside Abbie are becoming mine.

I’ve become her, trapped within her psyche. Kyson continues to prompt and coax me. “Whatever you’re doing, you can control Azzy.”

“You used power to get in there. Use it to get out.” His words make no sense because I don’t remember doing anything. Fury swells within me, hot and bitter. It’s directed at her, at her surrender. She made a promise.

“More than my life,” she had said. But this isn’t my life yet. I’m ensnared in a past that belongs to her, not me. We share parts of it, but not every scar.

My gaze sweeps over the room, taking in the walls closing in on me - walls that bear the marks of her self-destruction. “This is not me. This is not Abbie,” I whisper to myself as I close my eyes.

“Breathe, Azzy,” Kyson’s voice floats from somewhere distant.

When I open my eyes again, the walls are transformed. Gone are the haunting images of her deepest fears; now they’re adorned with our shared memories – each one a precious moment we spent together: dancing in the attic during the festival night; playing under the sun when our parents were still with us; painting with the children; an apple fight; and above all, her radiant smile.

As these memories begin to color the room around me, I feel her stir within me,

adding memories of her own – Gannon and Tyson; a quaint cottage surrounded by wildflowers and pebble footpaths; and finally, her mother.

Together, we rebuild these walls piece by piece using fragments of happier times – small things worth fighting for until all traces of blood vanish, and only we remain amidst our cherished memories.

“More than my life,” I murmur to her as my heart rate steadies and breath returns to normalcy.

“How are you doing this?” she asks tearfully.

“I have no idea,” I admit through choked sobs as I watch her – whole and beaming back at me. “But it’s time you let go.”

“How?”

“By letting me replace what lies behind it.”

“You can do that?” she asks incredulously, her gaze darting around the room filled with our memories.

“I don’t know, but I feel like I can,” I assure her, raising my hand that begins to glow subtly.

“What are you doing?” she asks as I approach the walls of her mind.

“Reinforcing these memories and overriding the others,” I whisper before pressing my glowing hands against the tiles. Suddenly, a blinding white light engulfs us.

I gasp as reality pulls me back and find myself with my hands on either side of her

head. “More than my life,” Abbie whispers back at me, her vibrant green eyes meeting mine.

“Always more,” I reassure her just as something warm trickles down over my lip.

“Azzy?” Abbie’s voice is laced with concern as she reaches out towards my face. That’s when darkness clouds my vision and everything fades away.

## Chapter

### Thirty

#### ABBIE

I can’t explain what she’s doing. It makes no sense, and before I know it, Azalea’s eyelids flutter and she passes out. I can feel her in my head, her essence or presence tainting and touching the darkest parts of me, twisting and manipulating. She lifts the weight of my past from me. I feel free. It’s as if I’m no longer trapped in the nightmares I’ve survived and am now merely an observer, dissociated from them. I still remember everything, but the feelings that haunt and trap me are no longer there. It’s as if she has erased those completely.

When she passes out, everyone goes into panic, while all I can do is stare. I think I’ve killed her, but Trey Gannon is quick to whisk me out of there and away from everyone. Yet, I want to check on Azalea. Need to know I haven’t hurt her.

“She is awake, Abbie. Damian just mindlinked me,” Gannon tells me.

I nod, staring at where Tyson lies on the bed, nestled between our pillows.

“You need to shower. You’re covered in blood, and I don’t want Tyson waking up

seeing you like this,” Gannon instructs.

It was Tyson we fought over first then Sia. Only recently did I learn that my aunty was Gannon’s true mate... and he killed her. Yet strangely enough, I feel nothing for that woman; hardly remembering her - my mother - who fought back when we left my grandmother’s house.

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That was when we left the pack we lived in and went on the run; also when we met Marrissa who at that time was known by Della to us.

We were attacked by bandit rogues, then Della and Jason came to our aid; after which we stayed with them ever since.

I'm beginning to realize how small the world truly is... how interconnected all our pasts are. But it leaves questions unanswered, ones I'm not sure I want the answers to.

"Why did you kill her? Was it just because she left you?" I ask Gannon.

Gannon sighs, kneeling next to me where I sit on the couch by the small bookcase of children's books that Gannon got for Tyson. Most of them are pop-up books.

"Abbie, you don't want to know the answers to these questions. They will do more harm than good," he warns me.

"How can they? I don't feel sorry for her; I barely knew her. I just need to know," I tell him.

"Why?" he asks.

"To make sure that isn't the only reason you want me because you couldn't have her. Because I look like her."

"You are nothing like Sia. Not even close. You have the same hair and eyes, that is



it.”

“Then tell me.”

Gannon sighs again, dropping his head onto my knees.

“When I met Sia, I was visiting her pack. I had to take a message to the council for the King. I stopped over at her pack and met her at the tavern,” he tells me.

His brows furrow together as if he’s trying hard to remember some detail, but my eyes are trained on his chest...the deep crevices that marred his skin...skin torn apart by his own claws when he tried to rip out his own heart.

“Anyway, Sia and her mother were being kicked out of their pack for something your grandmother did.”

“She informed me that the council had located another place for them in a pack closer to here. I lent a hand with her move on the weekends, but she kept pushing for me to change her. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but something about her persistence irked me. She also expressed a desire to meet Claire and work at the castle - another thing that didn’t sit well with me.”

“Why does she want you to change her so desperately?”

“Because your grandmother was dying, that’s why,” Gannon replies.

“So you never changed her?”

“No, she kept mentioning it and I lost my temper. At that point, I still hadn’t informed the King. Once mates are typically discovered, especially when you’re part of the King’s guard, the King conducts background checks and most of the time,

unless he knows them personally, you need his permission to change them. I hadn't told the King about her or anyone else for that matter. Something felt off about her, and I feared the King might have refused if I asked or uncovered something suspicious about her. So, I told her 'no' and we had an argument. She then rejected me."

"What did you suspect her of?"

"Collaborating with hunters," Gannon admits.

"That's why you didn't want to inform the King because he would have killed her?"

"Yes, and Abbie, you mustn't disclose this to the King either - not the real reason at least. You've seen what he did to Azalea when he thought she was a hunter's daughter."

"So where does Liam fit into all this?" I question him, trying to piece it together.

He exhales deeply before answering: "Liam isn't aware of Sia's existence; however, he frequently visits the town she relocated to. He met her there and they started dating. What I wasn't aware of was that Liam actually knew her before I did."

"Liam knew your mate before you did?" Gannon nods affirmatively.

"Yes, because your grandmother is human, her mate was a werewolf who fortunately passed the werewolf gene onto his children. He then left her for his own mate but since she had children, she was permitted to stay within the pack. She was a witch and also the very same witch Liam would visit to get location spells done when we had trouble finding people the King would send us after," Gannon informs me.

"So she was cheating on you with Liam?" I question him, causing him to stand up

abruptly. I slide over making room for him and he collapses onto the couch next to me.

“Yes, we were clueless about each other’s involvement with her. I never accompanied him when he went to see your grandmother. Long story short, after two years of enduring her infidelity, I’d had enough and confronted her. To sever the bond from my end, I knew I had to kill her. But when I called her up, she confessed that she wanted to be with me. Little did I know that she’d told Liam that I was an abusive ex-boyfriend who’d been harassing her and he intended to kill me in response.”

“And he just stood by idly while you killed someone he loved too?”

“At first, yes - he was shocked but a year prior, he suspected that I must have found my mate because of my suicide attempt.” He pats his chest where scars are visible: “Liam found me and stopped me from ripping out my own heart in grief over losing the bond. He spent all night feeding me his blood so that my healing process could speed up. Even though it remained unsaid between us, he knew – as well as myself – that I’d found my mate.”

I chew on my lip; my aunt was a monster to inflict so much pain.

“Anyway, when Liam stepped out of the car and saw me, he put two and two together. He was disgusted with her and she started screaming for him to kill me. But instead, he stepped aside and told me, ‘I’ll start digging a hole to bury the bitch in’, which is exactly what he did. I killed her and he assisted in covering it up.”

“You’re nothing like her, Abbie. Yes, you share some similarities. At first, that might have been why I was drawn to you but you’re nothing like her - absolutely nothing like Sia. Despite my bond with Sia, I never loved her the way I love you,” Gannon assures me.

Chapter

Thirty-One

AZALEA

The sound of murmurs was what I woke to, whispers and frantic speech my mind was too foggy to comprehend. Kyson sounded worried. I can tell that much from his tone as I return to the present.

“What do you mean? How can you not know?” Kyson snarls at someone.

Moments later, Cedric’s voice reaches my ears. “If she were a Landeena, it would be straightforward, but she isn’t Kyson. She is also half Azure. I am familiar with the King’s gifts, the Queen’s she kept hidden for the most part and my knowledge is limited”

“And what? Do you have no clue either? Tatiana was your mate!” Kyson snaps when Trey’s voice reaches my ears.

“I know of some of her Moon-blessed gifts. Cedric is right, though. We can’t fully understand Azalea’s gifts until they make themselves present. She only just started acquiring them. Azure and Landeena bloodlines were the first. The Moon blessed yet polar opposites. They were never destined to bring a child into the world together. Her gifts will remain unknown until she learns to use them or they reveal themselves,” Trey argues.

Kyson sighs loudly, and I open my eyes to find I am on the couch by the fire, a blanket draped over me. Damian sits across from me, looking rather tired, his head resting back on the armchair as he listens to them argue.

“So, what sort of gifts did Tatiana have?” Kyson asks.

“All I know is she had gifts of being a seer and elemental by nature,” Trey answers when Cedric speaks.

“Garret was the opposite. His gifts stemmed from the mind, which is why no one

could resist his command, and why he was so charismatic and cruel,” Cedric says, sounding a little bitter as he mutters the last word.

“So this could be a mix of either?” Kyson groans. Annoyance filters through the bond.

“Or something else entirely,” Cedric offers. I remain quiet, letting them talk or argue about what they seemingly don’t know.

Sitting up completely, I peer over the back of the couch to see Cedric hand him some leather-bound books before they both leave. Looking back at Damian, he is watching me.

“Abbie?” I ask him.

“With Gannon, she is fine, my Queen. You don’t need to worry,” he tells me before getting to his feet. Yet worry is all I feel for her, she tried to kill herself and almost succeeded if Gannon hadn’t intervened she’d be dead by now. The things I saw inside her head will forever haunt me, forever remain with me.

“Finally, you’re awake,” Kyson says as Damian steps around the coffee table.

“I am going to head back to my mate. But I will be ready to leave by the afternoon for Landeena,” he says before walking out and leaving me with Kyson.

“We are going to Landeena tomorrow?” I ask as Kyson wanders over with books in his hands. He sits down beside me.

“Yes. You still want to go?” I nod my head. I needed answers, anything to try and figure everything out.

“Any news from Larkin?” Kyson shakes his head. “No, though we have tried to reach him.”

“You don’t think that Crux ...?”

“Honestly, I don’t know what to believe anymore, Azzy. We’ll figure it out together,” he tells me, setting the books down on the small coffee table.

“How are you feeling?” he asks, moving my hair over my shoulder.

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“I feel fine,” I exhale as he cups my cheek with his hand

“You had me so worried when you passed out. Abbie was beside herself. It took all Gannon’s strength to get her to leave.”

“I just can’t believe we missed how depressed she was,” I tell him, feeling terrible that my best friend was suffering in silence, believing wholeheartedly that she had no one to confide in.

“A lot has happened. New things have come to light. Finding out about Gannon’s mate, I think that shoved her over the edge.”

“Gannon had a mate?” I ask.

“Apparently, yes. But more shocking is it was Abbie’s aunty. Gannon and Liam killed her,” Kyson tells me.

“He killed his own mate?” I ask, horrified.

Kyson shrugs. “I don’t know all the details, and we were just as stunned when we found out. He never told me. Although I know Gannon, he would never hurt a woman without good reason. It is also nearly impossible to kill your own mate,” Kyson says, resting his head back on the couch.

“Come, you should get some rest. We have to be up in a few hours,” he tells me.

“I just woke up,” I laugh.



“But I haven’t slept yet, and it is 3am in the morning. I can’t sleep without you, so you need to come too,” he tells me, standing up.

“I’m not tired,” I tell him, peering up at him.

“Good for you, but I am,” he smirks before scooping me off the couch. I scramble to grab hold of him, not wanting to be dropped as he walks toward the bed. He places me on it before stripping his clothes off, remaining only in his boxers. I lick my lips at the sight of him.

“Nope! Sleep. I am old, tired, and grumpy. You can have your way with me tomorrow,” he growls as he climbs over me. But I’m not tired. No, I’m wide awake.

Kyson crawls into bed beside, tugging the blanket up before flicking the lamp off. Only the light from the fireplace illuminated the room, casting shadows on the walls and roof. I stare at the ceiling, wondering how long before he falls asleep so I can sneak off to shower. However, sleep is instantly forgotten when I hear Abbie’s voice flit through the mindlink.

‘Are you awake?’ she whispers to me.

‘Yes, are you okay? I wanted to come to see you, but Kyson wanted to sleep,’ I tell her.

‘You can see me. I’m outside your door,’ she whispers through the link as if she is trying not to wake Kyson. I glance at him fast asleep, snoring, before getting to my feet and making my way to the door.

Opening the door, I find Abbie and Tandi. Tandi peers past me to look at Kyson asleep before reaching in, grabbing my wrist and tugging me out the door and rushing toward the stairs. Abbie giggles, racing to keep up with her as if she is performing

some kind of jailbreak. Dustin, who is standing guard with Trey, stumbles after us.

“Ah, you said you needed to speak to her, not kidnap her!” Trey hisses at her.

“Either come with us and shut up, or stay behind. No party poopers allowed,” Abbie states. Trey shoots me an inquisitive look and I shrug.

“Where are we going?” I ask as I nearly stumble down the steps.

“To raid the liquor cabinet and find the deserts,” Tandi tells me. Abbie giggles and shakes her head.

“I heard her giving Damian hell in the halls and went to see what the commotion was and was kidnapped too,” she shrugs.

“Tyson? And Hunter?” I ask the girls, relieved to see a smile on Abbie’s face after yesterday’s events.

“Hogging the bed. Gannon is with him,” Abbie tells me.

“And Damian is playing Daddy daycare,” Tandi says as we reach the bottom of the stairs.

Tandi scouts the hall before jumping in fright when Liam comes around the corner. Liam glances around before ducking behind the corner of the staircase with us. He peers down, then peeks around the corner toward the kitchen.

“Who are we hiding from?” he whispers, and Tandi giggles.

“Idiot, we are raiding the kitchen!” she snaps, pushing past him.

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“I could do with a midnight snacky poo.”

“This is a girl’s breakout only,” she tells him.

“Then why does the ferret face get to come? And him?”

Trey huffs at Liam. Tandi looks over her shoulder at Dustin and Trey dressed in the typical black uniforms, looking every part of my guard.

“Dustin, don’t count. He is one of us,” Tandi states, and he huffs as if to say he is not a part of this escape when her eyes slide to Trey.

“And he is the fun police that decided to tag along,” she growls.

“Well then, count me as the corruption! I know where the hard liquor is kept. Besides, I am her guard,” he says, pointing to Abbie.

“Since when?” Abbie demands.

“Since you did a jailbreak on my best friend in your rainbow pajamas and bunny slippers. You look like you’re up to mischief,” Liam tells her, sending her a wink. Tandi sighs loudly.

“So much for keeping this a small gathering,” Tandi says, stomping off toward the kitchen. We flick the light on to find no one down here, and I can’t help but laugh as Liam makes himself at home, raiding the pantry and coming out with a huge armful of sweets and chips that he dumps into Trey’s arms. Trey shakes his head but says

nothing, accepting his role in our escape that I am sure would get me in trouble later with Kyson.

Tandi follows Liam to the cellar, returning with liquor and wine bottles. “Do you girls drink?” she asks, and Abbie and I shake our heads.

“Oh, Clarice made Mud Cake!” Liam states, spotting it on the top level of the fridge.

“Dustin, grab some glasses while I steal this,” he says

“Clarice will murder you,” Trey tells him while Liam kidnaps the cake.

“Shush you! You saw nothing, and don’t you snitch,” he tells Trey.

“So why are we doing this again?” I ask, and everyone stops looking at Tandì.

“Ah, because we can! You’re the Queen. You can do what you want!” she shrugs, and I giggle. She has a point, kinda. I doubt any of the guards would step in unless I am putting myself in danger.

We sneak down to the ballroom where the orphanage was initially set up, but it is now clear since only a handful of children remain. Those that are still here are on the servant’s floor with Clarice and the other servants so they could be watched over.

Yet a few bunk beds and toys remain. We set up our picnic after ripping the sheets off. Trey starts a fire in the enormous fireplaces, and we flick the lights off since turning them on lit the place like a Christmas tree.

“So what did Damian do that made you ditch him?” Abbie asks, accepting a glass of wine from her. Liam sips his bottle of whiskey, not bothering with a glass.

“Nothing really, it just irritated me,” Tandi says.

“Fascinating. Tell me more about your domestic squabbles,” Liam says, and she rolls her eyes at him.

“I wanted to go to the archives and find my daughter. He wants me to wait.”

“Why?” I ask, thinking it is a little odd of him. He knows Tandi wants her daughter back, as any mother would after learning they are alive all this time.

“He wants to be sure. He said he is worried Larkin is lying and she is dead. He wants to check it out himself first,” she sighs.

“Yeah, I would say he is just looking out for you,” Trey tells her, coming over with a blanket. He drapes it over my shoulder, eyeing the wine glass in my hand that Tandi gave me. I sip it, finding the taste somewhat bitter.

“What about you and Gannon after last night?” Tandi asks Abbie.

The room falls quiet at her question, and I definitely didn’t want to think of the state we found her in. Abbie leans into me, resting her head on my shoulder.

“I’ll be fine. Though I learned a lot about Sia, who was Gannon’s real mate,” Abbie tells us. I have my own questions about this woman. As I’m about to ask them, Liam clears his throat awkwardly. .

“Liam was with Sia when Gannon was,” Abbie says.

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“Damn! And you think I am trouble? First, the Gamma’s mate and then the Beta’s mate. I’m starting to see a pattern with you,” Tandi laughs.

“So what about Sia?” I ask Abbie.

“She was my aunty,” she tells us. Tandi stares at her, wide eyed, before downing her glass.

“I’ll get more wine then, shall I,” she says, about to get up and retrieve the bottle off the small Lego table leaning against the wall.

“I’ll do it,” Liam says, plucking the glass from her fingers and wandering off. Abbie sighs.

“So your aunty then?” Tandi asks.

“Dead. Gannon and Liam killed her,” Abbie answers.

“And you are still with him?” she asks, aghast.

“I don’t remember her. It was before I was born. All I know is what my mother told me about her.”

“And what was that?” Tandi asks curiously.

“That they had a fight. It was why my mother and father left the pack. So I have no memory of her. I only remember my grandmother when mum would sneak me to see

her when I was little.” I had hardly any memories that I could recall of Abbie. In fact, I could scarcely remember a time without Abbie.

“I don’t remember you ever leaving?” I tell her, confused.

“What?” Abbie asks, looking at me, just as confused as I felt.

“You and Marrissa came with us a few times. My grandmother! She had curly red hair and always wore those bone things around her neck. You told me she looked like the wicked witch,” Abbie laughs.

My brows pinched together as I tried to recall this memory or anything of that she spoke of.

“She used to have the giant tire swing out the back under the banyan tree?” Abbie tells me. I shake my head.

“Well, turns out you were right about her. She was a witch and human,” Abbie tells me with a laugh, yet I am still wondering why I have no memories of this. Liam comes over to us and hands Abbie a glass, making me sniff the air. I looked at Liam, swearing I could smell blood, but he looked fine. I shake my head, believing I imagined it, and sip my glass of wine that I still hadn’t finished. Abbie sips her glass and pulls a face at its bitterness.

“Wait, your grandmother was a witch?” Trey asks, sounding curious.

“That’s what Gannon said. Why?” Abbie answers him.

“Nothing, just the name Sia sounds familiar to me for some reason,” Trey tells her but offers nothing else.

“So where is your grandmother now, then? Maybe she can do a location spell on my daughter,” Tandi says, mumbling the last part.

“Dead. We killed her when she came after Gannon for killing her daughter,” Liam says matter-of-factly as if Abbie wasn’t sitting across from him.

“Woah, hold up! You killed her grandmother too?” Tandi asks, shocked.

“Yep, and...” Liam’s words suddenly cut off when the door opens. The lights flicker on, and we turn toward the doors.

“Okay. I was woken up by a guard saying someone was messing around in my kitchen, only to find my Mud cake gone, along with half the pantry!”

Simultaneously, everyone points at Trey, who throws his hands up, and I giggle.

“And no one thought to invite me?” Clarice demands, wandering over. She plucks the whiskey bottle out of Liam’s hand and drinks from it before sighing.

“Fuck, I needed that! Those kids have been running rings around me all damn night,” she states before falling into our little circle on the floor. She hands the bottle back to Liam, who smirks and rolls onto his back on the floor, staring up at the ceiling.

“If you’re going to raid my kitchen next time, an invitation would be nice, girls. Now, where is that cake?” she says.

“I’ll get it,” Trey says, wandering off. I watch everyone get wasted while I remain nursing the same wine glass. They look like they need to let loose. Yet I can’t bring myself to drink when I am constantly at Kyson about his drinking. It doesn’t feel right, and I am still sober along with Clarice when the sun comes up. Who, I think, is sticking around to supervise, so we don’t cause trouble.



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Meanwhile, Abbie can barely walk and is in fits of giggles, her face bright red from all the wine. She has also lost a slipper. Tandi is dancing on top of a table with Liam, while Dustin is on the verge of having a heart attack every time she gets too close to the edge. Liam is singing about some made-up song and keeps calling Dustin his sweetpea, which ends with him being snapped at by Dustin.

I laugh, watching them make fools of themselves while sitting with Trey and Clarice. “Always fun watching. Reminds me of when I was young,” Clarice says, sipping her glass of wine.

“How old are you?” I ask. As far as Clarice is concerned, I don’t know much about her. Only now has it occurred to me.

“Too old,” she laughs.

“Have you always lived at the castle?” I ask her while watching Abbie hunt beneath one of the bunk beds for her slipper. She comes out and jumps up victoriously, clutching it.

“Pretty much. When I had my mate, we lived in town, and I used to walk here, but after he died, I preferred being at the castle. I was lonely in the house by myself. This place kept me sane,” she tells me.

Just the thought of something happening to Kyson twists my heart. I can’t even imagine losing him.

“What happened to him?”

“He was a werewolf. I had been holding off on changing him, knowing how horrific it is to do so?”

“What do you mean?” I ask, remembering that Gannon had tried to change Abbie. Clarice shakes her head.

“That is something best explained by your mate.”

“So what happened to him, then?”

“This was just before your parents’ deaths. The hunter attacks were quite frequent, but they usually hit the packs. It was as if they used the packs for training when they hit them. Anyway, when we learned of the attacks, he wanted to help protect them, that they were his people, and he had family there. I refused at first, but he snuck off. Kyson found him dead and brought him home for me. He is buried in the cemetery by the river.”

“And you never thought to find a new mate?” I ask her.

“No, I loved my mate. After that, I focused on helping here. Put all my time into this place.”

“When I first came here, I was hired as a nanny. I raised Kyson, Liam, and Gannon all here. Damian, too; I love all the staff as if they were my own. Then, once the King was older, he kept me on, and I stayed. Then I found my mate, then lost him a short time later, and all I had was this place, so I moved back into the castle,” she tells me.

“So you never had a chance to have kids?”

She shakes her head.

“No, but I am hoping one day I will get to help you raise yours. When you’re ready, of course, to try again,” she tells me.

I smile sadly and nod. A short time later, Clarice rises to her feet and says she had to check the boys. Yet moments after she leaves, the fun abruptly stops when Damian bursts through the doors furiously.

## Chapter

### Thirty-Two

“Take it back. Trey is not the fun police. My mate is!” Tandi says, flailing her hand at him. I have to agree with her because the look on his face is furious. Dustin moves quickly to my side as Damian storms in.

“You!” Damian snarls, and I glance between the table Liam and Tandi are dancing on and Damian. However, he is not looking at Tandi but at Liam. Liam looks over his shoulder at Damian.

“Me?” he says, pointing at himself when his eyes widen as Damian snarls and shifts. Tandi screams, flying off the table as it is upturned when Damian crashes on top of Liam. The air expelling from Liam’s lungs is audible as he hits the ground with the angry Lycan’s weight crushing the air from him. Tandi tries to separate the pair of them as they pummel each other, and Liam is far too drunk even to shift.

“Damian! What has gotten into you? Get off him!” Tandi screeches, ripping on his fur. Abbie giggles as she drunkenly stumbles over to me with her bunny slipper in her hand, clutching it as if it is some prized possession.

“Get ‘em, Tandi!” She squeals loudly beside me as Tandi jumps on Damian, clinging to him like a spider monkey as she bonks him on the head.

“I don’t think Damian is playing, Abbie,” I tell her. Abbie’s face suddenly turns serious as she looks at the pair, just as Damian punches Liam so hard that his nose breaks.

“Woah! Not the fucking face! Body shots only prick!” Liam spits at him. Just as Tandi slides off Damian’s back and hauls Damian off him, Trey strolls over to me, sitting next to me.

“You’re not going to stop them?” I ask Trey, and he shrugs.

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“Not unless you ask. Or they get too close to you,” Trey yawns. I look at Dustin, who also just shrugs.

“Liam can handle himself,” he says, looking unperturbed by his boyfriend getting his ass handed to him.

“Stay the fuck away from my mate!” Damian spits at Liam. But good old Liam just doesn’t know when to shut his mouth, and I eye-roll so hard I swear I catch a glimpse of my brain when Liam laughs like a maniac.

“Not my fault. She likes me more than you,” Liam taunts. That crazy ass Lycan has a death wish, and death is coming for him. As Damian spins on his heel so quickly, Liam only jumps out of the way of his foot as Damian goes to stomp him.

Damian’s foot misses him by mere inches when Liam punches Damian’s inner thigh as he reaches down to try to grab him. Which makes Damian grunt, and he drops his head.

Liam takes that opportunity to uppercut him. I hear the sound of his teeth gnashing before all hell breaks loose. Dustin sighs, stepping in front of us, acting as a shield. My heart skips a beat, and I grab Abbie, ripping her away as they come flying toward us. Trey quickly moves to block me as Liam comes flying toward us from a kick to the stomach. Trey grabs him, shoving him away and toward the doors, while Dustin shoves us behind him to the side.

“Out now!” Trey snarls, pointing toward the door while glaring at Liam, and I feel Kyson wake, and by God, they want to run before he gets here. Liam bows and looks

at Dustin.

“Come on, Dustin, you can kiss my boo-boo’s better,” Liam purrs. Dustin growls and watches as he saunters out, and Trey blocks Damian as he follows him.

“Go, Trey is with me,” I tell Dustin, and he sighs, rushing off after him.

Tandi appears to be in shock, and she gasps when Damian turns his head to look at her. He looks menacing. And I don’t blame her at all for not wanting to go with him. His chest rises and falls heavily with each panting breath he takes.

“Tandi now!” Damian clicks his fingers at her, but she shakes her head, eyes wide as she stares at him petrified.

“I’m good here. You go ahead.” But not petrified enough to defy him.

“It wasn’t a question. Now!” His demand of her makes her eyes narrow. She clearly isn’t impressed by him making demands of her, and it isn’t like she was doing anything wrong. They were only dancing, or is that not allowed? I wasn’t sure what appropriate male and female interactions are outside my guards, so I’m not sure. Then again, Kyson, I know, easily becomes jealous, especially with Trey. Dustin, not so much, but he has even had his moments with him.

Abbie snickers behind me, cupping her mouth with her hands. She has been in fits of giggles since the first glass of wine. She can’t even stand upright properly. Abbie is leaning against me, and I am sure she will topple over if I move. Damian’s head twists at the noise she makes before recognition dawns on him. His eyes soften slightly as he peers at her.

“Abbie, Gannon is on his way to get you. I sent Clarice to watch Tyson,” he tells her.

“What! You speak to her nicely while I get yelled at for doing the same thing!” Tandi snarls, outraged.

“You’re older. You should know better! And she wasn’t dancing with the man whose initials are carved into her damn thigh!”

Tandi rolls her eyes and folds her arms across her chest, popping her hip, which is a big mistake from where her pajama pants have ridden up, exposing the white scar marring her skin.

Damian snarls at her as if she did it deliberately, and she realizes the mistake, quickly fixing her stance as his eyes lock on her. He growls, stalking toward her, and my feet move when he grabs her. I shove past Trey as she squeals. Her small body hits the floor as he pins her.

“Damian!” I snap. Trey races past me just as she screams.

Everything goes to shit. Trey tries to pry him away, and I see blood spill on the floor and Tandi screams a blood-curdling scream that makes my heart leap into my throat just as Trey rips him back. The inside of her thigh is all bloody, and Trey growls at him just as Kyson rushes into the room and rips Trey off Damian.

But my eyes are on Tandi’s thigh, torn to pieces by his claws. Tears brim in her eyes as she looks at where he carved his name, or half of it, on her leg with his claws. Damian, coming back to his senses somewhat, stares at what he did, yet his anger is quick to grip him in this heightened state.

“I think I am going to be sick,” Abbie says behind me, and I turn to see her face white as a sheet. She staggers and is about to hit the ground when Gannon is suddenly beside her. He scoops her legs out from under her, and she pukes all over his shirt the moment he does.

“Sorry,” she murmurs, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand.

“But I feel better now,” she nods. Gannon blinks down at her before lifting his head to look past me at Kyson.

“My King?” Gannon asks.

“Go, Trey and I have him.” Kyson answers.

“Night,” he says, walking off with Abbie, who has officially passed out from either fear or alcohol or both.

I grab the napkins from when we had cake, pressing them against her leg, trying to clean it up. Trey taps me on the shoulder, and I move aside, letting him tend to her. When I rise to my feet, it’s to see Kyson glaring at his Beta while Damian is glaring at Trey’s hands on her leg.

“He’s helping her, back off!” Kyson tells Damian in a warning. He is livid, and I hope it isn’t directed at me. I can tell he isn’t impressed waking without me beside him, but he doesn’t mention it, and I can tell he is trying to keep himself calm despite also feeling the urge to drag me out of the room.



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What a disaster this night, or more morning as it is now, became. Tandi hisses, and his claws got her deep, the napkins barely doing anything to stem the bleeding.

“Damian needs to heal you,” Trey mumbles, looking over his shoulder at Damian.

“He mutilated me! I don’t want him anywhere near me!” she snaps.

“Just help me up; I will walk it off,” she groans as she holds her hands out to me, and I grab them, hauling her to her feet. Yet the moment she stands, blood cascades down her leg like a waterfall, Trey clutches her thigh in both hands.

“Don’t be fucking stubborn!” Damian snaps, shaking off Kyson’s arm on his shoulder.

“No! You’re not touching me!” she snaps at him when he pauses, looking around on the floor where mushed-up cake and spilled drinks ruin the floor, and guilt smashes me at the mess we have made. Damian growls, snatches the cake knife from the floor, and stalks toward her. She stumbles back, her leg still clutched in Trey’s hand.

“Get off her!” Damian snarls, and he holds the knife out to her. Her hands tremble as she hesitantly snatches it.

“Enjoy it. It will be the only time I let you carve me up!” he snaps at her before dropping to his knees in front of her. He growls and looks up at her, and shakes his head.

“What? You don’t get to act disgusted. You did it!” she snaps at him.

“I’m not disgusted! Look at it!” he snaps at her, and we all lean a little closer, and she narrows her eyes at him, pursing her lips.

“You best be bloody fixing it. I am not walking around with DAM on my leg!” she growls furiously.

Did she mean she wanted him to carve into her more? Or did I hear that wrong? Damian looks over his shoulder at the King. Kyson shrugs, his eyebrows lifting almost into his hairline at her words.

“Well, you asked this time, so don’t bitch when it hurts,” he tells her.

“Yes, because you mutilated me! Now fix it!” she says, tapping her foot impatiently.

He lifts his hand to her leg, his sharp claw slicing through her soft flesh, and she grits her teeth, grabs his shoulder and bares it while I feel woozy just watching.

Damian does it fast before running his tongue across it and quickly healing the damage he caused, leaving behind only faint scarring.

Tandi examines it, scrutinizing it when a wicked smile graces her face as she runs her thumb over the knife in her hand, wiping the chocolate off it before sucking on her thumb.

“My turn! And you better not squirm like a bitch,” she says, and I look away, noticing that he has shifted back and is now naked, kneeling before her.

“Your name only. You write something stupid on me, and I will...”

“Do nothing. You cut me first!” she says, waving the knife in his face. He sighs, and Trey gets to his feet, reaching me at the same time Kyson does.

“That is not normal!” Trey says, shaking his head at them as Tandi carves her name above his pec, while Damian watches her, making sure she embellishes nothing.

“Wait, I forgot to dot the I,” she says, stabbing the point into him and making him hiss.

“There,” she says, dropping the knife and walking off. She passes us and moves through the double doors, snickering to herself. Damian stops beside us, and I glance at his chest, keeping my eyes above the waist. His blood streaks down his chest as he stares after her.

“That woman is driving me crazy! I don’t know if I wanna kill her or kiss her. Maybe both!” he snaps, chasing after her while mumbling. When they leave, Kyson’s hand falls on my lower back, and I cringe, waiting for his wrath.

“Are you okay?” he whispers, kissing my temple. I peer up at him as he drapes his arm across my shoulders.

“You’re not mad?” I ask him.

“Too tired to be mad at you. Besides, you don’t look drunk, and you’re not brandishing a knife like a madwoman,” he says, gripping my face and sniffing me.

“I only had half a glass of wine. I stopped drinking. It wouldn’t be right if I was drinking while constantly scolding you for the same thing,” I tell him. He glances at Trey and sighs.

“I trust you. And I trust Trey not to let you get in trouble, Azzy,” he says, kissing my forehead.

“Come on, I should clean this mess up,” I tell him, looking at the mess we made.

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“Go, I will do it,” Trey says, walking toward the doors, he grabs the plastic bin, and I move to help him, but he shakes his head.

“Bed, my Queen. We are leaving for Landeena this afternoon once we hear back from Larkin. His deadline is today. I can handle this. Go get some sleep.” Trey says, but Kyson is already steering me out the door before I can protest further.

Chapter

Thirty-Three

GANNON

Abbie is still passed out when I reach the room. Clarice, however, stands in the hallway. My bedroom door is open as she stands by the door, watching Tyson while rocking Hunter in her arms and putting him back to sleep.

She glances at me, covered in vomit and chuckles.

“I am glad you find it so funny,” I tell her. She smiles at Abbie, who is snoring in my arms, her mouth open. She is out cold but won’t be once I put her in the shower.

“At least she had fun and got out of this room for once,” Clarice says, and I nod in agreement. She’s not wrong. The moment she took off with Tandi, I had Liam looking for her, him promising to stay by her side. She needed time with Azalea and Tandi. Even if I think Tandi is a little wild, she is familiar to Abbie, and this would give them time to hang out without me hovering around.

“Let me set him down in his crib,” Clarice says, walking off toward Damian’s room, only to stop when we hear voices. Or more like arguing. I roll my eyes, and Clarice pauses.

“On second thought, I might lay him down on your bed for a minute,” Clarice says when I recognize the voices to be Tandi and Damian. I wander into my room, finding Tyson where I left him, fast asleep on Abbie’s side of the bed. Clarice sets Hunter next to him, propping pillows around him before following me into the bathroom. She turns the shower on for me while I pull Abbie’s soiled clothes off. I place her in the shower. My chest pangs when I glance at her marred flesh.

Long slits run up both arms. My mark on her neck has covered and removed Kade’s, yet the guilt I feel about marking her without consent still coils inside me.

“She’ll forgive you,” Clarice says. The woman is too observant and can read me like a damn book.

“I know; it just doesn’t feel right,” I tell her, glancing at her. She nods, grabbing soap and a loofah as Abbie stirs under the water.

“She will forgive you. You were trying to save her,” Clarice says as I tug my shirt off, tossing it in the hamper.

“I am not worried about her forgiving me for marking her, that she will forgive,” I tell her, sticking my head out the door.

“Get it off your chest, son. I am not a mind reader. I know you tried to change her.”

“She said I tried to force her to live.”

“Because you did,” she tells me. No judgment from this woman ever come. I could

tell her my darkest secrets; I know she would take them to the grave with her and not judge me for my mistakes.

“Yes, but I don’t think I can keep the promise I made to her if she tries to do it again,” I whisper.

“I don’t think she will try again, Gannon. Whatever Azalea did, it made her want to live. Abbie spent so much time trapped in her past that she forgot she now has a future, and that future is with you and Tyson. You just may need to remind her of it occasionally,” she tells me, passing me the soap and loofah.

I take them, and she pats my cheek before walking out. “I will take Tyson for the night. I am taking Hunter for the night, too. I will have Dustin come and grab Tyson for me,” she tells me.

“Thank you,” I tell her, and she nods, closing the door and leaving me with Abbie. I strip my pants off and climb into the shower. Abbie sits at my feet, leaning against the shower wall while I quickly wash myself before kneeling to wash her. She jerks awake when I pull her head under the water, coughing and spluttering. She wipes her eyes, peering around.

“You’re safe. It’s just me,” I tell her, and she sighs, leaning back against the shower wall. Leaning out of the shower quickly, I grab her toothbrush and mouthwash.

I put toothpaste on it, passing it to her, yet her eyes were already closing. “Abbie, brush your teeth,” I tell her, placing the toothbrush in her hand and bringing it to her mouth. She chews on it while attempting to brush her teeth. I quickly wash her hair before tilting her head back while laughing at her when I try to pull the toothbrush from her mouth.

“Open your mouth,” I chuckle, scrubbing her teeth the same way I watch her scrub

Tyson's every morning and night.

"Spit," I tell her when I am done. She does, mostly spitting it on herself, and I quickly wash it off her.

"Come on," I tell her. She sluggishly peers up at me, returning to her surroundings and looking around again. It is clear she has already forgotten where she is. She is completely shitfaced, and she smiles lazily, and I roll my eyes, grabbing her under the arms and pulling her up.

"I think I drunkded too much," she giggles, slurring each word and making me laugh.

"That you did," I tell her.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

“Did you find my bunny?” I raise an eyebrow at her, not knowing what she is talking about. I half drag her while she stumbles out of the shower. It takes me a solid twenty minutes to dress her because she keeps demanding her bunny, which I finally figured out is her damn slippers.

I place her in bed, tucking her in, her slipper tucked under one arm. Shaking my head, I put my boxers on before moving toward the door I realize is slightly ajar. As I close it, I catch movement and open it, wondering if it is Clarice and if she needs something. Yet when I open the door, I catch a glimpse of something I wish I could unsee. I blink at the scene before me. Damian had Tandi’s legs around his waist while he impales his cock in her while pressing her against the damn wall. I clear my throat. Staring up at the ceiling instead of his white ass.

“We have rooms for a reason!” I call out, and Tandi shrieks.

“Noted, we are getting there,” Damian growls, quickly rushing to his room down the hall. I shake my head, shut the door, and fall onto the couch.

Abbie will freak out if she wakes up with me on the bed next to her. She never lets me sleep next to her unless Tyson is between us. Besides a few stolen kisses and brief hugs, that is it. It is also what caused the incident the other day. Tyson has his own room now and still. She refuses to sleep in the bed without him or when I have put him in his room, I wake up to her there with him or her creeping over to the couch. Shutting the lamp off and closing my eyes, I drape my arm across my face. The sky is already starting to lighten, yet sleep takes me.

A while later, I am abruptly awoken from oblivion by a loud crashing noise, which



has me sitting up instantly. My eyes peer around the room, adjusting to the darkness as my night vision kicks in. I sigh, finding Abbie getting to her feet from the floor. She giggles, and I sit up just as she stands.

“Abbie, you should be asleep,” I groan, rubbing my eyes when I feel her body hit mine as she stumbles into me. I catch her to realize she has shredded her clothes in her sleep.

“Abbie,” I stammer. She only giggles, climbing into my lap, her lips attacking me. I grip her arms, but she pushes me back, straddling me. Her mouth crashes against mine, and I groan, kissing her back before regaining my wits and pushing her back.

“Abbie, you’re drunk,” I tell her. She slurs and mumbles while her hands continue to tug at my clothes. I remove my shirt, dragging it over my head.

“You don’t want me,” she pouts while sitting up.

“Not while you’re drunk, I don’t. Now lay down,” I tell her, patting my chest. She ignores me, instead trying to kiss me, and I sigh.

“Abbie!”

“I want you,” she whines, licking my chest.

“And if you still want me in the morning, you can have me, but not while you’re like this,” I tell her, yet still she insists, and I roll my eyes, tucking her beside me and locking my arms around her squirming body. Her ass rubbing against my crotch, making me extremely uncomfortable as I trap her between the back of the couch and my chest.

I sigh and purr before realizing my calling will work on her now, and I take full

advantage of it, letting it calm her and essentially knock her out.

I am not giving her another reason to hate me. And fucking her, while she is like this, will make me hate myself as much as she will hate me in the morning.

“Sleep, love, you’re safe with me,” I whisper, kissing her cheek. She squirms but gives up eventually, while I enjoy having her this close, loving the feel of her body safe in my arms.

## Chapter

### Thirty-Four

#### DAMIAN

I am livid. Gannon said he would get one of the guards to watch over them; I just didn’t expect it to be Liam. And why would she agree? And she was acting like it was no big deal, and I was the one overreacting? I stalk after her as she storms off toward our room, where I left Clarice to watch Hunter and Tyson.

“Tandi!” I call out to her, taking the steps two at a time as I try to catch up with her. She ignores me, practically running from me, which only infuriates me more. This won’t be the end of this conversation, I am not done speaking to her yet. But she insists on ignoring me, which is really getting on my last nerve.

I’m not done with her. We still have more to hash out. I shout behind her, “Where do you think you’re going?” She doesn’t even turn around to respond, and once again just keeps walking,

“Away from your dumb ass, that’s where!”

I jog to catch up with her. For someone with short legs, she sure can move fast when angry. I grab her shoulder and spin her around. Big mistake on my part. She looks like the devil himself, furious little eyes glaring up at me. looks like the devil himself, furious little eyes glaring up at me.

“What the fuck do you want, Damian? You already carved over Liam’s letter. You want me tattooed too with your face on my back!” she snaps at me.

“What are you expecting? Me to be okay that you fucked Liam? How do you think it makes me feel? Everyone has had their hands on you but me,,” I retort, just as angry with her that she would go get drunk with one of the guards whom she fucked! Does she not see how that would piss me off after everything I’ve done for her?

Her eyes are blazing and turning pitch black as she jabs me in the chest with her finger, “You act like I had a choice; you think I wanted to be made a whore, that I enjoyed it? Maybe a few of them, but that’s beside the point. You are so unbelievable. Since you are so anxious for your turn, here is your chance!” she snarls at me.

I just stand there, not knowing what to do or say. Tandi never had a choice in any of it. Before I can clean up, sticking my foot in my mouth, she grabs both my hands, placing them on her boobs.

“Is this what you want? You want to put your hands on me? Here you go. Well, what are you waiting for? You want me to be your whore, don’t you?”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

“Tandi, that’s not what I meant,” I try to tell her while jerking my hands back, but she just grabs them tighter, holding them in place as she walks me backward.

“Yes, the fuck it was, so have at it then!”

I move my hands from her breasts, making her even angrier. “You don’t get to throw that shit in my face and try to backpedal!” I snarl at her when she shoves me.

“I didn’t make you a fucking whore, so don’t put that shit on me!” I snap at her, and her eyes widen, and her lips part slightly in shock. It lasts all of two seconds before they narrow, and she growls as her canines slip out in her fury.

Tandi begins pushing me on my chest, hard at that. When that doesn’t work, she punches me. An involuntary growl escapes me, and I grab her. Tandi growls back and bites me below her name as she thrashes, trying to escape my grip.

“Fuck you, Damian!” In a surprise move, she headbutts me, causing me to loosen my hold. This woman is insane. My forehead starts throbbing, and I’m unsure how she didn’t knock herself out because fuck that made me see black for a few seconds.

Regaining my senses only for her to jump me knocking me flat on my ass, I use my arms to block her. She is strong as hell for someone so small. I try to get up, only for her body to crash against mine, her legs lock around my waist, and I only just manage to remain standing as I catch her. I struggle with her as she attacks me, trying to restrain her.

She lets out a sound of annoyance when she tries to gain advantage on me. Suddenly,

I feel her canines pierce my neck, marking me inadvertently. She pops her head up in shock at the realization of what she has done.

Before she can think twice about it, I grab the back of her head, kissing her forcefully. She bites my lip, drawing blood, kissing me back even harder. Her legs wrap around my torso. She groans, mauling my mouth, and I press her against the stonework of the wall. My dick is at attention as I rip her bottoms off halfway down as best I can while her legs are wrapped around me. Off in the distance, someone clears their throat, and I glance in the direction the noise came from.

Gannon is staring up at the ceiling instead of at me. “We have rooms for a reason!” he snaps, causing Tandi to shriek.

“Noted. We were getting there,” I growl just before he shuts his door, and I chuckle, shaking my head before feeling her hands tugging at my pants, freeing my cock from the confines of my pants.

The heat and slick from her pussy teases my tip. I thrust in her hard, causing a throaty moan to escape her lips and her claws to dig into my back.

“Harder!”

I do as I’m told, pinning her to the wall as I ram into her pussy.

Yet hearing voices down the hall, I hurry to our room and kick the door shut behind me, slamming her back on the bed, my lips moving to her neck while her hands claw at me.

“Hunter!” she hisses, gripping my hair and lifting my head as she turns her head toward the cot.

“Clarice has him,” I tell her, and she looks at me before nodding. I lean down, kissing her, only for her to pull away after a few seconds.

“That is not where I want your mouth,” she says, and I chuckle, all too happy to oblige.

“Well, what are you waiting for then,” I pull out, unsure if I like how demanding she was or not but fuck it makes my cock harder the more she orders me around. I move down her body, dropping my head between her legs, sucking on her clit, making her hips buck off the mattress as I taste every part of her.

I groan when I taste her slick coat, my tongue as she comes undone, her hips moving against my face as she rides out her orgasm. Seconds later, she grabs my hair, pulling me up her body, then forcing me on my back and straddling me. I watch as she tugs her top over her head. I knead her breasts as she mounts my cock. A groan escapes me as I feel her walls grip me as she sinks down on me.

She rides me like a bronco with the bed screeching across the floor, causing me to grunt. She is wet and tight, placing a vice grip on my cock. I sit up against the headboard to stop my head from banging into it. This woman is going to be the death of me. If it was like this, I’m okay with it. It’s good I don’t have to worry about breaking her, yet I am slightly worried she might break me. She forces her breast into my mouth and places her hands on the headboard.

Tandi hops off me quickly, and I wonder what she is doing. I’m about to reach for her when she moves down my body, pushing my legs apart, and inhaling my dick in her mouth.

“Fuck!” I curse as her tongue runs along the side of my shaft. Looping her tongue around the head had my eyes rolling in the back of my head. When I try to place my hands on her head, she pins my hands with hers on the bed. Just before I can blow in

her mouth, she stops, and her lips leave my cock with an audible pop.

She turns around reverse cowgirl style, giving me a view of her magnificent bubble butt. I squeeze her ass as she sinks down on me with a moan; I like this position, watching her bouncing up and down. Before I know what is happening, we crash down with the bed frame broken. Tandi begins to laugh hysterically with me as she tries to right herself.

“Come here,” I tell her.

Lifting her up and placing her on top of me, I kiss her deeply, forcing my tongue into her mouth. I roll her with me, her legs wrap around my waist as I push her onto her back and slowly re-enter her.

Chapter

Thirty-Five

AZALEA

Kyson grips my arm as I walk up the stairs to our room. “I’m not drunk,” I tell him, not that I mind the sparks racing up my arm. Or his scent clouding my brain.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

“I wished you woke me. I don’t like you being far from me,” Kyson tells me. While nodding my head, I yawn. I am exhausted, yet I can feel that Kyson is wide awake now that he woke up to such chaos. Pushing the door open, I rush toward the bed and face-plant onto it, wanting nothing more than to curl into a ball beneath the covers. Kyson wanders over to the fireplace, chucking an extra log in while I try to get out of my pants and shirt before crawling under the blanket.

The bed dips beside me as Kyson climbs into bed beside me; I snuggle into his side, and he pulls the blanket up, encasing me in his arms.

Surrounded by his scent, it doesn’t take long before I crash and burn, sleep taking me. However, it isn’t long before I am also awoken by his movement beside me. My eyes flutter open when I feel his arm move beneath my head as he turns the page of the book he is reading.

“What are you reading?” I ask while yawning, the words coming out all jumbled.

“I don’t speak yawn?” he says, and I tilt my face up to look up at him. He smiles, leaning down and kissing my nose.

“One of the books Cedric gave you,” he answers before pressing his lips to my forehead.

“What’s it say?” I ask him, curious about what gifts my parents had and what ones I could have possibly inherited.

“Not much, really, I only just started reading it.”



“Can you read it to me?” I ask him, but he rolls away from me. He sets the book down on the bedside table before rolling into me.

“Hmm, I can, but—” he doesn’t finish. Instead, he smiles deviously and presses his lips to mine, flooding me with his calling. The sound vibrates from his chest, awakening my desire and every sense in my body, calling me to him; I kiss him back hungrily when his calling stops abruptly. Yet, he has awoken it already, and now, instead of being hungry for knowledge, I am hungry for him.

Kyson laughs against my lips as I crawl on top of him. My lips travel down his neck to where my mark lies on his neck. His hands gently trail up my sides, making my entire body tingle and heat under his gentle touch. My fingers trail down his chest before moving between our bodies, and I squeeze him through his boxers when he growls, flipping me onto my back and pressing his body between my legs.

Kyson grips my panties before sitting up between my legs as he tugs them down my legs. I lift my hips so he can remove them, he tosses them aside. His heated gaze runs over my body as he pushes my thighs apart and flat against the bed. My legs tremble with anticipation as he settles between them. His hot breath sweeps across my lower lips, and my hips lift, wanting his mouth on me.

Kyson smiles, lowering his head, his teeth graze my inner thigh as he nips his way down. He sucks the inside of my thigh next to the apex of my legs, and my hips buck, but his hands grip my thighs, pressing them into the bed and holding me still.

“Well, aren’t you a demanding little Vixen today?” he purrs before teasing me with his tongue along the crease of my leg.

“Kyson,” I breathe, wiggling my hips. He chuckles softly before sweeping his tongue across my slit. I moan, melting against the mattress. He buries his face between my legs, his mouth covering my pussy. His hand pushes against the back of my thigh,

forcing one of my legs higher as he drapes one over his shoulder and settles between them. His mouth teases as he sweeps his flat tongue across the seam of my lower lips, making me moan as my skin tingles and burns with desire.

He growls softly before his tongue peels my lower lips apart. He runs his tongue through them to my clit and sucks hard. My heart pounds uncontrollably and heat floods and pools in my stomach, warming every inch of me as sparks rush across my skin.

His tongue swirls, driving me wild, and making me whimper at the building sensation as he continues to torment me with his tongue.

Kyson tastes and licks every piece of me before dipping his tongue inside me and lapping at the juices spilling from me. My legs tremble when I feel the first slivers of pleasure tighten the muscles of my belly. He slides his finger deep inside me while sucking. My inner walls squeeze and clamp down around his finger as he pulls out slowly. His finger drenches in my arousal and slides in and out effortlessly as he adds another, stretching me open. My inner walls squeeze as the friction builds, and I move my hips against his mouth.

Heat washes over me, and I moan as my sensitive nerves pulsate against his tongue. My walls flutter when my orgasm ripsthrough me, his fingers plunging in deeper, and my inner walls clench as he continues his relentless sucking and licking, making me cry out.

Everything tingles, my thoughts solely consumed with the pleasure he is inducing, solely consumed with him. When I finally burn so hot, I am holding my breath, I tumble over the precipice, falling blissfully as I reach the peak of my climax. My moan echoes as I come hard.

The slickness of my arousal spilling out of me, and my body tenses and spasms as I

ride out the waves of pleasure, leaving me breathless.

Kyson slips his fingers from me, his hot tongue lapping at my juices before he kisses and crawls up my body, settling his weight against me. His lips, slick with my juices, mold around mine as he plunges his tongue into my mouth, forcing me to taste myself. I smile against his lips, enjoying his touch, enjoying him. It feels like we hardly have time for each other, so I am thankful for this moment despite being exhausted from being up all night. Kyson always has a way of making me forget the torment life throws at us, and right now, I want nothing more than to forget with him.

His hips thrust against my entrance, making me jolt at the over-sensitive nerves as his erection presses against me. My hand moves down his side, and I push the waistband of his boxers down his hip before he tugs them down and gets rid of them by kicking them off. His thick, hard cock presses against my core, and I feel the head of his cock slide between my lower lips over my clit as he rocks his hips against me, coating himself in my arousal as it slides through my folds.

I arch my hips, rolling them against him, and moan into his mouth before reaching between us, my hand stroking his hardened length as my fingers wrap around his shaft. He groans, thrusting into my hand. His lips travel down my neck, sucking his mark and nibbling on it, and I tilt my head to the side, offering him more. Kyson purrs, and I love the sounds he makes, love how the bond tugs, wanting me to claim our mate over and over. He is mine, and I am his. There is no greater comfort than knowing that he was fighting alongside me. That now we fight for each other instead of against each other. No more fighting, just us. I wiggle my hips, rubbing against him, before gripping his hair and bringing his lips back to mine.

He kisses me harder, taking his cock in his hand and positioning himself at my entrance. Moving my hand to his hip, I tug him closer, rolling my hips against him. He presses the tip against me, his cock sliding into my wet core, stretching me around his thickness and making me moan into his mouth at the feel of him filling him.

Kyson kisses me harder, biting down on my lip as he sinks deeper, making me gasp. I roll my hips against him as his teeth tease my bottom lip into his mouth, my juices coating his shaft as he rocks his hips gently against me. I chase the slow friction, rolling my hips against him and meeting his slow thrusts, wanting more, needing him to move faster.

Growing impatient, I kiss him harder. My hand on his hip tugging him closer, and he moves quicker, building up the friction as he drags his cock out before slamming back in. I gasp into his mouth at the slight pain that turns into moans, muffled by his lips as they devour mine.

The only noises in the room are my cries of pleasure, and the wet sounds of our bodies coming together. Kyson drives his cock into me harder when I push on his shoulder, wanting to change positions.

“You can’t go on top, Azzy; I am not wearing anything, so I have to pull out, or I will knot you,” he purrs, nipping up my neck to my lips.

“Then knot me,” I murmur, pushing on his shoulder, and he stops, pulls away, looking down at me. I can feel his shock through the bond, and feel his desire to do as I suggested. Yet, also his caution, as if he is afraid to get his hopes up.

“If I knot you...”

“I can get pregnant. I am aware, Kyson,” I finish for him, and he stares at me for a second.

“A baby is never a bad thing, though timing kinda sucks. However, I don’t think the timing will ever be right, not for us anyway, so if it happens, it happens. If it doesn’t, it doesn’t...” I tell him.

“You want to try again?” he asks, and I can feel his heart racing against mine as hope and excitement bleed through the bond.

“I need to hear you say it, love. I want to know this is what you want and not just you saying it because it’s what I want,” Kyson tells me warily as he watches my face.

Yet listening all night to how Abbie and Tandi gush over their children while I longed for the child I lost made me only crave being a mother more, made me crave seeing Kyson become a father.

I lost my family twice, and I suddenly long for family more than anything, which means creating one with him. I know he will be a great father because, despite everything in our past, he is a great mate, a great King.

“Yes, my King. I want to try again,” I tell him, and he smiles, his eyes sparkling as he nods. His arm slides underneath my lower back. He sits back on his knees with me on his lap, pulling me on top. His hands grip my ass as he moves me up and down his hard length, our positions changing.

I readjust my legs and lock my arms around his neck. Kyson nips my collarbone, making me gasp at the sting before tracing his tongue over it, and I grip his hair, tugging his head back to kiss him. Our bodies move as one like a well-choreographed dance. Kyson groans into my mouth as I roll my hips against him, one hand squeezing my ass in a bruising grip while the other goes to the center of my chest as he pushes me back slightly, dips his head, and sucks on my nipple.

My skin heats and tingles rush over my body when I feel the pressure in my lower stomach build, and his knot expands, pressing against my opening as it swells. My heart pounds in my ears when I feel my walls clench as I lift my hips, his cock dragging along my inner walls, sending me over the edge with one hard thrust. I drop my weight, taking his knot as it locks into place.

My hips rock slowly as I ride out the remnants of my orgasm when his hand wraps around my throat, tilting my face down to his as his mouth covers mine. My entire body spasms and tingles. My breathing is ragged as I try to catch my breath while his seed spills into me, warming my insides as he groans into my mouth.

My movements slow before I still, and Kyson shivers, clutching me closer; his lips pressing against my chest as we both try to catch our breath while his fingers trace up my spine. My entire body relaxes; I feel boneless as I relax against him. Kyson lifts his head, his lips going to the side of my mouth before nipping at my lips.

“I love you,” he murmurs against my lips. I smile, kissing him back.

“I love you more,” I tell him before my back hits the mattress as he leans forward, pressing his weight against me.

“I could argue that you are wrong. And that I love you more,” he laughs. I laugh with him.

“But you won’t because I am right,” I tell him. He raises an eyebrow at me.

“Is that so, my Queen?” he says, rolling onto his back, so I straddle his hips. I smile down at him, my hands in the center of his chest.

“Say it, say I love you more,” I chuckle.

Kyson chuckles, shaking his head. “Not a chance. You won’t win that one, my Queen. I will always love you more,” he says.

“Your Queen, I thought I was more than that?” I muse, pursing my lips.

“Empress, whatever,” Kyson growls. “Same difference,” he laughs.

“No, pretty sure I am of higher rank than you, now,” I chuckle.

“Maybe you should call me Alpha,” I laugh.

“Not a chance. I am the Alpha of this relationship. And you are an Empress, and I am your mate, therefore emperor,” he laughs.

“Hmm, right then,” I tell him, climbing off. He grips my hips, holding me in place.

“Azzy, I am knotted to you,” he hisses.

“Well, Alpha, I guess we are in quite the predicament,” I tell him and his eyes narrow.

“How so?”

“Because you just found yourself stuck in a get-along knot. So who wears the pants

now, my King?” I tell him and he laughs. I move, making him stop and grip my hips.

“Azzzy!”



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

“My King, I think I may go get a drink. Are you thirsty?” I tell him, wiggling trying to climb off him.

“Are you trying to rip my dick off?”

“Well, that depends. Who is Alpha?”

“Okay, just stay damn still; I want my junk intact,” he curses.

“Say it then?” I tease, and his eyes sparkle with mischief before he grips my hips and rolls, pinning me beneath him.

“Oh, how easily our roles are reversed, Empress,” he teases as I struggle to shove him off.

“I can always order you off,” I tell him when he jams his fingers in my ribs and tickles me. I squirm away from his torturous fingers.

“What was that? I can’t hear you, my Queen. Who is whose Alpha?” he asks, pressing his weight on me and pinning me in place, yet I can’t catch my breath or hold a straight thought as his fingers tickle and prod every sensitive area.

“Say it, and I will stop,” he says, and I laugh. Tickling really is the worst torture.

“You, you are the Alpha,” I squeal, laughing, and he stops while laughing as I try to catch my breath. Kyson smiles and leans down, pressing his lips to mine softly.

“I love you,” he mumbles. I open my mouth when his fingers dance across my ribs in warning; making me laugh.

“I love you too, my King,” I purr back at him, and I feel him smile against my lips, having won this one.

Chapter

Thirty-Six

ABBIE

I am never drinking again! My head feels like it has been crushed in a vice, and my mouth has never felt so dry. How do people drink every day? This is horrid. I don't understand how Liam and the King managed to be alcoholics. My eyes flutter open which makes me feel even more like death.

Yet instead of being in bed with Tyson, I am here staring at the empty bed. Lifting my head, fingers trail down my spine and make me shiver when I use my hands to push up so I can look around. Only I find I am laying on top of Gannon. I peer down to find myself completely naked before dropping back down on top of him to cover my nudity.

“I didn't sleep with you. Well, I did sleep as in the closed eyes kind of sleep in the dream state,” he mumbles, rolling on his side. I shriek, becoming trapped between his huge body and the back of the couch.

“Why am I naked?”

“You said you were hot and kept taking your clothes off,” he mumbles, yawning before pressing his lips against my forehead.

His lips pull up in the corners. “I bet you have a wicked hangover,” he chuckles.

“My head hurts,” I tell him. He hums before sitting up slightly and looking over the arm of the couch. He reaches a hand over to the small coffee table, retrieving a bottle of water. Yes! Water! Liquid! I thought, snatching it from him and twisting the cap off. He laughs, sitting up, moving toward the bathroom, and returning with Tylenol. Gannon pops two from the packet, handing them to me, and I quickly swallow them before dropping back down on the couch. I intended to live here for the next few hours until this headache went away.

Gannon moves to sit back down, and I wiggle over so he has room, my nipples going hard from the lack of body heat. He lifts an eyebrow at me as I pat the couch.

“You are going to let me lay with you?” he asks.

Wasn’t that what we were just doing? I think to myself, a bit late for modesty. I slept naked on top of him for goodness sake.

“Ah, yes, I am freezing, and you’re like a hot water bottle,” I tell him, and he chuckles before grabbing the blanket and laying back down.

“You could put clothes on,” he says, laying back down and tugging me closer.

“That feels like far too much effort,” I groan, snuggling into his side. “Wait, where is--”

“Clarice has Tyson,” Gannon mumbles, slipping his arm beneath my head and the pillow as he tucks me closer. I inhale his scent while his fingers draw circles on my lower back as he shuts his eyes, going back to sleep. Yet thanks to this headache, sleep doesn’t want me, so I find myself watching him.

His scent encases me as I watch his face relax as he tries to go back to sleep, and I lean closer, pressing my lips against his. His eyes flew open at the action, and he jerked his head back. I giggle at the shock on his face, yet I feel different.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

Truthfully, I haven't felt the same since whatever Azalea had done to me. As if all the fear and weight of my past no longer suffocated me. It is still there but no longer at the forefront of my mind, and watching Gannon sleep, I realize he truly isn't one of those monsters.

Heck, I slept naked next to him and he didn't try to touch me or anything. Just slept.

"Abbie?" Gannon murmurs as I sit up on one elbow. Gannon pushes my hair back behind my ear. His brows furrow and his lips part to say something, yet I cut whatever he was about to say off as I lean down, pressing my lips against his. He groans, and his lips part at the demand of my tongue as it slips inside his mouth.

His arm around my waist pulls me closer while the other slips into my hair as I deepen the kiss, my tongue tangles with his, but he lets me have control when I feel him smile against my lips.

"Are you feeling alright?" he mumbles against my lips, attacking his. I nod my lips, not leaving his, as I lift my leg over his waist to straddle him when he grips my knee and pulls away.

"Abbie," he whispers.

"What?" I ask, smiling as I peck his lips, but he shakes his head.

"We should stop," he groans, moving his lower half away and making my legs slip off his waist.

“Isn’t this what you want?” I ask him, confused.

“Is that what you want?” he asks in return, and I nod, moving closer when his hand grips my hip, and he clears his throat, stopping me from crawling on top of him.

“Abbie, stop. I don’t want to scare you,” he says, his voice coming out more of a growled warning. I swallow at the noise as he moves onto his back. .

“Gannon?” I ask, confused by his actions, he always says I refuse to touch him, so I do, and now he doesn’t want my touch. I move to crawl on top of him, only for him to move quicker and grip my leg before I place it over him.

“Abbie,” he says in the same warning tone, his grip on my thigh tightening as he held it off him.

“Gannon, I am fine,” I tell him, and he sighs but lets my leg go, shutting his eyes, and I drape my leg over his waist to find he has an erection. I gasp at the feel of it touching my naked leg and swallow.

“See, that’s why Abbie. You are making me aroused,” he says, and I chew my lip, looking down at him only to find him watching me, waiting for me to flip out at him.

“I won’t hurt you,” he whispers, cupping my cheek in his hand. I lean into his touch, loving the warmth of his skin and the scent of his wrist by my nose. Sucking in a breath of his heady scent, I move on top of him, and he adjusts himself, pulling me higher and away from his hard cock. I wiggle lower, only for him to grab my ass; his hand grips my ass cheek before he suddenly freezes.

“Shit, Abbie, I didn’t mean.”

“Will you stop? Do I look freaked out? I just want to touch you,” I tell him before

grabbing his hand and placing it back where it was on my ass.

“You want to touch me?” he asks, and I nod. Well, I am trying to, but he’s making that a bit difficult.

“You know you don’t have to?” he whispers.

“I want to, I want to be able to touch you, Gannon,” I tell him, and he sighs and lets me explore his body. I have countless times, yet never did my hands wander the way they are right now as my fingers map out every part of his exposed chest and his abs. My hand moves lower toward the waistband of his pants when he wraps his arm around my waist and sits up, making me shriek, not expecting it.

He sits there for a second as if gauging my reaction to his action as I straddle him. His erection pressing against my lower region makes me look down when he grabs my chin, forcing my gaze to meet his.

“I would never hurt you,” he whispers, brushing his thumb over my lips.

“We can stop. Do you want to stop?”

I shake my head, and my hands move over his chest to his shoulders.

“Then say it, I want to know you understand, Abbie; I want to know it is what you want?” he whispers as his fingers trail down the side of my neck to where his mark lay. I shiver as his fingers graze over it.

“You won’t hurt me,” I whisper.

“Never,” he says, tugging me closer before pressing his lips against mine softly. My arms wrap around his neck, and I push closer, so my chest is flush against his as I kiss

him harder when he stands, gripping my leg and wrapping it around his waist while not breaking our kiss. His fingers tangle in my hair as he moves toward the bed before stopping beside it before he sits on the edge of it.

“Is this alright?” he asks around my lips, sucking on his. I nod in answer, not caring where he puts us as long he doesn’t stop kissing me.

The longer he does, the less I think about it. My body takes over, consumed by him. I tug him closer when he suddenly rolls and makes me gasp when I find myself on my back with him pressed against me. He holds all his weight on his arms and peers down at me, his eyes move to my chest and back up.



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“Am I allowed to touch you?” he asks, and I wiggle beneath him, feeling my face heat as I nod. I want him to touch me and feel his hands on my body. He smiles, leaning down and brushing his lips against mine. His tongue sweeps into my mouth as he kisses me deeply. His pelvis brushes against me and I find I don’t shy away, not even when I feel his hardness press against me.

Gannon presses closer and a moan escapes my lips when he presses himself against me, touching some nerve that makes my hips buck and my eyes widen. I gasp, pulling away from him. “You like that?” Gannon asks, watching me as he rolls his hips against me again, making something tighten inside me as his cock brushes the same spot.

I nod my head, shutting my eyes. “That’s what it should feel like Abbie, pleasure not pain,” he whispers, and I open my eyes to look at him.

“So can I touch you, you can tell me to stop,” he murmurs, leaning closer, a smile on his lips as they brush mine. I nod, he kisses me, plunging his tongue into my mouth and tasting every inch of it before his lips move to my neck and over my collar bone; tingles rush over my skin where he touches.

I feel the mark on my neck warm, and tingle as his lips move lower and his tongue swipes over my peaked nipple, making it harden impossibly more as he teases it with his tongue. His lips move to the other when he moves lower, his lips and tongue running down my ribs to my hips, making me squirm when I feel his arms move under my bent legs, making me sit up. He kissed my knee, his eyes watching me as his lips trailed and sucked down my leg, when I realized he was about to put his mouth down there.

“Gannon!” I hiss when I feel his warm breath sweep over me, and I groan as he blows his hot breath over me.

“Do you want me to stop?” he murmurs, laying on his belly. I chew my lip, unsure about having his face down there. “I won’t hurt you, Love. You can watch, say stop, and I will,” he ran his nose up the inside of my leg, making me shudder.

“And it won’t hurt?” I ask him. He shakes his head before trailing his tongue down the inside of my thigh. My legs close almost entirely on his head when I feel his tongue sweep across the apex of my legs. His hands grip my thighs before I can crush his head.

“No pain, just pleasure, Abbie,” he whispers, looking between my legs while I think when I open my legs for him. I watch him, and he watches me back as he lowers his head before his mouth is on me. His tongue sweeps between my lower lips to my clit.

I moan at the feel of it, and I hear him chuckle before sucking it into his mouth, and my head rolls on my shoulders at the intense feeling of it before I fall back on the bed while he kisses my most private area.

I can’t stop the intense feeling building or the cries spilling from my lips as his tongue swirled and sucked my flesh. When the feeling grows, becoming too much, I grip his hair.

“Stop!” I shriek, feeling on the verge of combusting, like I’m going to wet myself or something. Gannon stops immediately.

“You don’t like it?” he asks as I try to catch my breath.

I shake my head. “No, it was just getting too intense,” I breathe. Gannon laughs, making me lift my head to look down at him.

“It’s supposed to feel like that, Love,” he says.

Am I supposed to feel like wetting myself? Is he crazy?

“Let me; I’ll show you.”

I shake my head. He has gone mad. Does he want me to pee on him?

“Abbie, I can assure you whatever you are feeling or are currently too embarrassed to say is normal. It should feel like that,” he tells me. “And it gets better,” he tells me, making my eyebrows pinch.

“Do you trust me?” he asks, and I nod. I do trust him. I trust him with my life.

“Then you know I wouldn’t do anything to upset you.”

I nod, staring down at him as he lowers his face between my legs again, giving me the chance to pull away. Still, when I don’t, his mouth covers me again, and the feeling builds quickly, making me want to pull away as it climbs higher, making my muscles tense and quiver.

I pull away, and his hands grip my thighs. “Relax, Love,” he mumbles against me when he starts purring. Only this time, his purr sounds different. It isn’t so much a sound but more of a feeling as it wakes some primal part of me I didn’t know existed. Forcing calm over me, and as soon as it does, my body turns to putty in his hands, making me realize it had to be the calling thing Azalea had told me about.

Gannon’s mouth doesn’t let up when I reach some peak before an intense crescendo. My entire body tenses at the feeling before I crash and fall blindly into bliss.

My entire body spasms, my toes curl as it rocks through me in waves, and my inner

walls flutter and pulsate, making me cry out as he slows, letting me ride out the intense pleasure that leaves my entire body exhausted and tingly.

When the feeling starts dissipating, I find myself breathless as Gannon crawls up my body before kissing me, his tongue delving between my lips. I can taste myself on his tongue, making me groan into his mouth.

I wrap my legs around his waist, yet they feel so heavy they crash back onto the bed. Gannon chuckles, pecking my lips before looking down at me as I yawn, suddenly feeling sleepy.

Gannon kisses my cheek and moves to hop off me when I grip his shoulders. “Rest; we can do more later,” he tells me, but I shake my head. That doesn’t seem fair, and I know he’s aroused. I can feel his cock straining against his boxers as it presses against me.

“But—”

“I’m fine, Abbie,” he whispers, moving away when I wrap my arms around his neck.

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“But I want to,” I tell him before yawning again.

“Go to sleep,” he laughs, but I refuse to let go, wanting to give him something. He sighs, settling his weight back against me.

“What do you want to do then,” he asks, though it was clear he wasn’t going to have sex with me when my eyes fell to his neck. Before I can even suggest it, my canines slip free, protruding extremely fast, as an overwhelming desire to mark him washes over me.

The next second they are in his neck, and he grunts. My eyes widen in shock as I feel them slip into his neck and through the muscle. I didn’t even ask. I almost choke as his blood floods into my mouth, coating my tongue. Panic courses through me as his hand tangles in my hair.

“Shh, you can mark me,” he whispers, and I seem to forget that he can feel me through his mark on my neck. I relax when I swallow his blood, and it is like every nerve ending bursts in my body when the bond is forged. My entire body tingles, and my skin buzzes when overwhelming happiness floods me, bringing tears to my eyes when I realize it isn’t mine, but his.

Chapter

Thirty-Seven

KYSON

Azalea falls asleep pretty quickly, yet as the sun rises, I know I have to get out of bed, so I decide to check in with patrols, and with Damian, who is meeting me at my office. We are supposed to be heading to the Landeena Kingdom today. Yet not hearing back from Larkin is starting to bother me. He was supposed to let us know by this morning. We haven't heard a word from him since he left here that night.

"Something is going on?" Damian tells me as I hang up the phone from trying to call Larkin for the third time this morning. It is suspicious. I don't know who to trust, but one thing is certain, the council can't be trusted. And neither can anything we thought we knew about the Landeena massacre. Nothing makes sense anymore.

"I think you need to hold off on going to the Landeena Kingdom, my King. It isn't safe. And I have a bad feeling about all of this," Damian tells me, and the worry is clearly etched on his face.

"Azalea won't like it, but I think you are right," I tell him, and he sighs in relief just as Gannon steps into my office.

"How is Abbie?" I ask, earning a smirk from him. He sits down, and I press my lips in a line, trying not to smile when I notice she has finally marked him. He clears his throat awkwardly.

"Good, yep. Everything is good," he chuckles, and it is good seeing him happy for once about something. I know he has struggled badly with Abbie and her PTSD.

"Azalea?" he asks, changing the subject.

"Damian and I were just discussing whether we should postpone the trip to Landeena," I answer.

"No word from Larkin?" he asks, and Damian and I both shake our heads.

“Nothing,” I answer, and Gannon sighs.

“Do you want me to send Liam and Dustin to Cypress searching for him?” Gannon asks, but I shake my head and scratch my chin while I think about what the best approach will be.

“Not yet. We will give him today, if no answer by tonight, and he is still unreachable. We raided the council,” I tell them. They nod, and Damian gets up from his seat before pausing.

“What is it?” I ask. I know he wants to ask me something, I can read him like a book, and he has been nervous all morning.

“Tandi wants—” I wave my hand, cutting him off, already knowing what he is about to ask.

“All the children who were adopted had their pictures taken. All documentation is in the cellars. She can have access to them. I will let the guards know,” I tell him, and he nods.

“Do you really think Paige is one of the children?” Gannon asks us both. Larkin could be lying, but I highly doubt that. He genuinely appeared disgusted with Tandi’s claims and also truly believed Brock didn’t kill his own child.

“I hope so, if not—” Damian pauses, looking at me.

“If she isn’t, permission granted, you don’t have to ask not when it comes to children,” I tell him, and Damian nods. I know if he can’t find Tandi’s daughter. The next place he will be going is to drag the information out of Brock by any means possible. I watch them leave, and I smirk as Gannon leaves, seeing how happy he is. At least that will be one less thing playing on Azalea’s mind. Abbie is a constant

worry for Azalea since her attempt to kill herself. I know it has heightened her concern to magnitude levels. Azalea would not cope with losing her a second time. As he goes to walk out the door, I call Gannon back to me.

“Ah Gannon, a moment please,” he stops, looking back at me.

“Close the door, I need to speak with you,” I tell him, and he sighs, looking out to the hall before shutting the door. He retakes his seat across from me, and I sit back, watching my friend.

“Sia?” I ask.

“Liam told you?” Gannon asks, and I shake my head.



“No, Dustin did.”

He nods, knowing Liam must have spoken to Dustin.

“Dustin told me about Liam’s involvement but said nothing about you. I want to hear it from you,” I tell him, and he runs his fingers through his hair.

“Sia was Abbie’s aunt, and Sia was my mate.,” he breathes out.

“And Liam helped you cover up her death?”

“You did not need to keep that from me, or Damian. I figured something went down,” I tell him, pointing to his chest. We’ve all seen his scars, we all know what causes that sort of damage. We also knew something bad happened for him to want to end it.

We didn’t want to pry, and I trusted Liam to come to me if he was worried about Gannon. I knew he would tell us one day the story behind them.

“And her body?” I ask.

“Outside her old pack along with her mother’s,” Gannon tells me.

“The mother?”

“Came after me when she learned I killed her daughter.”

I nod in understanding.

“How did Abbie take this news?”

“Not well at first, but she understands why I did it,” he explains.

“Is that all?” I ask him.

“There is more, but I can’t tell you, my King. I won’t risk Abbie.”

I swallow, knowing it must be bad if he is worried about telling me.

“If I look into Sia’s background, what will I find Gannon?”

“Are you asking because you already know, my King?” he asks in return.

“I’m asking as a friend. I am asking for my Queen. Your Queen. If there is anything I need to know, this is your chance to tell me,” I tell him. Gannon looks away, and that is an answer in itself for me.

“Abbie’s parents weren’t involved,” he says.

“Abbie won’t be punished for her family’s mistake, Gannon. You have my word, but the fact you never told me you found your mate in the first place has me worried. The fact you didn’t tell me says either you knew I wouldn’t approve or suspected something was amiss.”

“I want your word, my King. Abbie stays out of it. Any punishment you see fit for her family’s crimes, I will take on her behalf.”

“Your Queen would have my balls if I tried. Rest assured, Gannon. I have learned from my mistakes, I won’t punish her like I did Azalea. We may be products of our parents, but wearen’t them, I see that now,” I tell him. Gannon seems to think for a

second.

“Sia worked for the hunter organization, so did her mother. Liam and I found out she was one of the hunter’s suppliers.”

I purse my lips at the new information. I’m a bit peeved he never told me but a lot less peeved as she’s no longer a threat.

“Suppliers?” I ask him.

“Yes, her mother was selling Wolfsbane to the hunters' organization.”

“She was growing it?” I ask, but he shakes his head.

“We found no evidence she was growing, but she definitely obtained it from somewhere.”

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“You won’t keep anything like this from me again. I understand why you did. But we could have figured it out together.”

“Sia was trying to weasel her way into the Kingdom. She was very insistent that I change her. I wanted to wait. When I refused her, she went to Liam and tried to have him kill me.”

“She wanted access to my kingdom?”

“It appeared so. All she talked about was coming here and me changing her. It set off alarm bells, yet I never figured out her intention. She never told Liam anything that was suspicious, either.”

It makes me wonder how she got involved with the hunters in the first place.

“Then, when I thought we figured it out, and she was willing to accept me, I walked into an ambush. Luckily, Liam knew me better than her. Brotherhood won,” he tells me. It explains why he and Liam are joined at the hip usually. I nod in understanding, thankful it also did.

“You can go, maybe see if Abbie and Azalea want to help Tandi. It will keep them distracted while we try to figure out this Larkin issue,” I tell him. Gannon nods, getting up from his seat and walking out, leaving me with much to think about. This puzzle is getting larger and the pieces more complicated to place.

Chapter

Thirty-Eight

AZALEA

Later that afternoon

We're sitting on the cellar floor, sifting through documents and photographs of the orphanage children. Tandi hands them off to Abbie after she's done examining each one, and Abbie re-stacks them back into the boxes. Yet, the deeper we delve into everything, the more disheartened Tandi becomes.

"How old would Paige be now?" I ask.

"Seven in February," she replies with a sigh.

"Well, that rules these kids out," Abbie comments, passing me a pile full of toddler photos. "We might have to do a DNA test. She could look different from how you remember?" Abbie suggests.

"I will recognize her," Tandi asserts confidently.

"How can you be so sure?" I question.

"I'm her mother, and she has a scar. It runs down one side of her face, from her chin to her hairline. She fell off the stairs when she was three and landed on a glass table," she explains. "Brock beat me good for that one. I wasn't even watching her at that time, she was with the sitter because I had to work since he provided nothing. He broke three of my ribs that night and I had to borrow money for her cough medicine of Crux," she says, her mind taking her back to some god awful memory that makes her shudder before she returns to us with a shake of her head. "I'll grab the next box," she states.

My stomach churns as I hear this while she continues to sift through the photos.

“Well, I’ll start with this pile then,” I tell her.

Tandi talks about such tragic circumstances so casually; it’s as if she’s become desensitized to her own trauma. It saddens me how much suffering she’s endured since our days at the orphanage when she was still Taylor.

“This place gives me the creeps,” Abbie admits, rubbing her arms as she sets the box back on the shelf.

I glance over my shoulder at her and nod. We spend hours in the cellars combing through every child’s information until Tandi tosses the last document into the box - none of them are Paige.

Just as Damian walks in to check on us, Tandi gets up and starts walking towards the stairs, looking defeated.

“Hun?” he asks as she heads for the stairs, he reaches for her, but she pulls her arm away before he can grab her and dashes up the stairs. Damian turns to look at Abbie and me, confusion in his eyes.

“None of them were Paige,” I tell him, heart aching for Tandi.

Damian swallows hard, staring after Tandi as she disappears upstairs. “Go, Damian, take the afternoon off. I’ll speak to Kyson and let him know,” I reassure him.

“Thank you, Azalea,” he says gratefully, then rushes off after Tandi.

Abbie and I pack everything up before climbing the stairs and emerging from the pantry. As we do so, Tanner is standing in the kitchen looking rather lost, clutching

his wide-brimmed hat in his hands.

“Tanner, what can I help you with?” Clarice asks, entering the kitchen from the foyer.

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“I was going to see if you could ask the King or Queen for a few moments of their time,” Tanner says, addressing Clarice while looking at me.

Clarice growls - something which surprises me since I’ve never heard her growl at anyone in anger before. “I told you yesterday this wasn’t your issue. Leave it be,” she snaps at him.

“It’s fine, Clarice. What is wrong, Tanner?” I ask.

“My Queen, I will sort it out and speak with Kyson. You don’t need to handle this one,” Clarice insists, trying to usher me out of the kitchen along with Abbie.

“It’s your brother, my Queen,” Tanner blurts out, causing us all to freeze in shock.

“You dare mention him to her after what he has done?” Clarice snarls, turning on her heel and pointing an accusing finger at Tanner, who looks defeated but defends Peter anyway.

“He’s just a boy, Clarice. How can you say that when you’ve helped raise him with me? You know how useless his grandparents are with him and Ester, well.”

He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, my Queen. I just worry about him.”

I swallow and nod, Tanner turns to leave. Clarice watches him go, and I can see his words upset her deeply.

“Wait, Tanner. What of my brother?” I ask him, and he stops.



“My Queen, you don’t have to deal with this, the King can,” Clarice says, but I shake my head. Kyson has enough going on, and he is my brother.

“His grandparents kicked him out, and he...” Tanner tries to explain.

“He what, Tanner?”

“I have been sneaking him into the stables at night,” Tanner says, while dropping his head in defeat.

“You’ve been what?” Clarice screams at him. Tanner flinches at her anger. I hold up my hand.

“Where is he now?” I ask.

“Hiding down by the river until it gets dark so he can cross the river without being seen, my Queen. I know what he did was wrong, but he is just a boy. He has no one else and nowhere to go.”

“He has Ester,” I tell him, but he shakes his head.

“Ester, that woman is trash. She doesn’t give a shit about him. The moment you kicked them out of here, she left when no one was watching, he has been on his own since,” Tanner tells me, and I swallow.

“Wait, when did Ester leave?”

Tanner pauses to think for a second, counting on his fingers.

“The night Elder Larkin left. Peter came to find me. Ester was fired from the fruit market she worked at, and he asked for food. I asked him why he couldn’t go home.

His grandparents tossed him out, and his mother once again abandoned the boy,” he tells me. I sigh, looking at Abbie, who nervously chews her nails as she listens.

Looking back at Tanner, he stands nervously waiting for me to say something. “Take me to my brother,” I tell him, and he nods.

“Clarice is coming and–” I sigh.

“I need to get the King. I am not making any decisions without him,” I tell him.

“Thank you, my Queen. I can bring him to you, I can bring him here if you like while you get the king?” he says.

“I’ll make him something to eat,” Clarice says, grabbing the bread, and I nod to her.

“Okay, I will go find my King,” I tell Tanner before turning on my heel to go searching for Kyson. We have come too far now just to start hiding things from each other again. Looping my arm through Abbie’s, I tug her toward the door, and we head toward his office.

As soon as we step out of the kitchens and move up the corridor, Trey and Dustin come out of the staff lunchroom and trail us. They had left us to sift through the paperwork, knowing the guards in the cellar would watch us, and it felt good giving them some time off. They must get rather bored following me all day, not that they ever say anything. Walking into the room, I hear Kyson’s phone ringing, and we enter silently.

“Crux!” Kyson states, answering the phone and placing it on loudspeaker, so I can hear. Kyson pushes his chair out and pats his knee, wanting me to come sit on his lap. I walk over to him, and he pulls me onto his lap, wrapping his arm around my waist and pressing his lips to my shoulder.

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“My King, I was wondering if you have seen Elder Larkin?” I hear Crux’s voice. I look at Kyson, who motions for me to remain quiet.

“Why?” Kyson asks him. I can tell that Kyson finds his call rather suspicious.

“Well, he has been missing for several days, that is why. He is unreachable, and I checked his car coordinates, and it says he is in your kingdom, My King, so one would assume you had seen him considering he has been there for a week,” Crux answers. Now that makes no sense at all.

“I want this tracking information you have,” Kyson tells him.

“Of course, I can email it through. Is everything alright in your Kingdom? I have been hearing some startling rumors,” Crux asks.

“Rumors like what?” Kyson asks.

“That your men stormed through one of my businesses for one, that one of my workers was kidnapped by one of your guards and eight of my security personnel were killed. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you? I’ll look into it, but someone wiped my security footage, which I find rather odd. Then Larkin was tracked there, so I figured it was to speak with you?”

“Well, Crux, I would be less worried about my kingdom and more worried about yours. Rumors are circulating, and I’m beginning to notice something.”

“What is that, my King?” Crux asks in a tone that almost sounds mocking.

“Everything leads back to the council,” Kyson says.

“Doesn’t it always. I will send you the tracking data. When you find Larkin, ask him to call me, please,” Crux tells Kyson.

“Will do,” Kyson replies, hanging up on him and glaring at his phone screen.

## Chapter

### Thirty-Nine

#### KYSON

I gently tap Azalea’s leg to climb off me, my mind racing, and I need to speak to Gannon, Liam, and Damian. Something is amiss. But as I attempt to rise from my seat, Azalea’s hand grabs mine, her nervousness palpable. I pause, feeling the weight of her anxiety pressing against me through the bond. Why is she nervous?

“It’s alright, love, we’ll figure it out,” I assure her softly, attempting to move past her. Yet, once again, she clings to my hand, her grip tightening, then moves in front of me, blocking me from passing her.

“Azzy, love,” I say, locking eyes with her.

“Peter is waiting for us in the kitchen,” she blurts out the words before I can comprehend their meaning. Peter is back on the castle grounds? At first, I believed her nervousness and worry were over Crux, not over her damn brother. The mention of her brother’s name sends a surge of anger through me. How dare he return to the castle grounds? And more importantly, how did he manage to bypass my guard?

“I’ll handle it,” I tell her. But she presses her hands to my chest, her voice trembling

with a mixture of fear but also pleading, as I move toward the door.

“No, I want to help him,” she pleads, causing me to halt. I grip the door handle tightly, conflicted between my own anger and Azalea’s need to help everyone, even those who don’t deserve her help.

“No, Azalea, I won’t allow that,” I assert firmly, my voice laced with frustration. Hasn’t he taken enough from us? I had reluctantly accepted her decision to spare his life before, but that is as far as my tolerance extends. I have no desire to aid him in any way. I don’t even think I can stand to see his face again without wanting to kill him.

“Ester abandoned him again. His grandparents kicked him out. He has been staying by the stables and the river,” Azalea explains.

“The answer is no, Azalea. He is not supposed to set foot on the castle grounds again.”

“He is just a boy, Kyson,” she defends him, her voice tinged with a hint of desperation.

“And some would say you’re just a girl, Azalea. You are not much older than him. He knows right from wrong. He knew what he was doing,” I argue, struggling to understand how she fails to see the gravity of his actions. After all, she is the one who was stabbed by him.

“Can we just hear him out, please?” she implores. My mate’s forgiving nature is both a blessing and a curse. It seems that because Peter is her blood, she feels compelled to give him a second chance. But sometimes, second chances can lead to a never-ending cycle of disappointment and heartache. I refuse to let him jeopardize our happiness once more.

“You are not obligated to help or love him, Azalea. Not after what he did,” I remind her.

“I know that, Kyson. Peter isn’t bad. He made a mistake,” she insists, her voice quivering with emotion that I recognize instantly as guilt through the bond.

“A mistake? It was more than a mistake, Love. That so-called mistake cost our daughter’s life,” I reply, my words coming out in a furious growl. Azalea flinches at the mention of our loss, her pain clearly etched across her face.

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“We all make mistakes, Kyson. He will live with his mistakes for the rest of his life. I just don’t want my brother to be one of mine. I don’t want that guilt hanging over me; I need to know I tried,” she whispers, her voice filled with anguish.

“No, Azzy. This is not about guilt or obligation. It’s about your safety and our future together,” I argue, desperately hoping she will see reason. But deep down, I know that her need to help him stems from a fundamental part of her being. It is a trait inherited from her mother, one that I both admire and fear. She knows I am right. But I also know she won’t be able to handle the guilt if something happened to him if she didn’t help. Damn, Azure’s handing that down. I learned so much reading those few passages of Cedric’s book.

Azure’s were magnificent for their ability to forgive and move on, for their elemental gifts, and for being empathetic; it makes me wonder if that was part of why Tatiana put up with Garret. Unfortunately, she also inherited a few of her father’s traits. I have observed that first hand and been on the receiving end of her temper.

His temper, his command, and his bite. We were yet to see all of Azalea’s moon-blessed gifts, and I think the possibilities are infinite when it comes to Azalea. Because one thing I realized with startling clarity and why the Moon Goddess blessed both bloodlines with opposing gifts, they were to balance the other out. They were never supposed to come together, for it would throw off the balance of power.

Opposites attract. One was benevolent and the other malevolent, but once together, they detonated. Together, they were unstoppable and an impossible force to reckon with, and I suddenly understood Garret Landeena’s purpose of marrying Tatiana. It was to gain what he was lacking, another power trip. Yet, such qualities together

would make it near impossible to live with. The Landeena ego would always overrule any guilt he felt.

“You know I am right, yet you want to help him anyway, love. You hope to find some redeeming quality, but what if there isn’t one?” I ask, my voice tinged with concern. She averts her gaze, her silence speaking volumes. She knows deep down that I am right, but the need to help her brother outweighs all logic. That need to know is strong within her, so I know I am on the losing end of this argument. That Landeena stubbornness will be the death of me.

“I need to know. I can’t abandon him like everyone else has,” she finally admits.

“But are you doing this for him or for yourself, Azzy? What do you hope to achieve?” I question gently, attempting to understand the driving force behind her decision.

“Both. Kyson, I want peace. I won’t find peace by turning my back on him. I need to know that I did everything in my power to save him,” she confesses, her words heavy with the weight of her emotions. It becomes clear to me that this is about more than just Peter; it is about Azalea’s own inner turmoil and her quest for redemption. But from what?

Hearing her words, witnessing the guilt and anger that fuel them, I realize the depth of her struggle. Living with such intense passion and conflicting emotions must be exhausting for her. She needs this resolution, even if it comes at a cost. She needs to know that she did everything she could to save her brother.

I kneel before her with a sigh, wishing she could see the potential danger of getting too close to the boy who nearly destroyed us. I fear that her unwavering love and determination may be what gets her killed.



“This is your last chance, Azzy. Promise me that this will be the end of it. If he hurts you, promise me that you will not give him any more of your time. Promise me that you will let me deal with him,” I beg.

“But he’s a Landeena,” she whispers, her voice filled with uncertainty. However, she must understand that his bloodline will no longer protect him from my wrath if he brings harm to her again.

“But you are not. You may have been born into that family, but you are now Valkyrie, mine as I am yours. I refuse to watch him destroy you again. I won’t allow him to dismantle what we have built. And I certainly won’t stand by and watch you destroy yourself over him. So promise me, this is the last time. If Peter does anything wrong, you will let me handle it,” I declare firmly. Azalea swallows hard and lets out a resigned breath.

“Last time,” she whispers, and I sigh in relief.

“We’ll deal with Peter first, then I need to speak with the guards, including your own. We must be prepared for anything,” I say, my tone resolute.

“Crux mentioned sending you the coordinates to Larkin,” she interjects.

“Yes, he did. But something tells me he may try to buy time or come up with an excuse not to send them right away. We must remain vigilant,” I explain.

Chapter

Forty

AZALEA

After we had settled the situation with Peter, Kyson leaves me in the company of Abbie, Liam, and Trey. Together, we make our way back to Abbie's room, where we intend to check on Gannon and retrieve Tyson from him. Gannon needs to meet up with the King and Damian to strategize their next move regarding Crux and Larkin.

As Kyson had predicted, Crux still hasn't provided us with the tracking information we need. It appears that we will have to find another way to obtain it. But the more I think about it, the more convinced I become that Crux is deliberately taunting us and stalling. He knows he is cornered and is now plotting against us harder than ever, buying himself time.

I can't fully comprehend how Peter fits into this intricate web, but a nagging feeling tells me I am onto something. Everything seems connected in some way. "I can't believe Kyson let Peter stay," Abbie remarks, voicing her confusion.

"Not without conditions. A guard will be with him at all times until we figure out what to do," I reply with a sigh. It is a better arrangement than having him sleep in the stables unsupervised.

"I just don't understand why Ester abandoned him again. And where could she have gone?" Abbie murmurs, her perplexity mirroring my own. Kyson is equally baffled by Ester's actions. She had fought to save Peter's life, only to abandon him at the first opportunity. It makes no sense.

"It's as if she saw him as nothing more than a pawn, someone to be saved for her own benefit. She doesn't deserve to be called a mother," Abbie states firmly, causing me to pause in my tracks. Her words strike a chord within me, and I furrow my brow as I try to make sense of it all. Trey halts just in time to avoid colliding with me and steadies me by gripping my arm.

"You're right," I mutter, lost in my thoughts.

“I know. What mother does that to her son?” Abbie continues. I don’t even realize I’m still stopped in place, trapped in my own thoughts. Liam halts as well, placing a hand on Abbie’s shoulder to bring her to a stop. They both stare at me, waiting for an explanation. The gears in my mind churn as I consider the possibility that Ester is connected to both Kingdoms and somehow the council, she goes missing the same day Larkin does, that can’t be a coincidence.

“Azalea?” Trey murmurs. I look between them as they stare at me, the cogs in my head turning. Ester had access to both Kingdoms. And both Kingdoms were attacked by hunters.

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She had a reason to resent my father when he rejected her while she was pregnant with his son. And Marissa had been present in both Kingdoms during the attacks. Though I know Marissa is not responsible, it raises questions about what Ester stood to gain by killing Claire and letting Marissa hide me away while she hid Peter from the world.

“What is it?” Liam asks.

“It’s Ester,” I murmur, attempting to piece together the puzzle. But why would she have a motive to kill Claire? That is the one aspect that eludes me. What could she possibly gain from it, and why did Marissa flee afterward?

In the hazy memories from my dream, my mother specifically instructed Marissa to take me to my mate. So she must have known that Kyson was my mate even before we did. My mother believed I would be safe with him. But then why didn’t Marissa hand me over to Kyson? And why did she run away from the Kingdom after Claire’s death?

“What about Ester?” Trey presses for more information.

“Just as Abbie said, Peter is a pawn to her. It’s the only explanation that fits. It would explain how she could abandon him after fighting for his life. Blaming my father for rejecting her is her motive. And she had connections to both Kingdoms when the attacks occurred,” I explain, connecting the dots in my mind. Liam draws closer, exchanging a glance with Trey as they ponder the implications of my words.

“It was Ester who allowed the hunters to infiltrate Landeena, she had to have let a

hunter in to kill Claire,” Trey suggests after a moment of reflection, but his brows furrow at the last part because the bit about Claire doesn’t make sense still. However, I interject, finding flaws in his theory.

“But she wasn’t present when Larkin came here. She wouldn’t have known about any of it,” I point out, finding holes in Trey’s reasoning.

“Peter did say Ester went missing the night Larkin left here,” Liam says, looking at Trey.

“Peter!” Trey exclaims suddenly, but I shake my head.

“Think about it, Azalea. Who else could it be?” Trey insists.

“Peter seemed genuine,” I counter, but Trey scoffs dismissively.

“There is one way to find out for sure. Command him to answer, question him, and extract the truth,” Liam proposes.

“But that would hurt him,” I protest.

“Sometimes, Azalea, commanding is a necessary evil. Remember what Kyson told you earlier when he agreed to let Peter stay?” Trey reminds me.

“He said I had to see past my own desire to see the good in someone,” I recall with a heavy sigh. I know they are right. It is the only way to know for sure. But the thought of causing him pain, even after he has hurt me, is difficult to accept. Still, I know Kyson will manipulate my aura if I ask him to, and he will do it for me.

“Okay, but first I need to retrieve Tyson. The King wants to see Gannon,” Abbie says.

“We are going with him to see the King. I promised Kyson I won’t go near Peter without him. I am not breaking that promise and giving him reason to kill Peter before we get answers,” I tell her. Abbie nods, rushing off to find her mate and Tyson. Liam observes her departure before turning to me with a knowing expression, a knowing of what I am unsure of, but the way he watches her is odd.

“I don’t know what’s going on between you and Abbie, but mark my words, I’m watching you, Liam. Gannon has entrusted you with keeping an eye on her when he can’t be with her. But your presence lingers on her like a foul smell, I know you’re up to something,” I warn him.

“I would love to argue about the foul smell comment. I exude a divine scent, one of blood and sultry sin. Just ask Dustin; he’ll happily confirm it. But you’re right, my Queen. You’re very perceptive, I am up to something, though I promise my Queen you have no reason to be concerned,” he teases. I shake my head, and Trey offers me his arm, which I gratefully accept. I lean against him, using him as a support. Fatigue weighs heavily on me, and I desperately need rest.

“Apparently not observant enough. Look at the mess we are in,” I tell him.

“Good thing you have a guard and friends willing to help you clean it up,” Liam laughs, sauntering off after Abbie.

“Can we make a quick stop at my room? I want to retrieve the books Cedric gave me,” I ask, looking up at Trey.

“Of course,” Trey replies, studying me with concern. “What’s on your mind? You seem troubled.”

“Nothing. I’m just trying to figure out how Claire fits into all of this. She’s the one piece that doesn’t make any sense. Ester seeking revenge on my father, no matter

how petty, still provides a motive. But killing a pregnant woman?" I question aloud.

"Like mother, like son," Trey murmurs, his words hanging in the air.

"We'll figure it out. Though I'm not sure Ester is clever enough to pull off such an act. But you're right—there are too many coincidences surrounding her. And her sudden disappearance only makes her appear more guilty. Either she has unbelievably bad timing and constantly finds herself in the wrong place at the wrong time, or there's something we're missing entirely." Trey analyzes the situation with a thoughtful expression.

"And if she is guilty, it means someone was aiding her. She managed to navigate through two kingdoms without arousing suspicion. How is that even possible?" I ponder, feeling more confused by the second.

"The same way, it's possible that none of us knew she had a child or, in my case, that she kept the child. Secrets have a way of coming to light, even the best-kept ones. Nothing remains hidden forever. You're living proof of that. And if someone is assisting Ester, my bet is on the council and Crux," Trey surmises.

"Wait, didn't Tandi mention that Crux had a mistress?" I recall.

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“No, Crux wouldn’t associate with someone like her, especially not if his uncle had been involved,” Trey counters with a shake of his head.

“Unless they both had motive,” I muse, piecing together another possibility. But what motive would Crux have? What would he gain from killing his own uncle?

Chapter

Forty-One

KYSON

We gather around my desk, surrounded by piles of scattered documents as Damian, Cedric, and I attempt to unravel the intricate puzzle before us. The weight of the task is heavy upon us when an email notification from Crux interrupts my concentration, coinciding with the arrival of dinner time.

“Crux sent me the tracking info,” I tell everyone as I pull it up from the link in the email.

“We’ll wait for Gannon,” I add, knowing he is on his way here.

Anticipation fills the air as we wait for Gannon. He is waiting for Abbie to relieve him of Tyson’s care so that he can join us. Unfortunately, Tyson’s fussiness has prevented him from being handed over to Clarice earlier, leaving him confined to his room until Abbie’s return.



Damian immediately leans in to peer over my shoulder as I access the maps and coordinates.

Confusion knits my brows together, and Damian exhales deeply, placing his hands behind his head as he paces back and forth.

“What does it say?” Cedric inquires, his focus divided between writing a timeline detailing our knowledge of the council, the hunter attacks, and the Kingdoms.

“It says he is still within the Kingdom limits. According to this, he never left,” Damian reveals, his voice laced with disbelief.

“So we have a traitor within the Kingdom?” I growl, frustration tainting my tone.

“Or Larkin is a traitor?” Cedric suggests. However, Damian vehemently shakes his head. “No, I don’t trust the man, but Azalea commanded him. You know this. There’s no way he could have been lying.”

“There’s no way he would abandon his son,” I add firmly, my conviction unwavering after seeing him trudge in here and demand his son knowing he was risking his life by doing so.

“But what if Crux forged this information?” Cedric proposes, scratching his chin as he approaches my laptop.

“In that case, where is Larkin?” I breathe out wearily, feeling a throbbing headache begin to take hold. All I desire is to retreat to my room with Azalea and forget the chaotic world outside.

“According to this, he’s down by the old mill, just inside the surrounding forest,” Cedric relays, pointing to a specific location on the map.

“I can send some men to scout the area,” Cedric offers, but I shake my head in response.

“No, it’s late, and that part of the woods is too dense. We can wait until tomorrow. If it’s an attack, I’d rather have daylight to assess the situation,” I declare, aware of the sudden opening of a mindlink. Azalea’s bond tugs at me, and a smile graces my face as I open the connection.

‘Where are you? Are you still in your office?’ she asks through our link.

‘Yes, but we were just about to head to the old ballroom. It has more space, and we need assistance going through old case files. So the Landeena guards and our own guards are coming to help us sift through everything,’ I inform her.

‘Alright, I have Abbie and Gannon with me. Dustin is fetching Peter and bringing him up. Trey and Liam went down to the archives to retrieve staff documentation.’

‘Staff documentation? And why are you bringing Peter up?’ Curiosity laces my words as I questioned her, sensing her nervousness reverberating through our bond.

‘Yes, Peter. I think I know who is aiding Crux,’ she reveals, her conviction palpable.

‘And how did you come across this information?’ I probe further.

‘Something that Abbie mentioned, about Peter being manipulated. I believe it is Ester, Kyson. Too many pieces don’t fit together, and I want to question him while also examining Ester’s files.’ Pondering her words for a moment, I glance at Cedric.

‘I’ll send some men down to assist in bringing everything up,’ I assure her, rising from my seat. Gesturing towards the scattered boxes, I signal to the others, and they promptly begin packing everything away.

‘I’m on my way. The kitchen staff can deliver dinner to the ballroom,’ I inform her before severing the connection. Contemplating her words, I find reassurance in her unwavering certainty. I will not doubt her anymore.

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“Take a photo of that board,” I instruct Damian and Cedric, pointing towards a storage room adjacent to the ballroom. “There’s a large whiteboard in there. It’ll be better than cramming everyone into my office. Besides, there are toys and things for the kids to occupy themselves with.”

With our documents safely packed away, we make our way to the ballroom. A sense of déjà vu washes over me. Countless times we have combed through these very same documents, explored the archives, and examined crime scene photographs. Yet, we have never found anything substantial, leaving me concerned that once again, precious time is slipping away.

As we enter the ballroom, I catch a glimpse through the grand double doors of Dustin positioned at the far corner with Peter, who appears petrified and out of place. Azalea has kept her promise though and refrained from entering, standing by the doors waiting for my arrival.

Drawing closer, I reach out for her, pulling her into an embrace and inhaling her sweet, intoxicating scent. It calms me and restrains my desire to harm her brother. Inside, Abbie and Clarice are setting up two long tables and arranging food while Cedric’s trusted Landeena guards assist in bringing up the files. Moments later, Liam and Trey enter with three enormous boxes each, stacking them on the second table.

Observing the room and witnessing its rapid transformation, I feel as if we are preparing for war. In a sense, we are, considering the intensity with which everyone delves into the paperwork. Cedric projects the photo onto the massive whiteboard, capturing the attention of all present.

“What is he doing?” Azalea inquires, her curiosity piqued.

“He’s creating a timeline. And that is an old map with all the locations Hunters have hit over the years. The only things we know for certain are that it involves the Kingdoms and the missing rogue children, with the council somehow intertwined,” I explain. However, it becomes clear why our previous efforts had yielded no connections—there simply aren’t any.

“What about Larkin?” she probes, to which I shake my head.

“Crux sent the coordinates. Cedric will investigate tomorrow when it’s light out,” I tell her, hoping that our answers will finally reveal themselves in the coming hours.

Later that Night

As Azalea continues to exert her command over Peter, a sense of exhaustion washes over her. He has passed out for the third time, leaving her feeling drained and disheartened. Abbie left an hour ago, unable to bear witness to the ordeal any longer, joining Tandi. The weight of guilt weighs heavily on Azalea, and she has thrown up twice at the mere thought of inflicting harm on her own brother. Trey stands off to the side, his expression blank, while Cedric taps Peter’s face in an attempt to rouse him.

Everyone else has departed, leaving only our personal guards, Cedric and two Landeena guards, by my side. Gannon gazes at the board in front of him, his curiosity evident as he and Liam meticulously go over every detail. Clarice returns after putting her boys to bed, glancing briefly at Peter before diverting her gaze, unable to watch.

“Please, Kyson, no more,” Azalea’s voice quivers with a hint of desperation. “He knows nothing. You’re just torturing him.”

I let out a weary sigh, realizing that she is right. Peter mumbles unintelligibly, drooling onto himself.

Despite our efforts, we have been unable to extract any additional information from him. Azalea's command had made him eager to answer every question except one. We have concluded that he indeed panicked when he killed our daughter. It was never his intention to kill her. However, it perplexes me how he can confess to poisoning Azalea with wolfsbane but claims to have no recollection of where he obtained it. Something isn't adding up.

We have been at it for hours, trying to force the answer out of him, but it remains unanswered.

"How can he admit to giving it to her but not know where he got it?" Cedric growls in frustration, tapping his face.

"Leave him be. He truly doesn't know," I sigh, shaking my head in resignation.

"But he gave it to her!" Cedric's anger flares, directed at Peter as he starts to cry.

"What if he was commanded to forget?" Trey's suggestion, made earlier, begins to resonate with me. Azalea squirms on my lap, her concern for him echoing through our connection. I have to remind myself that Peter poses no threat, especially when he is weakened to the point where he can barely lift his head and Azalea is surrounded by my guard and her own, yet I hate the feelings through the bond he causes her.

"Go," I whisper to Azalea, giving her permission to approach him. She jumps off my lap, rushing towards him. Trey and Cedric quickly step in her way. They don't want their Queen near him.

"Stand down! Back up!" she snarls, her command leaving no room for disobedience.

Trey reluctantly backs off, followed by Cedric. I rise to my feet and make my way towards them as Azalea drops her knees and cradles Peter's head in her hands.

"I don't know, Azalea! I don't know, I wish I did!" Peter pleads.

"I know, I know. But we had to be sure," she whispers soothingly to him. He nods weakly in response. Azalea glances over her shoulder towards the table.

"Get him some water and a damp cloth," she instructs Cedric with a snap of her fingers. He swiftly complies, bringing her a bottle of water. I grasp Peter's head gently, lifting it up. Azalea's heart beats frantically in her chest as she reaches out to grip my wrist, searching my eyes, worried I am going to snap his neck.

I tilt Peter's head back, and she exhales in relief as she realizes I have no intention of harming him. Uncapping the bottle, she guides it to his lips, helping him drink. Cedric approaches with a wet cloth, which she uses to wipe away the sweat that has accumulated on his face after enduring hours under her command.

"Dustin, can you help him to a room?" Azalea asks, her gaze fixed on me. I can tell she is not seeking permission. I press my lips together in a tight line.

"I will stay with him tonight," Dustin assures both Azalea and me, leaving no doubt that he will not leave Peter's side wherever he is placed. "He can stay with Liam and me," Dustin suggests. Fear flashes in Peter's eyes at the mention of Liam's name as he glances towards where Liam stands alongside Gannon.

I have no intention of arguing. Dustin is a man who sleeps with one eye open, Liam's paranoia and insomnia doesn't let him sleep. So if Peter so much as attempts anything, he will wake up to a knife at his throat before he can even sit up.

"That's fine, but use my old quarters. Tandi and Abbie are in yours. I don't want him

near their families.”



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Dustin nods, then pauses, his eyes darting to Liam as he addresses me. “Ah, my King but...” Dustin doesn’t finish, his eyes locked on Liam behind me.

“It’s fine, Dustin,” Liam tells him. “Unless you’re uncomfortable?” Liam says, making my brows crease in confusion, Dustin used to be one of Claire’s guards but Dustin hasn’t had an issue working as my guard in my old quarters, well not that he has expressed anything about being uncomfortable.

“It’s different from guarding, than it is sleeping in her old room, Liam,” Dustin says, grasping Peter’s arm and helping him to his feet.

“I’ll be up when I can,” Liam says.

“Unless you need any assistance?” Liam asks Dustin, concern etched on his face. Dustin nods in response.

“One of the Landeena guards will wait with him until you’re ready, Liam,” Cedric informs him. Liam nods, turning back to the board. Cedric motions for one of the Landeena guards to accompany Peter, who grabs his other arm.

“Azalea, stay here,” I instruct her firmly, despite her growls of protest. We have established conditions and rules regarding Peter’s presence, and I will not break them, but she can’t either.

Returning my attention to the board, we attempt to piece together a timeline, searching for connections or clues. So much remains missing, and the involvement of Crux, my sister, and Ester continues to confuse me. Azalea firmly believes that

everything is intertwined, convinced that Ester is Crux's mistress.

Leaning against the table, I study the board before me. Azalea joins me, her eyes scanning the information. I can practically feel her mind working, a mixture of tension, confusion, and determination pulsating through her.

"Okay," she begins, her voice filled with determination. "I know everyone says that Ester and Crux are not involved with each other, and you're searching for the council's connection."

I gaze down at her, waiting for her theory to unfold.

"But maybe we shouldn't focus on the council's timeline just yet. Let's place Ester's timeline on the board instead," she suggests.

I let out a weary sigh, willing to entertain any idea at this point. Gannon and Trey move towards the table, gathering documents and starting to piece together a timeline based on the limited information we have.

As they work, the significant dates begin to take shape:

2004—Azalea was born.

2007—December - Ester becomes pregnant.

2008—February - Landeena Kingdom falls. Azalea goes missing. Marrissa Talbot disappears.

2009—Ester returns to the Valkyrie Kingdom and starts working as a castle servant.

2013—Valkyrie Kingdom is attacked. Claire is killed.

2014—Marrissa Talbot is murdered. Azalea and Abbie are placed in an orphanage.

2022—Azalea Landeena is found and returned to the Valkyrie Kingdom.

I study the timeline, hoping for some revelation or connection to the council. However, nothing jumps out at us. Azalea clicks her tongue in frustration.

“See? Nothing,” Gannon remarks. Azalea furrows her brow, deep in thought.

“So where was Ester during that year after my family was killed?” She directs her question towards Trey.

“And where did you go after the Kingdom fell?” she asks him, still peering intently at him.

“With the Landeena Guard, searching for you,” Trey responds.

“Add it to the board. Let’s see if anything aligns after my parents’ Kingdom fell,” Azalea requests, her brows furrowing as she ponders the possibilities.

“What’s the point of all this?” I question, worried we’re just going in circles at this point.

“I’m trying to understand how no one recognized Marrissa or Ester. These two women were present in both Kingdoms when they fell,” Azalea sighs. The task of mapping out every person’s timeline would be daunting and endless, but if we can find connections in specific individuals, it may lead us closer to the truth.

Chapter

Forty-Two

AZALEA

We are missing something. I can feel it, and it is right on the tip of my tongue. One thing that will tie everything together, yet there is also how the council is involved and why Crux would go against his own uncle, my father.

I watch as Trey adds his details to the board, trying to find anything that can link Ester to the rogue murders or the council.

- Azalea was born.
- Ester falls pregnant with Peter.
- Landeena Kingdom falls. Azalea is missing. Marissa is missing.
- Trey spent 3 months in Valkyrie Hospital for silver poisoning.
- Trey was released from hospital in May and went looking for Marrissa and Azalea.
- Ester moves back to Valkyrie Kingdom, starts working as a castle servant.
- Trey returned to Valkyrie Kingdom and started working at the Mill.
- Trey failed the guard trials

- Trey failed the guard trials

- February - Landeena anniversary. Valkyrie Kingdom attacked. Claire was killed. Marrissa on the run.

- Marrissa Talbot is killed. Azalea, and Abbie are placed in the orphanage.

- Trey rejoined guard trials and passed, became Royal guard.

- Azalea Landeena found and returned to the Valkyrie Kingdom.

I sigh. So Trey wasn't within the castle grounds while Marissa was. I chew my lip when Clarice speaks up.

"You worked at the Mill? You must have known my husband," she says, smiling sadly.

"Who was your husband?" Trey asks her.

"Emanuel Lounges," she answers.

"Ah, yes, I worked alongside him. Nice man, I didn't realize he was your mate, though."

"I hadn't changed him yet. He died just before we lost Claire," she whispers, bowing her head to the King, who smiles sadly at her. "Not marking him is probably the only thing that spared me death after him," Clarice adds sadly.

"Wait, Emanuel Lounges?" Gannon asks, and we all look at him.

"Yes, you met Emanuel once in town with me," Clarice tells him, and he nods.

“Yes, but I didn’t know his last name was Lounges!” Gannon exclaims.

“What’s that got to do with anything?” I ask, curious as to why, out of everything, that is the one thing he picks up on.

“He died the night of the Ravana Pack attack?” Gannon asks Clarice.

“That’s correct. The 2012 attacks, when the hunters hit nine packs that month. He said he had family left in the pack and went to help. Kyson found him and brought him back home to me, he didn’t even make it to them,” Clarice says before swallowing as she glances at Kyson.

“Ravana Pack attack?” I ask, confused.

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“Small pack that is not far from here. There are over 80 small packs in this state,” Kyson tells me, and I nod. I knew it was big, I just hadn’t realized how big.

“Ah, now I remember where I heard that name from! Abbie mentioned her aunt, Sia. That must have been who he was going back for. Emanuel told me he had two daughters in Ravana Pack that were estranged,” Trey says.

“Excuse me?” Clarice asks, and everyone turns their heads to look at her. The look on her face is horrific as she stares at Trey like he just punched her.

“Sia Lounges?” Gannon asks abruptly. Yet, I can’t take my eyes from Clarice, who looks like she is on the verge of tears. She shakes her head.

“Wait, enough!” I yell, cutting everyone off as they reminisce on the past. One that is becoming more and more confusing.

“Clarice?” I ask her.

“No! My Emanuel didn’t have children. He would have told me! He was going back for his siblings,” Clarice says..

“Clarice?” I whisper hesitantly, biting my lip. She shakes her head, averting my gaze.

“I think it is time I go to bed,” she says, bowing her head and quickly leaving.

“Crap! I didn’t mean to upset her,” Trey curses, watching her go.

“It’s not your fault, Trey. But now I have a strange feeling that this is bigger than any of us realize,” Gannon murmurs, looking back at Liam, who is watching her leave.

“What do you mean?” I ask him.

“Sia Lounges and Vivienne lounges, were Abbie’s aunty and grandmother. They lived in the Ravana pack, after being forced out of their first pack. Emanuel was too late, by that time Sia and Vivienne were already dead, he just didn’t know it, he was going back for two dead women,” Gannon tells us.

“But what’s that got to do with any of this though?” I ask, still confused.

“Because I met Viviana Lounges, through my father. However, Crux was one of the men that introduced my father to Vivianne’s mother when I was a child. I later met Vivianne as a woman when she was pregnant with the twins, Sia and Lina. When I met Sia as an adult, it was at a pub her mother Vivianne owned. I didn’t talk to Vivianne for years, after the Landeena attack I...” Liam glances at Kyson who looks away.

“I went a while without speaking with her. I used to stay at Vivianne’s pub whenever I passed through. She is also who I went to after Landeena fell,” Liam explains.

“Why would you go to Abbie’s grandmother?”

“Because she was a witch. And I needed a location spell to locate you. She also ran an apothecary shop inside her house,” Liam explains.

“And Sia Lounges had ties to the hunters, we learned after I killed her,” Gannon explains. Kyson growls, and Gannon hangs his head before turning back to the whiteboard.



“I’ll go check on Clarice,” Damian murmurs, rushing out after her. Kyson wanders over to me and wraps his arms around me before looking at Gannon.

“You and Liam add to the timeline everything you know about Sia,” he tells them before pressing his lips on my hair.

“And you and I are going to bed. I have to be up in the morning to look for Larkin. And it is past midnight. You need to get some sleep,” Kyson says, leading me out of the ballroom. However, I am wide awake and too nervous to sleep, but he is right. I have been standing for hours, and it is starting to take a toll on me. Plus, my feet are killing me.

We head toward the stairs, but I stop when I hear crying coming from the kitchen and Damian’s hushed voice trying to calm down Clarice. “I feel terrible. I thought she knew he had kids,” Trey murmurs, following us up the steps.

“It’s not your fault,” Kyson tells him, and Trey swallows. We climb the stairs, and I am about halfway up when a sickeningly sweet smell wafts to me before I hear someone groan. I sniff the air, recognizing the scent to belong to Abbie.

“Abbie?” I call out, grabbing the banister and rushing up the steps. Abbie stands clutching her stomach and leaning against the wall, shaking. Sweat is coating her skin and her face is all flushed.

“I need a doctor. Something is wrong,” she whimpers. Running over, I grip her arms. She leans into me, and I look toward the corridor from near her quarters, a terrified feeling settling into my gut.

“Why didn’t you mindlink?” Kyson asks. Abbie’s brows crease, and she shakes her head.

“I forgot I can,” she groans, clutching my arms when Kyson growls, grabbing her and sweeping her legs out from under her. He turns and looks at Trey, who starts rushing up ahead to open doors from where Abbie came from, when I feel the mindlink open up.

‘Gannon, get to your quarters immediately!’ Kyson says through the link.

‘Are Abbie and Tyson alright?’ Gannon asks.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

‘Azalea and I will take Tyson for the night. Just get to your room!’ Kyson snaps at him.

‘I’m on my way. What is going on?’ Gannon panics. Kyson growls, and I can tell he is mouth breathing. Looking at Trey, so is he and my eyes widen, and I gasp as it hits me, just as Kyson says it.

‘Can’t you feel her Gannon? Abbie is in heat!’ he says, pushing his way into Gannon’s room. Tyson is asleep on the bed, and Trey quickly grabs him, rushing out of the room while Kyson lays her on the bed.

“Hang on, Abbie. Gannon is on his way,” I whisper, brushing her hair back. “It hurts,” she sobs, curling into a ball.

“Gannon can make it go away,” I assure her just as the door bursts open. The moment he steps into the room, it is like someone slapped him. His pupils dilate, and he growls. I back up as he shakes his head, realizing it is me and not another male. He watches as I creep along the wall as he remains frozen on the spot, unable to move.

“It’s Azzy, Gannon,” Abbie whines, and his head whips toward her. He blinks, moving toward the bed, and I rush past him and bolt out the door, slamming it shut behind me.

Chapter

Forty-Three

## AZALEA

Kyson wakes early to Tyson trying to climb out of bed, which in turn wakes me. Rubbing my eyes, I hear arguing outside the door between Dustin and someone else. The door is slightly ajar and as I sit up, Tyson runs toward it, but Kyson scoops him up before he reaches it.

“Where are you off to, little man?” Kyson asks, bringing him back to me. I grab Tyson, wondering about Abbie and whether her heat has subsided. Yet, as the voices grow louder, my curiosity piques. “Lim, Lim,” Tyson tuts, grasping at the air and pointing to the door.

“I need to go shower,” Kyson says, pecking my lips just as Liam’s voice reaches my ears. I realize it’s Dustin and Liam arguing.

“Lim, Lim,” Tyson toots, squirming to get out of my arms before he goes limp on me and slides out of my arms. His little feet pound toward the door, and I groan, racing to stop him, not wanting to interrupt their obviously heated argument. Yet, Tyson shoves through the door. I quickly grab my robe, pull it on, and move closer to the door.

“Just go. You’re supposed to be watching Peter,” Dustin snarls at Liam as I approach the door. Liam is standing by the door, and Tyson rushes toward him. Liam scoops him up as if it is second nature to take the boy. He props him on his hip while Tyson smacks his chest, screeching. “Lim, Lim.”

“See, this is exactly what I mean, Liam. What happens when you want kids? I can’t give you that; I am a man, not a fucking woman,” Dustin snaps, pointing at Tyson. Liam looks at Tyson in his arms.

“What do kids have to do with anything? You always have some fucking excuse,

Dustin.”

“Language, Liam.”

“The squid doesn’t know what I am saying. It’s been three damn years, Dustin, and you still turn me down.”

“BECAUSE YOU’RE NOT FUCKING GAY. I AM GAY, LIAM. YOU’RE NOT!”  
Dustin yells at him. He pauses, then sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“You mark me, then what? Later on down the track, you want kids and leave me for a damn woman. I don’t do vagina, Liam, I don’t swing that way, and I won’t handle seeing you with another woman. It is better to keep things the way they are,” Dustin tells him.

“I don’t want to be with anyone else, only you. How many damn times do I gotta tell you that?”

“You say that now. I see you with Tyson, Oliver, and all the other kids. You will want kids,” Dustin tells him. Liam snarls, looking down at Tyson. “Do I look like father material to you? I would fuck some kids up raising one. I don’t want kids, even if I eventually did. We got what...” he looks at me.

“A handful of kids downstairs that need adopting. Take your pick. Then what excuse have you got? I don’t want kids; I only want you, you Dustin. We can figure out the rest later.”

“You’re bisexual, Liam, not gay. You will want another.”

“What has my sexuality got to do with anything? I can be considered Mysexual, too; I fuck myself; I beat Mrs. Palmer a few times a week, too, I really give my left hand a

fucking workout when you're in a bad mood, but that doesn't mean I want to continue fucking it. Damn, have a left arm like Popeye!" Liam snaps at him.

"Again, Liam language!" Dustin growls, and Liam shakes his head, wandering over to hand me Tyson. I take him, and Dustin sighs.

"I'm sorry Azalea, he is just leaving," Dustin tells me, and I see Trey still as a statue by the window.

"Ah, who is watching Peter?"

"Don't worry about him. Tied him really good to the bed. He ain't going anywhere," Liam tells me. I shake my head and look at Trey, who groans.

"I guess I will go get him then?" Trey says when I raise an eyebrow at him.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

“Handcuff keys on the dresser. You’ll need a knife to cut the ropes off; I knotted them perfectly.”

Trey nods when Liam clears his throat.

“Wait, you’ll need these too,” Liam says, digging in his pocket. He tosses two keys to Trey. “The little one will release the ball gag, and the skinny one is for the choker. I told you he wasn’t going anywhere. Dusty poo likes a little bondage,” Liam says, winking at me before turning back to Dustin while Trey holds the keys up, looking horrified at him. Dustin’s face turns bright red. I just blink, not really needing that information.

“Go, I have work to do. We can argue later. Azzy doesn’t want to hear this shit,” Dustin says, waving him off. “You’re causing a scene.”

“I am not causing a scene. You are. Three years, Dustin, I have been asking you to let me mark you, three years, and you still turn me down,” Liam snaps before walking off and following Trey. Dustin turns to face me.

“Sorry,” he mumbles.

“Trouble in paradise, Dustin,” Kyson says, coming behind me, trying to put his cufflinks on.

“That was quick,” I tell him.

“Larkin, remember, I am leaving the guard here with you and going with Cedric.”

“Wait, you’re going by yourself?” I ask him.

“No, Cedric will be with me.”

“Maybe take Damian and Gannon with you?”

Kyson shakes his head.

“I am not leaving you here defenseless. I should only be gone a couple of hours at max. I’ll be fine. And Gannon is still locked down with Abbie’s heat,” he tells me, kissing my forehead and wandering off.

“I’ll be back soon,” he calls over his shoulder, and I sigh, looking down at Tyson.

“Let’s go see Clarice and get you out of your jammies,” I tell him when Dustin moves toward the window. He grabs a backpack.

“Liam came and got his clothes already. That’s why he came down. I forgot the bag,” Dustin says, holding it out to me. I take it, and he follows me into the room. “What’s the deal with you and Liam anyway?”

“He wants to be exclusive.”

“You aren’t already?” I ask him.

“Not from his lack of trying,” Dustin tells me.

“Then what’s the issue? He seemed pretty upset.”

“I know he will leave me eventually. It is better this way.”



“You mean because he also likes women?” I ask, remembering Tandi.

“Yes and no, he mainly does that to piss me off. I told him I don’t care who it’s with; I know he will leave me for a woman eventually,” Dustin says, sounding defeated.

“I don’t think he would, not if you let him mark you.”

“You sound like Gannon. He said the same thing the other week,” Dustin groans.

“You don’t believe Gannon?”

“No, I just don’t want him to resent me later because he has marked me. And I won’t allow him to fool around with women once he does. Which wouldn’t work if he decided he wanted kids. I can’t give him that, so—” He shrugs as I pull Tyson’s top off.

“Can always adopt, as Liam said.”

Dustin shakes his head, passing me Tyson’s tank top, when we hear a knock on the door. Dustin goes to answer it. He opens the door, and I realize it is Tandi.

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“Clarice and I are taking the kids out to play on the hill after breakfast if you want to come,” she says, with Hunter in her arms.

“Yep, I will be down in a minute. Where is everyone eating?” I ask her.

“Ballroom, we are taking a few orphanage kids out with us while the weather is nice. A storm is meant to hit this afternoon, and they will end up stuck inside if it sticks around,” she tells me. I nod.

“Okay, I will be right there. I just gotta get changed,” I tell her. She nods, turning and walking away with Hunter. I finish dressing Tyson, and Dustin watches him for me while I quickly change and mindlink Kyson.

‘Can Peter come to the hill with the kids? Trey and Dustin will be with us?’ I ask him. Yet, after last night, we have all determined that Peter is no longer a threat to me. It was sad, really. Everything he did was for his mother, only for her to abandon him again. He seriously believed if the King got rid of me, she would be allowed back into the castle where he could see her.

‘Yes, but stay with our guard; I love you,’ he tells me.

‘I love you too,’ I tell him, cutting the link off. We make our way downstairs. A handful of children, Clarice’s boys, Hunter and Tandi, are already here when Trey brings in Peter. He sits at the table with his face down.

Yet, after about twenty minutes, he is animatedly playing with a few orphanage kids while I wander over to the whiteboard to look at the added parts Liam and Gannon

put up about Sia and Vivienne. Liam comes over and leans on the table next to me as I stare at it. Liam helps me read the newest parts since I can't recognize the wording.

"So, did you find out why Sia was kicked out of the Vermillion pack?" I ask Liam, who nods.

"Yes, last night I rang the alpha of Vermillion, who pulled the records from back then," Liam tells me, wandering over to the table. He picks them up, but Dustin takes them from him before he can show me.

"What does it say?" I ask him.

"They were kicked from the pack for Vivienne's works in witchcraft and the illegal dealings with Wolfsbane."

"Illegal dealings?" I ask.

"Yes, though, we never found out who her supplier was. After digging around last night with the King's resources, we are pretty sure she was the one supplying the Hunters with wolfsbane," Liam tells me.

"One thing I want to ask. When did you meet Abbie? Gannon told me she has memories of her grandmother in Ravana Pack. But you don't remember meeting Vivienne despite Abbie saying you were there," Liam asks, grabbing one of the markers and moving toward the board.

"I was about five years old. All I remember is that Abbie's family was being chased by rogue bandits. They were attacked; Marrissa and Jordan helped them, and after that, they stayed with us."

"Why?"

“Abbie said she met with her Grandmother a few times when she was a child.”

Liam shrugs but adds it to the board.

I nod, turning back to the drawing board, and Liam walks me through what everything says again.

- Azalea was born.

- Three years later, Ester falls pregnant with Peter.

- Landeena Kingdom falls. Azalea is missing. Marissa is missing.

- Trey spent three months in Valkyrie Hospital for silver poisoning.

- Trey was released from the hospital in May and searched for Marissa and Azalea.

- Ester returns to the Valkyrie Kingdom and starts working as a castle servant. Started in the stables.

- Trey returned to the Valkyrie Kingdom and started working at the Mill.

- Trey failed the guard trials.

- March Ester moves into the castle as Claire’s personal servant.

- May-Marissa starts out in the stables at the castle.

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- Trey failed the guard trials.
- January - Marrissa starts working as a castle servant.
- Gannon meets Sia, and she rejects him. Sia moves to Ravana Pack after being kicked out of Vermillion Pack.
- February - Landeena anniversary. The Valkyrie Kingdom attacked. Claire was killed. Marrissa is on the run.
- May- Kyson created the Pack Oath for the Royal Guard.
- Sia is killed almost a year after Claire's death.
- Marrissa Talbot was killed. Azalea and Abbie are placed in the orphanage.
- Also, the year after Claire's murder, Gannon investigated rogue murders with Liam, and Vivienne followed him and tried to kill him out of vengeance for Sia. Liam buried her body near the river near the bridge.
- Trey rejoined guard trials and passed, becoming a Royal guard.
- Azalea Landeena is found and returned to the Valkyrie Kingdom.

I stare at the board, trying to piece it together before looking at Liam. "Crux, is that how you met Vivianne?" I ask him, and he nods.

“Yes, with my father as a kid. But I never spoke to her again until years later. I needed a location spell done,” he tells me.

“So Crux knew Sia?” I ask again.

“Yes, Crux had worked with Vivienne in the past, not long before Claire was killed. As far as I know, that is when I found out about her working with Crux; it could have been longer for all I know,” Liam tells me.

“And there is your link. I just don’t understand why Crux would work with Ester and how it is connected with the council besides Crux,” I tell him, and he seems to think for a second.

“Did Ester know Sia?” I ask, and Liam shrugs. “No idea.”

“But Ester knew Crux?”

“Everyone knows Crux. He has been on the council for centuries,” Liam states, and I sigh. Yeah, that was a dumb question. It still didn’t explain about the rogue murders or Claire. Clarice claps her hands loudly, drawing all the kid’s attention.

“Come on, we can play outside until lunch, but then we need to lock everything down. A storm is brewing, kiddos, so sunwhile you can,” Clarice tells them, and I smile, moving toward Tyson, who is sitting next to Tandi. I grab him, and we take the kids to the hill by the cemetery and stables. The kids instantly take off, yet Tyson wanders around, following Tandi and me. Liam takes off to play with the kids as they all roll down the hill, racing.

“Where is Damian?” I ask. She pushes some hair behind her ear before looking at me.

“Looking into Alpha Brock, he is trying to see what he can find out about Paige for

me,” she says, and I press my lips in a line when Tyson tugs on my shirt, trying to get my attention.

“Du, Du,” he toots, pointing toward the stable.

“Yep, duck, duck,” I tell him, and he waves to it, still holding my shirt, which is fisted in his hand while he keeps squawking,

“Du, Du.”

“Gosh, he is an idiot,” Dustin laughs, pointing at Liam covered in grass, rolling down the hill, and knocking the kids over, who squeal, trying to jump over him as he rolls toward them.

“Dustin!” a voice calls out, making us look toward the castle. He wanders off to speak with Trey, and we turn our attention to the kids playing when Hunter starts fussing.

“I am going to go put him down to nap while Damian is still up there. I will be back,” she says. Yet as time passes, the sky begins darkening with the approaching storm, and Kyson still hasn’t returned.

“Du, Du,” Tyson yells, and I look down at him just as the wind picks up.

“Come on kids, inside. This storm is coming over faster than we thought,” Clarice calls out, and I move to help pick up the toys scattered along the ground with Tandi. Tyson refuses to go with Clarice or Dustin, yet he is in his jacket and beanie, so nice and warm, I let him follow as we pick up the junk the kids dragged out.

“Dustin, Liam, run these in,” I tell them, pointing to the huge plastic tubs. Tandi and I filled with balls and skipping ropes.

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“I’ll grab the last one,” Tandi tells me, rushing to the top of the hill while Clarice leads the last of the children inside with Peter. Liam and Dustin carried the tubs in while Trey was helping tug the clothes off the line with the servant.

“Come on, Tyson,” I tell him, holding my hand out to him. Only when I look down do I not see him.

“Tyson?” I call, turning and looking for him.

“Tyson!” I yell out, and I look at Tandi.

“He was just here!” I tell her.

Tandi looks around from the top of the hill, looking around frantically, just as the wind starts howling loudly.

“Tyson,” I scream when Trey runs over.

“What’s going on?” he asks, jogging over.

“I can’t find Tyson!” I say, panic bubbling in my throat.

Chapter

Forty-Four

AZALEA



Trey looks toward the tree line of the forest, and Tandi does the same. “He couldn’t have gone far,” Tandi says, moving towards me while my head twists from side to side, searching for him.

“I’ll go check the forest edge,” Trey says.

“What’s going on?” Liam and Dustin yell out simultaneously when they see us staring in every direction.

“Tyson, I can’t find him!” I yell out over the howling wind. Dustin and Liam exchange looks before Liam jogs over to us.

“I’ll check the cemetery,” he says, running off and calling out Tyson’s name.

“Clarice is checking inside in case he somehow got past one of us,” Dustin tells me. Tears prick my eyes at the thought of losing him. Abbie would never forgive me if something happened to him. I just don’t understand. I turned away for only a second. Is he hiding?

“I’ll check out the front,” Dustin says, sprinting off before I hear the mindlink open.

‘Azzy, what is going on? Why are you upset?’ Kyson mindlinks.

‘I’ve lost Tyson!’ I admit while frantically searching the gardens. Tandi scans all the cubby holes surrounding the castle.

‘All guards, look out for Tyson, Gannon, and Abbie’s son,’ Kyson yells across the link.

‘What about Tyson?’ Gannon booms through the link. Dustin answers him while Kyson continues talking to me.

‘I’m on my way back, love. We found Larkin’s empty car,’ he tells me, and I’m about to ask what he means when Tandi calls out.

“He isn’t inside in the kitchens or laundry. I checked the cellar too,” she says, an edge of panic in her voice.

“I just don’t get why he would run off,” I say just as he reaches me.

“We’ll find him. He couldn’t have gone far,” Tandi tells me, looking around, trying to reassure me. The storm has really picked up. The clouds close in and take the light with them as thunder booms loudly and lightning streaks the sky with flashes of light.

“He was right here, though. He was right here, tugging my shirt, looking at them...”

“The ducks!” I blurt, my eyes going to the stables. The ducks are no longer on the little hill above the stables, and my heart flutters in my chest.

“The lake!” I shriek in panic as I take off toward the stables. I rush to the narrow path and look down toward the lake and small pier. I can’t see him anywhere when Tandi nudges me.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

“There!” she says, pointing toward the stables where the ducks are huddled outside the stable doors. My eyes widen, and I dash down the path toward the stables. The wind whips my hair around my face as I reach the bottom just as thunder rumbles across the sky followed by the deafening crack of lightning.

The ducks squawk and quack, flapping their wings as I step through them. I rush into the stables, almost slipping, catching myself on the stable door as I turn and peer inside. Relief floods me when I see Tyson chasing a baby duck between the stalls. He has it cornered and is trying to coax it out with a piece of straw.

“Tyson!” I breathe in relief, clutching my chest. My heart races so hard I think I might have a heart attack. At the sound of his name, he looks over his shoulder.

“Du, Du,” he cackles with laughter.

“Yes, duck, duck,” I chuckle as Tandi walks in behind me.

“There you are, little man. Gave us a fright,” she says, as I scoop him up off the filthy floor. The horses become spooked and start carrying on. Hay is blowing around the stables from the open doors, making the wind whistle loudly.

“Come on, we should get back before this storm hits. It won’t be long before the rains pelt down,” Tandi says as the wind chimes and buckets clang noisily, and the rafters creak, the tin roof groaning under the wind. The horses’ hooves on the floor are loud as we make our way back out.

“Du, Du,” Tyson says, squirming in my arms, wanting to catch the petrified baby

duck.

“No, we can play later. Don’t you want to see mummy?” I ask him when we hear a bang.

“Heeelp!”

I stop looking back into the stables at the spooked horses.

“Did you hear that?” I ask Tandi. She looks around but shakes her head, and we head toward the doors.

“Help!” I hear the sound of choking coughs as we draw nearer to the last stall before the doors. I stop again, looking at the spooked horse inside.

“I heard that!” Tandi says before we hear a loud banging noise thump again. The horse jumps and goes up on its backlegs, knocking down some bales of hay that were stacked on top of each other in there with the horse, which I find a little odd.

“Help!” a voice croaks again before rapid, loud coughing.

“Tanner?” I call out, thinking I recognize the voice. Tandi opens the gate of the stall, causing the horse to rush past us. We barely jump back in time as it barges out of the stables and into the storm.

“Damn it!” Tandi curses, trying and failing to stop it.

“One of the guards will grab her,” I tell her.

“Down here!” A barking cough comes, and Tandi turns to look at the floor and the giant floor-to-ceiling stack of hay that covers the entire rear wall.

“Tanner? Is that you?” I yell out.

“Who is Tanner?” Tandi asks, kicking the hay around to see if he has fallen over in the ruined stall.

“The gardener and one of the stable hands,” I tell her when the coughing gets louder, and Tandi looks behind the bales of hay on the far wall of the stall when she steps on something hollow. She stomps her foot down, and I peer into the stall.

She bends down and sweeps her hand across the floor.

“Down here,” comes the barking noise again, and Tandi sweeps her hand furiously.

“Larkin?” she yells, and I place Tyson down to help her.

‘We can’t find him! Where did you go, Azalea?’Trey calls through the mindlink.

‘We found him,’I quickly tell him, having forgotten with all the noise and becoming distracted. I gasp when Tandi hits a handle and looks at me. “Is that a trapdoor?” I whisper to her, forgetting about Trey in my head.

Tandi pulls it, but it doesn’t budge. “Here, help me,” she groans, and I grab the other handle, and together we rip it open. I fall on my ass, tripping over one of the fallen hay bales. Tandi jumps back as it flings open.

“Ah, thank the Goddess!” Come Larkin’s croaky voice.

“Larkin?” Tandi says, peering down into the trapdoor. I get to my hands and knees and peek into the trapdoor, finding blue and purple lights. Larkin is tied to a chair that has fallen over. All around him are rows and rows of potted plants beneath the lights on tables. I sniff the air.

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“Wolfsbane,” I whisper. My eyes widen at what I see, and I open the mindlink to report to Trey, Liam, and Dustin.

‘Trey, we found...’ I begin before everything goes dark. Pain rattles across my head, and it feels like everything slows down.

One second, I am peering into the trapdoor. Next, I am on the ground, my eyes zoned out as my head hits the floor when a shovel clunks loudly next to my head.

My ears ring loudly, and I can feel the trickle of blood slowly sliver into my vision as it drips from where I was hit.

Tyson, I can vaguely hear, is screaming, yet despite being near me, his voice sounds distant. I try to make sense of what happened before Tandi screams, and I blink, fighting to stay conscious, when she is shoved into the trapdoor, and the lid is slammed shut.

“Just like that bitch, Marissa! Just gotta stick your nose where it doesn’t belong!” I hear an angry voice. The mindlink opens, and the last thing I hear is Kyson’s panicked voice when someone grabs the scruff of my shirt, fisting it below my chin. Is that Tanner? The figure lifts me before I see his fist fly toward my face, and darkness swallows me.

I swallow, my tongue feels thick in my mouth, and my arms hang limply by my head. I turn my head, looking around to find myself upside down over Tanner’s shoulder, and we are deep within the woods. The mindlink goes crazy when I hear shouting in the distance and smell the smoke from a fire somewhere.

The stables are on fire, and I hear people shouting. Tanner curses and mutters, trudging through the woods, and I remain silent when I hear his phone ringing.

‘Kyson!’ I murmur through the mindlink, barely able to hold a conscious thought. My head is pounding like a drum, my skin laced in goosebumps from the dropping temperature.

‘Where are you, Azzy?’ he rushes out.

‘Woods. Tanner,’ I murmur. My consciousness wanes, and I feel queasy and so heavy as I sway with each step he takes.

“What else did you expect me to do? Just meet me at the tunnels! The plan can still go ahead! The hunters are already on their way. This changes nothing!” I hear Tanner yell at someone on the phone before darkness sweeps over me once again.

## Chapter

### Forty-Five

#### KYSON

Everyone frantically searches for Azalea, Tyson, and Tandi as Cedric and I pull up. Trey is in a panic because he can’t feel her through the sire bond, and I can’t feel her through our mate bond either.

Cedric and I race toward where we can see smoke. I had been trying to force the mindlink, failing to reach her, when all of a sudden, I suddenly feel her pain. I almost run the car off the road as the pain smashes through our bond. Despite leaving the entire guard here except for Cedric, trouble still found us, and they weren’t enough to protect her.

Now, all I can think about is finding her. I order Damian, Gannon, and Dustin to find Tyson and Tandi. The compulsion from the oath has them frantically caught between their Queen and their mates and children, something I may have to reconsider. Azalea would be devastated if their desire to help her overruled that of Abbie and Tandi or their children.

“Fire! The stables are on fire!” Trey points to the stables. I can hear Damian shouting orders through the mindlink while I’m trying to reach Azalea. It’s utter chaos.

“Where is Tyson?” Gannon, grabbing my arm. I see Abbie race across the lawns toward the stables, screaming for her son. Guards are using hoses and buckets, trying to put the fire out. I run through the back doors of the stables. The trapped horses inside their stalls buck and try to break out as the flames draw nearer, licking up the walls and roof.

Liam frantically rips the stall doors open, letting the horses out. Dustin calls out for Tyson, who I can hear crying, yet the smoke is so thick and the heat so intense the closer we get to the front of the stables. Black billowing smoke spews out, making it difficult to see, and the fire rages as the doors bang in the wind.

“Got him!” Dustin yells before rushing past me, but I can’t see Azalea anywhere or pick up her scent with the smoke. Dustin rushes out with Tyson in his arms. I cough and choke on the smoke while checking the stalls for Azalea when I feel her wake. The mindlink flickers weakly as if she is trying to reach me.

‘Kyson,’ she murmurs through it. Her consciousness is weak through the bond, and I can feel how much pain she is in my own head, throbbing along with hers.

‘Where are you, Azzy?’ I rush out, knowing she won’t be conscious for long.

‘Woods. Tanner,’ she murmurs, and I can feel her slipping away from me.



‘Stay with me, love. Hold on. I need you awake so I can find you,’ I tell her, but the link dissolves no matter how much I try to hold on to it.

‘Get to the woods! It’s Tanner!’ I scream across the link and hear the howls of the Landeena guards outside as they take off through the woods in hunt of their Queen.

“On it!” Liam yells out from somewhere outside.

Liam and Trey rush off the moment Trey feels that sliver of her consciousness, trying to follow his sire bond. I attempt to navigate my way out of the enormous stables when I hear Damian’s voice.

“Tandi!” Damian screams out as he rushes into the stall across from me.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

“Kyson, help me!” Damian yells as I am about to run for the door to go after Azalea. With a growl, I move to help him find her top half trapped beneath a trapdoor. He opens the lid, and I rip her out. The trapdoor falls heavily to the ground with a loud thud.

“Tanner, your gardener. He took Azalea,” Tandi gasps as I hear the cracking of the tin roof above us. It is going to cave in any minute, and we need to get out of here.

“Larkin is down there!” she gasps, choking on the smoke. I pass her off to one of the guards, who is helping free the horses. He quickly takes her and runs out with her. My vision burns as the smoke gets thicker. My lungs wheeze with each breath.

“The old tunnels. And I think I figured out who was supplying the Wolfsbane to that witch!” Damian growls as I look into the trapdoor. Larkin wriggles on the ground, shackled by rope and silver chains that I can smell were doused in Wolfsbane.

“Don’t just stand there. Help me!” he chokes out. Damian grits his teeth, and I know he believes if he let him die, all his issues would be solved.

“I need to find Azalea,” I tell him. I couldn’t care less for Larkin right now when my mate is in the woods somewhere. Shifting, my vision adjusts, and my hearing strengthens as I shove out the doors and run for the forest.

I can hear every crunch of the twigs and leaves, even over the raging storm. Sniffing the air as I run, I pick up her scent in minutes, along with the savage sounds of fighting. Bursting through a thicket of trees, I find Azalea unconscious on the ground.

Liam and Trey have Tanner pinned to the ground as he thrashes and snarls. His brown Lycan form is drenched in blood, yet I race toward Azalea. Rolling her over, I scoop my arms beneath her.

As I hold her in my arms, her head rolls backward. There's a deep gash across her hairline and into her hair. In addition to that, her chin was also covered in a large bruise.

"Don't kill him!" I snarl as Liam grabs his head, getting ready to break his neck.

"Get him to the old dungeons. We need answers!" I growl at them. Tanner roars, trying to flail and get free, knowing precisely what the old dungeons are used for.

Tanner is dragged through the woods by them. Dustin comes to help, and as we finally reach the back of the castle near the stables, I find Abbie clutching Tyson up on the hill.

Gannon has Tandi dragging her away from the raging fire of the stables. My men are still trying to put out the flames, using a pump and pumping water straight out of the lake just as the rain hits. It pours, making the ground slippery, but it will help to douse the flames before the fire can spread to the surrounding forest.

Running past the stable, Damian smacks Larkin's back as he hacks and coughs. He looks up as I pass him and nods his head.

'Lock the place down!' I call across the mindlink. 'And get me the town Doctor!' I order, hearing a unison of yes return through the mindlink. Just as we step through the threshold into the huge foyer, Azalea begins to wake.

"Tyson?" She mutters.

“We got him, love. Tandi too,” I tell her, hugging her closer and inhaling her scent as I climb the stairs. Dustin is hot on my heels, and I see Liam drag a kicking and screaming Tanner through to the kitchens.

“Dustin, you are to wait with Azalea,” I tell him as I push the door open with my hip. I lay her on the bed before moving her hair to look at the gash, careful not to cut her with my claws.

She drowsily stares up at me, her eyes rolling, and I can see she has a severe concussion. Leaning down, I lick the wound, which looks like it is trying to seal itself. It does take me a few tries to pinch the skin together, but eventually, it seals shut.

“Mindlink me with what the doctor says. Also, when she wakes up,” I tell Dustin, who nods, taking her hand in his hand as he sits with her. Stepping out of my quarters, Abbie rushes past me and into the room. Gannon behind her.

“Need me to handle the gardener?” he asks, but I shake my head.

“No. That bastard is mine!” I growl, moving toward the stairs. Walking back through the corridors, I feel the chaos unfolding around me. The storm was in full swing, and guards and staff rushed around to secure everything and lock us down.

Moving through the kitchen, I head for the pantry. I walk down to the cellar before walking down to the cells. Moving to the back cell, I find the trapdoor already open and descend the stairs to the old dungeons.

I immediately feel the cold draft of the dungeons, the concrete steps making my heavy footsteps echo off the old stone walls. I hear the clanging of the chains and Tanner’s screams as Liam and Trey chain his arms and legs to the old wooden rack. The rack has rollers at each end, and once secured, you could turn the leavers, and it

would stretch them.

It is a rather painful and gruesome death. Reserved for the worst kinds of people. Tanner is one of those people. He touched my Queen, and he would pay with his life! But not before I tortured the answers out of him.

The old iron-barred door creaks as I pull it open, and Tanner's cries grow louder when he sees me step into the cell.

Trey snarls and backhands him. His head whips to the side. "Get back to your sire. I will handle him," I tell Trey, who is all too happy to go back to his Queen.

Moving around the table, Liam clips the silver strap across his head so he can't lift it while I grab a hose and funnel.

"Get me some wolfsbane," I tell Liam, who rushes off to get what little supply we have left. Funny how we struggled to source it, and this fucking worm has been growing it beneath our noses this entire time.

"I can explain!" Tanner whimpers as I set the funnel beside him for when Liam comes back. I drag my claws down the side of his face and lean down.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

“That you will,” I growl, grabbing his hand and lifting it. I place it in the vice-grip before twisting the lever. His screams echoed off the stone walls as I crush his hand slowly. Listening to each bone break. And this would be just the beginning. No one wants to be down in the dungeons with me. You know you fucked up if I bring you here because once down here, you never leave. Or if they do, it’s in pieces.

Chapter

Forty-Six

AZALEA

Dustin stands beside me, holding my hand as my eyes flutter open. Relief floods me when I see the canopy over my bed, along with Dustin’s face peering down at me, and not Tanner’s.

“Finally!” Dustin exhales and his eyes glaze over as he mindlinks someone.

“Tyson? Tandi?” I blurt out.

“Downstairs. Everyone is in the ballroom. This storm is horrendous,” Abbie says, and I feel the bed dip beside me. Abbie sweeps my hair back from my face. Tyson is on her lap, his head resting against her shoulder, fast asleep.

“Why the ballroom?” I croak, sitting up. Instantly, pain rattles through my skull, and vertigo washes over me as I try to remember anything besides seeing Tandi chucked down the trapdoor.

‘Love?’ I hear Kyson’s voice flit through my head, making me clutch it.

‘Sorry, I will be up soon. You have a bad concussion,’ he tells me, and I nod before remembering he can’t see me.

Dustin taps my shoulder, and I look up. He holds a bottle of water out to me before passing me some pills.

“Painkillers,” he says, and I nod. He drops them into my palm, and I pop them into my mouth and he helps me tip the bottle to my lips, so I can swallow them.

‘Where are you?’ I mindlink Kyson, trying to ignore how the mindlink feels like someone is drilling a hole in my head. I grit my teeth through it, and Dustin moves off the bed and wanders to my closet.

‘I’ll be there soon. But we found out some answers from Tanner,’ he tells me.

‘You’re with Tanner? Where?’

‘It doesn’t matter where. I don’t want you down here. I am sending Liam back up there to sit with you. He is swapping places with Gannon for a bit, he is now on his way to me,’ Kyson says when Liam interrupts the link.

‘I will be up soon, my Queen. Just need to shower quickly,’ Liam tells me before he cuts the link.

‘I’ll see you soon,’ Kyson assures me before he too cuts the link abruptly, and I don’t even want to know what he is doing to Tanner.

“Once you’re up to it, I will send for something to eat. You should try to eat.”

“Shouldn’t we be heading to the ballroom?” I ask.

“No, the storm is almost over. We just put those living in the east and south wings down there. The roof started leaking, and the place got flooded. And a tree fell through the servant’s quarters wall. We are unscathed here so far.”

“Yeah, it is blowing over. Though now I know you’re awake and okay, I might go down and help Clarice and check on Tandi, if you don’t mind?” Abbie tells me.

“No, of course! You didn’t have to wait with me,” I tell her, and she raises an eyebrow at me as if that were the stupidest thing I have ever said. I roll my eyes, causing me to wince at the motion, and she laughs softly. Abbie leans over and presses her lips to my head.

“More than my life,” I whisper.

“Always more,” she replies before cradling Tyson and wandering toward the door. Dustin asks Clarice to have one of the cooks bring up a snack, despite telling him I am fine and just thirsty. Only ten or fifteen minutes later, Liam walks in, freshly showered. His hair is still damp as he strolls into the room.

He pecks Dustin on the cheek, who is watching me like he is waiting for me to drop to the ground, as I pull Kyson’s robe on that Dustin got from the closet.

“Kyson said you got some information from Tanner?” Liam bites his bottom lip, and I raise an eyebrow, waiting for him to answer.

“He was supplying the hunters and Vivienne with wolfsbane. We also found out the connection to the council and Ester,” Liam tells me. I sit back on the bed, and Dustin cracks his neck and yawns while tiredly stretching his arms above his head.



“What’s the connection?” I yawn before glaring at Dustin. His yawning is contagious. I just woke up, no way I should be tired. He smirks and shakes his head.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

“So, it turns out when Garret kicked Ester out, he ordered Crux to take her for an abortion,” Liam tells me.

“He ordered Crux to take her?”

“Yes, and Crux was to take her to Vivienne. She was known for her concoctions and could make a potion to abort a Lycan fetus.”

“How does that link to Tanner, though?”

“To abort a Lycan baby, they used to give liquid mercury and high doses of wolfsbane. Vivienne was out of wolfsbane, so Crux had to meet her supplier, that supplier was Tanner. Apparently, when Ester started working here, she was blackmailing Tanner for his little side business. They had an agreement that neither of them knew the other.”

“But she didn’t have the abortion.”

“Yes, we know. Apparently, she cut a deal with Crux,” Liam tells me.

“What kind of deal?” I ask. Liam shakes his head and shrugs.

“Tanner doesn’t know. He just knows they have one,” Liam tells me.

“So, what is Kyson doing now?”

“Trying to find out what his plans were. How much he was plotting with the hunters.

Anything really,” Liam says.

## Chapter

Forty-Seven

## KYSON

Gannon pulls the funnel out of Tanner’s throat with excruciating slowness, causing him to choke, gurgle, and sputter on the remnants of the wolfsbane. The acrid taste of sulfur lingering on his tongue, his blood-drenches the floor beneath him, and his hand that is trapped in the vice, is gruesomely split down the middle. With a sickening twist, I hear the final crunch as the vice-grip closes, severing his hand in two.

Tanner’s screams reverberate through my veins, sending shivers down my spine. Seizing the old lead sprinkler, Gannon’s eyes gleam with sadistic intent. Originally, a medieval torture device designed to shower victims with molten lead, we have repurposed it, filling it with sulfuric acid. The giant ladle-like contraption has an iron handle and a sphere at the bottom, brimming with corrosive acid. Gannon begins shaking it vigorously, a malevolent grin spreading across his face as he showers Tanner’s writhing form with the burning liquid.

Even in his agonized state, Tanner manages to rasp out defiant words between his hoarse screams. “What do you plan to do with the hunters? And where is Ester, Tanner?” I demand, my voice laced with determination. Gannon withdraws the lead sprinkler, yet the flesh continues to be eaten away by the acid. He reaches for the baking soda to neutralize the corrosive substance, but Tanner’s wails persist, his breath straining from choking on wolfsbane and his own harsh screams.

“I hope they annihilate all of you!” Tanner rasps defiantly. I click my tongue in disapproval and shift my attention to his feet. Grasping the top of his foot and his

ankle firmly, I yank and twist with a deliberate force, contorting his foot in a sickeningly wrong direction. The bones snap, and Tanner's screams echo through the room. Moving to the next foot without hesitation, I prepare to inflict the same agonizing pain.

"What are their plans, Tanner? This ends when you divulge what I need to know," I growl, my voice dripping with raw fury.

Tanner's laughter fills the air, a sadistic sound that sends chills down my spine. He cackles as if this is some twisted joke, relishing in our torment.

"Has the storm subsided?" he taunts, before choking on his own blood. Gannon slaps him, attempting to clear his airway, and swiftly removes the silver strap holding his head in place. He turns Tanner's face away from the danger of suffocation, ensuring we extract the information we need. Tanner spits out blood, his dazed eyes glinting with a wicked smile as he looks up at the ceiling.

"Pain, such a fickle thing. You won't break me, my King!" he sneers, his voice laced with venomous defiance. I growl in frustration, and move to break his foot.

"Oh, how she screamed, yet no sound escaped her lips. That's when you know you've broken them," he taunts sadistically, causing Gannon to glance at me.

"Plop," Tanner chuckles darkly. "Her body just plopped right at her feet." His laughter intensifies, emanating a sinister aura.

"But it made even me sick when she stuffed your nephew back inside her. I always knew she was unhinged, but she completely lost her mind. It disgusted me to witness it. You should have seen the look on Claire's face when she killed her mate. Priceless. The poor fool didn't stand a chance. She woke up just as I drove that dagger through his chest. But her baby? Dead the moment he fell at her feet. It was as

if her soul abandoned her as she stared down at him.” His words drain the blood from my face, leaving me pale and shaken.

“He’s trying to provoke you, Kyson! He wants you to kill him!” Gannon snaps, gripping my wrist tightly as my fingers instinctively reach for Tanner’s throat. I hadn’t even realized I was moving toward his head.

Tanner giggles like a deranged schoolgirl. “That bitch couldn’t keep her mouth shut! She had to run to your sister when she caught Ester and me preparing our deliveries for the council. She ran, yes she did,” he laughs sinisterly.

“Who ran?” Gannon demands, his grip on my wrist tightening as my hand trembles, hovering dangerously close to Tanner’s throat.

“Marissa! She moved into the castle and discovered Ester, didn’t she? Started scheming to expose her, but then she took it a step too far by following us. The damn bitch went straight to Claire. Couldn’t mind her own damn business! Had to interfere,” Tanner spits with venom.

“Claire, always the righteous one. She played by the rules. Instead of coming to you directly, she confided in the council and requested a meeting with us the next morning after your blood donations, we knew she’d run to you the moment you returned. She made the mistake of contacting Crux, who gave us a little heads up. So we took care of it!” Tanner laughs, relishing in his own malevolence.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

My other hand twitches, but Gannon swiftly grabs it, preventing it from descending upon Tanner's head. He growls fiercely, his voice filled with warning. "Keep your damn head or get out!" Gannon roars. How can he say that? He killed Claire and tried to kill my mate – he had killed my nephew!

"The Hunters. What are their plans?" Gannon demands, his voice commanding as he begins turning the handle on the rack, stretching Tanner's limbs to their limits. Tanner's screams pierce the air, echoing with unbearable agony. As much as I desire to end his miserable existence, Gannon is right. Killing him prematurely will yield no answers.

"Plop," Tanner laughs, just as Liam nonchalantly descends the steps, whistling a tune. His presence seems incongruous amidst the grim scene unfolding before us.

"The storm has passed. Look at you, growing like a weed!" Tanner taunts, his laughter punctuating the room.

"I've always liked you, Liam, such a shame about Claire," Tanner chuckles, his voice laced with a twisted kind of fondness. Liam tilts his head to the side.

"What did he say about Claire?" Liam asks, and I see him stagger back.

"Liam, get out if you can't handle it. I am already trying to stop Kyson from killing him. Out or stay the fuck back!" Gannon warns him. Gannon twists the handle beside me, forcing Tanner's body to stretch even further, tearing his skin under immense pressure. His screams tear through the air, filling the room with an ungodly symphony of pain.

But I have listened to enough of this vile creature's taunts. I need answers now. Pushing Gannon and Liam aside, I thrust my hand into Tanner's diaphragm, plunging deep into his innards. I fish around, searching for his spine, until my fingers close around it. Tanner chokes and gasps, his body convulsing in agony as I halt my movement just before he succumbs to shock.

"Wait!" he rasps, lips turning gray. My claws pierce through his abdominal aorta, blood pooling around my hand.

"Where are they?" I roar into his face, watching as terror flickers in his widening eyes. His mouth opens in a silent scream as I maintain my grip on his spine, refusing to release him from his excruciating torment. He smiles, his eyes fluttering, and I know he is teetering on the edge of unconsciousness or bleeding out. Despite lying on his deathbed, a twisted smile adorns his face, and my heart pounds erratically in my chest at his final words.

"They're already here," Tanner breathes.

A primal growl escapes my throat as I clench my teeth, squeezing my fingers around his spine, and with a savage jerk, I rip my hand out, tearing his spine away from his body. Blood sprays in all directions, and drenches us.

Chapter

Forty-Eight

AZALEA

Dustin firmly grasps my arm as we cautiously descend the steps, his grip hindering my steps. Annoyed, I repeatedly attempt to shake him off, I am feeling much better now that the painkillers have taken effect. The throbbing in my head has subsided.

“Dustin, I assure you, I am perfectly fine,” I assert, my voice echoing my frustration. The storm outside has finally abated, allowing a few of the servants to gather near the doors, their curious gazes fixed upon the aftermath of the destruction it unleashed. Just as we reach the bottom of the stairs, near the entrance to the bustling kitchen, a guard approaches us.

“A tree has crushed the main gates. A few of us will go out with chainsaws to remove it. Damian wants us to check the town to see if anyone needs help,” he tells Dustin, who nods, waving him off.

We start walking down the corridor toward the ballroom when we spot Rachel, one of the servants that works in the kitchen, peering out the enormous windows that run along it.

“Bloody storm was wild,” she remarks, her attention momentarily diverted from her duties as she turns her attention back to the windows.

“It obliterated the east wing. It will need re...” Before Rachel can complete her sentence, a deafening explosion roars through the air, staining my face with splatters of crimson as shards of glass erupt from the window where she stands, along with an entire section of the wall. Chaos ensues as debris and stone hurdle in every direction. Damian’s voice cuts through my consciousness via our mindlink, piercing my thoughts and sending my blood cold.

‘We are under attack.’ Damian booms, warning everyone through the mindlink.

Reacting instinctively, Dustin shoves me aside, narrowly averting the impact of a second explosion. I duck for cover, barely avoiding falling debris.

“Head to the tunnels!” Dustin’s urgent command reverberates through the air, reaching anyone within earshot. Meanwhile, gunfire erupts outside, its thunderous



echoes mingling with the sound of shattering glass as bullets mercilessly pierce through the remaining windows, transforming them into a cascade of shards.

‘Azalea!’ Kyson screams through the link, and I can feel him racing to get to me. I feel his presence getting closer when men in armor start coming in through windows, doors, and blown-out walls. Dust clings to my body, obscuring my vision, and it is then that I realize my hands are inexplicably wet. Blinking away the haze, I glance down to discover that I have unwittingly tripped over a severed piece of Rachel’s torso. Limbs litter the corridor, a gruesome sight that elicits a horrified scream from deep within me.

I scramble to my feet and run toward the doors at the end of the hall.

“Get inside and lock the doors!” Dustin snarls before turning and racing to join the fray as hunters come from every direction.

“Abbie!” I scream desperately, praying that upon opening those doors, I won’t be confronted with the sight of lifeless children and staff members. As I approach the massive doors, they swing open forcefully, allowing a flood of daylight to spill in from a demolished wall. Clarice emerges from the chaos, her eyes wide with alarm, as the children race towards me.

I wave my arms frantically to get their attention, knowing they are running straight into the action. Clarice swiftly seizes their hands and redirects them towards the corridor on her right.

“Get to the tunnels!” I yell at her, and her head whips up and turns in my direction just as Abbie and Tandi rush out the doors. We meet and take off along with the servants that survived the blast toward the back doors.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

‘There are tunnels in the woods! There’s a bunker not far from here!’Clarice yells through the mindlink, and I scoop up Oliver as he slows while Clarice clutches Logan’s hand. Our feet pound on the stone floor to the double doors that lead toward the gardens when an explosion goes off directly behind us. The roof crashes down around us, and I am tossed into a wall.

Darkness momentarily steals my vision, and my ears ring loudly. Harsh fingers grip my arm and my eyes fly open to see Tandi, her grip strong and urgent as she yanks me to my feet. The stone floor beneath me is rough and uneven, causing me to stumble as I run. I can see her lips moving, but I hear no sound. I see Peter grab Oliver as he chases after Clarice. The air is thick with the stench of smoke and burning debris. The metallic scent of blood and the acrid smell of gunpowder fills my nostrils. When my hearing returns, I clutch my ears, explosions and screams fill the air, punctuated by the sound of our pounding feet on the stone floor. The roar of the collapsing roof and the shattering of glass grows louder as the castle is continuously blasted.

‘Where are you?’Trey yells through the mindlink just as someone outside opens the doors. Everyone screeches to a halt, and Clarice shifts, snarling savagely as she puts her body between us and the door. Yet when the doors open, it is Trey.

He rushes in, his eyes scanning everyone’s faces with relief when they land on me. “We have to go!” he shouts over the chaos. “They’re coming back!”

He waves us forward, and everyone rushes out as he points toward the forest. Servants rush out, ducking their heads, and I see Abbie behind me, clutching Tyson. She is bleeding, looking dazed, struggling to hold his thrashing body. Trey takes him

from her before we all start racing toward the tree line and the cover of the trees. Without hesitation, we follow into the gardens. The once beautiful landscape is now a battlefield, littered with debris and bodies. I see hunters running and shouting in every direction, some trying to escape, while others continue to fire at us as guards fight to keep them back so we can get to the bunkers.

Trey leads us towards a wooded area on the edge of the property, but the path to the bunkers means running across an open field by the cemetery. We sprint across the open area, dodging bullets and ducking behind tombstones when necessary. The sound of gunfire echoes all around us as we try to run toward safety.

Kyson, I can feel he is injured, yet with everything going on, I don't have time to worry. Shouting and screaming ring out loudly, and the place has turned into a war zone. It is challenging to tell our guards from the hunters, except for the insignia emblazoned on their chest armor.

We race up the small incline behind Trey, and I push Abbie forward as we try to escape the chaos behind us. I see Clarice stop up ahead, her hand held by Oliver, until Peter takes him and runs off. Tandi stands beside Clarice, her eyes wide with panic. Just as we reach them, Tandi's expression changes to one of pure terror, and she lets out a blood-curdling scream.

I turn around to see what has caused Tandi's reaction, and my heart stops. Time seems to stand still as my eyes scan the scene in front of me. Logan wanders around the carnage like a little boy lost, dazed, covered in dust and blood. I don't think, I just react and take off for him, dodging Lycans and men fighting all around us.

Reaching for him, my heart pounding in my chest, I wrap my arm tightly around his waist and pivot on my heel, our bodies melding together as I tuck him close. The soft wet grass beneath our feet betrays us, causing my foot to slip just as the deadly whiz of bullets fills the air, their menacing trajectory narrowly missing us by a hair's

breadth. Out of my peripheral vision, I can see Gannon on the flat terrain before the hill down to the stables, fighting alongside his men. Kyson, I can't see, but I know he is alive.

Trey's screams pierce my ears as he shoves Tyson into Clarice's arms. My feet slap the grass as I race for the meager protection of the building's side. Abbie waves urgently, her eyes wide with fear. My shoes slip on the dew-slicked lawn and Logan tumbles from my grasp. I blink, momentarily dazed, and reach for his flailing limbs just as Abbie's shriek splits the air.

I look up to see her sprinting toward me when a bullet's hot kiss burns my shoulder. Hissing, I grab Logan with my good arm. Growls and snarls tear through the air as Abbie's horrified eyes fix on something behind me just as she reaches me.

Her body crashes into mine, arms enveloping me in a tight embrace, spinning me around. My gaze locks onto the hunter behind us. In his hand, he grips a gun that was once aimed at me but is now aimed at Abbie.

The deafening sound of the gunshot splits the air. Abbie jolts against me, her sharp intake of breath slicing through the chaos, becomes the loudest thing I've ever heard.

A wave of warmth spreads from where she clings to me, my heart halting as the metallic tang of blood taints the air. Her hushed, garbled words graze my ear, "More than my life."

Horror rises within me like a torrent, a guttural scream tearing through the silence as her blood sputters out her lips and sprays across my face.

"Abbie! No!" I scream as her weight slackens in my embrace. Logan remains trapped between us. Gannon's mournful howl splits the sky, the sound slicing through me.

“Abbie! Abbie!” My cries ring out desperately, willing her back to life, as Tyson’s anguished wail echoes in the background. My eyes lock onto the hunter as he raises his weapon once more. Yet, it is Trey who intervenes, crashing into him with force. Despite everything, I am frozen, caught in an endless moment of agony as I clutch her lifeless form. Abbie’s blood stains my arms as her gaze drifts skyward, crimson tears trickling from her eyes, as blood spills from her parted lips as she gasps, blood bubbling out her lips which lose focus, then lose their light.

## Chapter

### Forty-Nine

#### KYSON

Thirty minutes earlier.

Tanner’s lifeless body lies splayed on the rack, his unseeing eyes fixed on the ceiling as the last wheezing breath escapes his lips. I scrub the blood from my hands and face, not wanting to startle the staff or children with the gory remnants. The copper tang of blood fills my nose despite my efforts. I must act quickly, strategize our next move because his last words mean the hunters are close.

I need to send out some scouts to ensure that there are no hunters or council members on the premises. As for Tanner’s body, it will have to be dismembered and disposed of in the furnace by Gannon and Liam.

I head to the stairs when the ground rumbles violently, knocking me unbalanced. Choking smoke and dust billow through the air as debris rains down. My ears ring from the thunderous noise above. Blinking through the haze, I spot Gannon and Liam’s hazy figures. Bruised and bloodied but alive.

My ears finally stop ringing as I get to my feet in fear for Azalea. I sprint for the stairs when white-hot pain rips through my side. The acrid scent of wolfsbane fills my nostrils. Hunters - they are in the tunnels with us. Rage boils up inside me and I shift, my vision coming into focus through the red haze of my rage.

They have taken enough from us - made orphans of our young, refugees of our people. I see Gannon and Liam shift too, their golden eyes burning with fury. We move as one, ripping through the hunters, shredding them until no heartbeats remain but our own. I scream to the others through our mindlink, ordering them to the tunnels and bunkers.

Gannon and Liam rush to protect Azalea and the others, not that they have a choice with the pact oath. It would be instinct to them, leaving me to check the tunnels. I stalk through the back tunnels, making sure there aren't any hunters left hiding, while all I want to do is find Azalea.

I get no reply from Azalea, yet I can feel she is alive, although panicked. Trey, I know, is trying to get her and gives me a run-down of what is going on above while I scour the tunnels, ripping the wires from bombs planted beneath the castle everywhere.

The ceiling above explodes, sending rocks and debris crashing down on me as I hit a fork in the tunnels. I turn to my left, wanting to take the tunnel that comes out by the river, when the tunnel starts exploding, I am forced to run in the opposite direction toward the tunnels leading to the stables and forest.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

As I approach the entrance located directly beneath the charred remains of the stables, the clash and din of battle above echo through the tunnel. Amidst this turmoil, a faint whizzing sound barely registers in my ears before a scorching pain brings me to my knees. A dart is lodged in my torso, another strikes my chest as I collapse onto the cold ground. I wrench it free, and am immediately assaulted by the pungent smell of wolfsbane.

Lifting my head with a growl, I strain to see through the thick smoke for whoever has attacked me. The dose of wolfsbanewon't be deadly, but it's enough to hinder me; too many could knock me out. Using one hand against the stone wall for support, I struggle back onto my feet, swaying as the poison courses through my system.

A voice that ignites deep resentment echoes from ahead - Ester's voice. "You just had to claim that whore as your mate! I would have ignored Crux's plan altogether if you hadn't chosen her! It should have been me as your queen!" she spits venomously, waving a dart gun aimed at my heart. "I was ready to abandon Crux's deal until she showed up like some damned ghost from the past! Should have killed her when we found them in that forest!" She pulls the trigger just as I hurl myself against the opposite wall.

The dart narrowly misses its mark and clatters behind me on impact with another explosion overhead causing tremors throughout the tunnel. Her eyes widen with fear as she realizes we're about to be buried alive. With a low growl, I retrace my steps towards an alternate tunnel leading into the nearby forest.

Ester's furious roars echoes behind me along with her relentless tirade, while dust and smoke provide some concealment from her aim. The chances of getting close while

she carries that gun are slim leaving me no option but to run. The wolfsbane is burning my veins, draining my strength with each passing moment. I wince and duck as another explosion shakes another nearby tunnel.

‘Trey found the Queen!’ comes a voice through the mindlink as I navigate through the debris of the collapsed tunnel towards a new route which will deposit me into the forest adjacent to our bunkers. The metallic echo of Ester discharging her weapon follows by a dart whizzing past my head. In these constricted tunnels, she holds an advantage not only because of her smaller size but also her weapon, which will stop me from getting too close to her. One more hit and it’s game over for me - she knows it too, hence her relentless mockery as I push myself to keep moving.

“Marrissa told me Azalea was dead. Stupidly, I believed her. Had I known she was alive, I would have finished her off too! Her father ruined me! He used me!” she screams as I try to keep moving. I just need to burn it out of my system. If I stop, I know I won’t get back up. What is in those darts? I curse, my legs faltering as my pace slows.

“I thought he loved me!” She laughs like a maniac, and I can hear her drawing closer.

“Turns out he was fooling around with me to piss off my brother. What better way to get back at his wife’s mate than to fuck his sister? Prick!” she curses and I try to focus on moving, each step, taking serious effort on my part.

“Then he tried to destroy me and take my baby from me! I kept thinking maybe Garret would change his mind once he was born. How was I supposed to know he wouldn’t inherit the Landeena gifts? And he shunned me again, but I made him pay for that mistake! Crux was right. Garret Landeena was nothing but a manipulative asshole!” I hear her rambling like she has something important to say, but do my best to ignore her.



Seeing the light up ahead, I feel another dart skim past me, the feathers grazing my cheek as it narrowly misses me. The sounds of panicked servants reach my ears, and relief floods me, knowing they got out and are near the bunkers to take cover, so I know Azalea must be close by. I just have to get to her. Seeing the narrow opening up ahead, I push harder, forcing myself to run, and drop my shoulder.

This one comes out on the mountainside, with a wire gate blocking the entry. I see kids rush past the exit heading for the bunker with the castle servants, and my shoulder crashes against the mesh, making them jump just as Peter runs by me.

I crash through the mesh just as she growls and tosses the now empty dart gun at me. It hits me on the downfall as I burst through the meshed gate and spill out onto the ground. My body rolls as my momentum is off, and I slam against a tree.

Ester growls, stepping out of the open tunnel, and stalking toward me. Yet, the wolfsbane in my system burns my veins like acid and scorches my insides as it makes its way through muscle and tissue, rendering me incapable of moving forward.

I groan, pushing up off the ground with one hand, knowing I have to get to Azalea, but first I need to end this bitch. My vision blurs as she stalks toward me, and I force myself up, swaying as I clutch the tree I rolled into. Staggering, I swing wildly at her, and she laughs, jumping back as my vision doubles. Yet, I can feel it is slowly and painfully burning out of my system. Whatever she gave me was stronger than just wolfsbane. However, the more I push through the pain, the toxins burn out, slowly. My muscles no longer spasm the way they had been, though my vision is dangerously blurry.

“I enjoyed killing Claire, but I think I will enjoy killing the Lycan King more!” Ester laughs when I see a shadow move behind her. My eyes flick back to her. She flexes her fingers, her claws slip free, and she raises her arm to swing at me. My reflexes are slower yet still, my hand whips out at the last second, catching her wrist, when I hear

a scream.

Ester tenses and staggers, forcing me to let her go as she stumbles toward me and falls onto her knees. Only when I do, I notice Peter behind her, a branch in his hand. He lifts it, swinging it again at her head before turning into a frenzied rage and raining blow after blow down on her as I try to remain upright.

“I loved you! I loved you, but you didn’t love me! You were my mother! Why didn’t you love me?” he roars, repeatedly swinging the branch at her head, caving her skull in.

Tears streak down his face as he bashes her head in, crushing her skull into the earth. Brain matter spills out her ears and through the back of her skull as it cracks open like an egg. Still, he swings, the branch breaking in his hands when I grab him, hauling him back with my arm across his chest.

He screams, brandishing the broken branch, and I look down at Ester. Her head is crushed under his blows and no longer distinguishable to the eye. “Enough Peter.” I rasp. “She’s dead, you’ve killed her,” I tell him, and he breathes heavily, taking in her remains. He drops the branch, catching his breath.

“Where is Azalea? Where is your sister?” I gasp, and Peter looks up at me over his shoulder.

“With the others. I will take you,” he tells me as he points toward the castle, and he runs ahead while I stagger, trying to keep up with him. I can hear fighting and the chaos of war.

Peter runs up the incline as more children rush down the hill with staff. I see Clarice standing at the top when she suddenly screams, making my heart splutter in my chest, and adrenaline fuels me to move faster.

I slip on the wet grass, coming up behind her to see Azalea stop, and Trey screams out for her at that exact second. I track her movements to see her go after Logan, who is walking into the line of fire and in the wrong direction. My eyes widen in horror, and my heart pumps erratically.

A gasp escapes me when I see Azalea run directly into the path of the hunters to retrieve him. It feels like everything slows down, time almost stopping for a few fateful moments. Or maybe I think it does as I watch my mate risk her life to save the boy.

Trey shoves Tyson into Clarice's arms and runs after her just as I regain my footing on the slippery slope when Abbie screams out to her. Azalea lifts her head and looks at Abbie just as Abbie's body collides with Azalea's, her arms locking around her in a hug, and at the last second, Abbie pivots. That's when I notice the hunter with his gun aimed directly at her.

As the echoes of the gunshot tear through the air, a heart-stopping silence falls. I see Abbie's body jolt against Azalea, their forms entwined. Time slows, almost to a halt, as the dreadful reality unfolds before my eyes.

Azalea's face, a mask of raw, unfiltered horror, twists in agony as she clutches Abbie closer. Her scream—a soul-shattering wail—cuts through the chaos, slicing into the marrow of my bones. It's a sound that etches itself into the core of my being, a haunting scream that makes my entire body cold as if bitten by frost.

The profound pain that erupts through our bond is glacial, that seizes my heart and squeezes mercilessly. It's as if Azalea's anguished spirit reaches through the bond, clutching my soul, shredding it with her grief. At that moment, my own heart feels scorched, incinerated within my chest by the ferocity of her despair.

Clutching my chest, I can barely keep my balance as I stagger down the hill, each

step heavy, drawn toward Azalea's grieving figure. She cradles Abbie's limp form, an image of devastating loss painted against the chaotic backdrop of battle. Azalea's cries pierce the air again, a broken, haunted melody of utter devastation.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

“Abbie! No!” Her scream booms and cracks through the air like thunder, her agony doesn’t just scream, it erupts something from within her, knocking me on my ass. Sitting up, I find everyone shaken, sitting up like they too felt the agony through my bond with her.

Gannon’s howl rips through the sky, a sound of such profound loss that it mirrors the void opening inside me from Azalea. Tyson, his little face streaked with tears, breaks from Clarice’s grasp, his cries for his mother adding to the chorus of heartbreak.

Trey tackles the hunter just as another shot fires, a near miss that sends a shiver down my spine. But all I can focus on is Azalea, her voice ragged as she rocks back and forth, clutching Abbie to her chest.

“Abbie! Abbie!” she screams into the void, her voice nothing but raw agony. She pleads, begs, her words a mantra of despair. “You promised, you promised. More than my life, Abbie, more than my life!” she wails.

Her cries don’t just break the silence; they shatter it, sending shards scattering into the hearts of all who hear her. This isn’t just grief; it’s a soul being torn to pieces, a vivid, visceral loss so intense that it threatens to consume everything in its wake. It’s as if her soul is dying with her. Just then, I notice the Eclipsarian nestled between her cleavage blink, catching on the light, making me look up. But there is no sun. My brows furrow, goosebumps lacing my skin from the cold void eating away at my insides.

Hunters lay strewn across the ground, most of them dead as my guards and the Landeena guards take out the last of them on the hill. Yet I can see more are coming

up from the river and from around the sides of the castle. We are severely outnumbered, and all I can think is I need to get to Azalea, yet she isn't moving, and isn't letting her go, she just stops as if a part of her has died along with Abbie.

Logan escapes from in between Azalea and Abbie, running to Clarice as Azalea rocks back and forth on the ground with Abbie clutched in her arms. "More than my life! More than my life!" she screams, her fingers tangling in Abbie's hair, as if saying it loud enough will bring her back.

Gannon, reaching her, falls to his knees, clutching his dead mate in his arms, forgetting the war going on around us. I amlost in the tragedy when I feel a blade slice down my back, forcing my attention back to the fight. I am forced to fight my way to them as I spin to find a hunter has come at me from the side, his dagger embedded in my side. I pull it free, my claws sinking into the side of his neck as I slash at him.

Trey moves alongside me as hunters suddenly come from everywhere. From up over the hills, out of the forest, and spewing out from the castle, they just keep coming. Even those who had run for safety in the bunkers are now spewing back onto the battleground as hunters chase them back toward us.

The Landeena guards and my guards form a circle around our Queen. Clarice flees with the kids, and Peter barely makes it past our circle of defense that offers little safety as all the guards move to cover their Queen.

Guns are drawn and aimed at my body, my back becoming a target as they unleash on us. I groan as a bullet hits me in my side, then my stomach, making me clutch it. Pain ricochets through me, and I stagger as I keep fighting. Nothing else matters, only Azalea does.

Another bullet pierces through my shoulder when I hear her scream as she feels my

pain. The ground shakes, and I am brought to my knees, my lungs wheezing for breath. Everyone pauses at the tremor in the ground, but I hear no explosion, which has me looking around nervously when Crux's booming voice echoes through smoke and dust as they surround us. This day will always be remembered as the day the Valkyrie Kingdom fell. The day the hunters took the Lycania Kingdoms down.

We are circled entirely as Crux steps out of the shadows and smoke and onto the battlefield. His smug smile of triumph sears into me. He is a traitor to his own kind. A betrayer to all.

Chapter

Fifty

AZALEA

She is gone. And I watch in horror as Gannon steals her from me, clutching her to his chest. I feel dead. Like I took my last breath when she did, like all life has left me. She died for me, and I feel completely and utterly numb until I hear his voice slice through the air as it mocks me. But it is his slow, methodical clap that makes me see red as I lift my head to see I am circled by the Landeena and Valkyrie Guards, shielding me instead of fighting.

My eyes scan the destruction to find Kyson getting to his feet not far from me. The sight of my mate makes my heart beat faster when Crux's voice brings me back to my surroundings.

Crux took Abbie from me. He won't take my mate too. "I have waited for this day since I learned of your birth," Crux laughs. My blood boils and sizzles, my skin warming with rage.

“The almighty Landeenas finally fall. The Landeena Kingdom should have been mine! He promised it to me! I took down my own mother’s Kingdom for it!” he yells as everyone halts under his voice. The hunters’ guns trained on us. They know we are cornered and there is no way out for us.

That fucking name! That fucking name everyone is obsessed with! The Landeena name means nothing to me. I know the sins that name carries. The heartache bestowed upon the Kingdoms from it, and the reign of terror it has caused.

Right now, I can feel the blood of that name burn through me along with my mothers, feel it in my toes as they tingle along with my rage. Yet, I am not just Landeena. My father’s name brings nothing but shame to me. I no longer want it. Crux can have it. That name has taken more from me than anything else.

Yet as I watch Gannon clutch my sister’s dead body in his arms and Liam tries to pry Abbie free of him, it angers me more. Gannon fights him, trying to draw her nearer, when Liam punches him and knocks him back, his hands replacing Gannon’s as he brings his hand down on her chest, pumping her heart as if he can save her and bring her back to us. Turning my head and seeing my mate on his knees makes pure, white-hot rage sliver through me. The ground vibrates beneath me, and I can feel its energy, breathing life into me like it is part of me.

“Your father lied to me, then took Tatiana as his Queen! His enemy! He took her as his Queen and birthed her spawn! It was never yours, Azalea. Your father promised it to me. The Landeena name was to be mine!” Crux roars in anger.

“You can have the fucking name!” I scream in anger as I rise to my feet. My guard tenses and takes protective stances, encircling me, but I want to see the face of the man who thinks he will be our downfall. I want to witness the life drain from his eyes when I take it from him.



“Stand down!” I scream at my guard when I see them move to protect me. My command rings out loud, my people drop to their knees, and Crux laughs, clapping his hands slowly as he strolls closer. Kyson’s fear bleeds into me, and I can feel his eyes on me, his heart beating in his chest in sync with mine as I stare down Crux, who smiles sadistically.

“Landeenas used to be Gods! The Landeenas were feared among the Lycania Kingdoms, and your father brought shame to the name! But not anymore. His reign ends here, today, with you, just like the Azures. You’re all that’s left,” Crux calls out to me.

He is right because I can feel their blood singing in my veins, feel the power that has awoken and now writhes through me, strong like a flexing muscle. He is right. I am Landeena and Azure by blood, but that is not all.

“You’re wrong. The Landeenas and Azures may be dead,” I tell him.

“Almost,” Crux sneers, pointing to me. I laugh, the sound wicked as the ground beneath my feet begins to shake, my aura pressing out, and I feel its strength as it wraps around my people like a shield.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

“But I am not a Landeena or Azure,” I tell him, and his laugh cuts off to hear what I have to say.

“I AM VALKYRIE!” Stepping out of the circle my guard has created around me, I glare at Crux as the earth splits and cracks beneath my feet.

“And you shall not take my Kingdom!”

Chapter

Fifty-One

KYSON

Power rolls off Azalea in seismic waves, forcing our guard to their knees. Standing defiant against Crux, her eyes blaze with fury, glowing that remarkable Azure blue, neon almost as I see her fingers twitch, catch a glimmer of the cerulean blue, the energy of the Eclipsarian bleed through her very essence, staining her. I can feel it running through the bond, healing me, healing her guard. She shivers, the shudder physical, as power zaps up her spine, and she straightens with a wicked laugh.

“But I am not a Landeena or Azure.” Azalea steps out of the protective circle of our guard, and my heart sputters as she exposes herself further. “I AM VALKYRIE!” she roars, and the pure anger behind those words cracks the earth.

“And you shall not take my Kingdom!” Her roar slices through the tense air, an eruption of volcanic anger that scorches the very atmosphere. I can almost taste the

fear emanating from the hunters; it's a thick, acrid stench as their weapons discharge in desperation. Bullets streak through the sky, only to halt and clatter harmlessly against an invisible shield she conjures with a mere lift of her hands.

Beneath us, the ground heaves and splits, a great chasm severing the battlefield, as if the earth itself sides with her wrath. Vines, thick and unyielding, burst forth, ensnaring the hunters and dragging them screaming into the abyss of the craters she has created. Her rage ignites the sky, fire sweeping across the sky, scorching the earth to a charred wasteland—yet, under her protective aura, we remain unscathed.

Crux's complexion pales, a stark contrast to the fury he now faces before him. His attempt at conquest has failed catastrophically; he has not subdued her—he has unleashed her. Tonight, though a kingdom may fall to ashes, from its remnants rises the Empress of Lycania, forged from the fierce flames of her wrath.

Darkness descends as she summons the storm clouds, her power manifesting as a storm of raw, primal force. Lightning forks down, carving scars into the earth, while thunder drowns out the cries of those they unleash on. Our castle, once a fortress of stone and legacy, shatters under the onslaught, its ruins deflected by her indomitable shield.

The bond between us thrums with her energy, healing and invigorating me. Her arms, raised high, command the winds which howl and whip around us. Her pain, the echo of every loss, every haunting memory she has endured, and every wraith that has ever touched her, fuels a war cry that resounds across the battleground.

The power spoken of in the ancient texts—the divine might of the Landeenas and Azures—unfurls before me. The air itself wails with the torment of her unleashed soul, obliterating all in its devastating path. Trees, stones, and bones are ground to dust, the landscape flattened as if by the wrath of the moon goddess herself.

As quickly as it unleashed, her cataclysm subsides. The silence in its wake is so profound, it's as if the world pauses, catching its breath. Her protective shield dissolves, shattering like glass, and the weight of her actions, and her losses, crashing down on her.

I rush to her side, catching her as her strength wanes. Our kingdom lies in ruins around us, the forest a mere memory, our enemies nothing but blood and ash fertilizing the soil. Her power, a display of divine wrath and mourning, leaves us standing in her ruin.

I clutch her to me, wishing I could take her pain away. Her heartbreak is palpable, a fissure that threatens to consume her. As one dynasty crumbles, but another awakens.

“I AM VALKYRIE!” she had declared.

And so she is.

Empress of Lycania.

The Valkyrie Empress.

AZALEA

Gannon wails as Liam attempts to revive Abbie, bringing me to my knees. My head drops into my hands, covering my face as I sob, collapsing beside them just as Kyson's arms catch me. How can the Moon Goddess be so cruel?

She grants me the power of the first Lycans, yet she robs me of my sister, leaving no way to mend it. Abbie deserves the kindness, loyalty, and love Gannon offers. After all she has endured and survived, it feels like the cruelest slap in the face—a betrayal to lose someone so pure.

Dustin tries to pull Liam away from her, but Liam shoves him back.

“Come on, Abbie,” Liam growls furiously. Dustin and Trey grab him, pulling him off, just as Gannon snatches her and holds her tighter.

“She’s gone. She’s gone. There’s nothing you can do,” Dustin tells Liam, but Liam shakes his head, reaching for her again.

“No! I’ve been feeding her my blood,” Liam snarls, tossing Dustin aside, and my head lifts at his words. No sooner does the words leave his lips than we hear her gasp.

I blink, unable to believe my eyes, while Gannon rocks back and forth, wailing loudly at his lost love. Her eyes open, dazedly obsidian, as her hand rises and clutches Gannon’s arm, making him jump as she sucks in a breath and her eyes return to their emerald color, life returning to her deathly pale skin.

“Abbie?” I whisper, choking on my sob, as her hand moves to Gannon’s hair.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

“Abbie!” I scream, and Gannon jumps at the feel of her hand in his hair as he lifts his head. Liam sags against Dustin, collapsing between his legs as he breathes heavily.

“I told you, brother, I wouldn’t let you lose her again,” Liam breathes heavily, catching his breath.

My chest warms as sparks of the bond flood me along with relief, and I lean against my King as Clarice releases Tyson, who crashes against his mother and father, crying and clutching them. Gannon crushes them against him as he holds on.

We have survived, yet our home has not, as I look around at what I have done. The destruction I have caused, and the carnage left behind. But we are alive, we are not dead, and that is what matters. The rest we can figure out.

“More than my life,” I breathe out in relief.

“More than my life,” everyone echoes in a chorus, repeating my words.

“More than my life,” Kyson whispers next to my ear.

Kyson’s hand finds mine; his touch is grounding, a reminder that this isn’t some nightmare that I truly destroyed this place.

“We need to go home,” I murmur, the words slicing through the quiet like a knife. “To Landeena.” Home—where all this began and where we must return to rebuild our lives.

Kyson nods, his gaze sweeping over the remnants of the castle. “First, we salvage what we can here. There’s much to be done,” he sighs heavily, looking around at our guards, who are already moving about the destruction, ensuring the hunters are dead and those that miraculously survived are taken care of.

The task is monumental. We mobilize swiftly, our people rallying despite their grief and shock at everything that has happened; they grieve the people we lost and their homes that are no more. The guards, once poised to protect, start digging through debris, salvaging pieces of our past. Every stone turned, and every item saved, feels like a small victory against the desolation of this place.

Clarice organizes a team to sift through the ruins for belongings and relics of the royal archives. These pieces of our history are more than mere objects; they are glimmers of a past that will inspire our future. The children help, too, their small hands picking up less dangerous pieces, their innocence a stark contrast to the surrounding destruction we now stand in.

As we work, I can’t help but feel the weight of every life affected by this catastrophe. The responsibility of my power becomes a tangible thing, heavy and overwhelming. Yet, as I watch our people come together, there is a budding sense of unity and strength. We are broken, yes, but not defeated.

In the midst of our efforts, a young guard approaches, a dusty book in his hands. “Your Majesty,” he bows slightly, offering the book to me. It’s an old ledger from the castle’s library, miraculously unscathed. I flip through the pages, barely recognizing the words that I still struggle to read.

“Anything else?” I ask, a small smile tugging at my lips despite the sorrow eating at me. The guard nods, just as I hear Kyson gasp as he pulls out more and more books, the books Cedric gave me and the ones Kyson would read to me. “How in the world did these survive?” Kyson marvels.

By evening, the ground where the castle once stood is cleared of bodies and the most hazardous debris. We set up camp in the cleared area, the night sky open above us. The stars are particularly bright, their light burning brilliantly to the darkness of the past day.

Kyson and I stand together, watching our people settle. “We’ll rebuild, love. Everything.”

“I know, but I took their homes from them,” I murmur.

“No, you gave them a reason to hope and not to live fearing the hunters. Tomorrow, we will start the journey back to Landeena. We’ll rebuild there, where it all began. It’s time to bring your people home.”

“Our people,” I tell him as Trey wanders up the hill toward me, a plate of food in his hands.

Later that night, as I lie beside Kyson under the vast expanse of the night sky, I feel a mix of dread and excitement. Landeena awaits with its own set of challenges and ghosts. But for now, the quiet whispers of the night promise not just an end but a beginning. A new chapter. As I drift to sleep, the echoes of our past mingle with the dreams of what the future will be.

Chapter

Fifty-Two

LIAM

A couple of days later.



They say luck comes in threes, and I am beginning to believe that old superstition as I sift through the rubble. Brick after brick, rock after rock, and dust... Well, you get the picture. Anyway, I am knee-deep in shit! Not literal shit, but you know, kind of metaphorical ... Aaah, nope! I am pretty sure that may have been an actual turd and not a rock that time. I toss it over my shoulder, hearing a grunt before nearly squealing with joy when I find my trusty apron.

I clutch it, making sure it is in one piece. It has a small burn hole, but never mind that, it adds character!

“Oh please, no. Of all the things to survive. That thing should have been the first to burn,” Dustin groans behind me. I narrow my eyes at him; what a vile thing to wish for! Does he not know how hard I worked to get it smelling like barbecued death and marinated skin jerky?

“That is not coming with us!” Dustin declares. That’s what he thinks!

“I think I might wear it when we get married one day,” I tell him, and he scrunches up his face.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:46 am*

“You will do no such thing!” he snarls, yet I am caught on the fact he didn’t deny he is going to marry me.

“It’s a piece of art! See this stain right here?” I ask, pointing to it.

“That is an impression of a face! Peeled it clean off. I think my butterfly impression is rather good; you can even see his bulbous nose,” I tell Dustin, and he shakes his head.

“There is something wrong with you, you know that, right?” he says, sifting through the rubble.

“You just don’t know how to appreciate art,” I tell him, shaking my head as I toss my apron over my shoulder and move a piece of wall from one of the chimneys. I nearly wet my pants with excitement; maybe I did a little. What can I say? I am old, and I’m allowed to pee a little. The old pipes aren’t what they once were. Sometimes, they leak.

But what I discover makes me realize that the old superstition is, in fact, true; I knew luck came in threes! I never doubted it for a second, as I stare down at Crux. His mangled body is all crooked, his arm twisted the wrong way. He coughs, and I quickly lift my head, looking around. Dustin has his back to me, which is the best view. Especially bent over something with my dick in... I’m getting off track, Frank, you dirty bastard.

Anywho, Dusty Poo is salvaging what he can, so that means I can sneak off with my gift from the Goddess. Peering around, everyone else is too distracted as they search

for junk while I've found treasure. Crux coughs, and I quickly slap a hand over his mouth, not wanting to alert the others that somehow, by the grace of the Goddess, this fucker was gifted an extra life. And gifted to meeeeeeee!

I start digging him out when I open the mindlink, looking for Gannon, who is over the far side with Abbie and Tyson. He hasn't left her side since she returned to us, though that sire bond I will have to do something about. Like I knew the risk, and all when I was secretly feeding her my blood, but man I didn't think she would be so clingy.

She made Gannon promise not to try to change her again after his failed attempt. However, I made no such promises to her. And I knew Gannon was worried about her attempting suicide again. So I made sure that if she tried again, this time, she would have my blood in my system, so she would change. I may not have made a promise to her, but I did make a promise to my brother to always have his back. I think he scared her when his blood healed her, burned the wolfsbane right out of her system, and he panicked, so he tried to drown her to force the change.

It was just sheer luck that it worked. Since she already had her wolf, changing her into a Lycan made it trickier. Sometimes, they will heal too quickly. And it is always the brink of death, along with Lycan blood and venom in their system, that forces the change. Completely dead, they are dead, you need to make sure to keep the heart beating. But it's that dangerous, brinking on death's edge that forces the gene mutation. This is why, when changing someone, we usually need permission from the King.

Sometimes, it doesn't go as planned, and intervention is needed, or resuscitation can take a few goes for the gene to kick in. Regardless, by my first stroke of good luck, it damn well worked! Although, the sire bond is a bitch. Mainly because I don't want the girl looking at me all goo, goo-eyed. No, those eyes are reserved for my brother and my brother only. And my eyes are reserved for my Dusty Poo.

And now the Goddess granted me the best prize and a third stroke of luck for my good deeds!

‘Psst,’ I hiss at Gannon, and I see his head turn looking for me.

‘Why are you whispering? It’s a mindlink; no one can hear you but me,’ he says, and I wave my arms in the air so he can find me. He nods and lifts his arms as if to say, ‘What?’ I wave for him to come to me, but he shakes his head.

‘Get here now! I need you to help me haul the body off!’ I hiss at him through the mindlink.

‘Huh?’

‘I want to make a kebab out of him. You know, up the bum.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Gannon snaps at me, and I roll my eyes at his tone.

‘Come here, and I will share him with ya,’ I tell him.

“Huh?”

‘You know, a head on a stick, a chicken stick or kebab. Quick before anyone notices, and they ruin my fun!’ I tell him. Crux groans, and I press my foot on his windpipe to shut him up while waving my arms for Gannon to come help me.

‘I swear if you are making me walk over there to show me something stupid or to toss another rock at me, I will fuck you up!’ he growls.

I wait for him to come to me while chatting animatedly with Dustin, who still hasn’t returned to see my treasure. And oh, what precious treasure it is! I am already

picturing ways to torture him that has my cock straining in my pants with my excitement. I wonder if Dustin would be down to fuck over his dead carcass?

I shake that thought away; he definitely won't be! Maybe he will let me fuck him while I wear his skin as a suit? I ponder that before deciding against it. Skewering him would be enough. Perhaps I can skewer him while Dusty skewers me. My cock twitches at the thought, only to see Gannon coming toward me, and I jiggle on the spot with excitement.

"What is it? For real? That smelly old thing survived, but my fireproof safe got destroyed? What the actual fuck!" Gannon curses seeing my apron.

"That is not all that survived," I whisper, nodding for him to look over the rubble at my feet. He peers over before looking around, a smirk on his face.

"What do you want to do with him?" he asks casually. He glances around to make sure no one is looking. This is one thing I love about Gannon; he loves the depraved stuff just as much as I do!

That is why this man is my best friend and brother! Plus, there is nothing hotter than watching another man with a knife, elbow-deep in innards covered in blood. I have jerked the old gherkin one too many times at the sight of Gannon carving up somebody, although he gets a bit weirded out when I do it in front of him. He understands and gets me because he is just as fucked in the head as me. He gets me and my need for sadistic, wicked torture.

There is also no better feeling than watching a grown man shit his pants because he knows he is looking death in the face. Or how their fear smells like burnt hair. The way the light fades from their eyes as they take their last breath. It makes me all tingly and hard just thinking about it!

“Help me get him to the bunker,” I tell him.

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“Hey, Dustin, can you please go sit with Abbie and Tyson for me?” Gannon calls out. Dustin lifts his head from sifting through all the crap holding a broken cup he found, and he thinks I am sentimental about my apron? What the fuck does he want with a broken cup? He can’t drink out of it. Half the side is missing!

Dustin nods before climbing over the crap to walk to the other side where Abbie and Tyson are with the King and Queen, taking his broken cup with him. At least my apron is functional! If he’s taking that thing with us, my apron is definitely coming!

Gannon and I start digging the bastard out, and he groans when Gannon accidentally steps on his busted leg.

“He’s going to scream when we pull him off that rebar,” Gannon says as we examine the bar penetrating his gut.

I glance around, trying to find something to muffle him, before taking my shoe off and removing my sweaty sock. “What pretty lips? Now open up wide!” I snarl, and he coughs.

“Kill me!” he rasps out.

“Not until we get you to the bunker,” I tell him, jamming the filthy sock in his mouth and slipping my boot back on. With another glance around, we quickly drag him out.

“You grab the...” I look down, trying to find a way to grab him so that we can get a good grip on him for a quick getaway, but one leg is bent awkwardly. “You get the ass, and I will get the head,” I tell him.

“You get the ass! You’re the ass man, not me!” Gannon says.

“Fine! I will get the ass, just hurry up before someone sees us!” I tell him, and we struggle for a few seconds. Crux mumbles incoherently in pain before we take off for the old trail behind the garden under the clotheslines. As we reach the forest edge, we see Peter, and we both stop dead in our tracks, caught red-handed with our new plaything. Both of us eye him while I consider whether I will have to julienne his ass.

“I saw nothing,” he says, strolling away and scooping an apple off the ground. Good boy.

“Quick!” I hiss, and we rush for the safety of the trees.

Thank you, almighty Moon Goddess, for this blessing! I think to myself as I laugh. This shall be fun! Coming up one Crux kebab!

“Hopefully, he tastes better than the Doyle steaks. He was a bit chewy,” I tell Gannon, and he chuckles.

He thinks I am joking, but a chef must always taste his masterpiece. It was just a little nibble, and he tasted like shit; I think I over-marinated him.

We get Crux down to the bunker, placing him in a section that is no longer in use due to safety reasons. It is even older than Kyson’s father. We strap the bastard down on a stone slab, re-breaking his distorted limbs. His screams are muffled by his gag. I pull out a set of my new tools. I am excited to put them to use, giggling to myself finally.

“What the hell do you have over there, Liam? Don’t think I didn’t hear you squeal like a schoolgirl meeting her crush.”

I spin around with my new toys in hand. Gannon’s brow knit together. Not sure what



to make of it, I click my tongue in annoyance at his ignorance of my new gems of torture. “It’s a pear of anguish, you ninny!”

“Since this fucker liked to make his profits trafficking and prostituting children, why not send him out with a bang-up his ass? I have one for his mouth, too. It came as a set.” I clap my hands anticipating my fun.

I strip down, putting my apron on. Just our luck, I find some of the medieval torture devices while securing the tunnels leading to the bunkers. Gannon helps put Crux’s knees in the splitter after we cut him free from his clothes while I hum to myself. Crux tries in vain to loosen his restraints. Gannon pops some wolfsbane under his gag before replacing it with the pear, twisting it to fit.

“Ah ah ah, Crux. Don’t think for a second I have forgotten about your other hole. Promise I’ll even spit on it for you,” I tell him, giving him a wink. I shove it up his turd cutter, causing his muffled scream to vibrate around the pear occupying his mouth.

An hour later, this turd is still trying to hang on to his wretched life. “Liam, we need to hurry up. Abbie is going to come looking for me soon.”

“Fine, let me get my skewers. His pecker is barely hanging on anyhow. Sausage kabobs, it is then,” I huff, rolling my eyes at his party-pooing mood.

The shock of his dick now at the tip of my skewer is his breaking point. We listen as his heart sputters to a halt, and my face lights up like a kid on Christmas at my handy work. Though I am upset, I can’t play a little longer.

Leaving him there, we make our way back to the ruins of the castle. Abbie looks over at us and exhales. “I have been looking for you,” she tells Gannon, quickly moving to his side.

“For real, that thing survived?” she asks, glaring at my apron.

“What does everyone have against my poor apron? It has done nothing to you,” I tell her. She pulls a face at me.

“It’s alright, I will get you one just like it, blood and all,” I tell her.

“I think I will pass,” she tells me before staring at me dazedly. Fuck, she is definitely sired to me. Gannon waves a hand in front of her face, and she shakes her head and snaps out of it. Gannon growls at her, gawking, tugging her closer.

‘I’m gonna have to take care of that,’ Gannon mindlinks me, and I nod. Though sires are difficult to break, it requires him feeding her copious amounts of his blood to rid hers of mine or knocking her up, which I say he’ll prefer doing to her. That always seems to remove sire bonds for some reason. No one knows why, and I can only guess, but for some reason, it works.

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Abbie doesn't love me; she knows that, not in that sense anyway, and it is the first thing we explained to her when Gannon started to pick up on it a few days ago.

"Ready to go?" Dustin says, coming over to us, and I nod to him. Dustin knows about the strange sire, and he glances at Abbie. Not with jealousy, just worry about Gannon. Yet, he needs not worry. Gannon will take care of it, and she will be just fine.

"Yeah, let's go," I tell him, tossing my arm over Dustin's shoulder, when I hear a voice behind me, making me stop.

"Abbie, are you okay?" Gannon asks, and I peer over at them; her eyes are at the forest edge, though she startles, looking up at Gannon.

"Sorry, I thought I saw something," Abbie says, and I peer around, not seeing anything. Dustin and I walk ahead a little.

"Saw what?" Gannon asks her.

"Nothing, I am being silly; my mind is playing tricks on me," she laughs nervously.

"Well, if it's silly, you have no issues telling me then," Gannon quips, and she sighs heavily.

"Abbie?" Gannon asks, and this time, Dustin stops, peering back at her.

"Must it be the sire bond thing?" Dustin suggests, but her next words sent my blood cold.

“It’s nothing; it’s impossible, and you’ll laugh,” she says, and Gannon gives her a stern look. “I thought I saw...” she shakes her head and sucks in a breath. “I thought I saw my grandmother,” she laughs, rubbing her temples. Gannon tugs her closer.

“Everything going on, it’s normal to see things,” he tells her.

“I know it’s impossible...” Her words turn to background noise as my eyes nervously scan the forest. But that’s the thing, it’s not impossible. I know because when I went back to bury Vivian’s body, she wasn’t there. I swallow thickly when Gannon drops his hand on my shoulder.

“Are you alright, brother?” he asks, and I force a smile on my face.

“Just thinking about our skewered friend,” I chuckle, and Dustin peers up at me.

“What’s going on?” Dustin asks as we head toward where the camp is set up.

“Nothing I can’t handle,” I answer.

Chapter

Fifty-Three

DAMIAN

My grip on the steering wheel tightens as the gates of Silvershadow Pack come into view. My jaw is set, determination and apprehension etching across my features. The road trip has been tense, mainly because we are hoping Larkin is right and that Paige is, in fact, alive. In the back seat, Kyson and Azalea talk in hushed tones, their concern palpable in the cramped space of the SUV like a heavy fog. Liam and Dustin are in another vehicle. We didn’t tell Tandi where we were going today; I didn’t want

to get her hopes up, so she and Hunter are with Abbie and Gannon. Gannon doesn't want to risk opening old wounds for Abbie by bringing her back here, so they continue on the trip to Landeena, believing we are just making a pit stop.

“We’re almost there,” Kyson announces, his voice steady but laced with a cautious undertone that sends a chill down my spine.

“Thanks for the reminder,” I mutter, trying to push away the knot of anxiety in my stomach. I can’t help but wonder what we’ll find at the end of this road - if we’ve come all this way just to face more disappointment. But I shake off those thoughts; I have to believe that we’ll find answers here, that we’ll find Paige.

“Hey, Damian,” Azalea says softly from the back seat, her voice barely audible above the hum of the engine. “No matter what happens, Tandi will be okay.” I nod my head, praying she is right.

As we approach the gates, I take a deep breath, steeling myself for whatever comes next. We’ve come too far to back down now. And if there’s even the slightest chance we can bring Paige home, it’s worth coming here, but if she is dead, Brock will meet his maker, too.

We through the gates, noticing the guards’ eyes studying us, their scrutiny palpable even from behind the windshield. I force a smile and nod in their direction. The car glides forward, bringing the packhouse and the town square into view. Towering pines loom over the property, casting eerie shadows across the dying lawn. Mist curls around the house, making it appear as though it is floating on a cloud. Though I must admit, the place looks a lot better now that Katrina is running the pack.

As we pull up to the packhouse, my heart hammers in my chest. This is it—the moment of truth. I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself.

“Let’s do this,” I murmur, pushing open the car door and stepping out onto the gravel driveway. Kyson follows, and I see Dustin and Liam climb out of their car and lean against it, watching our surroundings. My boots crunch underfoot as I approach the door.

“Damian,” Azalea calls out softly, her voice laced with concern. “Call out if you need me.”

I glance back at her, offering a small smile despite the storm raging inside me. “I will,” I promise, turning my attention to the front door before us.

“Ready?” Kyson asks.

“Ready,” I confirm, my voice barely above a whisper.

I approach the entrance, trying to clear my thoughts. What if Paige isn’t here? Or worse, what if she is, but we can’t save her? No, I can’t afford to think like that. We’ve come too far to give up now.

I lift my hand to knock, but it opens before I have the chance.

“Damian,” comes a sneering voice from within. Alpha Brock stands in the doorway, looking out of it, the smell of alcohol heavy on his breath. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I’ve come to talk about Paige,” I answer by shoving into his house. He stumbles as I let myself in.

“Paige?” He feigns ignorance, crossing his arms over his chest. “Who?”

“Paige. Tandi’s daughter.” I refuse to let him play games with me. “I know she’s here, Brock. And I want her back.”

“I have no idea who this Tandi is or who Paige is,” Brock sneers while Kyson leans against the door frame. He sighs heavily, but I shake my head at him. I don’t want him barging in if the girl is here. This Alpha may be a piece of shit, but he is Paige’s father, and I don’t want to scare her unless absolutely necessary.

“Enough of your lies, Brock.” My voice comes out like ice, and I can’t help the anger that simmers beneath my skin. “Where is Paige?”

“I told you,” he says. “I have no idea who you’re talking about.”

I’ve had enough. In one swift motion, I grab his collar and drag him out onto the front porch for everyone to see. My fists fly, connecting with his face again and again as I demand answers. The scent of blood fills my nostrils, but it only fuels my rage as he stumbles down the steps, tripping over his own feet.

“Where is she?” I roar, punctuating each word with a punch. Alpha Brock remains defiant, refusing to give up any information.

“Damian!” I hear Azalea call from the car. She steps out, her aura shimmering brilliantly around her. She’s never looked more powerful, and I am honored to have her as my Queen. And right now, she looks every bit like the Queen she is.

“Looks like you’re fucked now,” I laugh as she approaches. I step back, leaving a battered and bloody Alpha Brock on the ground.

“Tell us where Paige is, or suffer the consequences,” Azalea warns, her voice steady and confident.

Brock glares at her, his pride wounded, but still unwilling to yield. I can feel the tension in the air, thick and suffocating, as the standoff continues.

The scent of fear permeates the air as Azalea’s command rolls over her old alpha effortlessly. Brock stammers, forced lower to the ground under the pressure of it.

“Where is Katrina?” Azalea asks Alpha Brock, her voice cold and unforgiving.



“Away picking up supplies,” Alpha Dean answers for Brock, coming out to stand on the porch, his eyes darting between his son and Azalea. She nods, acknowledging his answer, but her focus remains on Brock.

“Now, let’s try this again. Where is Paige?” she muses, her words laced with a deadly calm.

Brock grits his teeth, fighting against her command. His stubbornness only lasts a moment before he pisses himself, the dark stain spreading across his pants. I can’t help but smirk at his humiliation.

Azalea laughs, the sound chilling and filled with power. “I’m not even using my full command yet; that’s just a taste. Did you know the Landeena command can kill? How about I start with your father?”

As if on cue, Alpha Dean drops to his knees, gasping and clutching his chest. He looks up at Azalea, pleading for mercy, but she remains unmoved.

“Where is Paige?” she asks again, her voice unwavering. Brock grits his teeth, and Azalea sighs heavily before Alpha Dean starts wailing and thrashing on the ground.

“Just fucking tell her Brock!” Alpha Dean screams.

“Alright!” Brock panics, his voice cracking under the pressure. “She’s next door with my mother.”

“Thank you,” Azalea replies, releasing her grip on both alphas. She turns to me, a victorious glint in her eyes. “Let’s go find Paige.”

With renewed hope, we make our way next door only to find Alpha Dean’s wife, who instantly rushes out to run to her husband. As we enter and climb the stairs, I can’t

help but think about the power Azalea wields and how it changes everything. I wonder what it would be like to have such a gift, but then I remember the responsibility that comes with it.

We approach a door with the name Paige written in block letters, the door covered in butterflies.

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The sunlit room feels like a world apart from the tense confrontation that had just unfolded. My heart races as I step inside, the floorboards creaking beneath my feet, and the little girl startles, rushing to hide under her bed.

“Hello,” I say softly, trying not to startle the little girl with curly brown hair who scrambles beneath her pink frilly bed; at least, she seems to be looked after. Her big blue eyes flicker up to meet mine as I crouch next to the bed and lift the blanket, curiosity, and wariness swimming in their depths.

“I won’t hurt you,” I tell her.

“Who are you?” she replies hesitantly, clutching a block to her chest as if it could protect her from any harm.

“May I sit down?” I ask gently, gesturing towards the wooden floor beside her. She nods, and I lower myself down, maintaining a safe distance between us. “I’m Damian,” I introduce myself.

“Paige,” she whispers, her voice barely audible.

“Nice to meet you, Paige.” I try to keep the conversation light, hoping to ease her worries. “You have a nice room here.”

“Thank you,” she says, her grip on the block relaxing slightly.

I reach into my jacket, pulling out a photograph of Tandi. “Do you know who this is?” I ask gently, showing her the picture.

Her eyes widen, and she nods. “Mommy,” she breathes out, her expression a mixture of hope and disbelief. She scrambles out from under the bed and rushes to her nightstand. Seemingly forgetting the stranger in the room, she comes over, holding out a picture. I take it, and she snatches the photo I have from between my fingers. “She looks different,” Paige murmurs.

“Your mommy misses you very much,” I tell her, my heart aching for the pain I know her mother has endured. “Would you like to go see her?”

Paige’s eyes dart to mine, and she seems unsure.

“Really?” Paige asks, her voice trembling slightly.

“Really,” I confirm, offering her a reassuring smile. “We’ll take you to her, I promise.”

“What about my Dad?” she asks, and that’s when Azalea speaks from behind me.

“Your father did a terrible thing, taking you from her.”

“Will he go to prison? Grammy said I couldn’t leave the house because if I am seen, people would take me away, and he would go to prison?” she asks, and Azalea smiles sadly.

“He did a bad thing, but I know your mother misses you,” Azalea tells her, and the little girl looks down at the photo in her hands and nods her head slowly.

“And you’ll take me to see my mommy?” she asks, and Azalea nods.

“Yes.”

The little girl looks at me.

“First, let’s gather your things, sweetheart.” I stand up and extend my hand for her to take. As she hesitates for a moment, I offer her a gentle smile and a nod, encouraging her to trust me.

Slowly, her tiny hand slides into mine, her grip surprisingly firm for such a small girl.

“You’re right here?” Azalea asks me, and I nod to her, letting her know she can go back to her mate. Together, Paige and I walk around the room, collecting her worn toys and threadbare clothes. Now and then, I catch her stealing glances at me, as if assessing whether I can be trusted.

“Damian?” she asks quietly, her voice barely audible.

“Yes, Paige?” I reply softly, kneeling to her level once more.

“Will... will Mommy be happy to see me?” There’s a vulnerable tremor to her words that breaks my heart.

“Of course she will be, sweetie,” I say. “She’s missed you every single day since you’ve been gone.”

“Promise?” She bites her lip, the weight of her longing evident in her expression, making me wonder if they ever let her outside at all; she is quite pale.

“Promise.”

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“Okay,” Paige says, a small but genuine smile finally gracing her lips. “Let’s go see Mommy.”

“Let’s go.” I squeeze her hand reassuringly, and together, we leave the room behind, ready to face. As we reach the car, I can see Kyson and Azalea waiting for us, their smiles warm and welcoming.

“Hey there, little one,” Kyson says as he leans against the side of the car. “You must be Paige.”

Paige nods shyly, gripping my hand just a little tighter. I lift her into my arms, feeling her small frame trembling with a mix of excitement and fear.

“Everything will be alright, Paige,” Azalea reassures, her voice soft and comforting. “You’re safe now.”

“Let’s get going, then,” Kyson suggests, opening the car door for me. As I settle Paige into the back seat, I fasten her seatbelt. Climbing into the driver’s seat, my eyes lingering on the little girl for a moment before I turn my attention to the road.

“Your mom’s going to be so happy to see you,” I tell her, my voice gentle. I can’t wait to see the look on Tandi’s face when she realizes her daughter is alive, and I have brought her home.

“Hey, Paige, want to play a game while we wait?” Azalea suggests, breaking through my thoughts.

“Okay,” Paige agrees hesitantly, her grip on the armrest relaxing a bit as she turns her attention to Azalea.

“Let’s play I Spy,” Azalea says with a smile. “I’ll go first. I spy something green.”

“Is it the trees?” Paige asks, her voice still timid but filled with a touch of excitement.

“Yup! Your turn,” Azalea encourages, and I can’t help but smile at the way she’s able to connect with the young girl.

When we are nearly there, I glance in the mirror, Paige is passed out, leaning against Azalea, who has also fallen asleep. “Are you okay?” Kyson asks, his voice hushed so as not to disturb them.

I nod, my grip on the steering wheel relaxing slightly as I allow myself to breathe. “Yeah, I am. Just... thinking about everything that’s happened.”

“Like what?” Kyson prods gently, knowing that sometimes Damian needs encouragement to share his thoughts.

“About how we found Paige and how she’s finally going to be reunited with her mother,” I admit, my voice tinged with wonder.

Kyson smiles and nods.

As the miles stretch behind us, my thoughts turn inward. I imagine Tandi’s face when she sees her daughter again, and I find myself filled with a sense of purpose stronger than ever before while also wondering what it will be like to see Tandi heavily pregnant carrying my child, one day, but for now, we have two children who will keep us busy which for now is enough for me.

“Almost there,” I murmur, more to myself than anyone else.

“Finally, my ass is going numb,” Kyson groans.

“I can’t wait to see the look on her face,” Azalea agrees with a yawn as she wakes, though her voice is filled with anticipation that matches mine.

## Epilogue

### AZALEA

#### One Month Later

We salvaged whatever we could. The thought of rebuilding led to the inevitable truth, a place that had become but a distant memory would now be our home. Where we will rebuild our lives and our Kingdom. Days we spent sifting through what was left of the castle. I still feel a little guilty that I destroyed the place, yet as Kyson told me, home is with our people, not in a physical place.

However, sifting through the wreckage that we once called home, we managed to save a few precious things. How they survived is beyond me.

A few of Kyson’s treasured books and Clarice’s favorite egg flip survived, too. Oh, and let’s not forget that dreaded apron Liam loves so much, the one that smells as bad as it looks. And of all the things to survive, I hoped that wasn’t one of them. But sure enough, it did, and his face had lit up like a kid on Christmas when he showed me. I have a funny feeling that his idea of a fabulous Christmas present involves blood and gore. And maybe more aprons.

Along with the knick-knacks we found was my father’s sword; the other was the jewelry box my mother gave me when I was a baby.



After moving here, Cedric and I started digging through old Landeena and Azure archives, looking for more information on the Eclipsarian. We learned that it is a broken piece of the sword and was used to create Lycan Bloodlines. The stone represented my mother's gifts, and the sword my father's. Brought together, they represented a sort of yin and yang, a constant balance, and created infinite power, yet in separate hands, they kept peace. One never overtakes the other, truth in the face of deceit and manipulation, love in the place of hate and war.

Cedric told me my father searched for the talisman, but it was rumored to be nothing more than myth and legend, and my mother told him the only thing she was gifted was the shield. The Eclipsarian was another of my mother's secrets. My father believed that it was with my mother, and he was right. And all along, it sat in a jewelry box right beneath his nose.

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It showed how far my father's greed went that he would give her an ultimatum. She would either hand it over, or he would force her to marry him, believing he could gain the advantage of her power through my birth. It also showed how much she was willing to sacrifice to ensure it did not fall into his hands.

She instead sacrificed herself just to keep the peace. But the most precious thing salvaged of all was our daughter's ashes; the bear somehow miraculously survived, so we still have that piece of her, which is now placed in the nursery we have set up, which was my old nursery as a baby. But we'll forever be grateful for the second chance we now have and the second chance granted to our people and those we thought we lost but weren't. Abbie had Gannon and Tyson; I have Kyson and this place. For once, we could all breathe and be happy and free. Finally, Abbie and I have freedom, yet death isn't the freedom we seek anymore; our freedom now has new meaning. It's living and the futures we know we have with our mates by our sides.

Now, we would finally find peace when we have known none. So, as I look up at the massive iron gates of what was once the Landeena Kingdom, I know we are finally home. A fresh start. But the first thing to go will be the Landeena crest; it will be replaced with the Valkyrie one.

Home used to be some made-up sentiment embedded in us for so long that we forgot the meaning of it. Growing up for Abbie and me, home meant pain, slavery, and then death. We truly believed that death was the only home we would know, the only way we would get freedom and have peace.

But I've since learned home was never a place or a thing, but within all of us all

along. Home is finding ourselves, our own meaning. Home is with those we love. So I know we will eventually find happiness here, in this place that has been desolate for so long. Forgotten and haunted by the ghosts of a past I never knew was mine.

Yet, in front of me is a future I am indeed excited to live. One beside my King and my family.

Arms wrap around my waist as his hands slide up and over my stomach, a growing bump that holds our future and the future of our people.

“What’s wrong?” Kyson asks as his hands gently trace my growing belly.

“Nothing. I just can’t believe we are here of all places,” I tell him as I watch the Landeena guards race around and secure the perimeter, almost as if it is muscle memory and they had never left.

“And where is that, my Queen?”

“Home. With you, with us,” I whisper, glancing over my shoulder at him. He brushes his nose against mine.

“Home is wherever you are,” he murmurs, brushing his lips gently against mine briefly before the cars start pulling into the circular pebble driveway. This place reminds me of Marrissa. I had hardly any memories of this place, but for some reason, it felt like she walked through those gates beside me. As if I can feel her, hear her in whispers traveling with the wind.

So many sacrificed for the Landeena name and the Azure name. For so long, the only woman I remember as my mother was villainized for her betrayal, yet everyone betrayed her, including her mate. She raised me, loved me, and paid the ultimate sacrifice of her life to ensure that one day, I could come back here and take the throne again.

To some, she would always be remembered as the villain, but to me, she would always be my mother. Always be the reason I am standing here and righting the wrongs of my father, righting the wrongs that were bestowed on our people. The Landeenas are dead. The Azure's dead, too.

I may share their blood, but I no longer share their name. I am not my parents. I will do better and restore the Royal names, yet I will never take theirs again. Those names instilled fear, ruined honor, and forged a path of destruction. Praised for the wrong reasons, loyalty given to them blindly, not earned. Those two names were blessed and cursed and are no longer part of the future I now chose or want.

Staring up at the place we shall now call home, Abbie moves toward me, bumping her shoulder against mine. I smile, looking over at her. Tyson is on her hip.

“Ready?” she asks. I nod, and Kyson unravels his arms around my waist and takes my hand, leading me toward the huge stone staircase. Everyone bustles around to get the place ready as what is left of our people move in. Reaching the top, Cedric is waiting by the door with Trey, the blessed sword that belonged to my father in his hand. I can't imagine what it must be like for them to be back here, yet they look almost relieved. Like this place, it never stopped being home for them.

Cedric bows his head, and Trey offers me his hand. I place mine in his, only for him to turn me around to face the courtyard, to see hundreds of faces of what's left of mine and Kyson's people. What's left of the fallen Kingdoms staring back at us. In unison, they all speak.

“We pledge our allegiance to Kyson Keller Valkyrie, Emperor of Lycania and Valkyrie, and to Azalea Ivy-Rose Valkyrie, Empress of Lycania and Valkyrie. As the true heirs and sovereigns of these realms, we commit our hearts and blades. We bleed for Valkyrie, we fight for Valkyrie, and if need be, we die for Valkyrie. We are the Valkyrie Guard—Our Empress and Emperor have risen. And so has the Valkyrie Guard.”

They bow their heads and fall to one knee in unison.

“As this Kingdom rises, we shall rise with it. And if this Kingdom falls, we too shall fall,” they finish.

I am in awe of their display and how quickly they would accept this new place as home. I turn to Cedric and retrieve my sword, my fingers wrapping around the hilt. The talisman is cool beneath my palm, and I pledge to my people, feeling it warm in my grip.

“I pledge my heart and my life to Lycania and to every soul that calls it home. I will bleed for them, stand in battle for them, and if fate demands, I will lay down my life for them. From this moment forward, I am Azalea Ivy-Rose Valkyrie, the true Empress of Lycania. This land, these people—they are my kingdom, and they are more than my life.”

I grasp the blade, its weight familiar and grounding. I slide my hand along its edge, the metal kissing my skin, a symbolic severance from the past and a fierce embrace of the future that lies before us.

Yet, as my blood washes over the steel, it transforms. Gone are the crests and symbols of Landeena. In its place, etched in blue and red carved into the replenished steel, lay the makings of a new one. A mixture of all the Kingdoms that rose and fell, the Kingdoms of Lycania. The steel glows and heats, branding and forging. And I can feel the power that lies within its steel, feel the rightfulness of it in my hand when hands move down my arms from behind, and the familiar sparks I love rush over me.

Cedric takes my sword, and Kyson lifts my bleeding hand to his lips from behind me, the warmth of his chest seeping into me as he traces the slice with his tongue, healing the wounds left. And the scar it leaves matches the new crest now emblazoned in the steel.

"More than my life, always more," Kyson whispers, his breath warm against my ear and I turn in his arms, my bump carrying our son brushing against him. My hands cup each side of his face.

“Forever yours, forever more than my life and beyond every forever,” I whisper.

The End.