



The Lycan King's Captive

Author: *Amy Pennza*

Category: Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

Description: I woke on the floor of a prison cell, but I wasn't alone. There was a man. My fellow prisoner. My protector. He spoke into my mind, saying things that couldn't be true. That I'd been bitten. That I was going to turn. That I had to obey him if I wanted to survive. He was beaten, but his voice rang with power and his body called to mine. And when he won our freedom, I learned he was far more powerful than I realized. I escaped one prison just to land in another. Now I'm caught in a war between shifters—and my protector has become my captor.

Total Pages (Source): 49

1

ABBY

Nerves fluttered in my stomach as I struggled to keep my ancient SUV on the road.

Although “road” was a generous description of the dirt track that wound through the forest. Even after four years in Maine, I wasn’t used to the narrow, twisting trails that passed as highways. Growing up in Texas, everything was flat and smooth, and cities were laid out in grids.

Here? The North Maine Woods didn’t have cities. It barely had roads. The land was owned by a mix of logging companies and the federal government, and neither of those entities were particularly welcoming to outsiders. The three-and-a-half million acres were populated by trees, not people.

So I’d been surprised to get a call asking if I offered emergency veterinarian services. The man on the phone had been polite and kind and extremely worried about his dog.

He’d also offered to Venmo five thousand dollars if I could come this afternoon. That was enough to keep the bank from taking my practice, so I’d thrown on a pair of old jeans and grabbed my house call bag. My phone had buzzed with the Venmo notification as I backed out of the driveway.

The SUV hit a rut, and I squeezed the wheel as my pulse picked up. For a brief second, I allowed my gaze to dart to the glove compartment, where my dad’s service revolver was tucked among insurance paperwork and fast food napkins. Dad died

before he could teach me how to use it, but I felt better having it with me.

Or maybe I just liked the idea of having part of him with me.

Because he would have been proud as hell calling his daughter Doctor Abigail Rowe. He would have loved watching me treat patients, and he wouldn't have cared one bit that I chose to follow my heart instead of money. Dad loved dogs more than anyone, to the point where I used to laugh and call him Dog's Best Friend. The only time I saw him weep was the day he buried his police dog, Max.

A branch scraped the passenger window, and I jumped and let out a yelp just as headlights rounded the curve ahead. Mindful of logging trucks, I slowed and moved to the side of the road.

A black Range Rover pulled alongside me, and its window lowered smoothly. Nerves prickling, I lowered mine and caught my breath at the sight of the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen. His dark hair was pushed back from a broad forehead, and his blue eyes were the color of a Texas summer sky.

And he smelled amazing. Like leather and something dark and spicy I couldn't identify.

The blue eyes flicked over me, taking in my ponytail and T-shirt. "You're the veterinarian?" He spoke in a deep rumble that seemed to resonate in my chest.

"Y-Yes." I swallowed against a suddenly dry throat. "Are you Roman? You called about a dog?"

"That's me. You have medical supplies?"

"Yes, they're—"

“Bring them. I’ll drive the rest of the way.”

“You want me to ride with you?”

Understanding entered his gaze, and he offered a smile that took his features from smoldering to supernova. “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t want to get in a car with a strange guy, either. It’s okay if you follow behind. Just stay close, because we’ve had a lot of fog rolling through. You don’t want to get lost out here.”

Somehow, I managed to nod. My thoughts raced as he maneuvered around and started back up the road. What was a man like that doing out here? Was he a reclusive millionaire who longed for privacy? The wealthy owner of a logging operation who was just as comfortable in flannel as he was polo shirts?

Dad’s gruff Texas drawl ran through my head. “Or a serial killer. Did you think of that one, Abby?”

“Stop it, Dad,” I muttered. Serial killers didn’t wire their victims money just before murdering them. Ahead, the Range Rover’s taillights dimmed. At the same moment, fog rushed across the windshield.

I squinted and applied the brakes. It would be just my luck to rear-end my first paying customer in months. The fog cleared, and a sprawling house appeared out of the purple dusk. It was lit up like a Christmas tree, its rows of windows gleaming a soft yellow.

My nerves quieted as we pulled into a half circle drive and stopped at the double doors. The house—a mansion, really—was stunning, and Roman was clearly a rich man who loved his dog.

He was out of his SUV and at my door as I reached for my bag.

“This way,” he said, his voice clipped.

I fell into step beside him and tried not to notice how his shirt strained across his broad shoulders. “Do you have any idea what’s wrong with your dog?” He hadn’t gone into details on the phone.

“Most likely an infection.” He ran lightly up the steps and pulled open the door.

A large foyer decorated in rich shades of brown and green greeted me, but I barely saw it as Roman ushered me past a grand staircase and down a hallway. We reached a pair of ornate double doors, and he threw them open and motioned for me to precede him.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

I froze in the doorway, my brain not comprehending the scene in front of me.

Four tall, muscular men stood around a big, wooden table. In the center lay an animal.

Not a dog.

Beast. The word punched into my mind. Black fur. Massive black claws. Thick snout like a wolf's, but this was no wolf. It was much too big. As I stared, the beast stirred and opened glowing yellow eyes.

The men around the table looked toward me, identical yellow eyes in every face.

“What...” I stumbled back.

A brutal hand slapped over my mouth, and Roman's voice growled in my ear. “Don't scream or I'll snap your neck.”

Words of protest died in my throat.

He pulled me against his hard chest and walked me forward so quickly my feet left the ground. My vet bag caught on my elbow and swung wildly.

When we reached the men, one of them frowned. “She's a doctor? Not much to her.”

Another ran an assessing gaze down my body. “There's enough.”

My heart thumped hard in my chest, and my throat went instantly dry. At the same time, my brain still refused to process what I was seeing. Their eyes weren't right. Something was wrong.

Everything was wrong.

A sense of detachment settled over me. Maybe it was self-preservation. Maybe it was the start of a mental break. Whatever it was, it offered me something to cling to as fear threatened to claw me apart. I seized it, letting the unanswered questions in my mind swirl away as I focused on breathing.

Roman's leather and spice scent teased my nose, but now my stomach lurched. He spoke in my ear again, his voice so low it was almost inhuman. "Listen closely, Doctor, because your life depends on it. Understand?"

Pulse pounding in my neck, I nodded as much as I could with his palm tight over my mouth.

"You're going to examine this animal. Then you're going to treat him, because I need him alive. If you refuse, if you disobey me in any way, I'll let my men take turns with you." He pushed his groin into my ass, rocking me forward. "One by one, between those long legs you're trying to hide under ratty clothes."

A whimper escaped before I could stop it. The beast on the table went blurry as hot tears trickled down my face and onto his hand.

Roman's lips moved against the fine hairs at my temple. "Easy, Doctor. Follow my orders, and I'll let you live. Do what I say, and none of these men will touch you. I give you my word."

He was lying, but I couldn't worry about that now. I was Sheriff Daniel Rowe's

daughter, and I knew my best chance of survival lay in taking each moment as it came. I couldn't think too far ahead. So I blinked the tears away and made a sound of acquiescence.

The hand lifted away from my mouth, and then Roman gave me a rough shove toward the beast. "You can examine him. He's mostly unconscious."

Mostly? That was no way to examine an animal this size. But Roman's threat still rang in my ears, so I put my bag down and took my first long, hard look at the beast.

The animal was so large its front and hind legs dangled off the table, giving me an up-close view of curved claws that tapered to needle points. The beast's head was canine, with a long snout wrapped in what looked like leather straps. Blood matted the black fur and smeared the table. Around the beast's ribs, bits of purplish bone peeked among clumps of fur that looked singed, as if someone had pressed a hot poker against the animal's flank.

Outrage flooded me. Someone had tortured this animal. I didn't need to be a detective to know Roman and his men were responsible.

But why? Were they circus people? Some kind of exotic animal traffickers?

Suddenly, the beast's flesh shivered.

Then it knit back together. Like a video playing in reverse. Bone disappeared. Fur shifted.

I took a quick step back.

Roman was right there with a hand on my shoulder, shoving me forward so my hip bumped the table. "I said examine him, not gawk at him."

“But it—”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

Another shove, this time hard enough to make my teeth click together. “Remember our deal, Doctor.”

Anger pumped hot in my veins, but I kept my tone respectful and my head down. “I need my stethoscope to check its heart.”

“Get it.”

I knelt and pulled it from my bag, then tried to ignore the way the men watched me lean over the beast. Its heart rate was slow but steady, and a small wave of relief washed over me. There was no question my life was tied to the animal’s. If it died, Roman didn’t need me anymore.

The beast shivered again, but its eyes stayed closed when I ran my hands over its head and snout, checking its ears and nose. As I moved through the exam, instinct took over, and the tremors in my hands faded. The animal was a patient, and it needed help.

“Has it vomited?” I asked Roman as I palpated the beast’s neck, checking its lymph nodes.

“Harris,” he said, and a man across from me answered.

“Once. In his cell.”

I stopped. Cell?

Roman spoke just behind me, an edge of impatience in his voice. “What’s wrong with him?”

As long as I kept the exam going, I had some semblance of control. So I moved more slowly, running my hands down the animal’s front legs again. “Two broken ribs. No other fractures I can feel, but I need x-rays to be certain.”

“Anything else?”

“I...” My mind blanked.

Roman seized my arm and spun me around. His blue eyes were tinged with gold. “Why isn’t he waking up?”

My heart thudded painfully. “H-He looks like he’s been abused or tortured. His nose is dry. He’s shivering and vomiting. All symptoms of infection.”

“So how do you treat it?”

“Antibiotics. And maybe—”

“Do you have any?”

I swallowed. “In my bag. But I’d rather get some blood work before I give him anything.”

Roman squeezed my arm before releasing me. “Give him the drugs. Now.”

It went against everything I’d been taught as a veterinarian. I wanted to balk, but I had no doubt he would follow through on his threats without batting an eye. And who knew what he would do to the animal. If he thought the beast was too sick to be of

more use to him, he might finish it off.

“The supplies are in my bag,” I told him.

“Get what you need. Do it quickly.”

I obeyed, loading a syringe with amoxicillin. Nerves fluttered in my stomach as I grasped the beast’s thigh, feeling for the muscle. “It would be better if you held him,” I dared to murmur. “If he moves, I could hit something important.”

Two of the men grasped the animal’s shoulders.

“Get on with it,” Roman said.

I held my breath as I plunged the injection deep.

Nothing happened.

The beast was still save for the rise and fall of its chest.

The room was quiet.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

The men didn't move.

I released my breath.

But then...a ripple ran down the animal's flank.

Then another. And another.

The animal's legs twitched.

No, the bone undulated, moving in ways no bone should.

I backed up, shaking my head as the rippling continued and fur receded and the animal on the table changed shape entirely. Its bones lengthened. Fur changed to flesh.

Blood pounded in my ears. The syringe dropped from my fingers and clattered against the marble.

The changes sped up, until skin slid over bone and muscles shredded and knit back together before my eyes. The beast on the table became a nude man, his muscled body covered in bruises.

My knees loosened, and I might have fallen except for the strong arms that caught me and turned me around.

Roman stared down at me, his gorgeous blue eyes fully gold. He smiled, showing

straight, white teeth.

But something was wrong.

Everything was wrong.

His canines were much too long.

“You’ve been a great help, Doctor,” he said. “So useful.”

Run, my brain screamed at me. But I couldn’t. My body was frozen, and I was helpless to resist as he gripped my ponytail and wrenched my head to the side.

“I’ve got a few more uses for you, Abby,” he said.

Then he tore into my throat.

2

CYRUS

The female was as good as dead. The bite hadn’t killed her, but the fever almost certainly would. Few women survived it.

One of many reasons the werewolves hated my kind.

I sat with my back against the damp wall and my filthy, blood-encrusted legs stretched before me. Weariness tugged at my eyelids, but I resisted the urge to nod off.

Sleep was a dangerous activity in this place.

So I kept my gaze on the woman.

It had been two days since Roman's men brought her downstairs.

Or maybe it was three. When I first came to the windowless basement, I marked the days by how often they brought food. Then they brought food less often. Eventually, they stopping bringing it altogether and time congealed into one black, sticky mass.

But the female had given me something to look at besides the concrete floor or the metal bars. She was a distraction from the pain that gnawed my flesh like a thousand tiny teeth.

I'd grown accustomed to the ragged sound of her breathing. Had even come to depend on it. At first, I'd watched closely for signs she was recovering or becoming aware.

But she remained unconscious, and her skin grew flushed as her temperature soared. So it was only a matter of time until those ragged breaths stopped.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

She shivered now, her body trembling on the thin mattress in the cell across from mine. She lay flat on her back, her head turned slightly toward me. Depending on their mood, Roman's men alternated between plunging the basement into total darkness and blasting it with light. Right now, the naked bulbs buzzed like hornets, giving me a clear view of my fellow prisoner.

Even in the throes of the fever, she was lovely. Though she was tall for a woman and slenderly built, she had curves in all the right places. Her sweat-dampened clothes clung to high, firm breasts and gently rounded hips.

My cock stirred, which was both inconvenient and inappropriate, given the circumstances. I drew a knee up and forced my attention to the safer, more neutral parts of her body.

Dark brown hair spread around her head, framing delicate features. In the beginning, when the bite on her neck still wept, she'd looked at me with bleary eyes, so I knew her irises were a clear, bright green. An unusual color on anyone. I'd expected blue.

But the green suited her. It was a pity I'd probably never seen it again.

I rested my head against the brick wall and inhaled, dragging her scent into my lungs. Under the grime and sweat was something light and feminine.

Lavender. That was it. There was another scent, too. The sharp, astringent bite of antiseptic.

A doctor, then. She'd saved me upstairs, when I lay half dead in Roman's study with

the stench of my burnt flesh in my nose.

Then another scent had surrounded me—a mix of flowers and band-aids. It had driven away the sickness and hurt, calming my inner beast and letting me relax for the first time in...

Well, a long damn time.

Gentle hands had touched me, and a soft voice had pulled me from the black haze that threatened to swallow me whole.

She brought me back, and now I had to watch her die.

Roman would pay for that.

He played a dangerous game, dragging a human physician into our war. She was bound to have a family. Her ring finger was bare, but someone so accomplished and beautiful almost certainly had a man. Someone to report her missing. Roman was powerful, but he'd let his ambition make him sloppy. His fellow alphas might be afraid to cross him, but that could change if human detectives started snooping around their packs.

Raw anticipation shot through me. The only thing more satisfying than killing Roman myself would be watching his alphas do it for me.

A door overhead opened, and booted footsteps clunked down the stairs along with a booming voice.

“And how are my prisoners today?” One of Roman’s guards—a redheaded son of a bitch named Carl—appeared with a metal bucket, which he dragged across the bars of my cell before smirking at me. “Well, don’t you look like shit.”

That makes two of us, asshole. I kept my expression neutral, but I didn't bother smothering the hate I knew burned in my eyes.

"Nothing to say?" His smirk widened to a grin. "Guess you're not really the talkative type these days, huh?" He laughed at his own joke, then swung toward the female's cell.

I sat up straighter, ignoring the stabbing pain in my ribs.

He stared at the woman's prone figure for a minute, then muttered, "Dumb bitch. It was stupid as hell to come out here alone." He turned back to me. "That's the problem with these modern feminist types. Always thinking they're a match for a man."

Contempt rose thick in my throat. Apparently, he'd forgotten the woman had been outnumbered five to one in the study. Then again, math probably wasn't his strong suit.

He unlocked my cell door and stepped inside. Yellow rolled over his pale blue eyes as he looked me over. "Not so high and mighty now, are you, naked and sitting in your own filth?" He gave the bucket in his hand a shake. "Got your toilet for the next couple of days."

I regarded him steadily, letting promises leak into my gaze. Carl and I were going to meet again someday. I wasn't sure when. I just knew he was going to die when it happened.

He swallowed and shuffled back a step. Then he seemed to realize what he'd done, because he charged into the cell like a clumsy bear. He went to the corner, switched out my shit bucket for the new one, then straightened with a heaving chest. "Keep looking at me like that and I'll break your fucking jaw."

He wouldn't. Roman had pushed too hard and he knew it. His men hadn't roughed me up since they brought me back downstairs. The reprieve was almost certainly temporary, but for now I was relatively safe.

Which meant I was free to look at the cocksucker any way I wished.

He had trouble holding my stare. His brows drew together, and his breathing grew labored. After a few seconds of struggle, he dropped his eyes to my chin and tightened his grip on the bucket handle. "I should toss this in your face, you arrogant prick."

I braced myself for him to do it. Something told me he wasn't smart enough to know the contents of the bucket were just as likely to kill me as another beating. The doctor couldn't save me if my wounds got infected again. At the thought, I looked beyond Carl to her cell.

Her green eyes were open.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

And lucid.

And staring straight at me.

My heart slammed against my chest. If Carl knew she was awake, he'd alert Roman. And there was no telling what they would do. Females were so scarce, they were unlikely to kill her. But they might pull her from the basement. Make her endure her first shift surrounded by hard-eyed men who thrived on others' agony.

Holding her gaze, I shook my head once, hard.

She closed her eyes just as Carl swung toward her. He stared for a moment before turning back to me with a sneer. "You growing fond of your cellmate? I thought you were too good for one of her kind. Funny how a few months in a cage proves you're nothing special."

I lowered my gaze to a spot on the concrete. Let him think I was too beaten to challenge him. Whatever kept his attention off the female.

He gave a condescending huff and left the cell. After he locked up, he went to the stairs and shot me a final smirk. "Don't get your hopes up, Romeo. That bitch won't live through the night. But you will, and Roman has plenty of other fun activities planned for you."

I waited for the sound of the slamming door to drift down before I dared to look into the other cell.

The female stared at me, fear and confusion in her eyes. As our gazes met, she opened her mouth.

“NO,” I said in a telepathic voice, transmitting directly into her mind.

She jerked as if she’d been hit, and a gasp escaped her dry, cracked lips.

Dizziness washed over me, but I pushed it away. Summoning all my strength, I spoke again, my mental voice rusty after such a long period of disuse. “Close your eyes and don’t talk. They have cameras down here. If they see you’re awake, they’ll come back.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and went still. So far, so good. If she could handle me talking inside her brain without freaking out, she might accept what I had to say next.

But there was no easy way to tell her what she needed to hear. If we had more time—if we weren’t in this forsaken place—I could feed her facts gently. Ease her into a world she’d probably only heard of in fairy tales.

But we didn’t have the luxury of time, and this world wasn’t gentle or easy.

Her brow furrowed, and her body tensed, as if she anticipated a blow.

I marshaled more strength and gave it to her.

“The man who bit you is a werewolf. So am I.” The last was a bit of a lie, but close enough to the truth for now.

Her heart rate sped up, but she kept her eyes closed.

I drew another deep breath and continued. “You were bitten. If you live through your

first shift, you'll become a werewolf, too."

Her chest rose and fell more rapidly. On the mattress, one of her hands curled into a fist.

"Do you want to live, Doctor?"

She jerked again. Eyes still screwed tight, she gave a subtle nod.

"Good. Then you need to do everything I say."

3

ABBY

Werewolf.

The word raked around my fever-addled brain, echoing like a taunt.

But the man in the other cell wasn't taunting me, and he wasn't joking. His tone was deadly serious.

And he'd spoken inside my head.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

Impossible.

But a lot of other things were impossible right now. Like how I was alive at all. I didn't need a thermometer to know my temperature was far too high for me to be conscious.

Or breathing. I should be in full cardiac arrest, my body convulsing and my organs shutting down. Yet I was alert and listening to him tell me I was going to transform into a creature that shouldn't exist.

Because Roman bit me.

That was impossible, too, but it was reality. The memory of it—of everything that happened around that table—was seared into my brain. I knew the man's words were true, just as I knew he was the beast I treated that night. He'd appeared in the blackness that swallowed me after Roman's bite, his golden eyes like suns that warmed me when the chills threatened to shake my bones apart. I'd clung to his heat as my heart thudded in my ears and my mouth grew so dry my tongue swelled.

And it was his presence that pulled me from the abyss. Somehow, I'd sensed him in the darkness, and something inside me had raced toward him, carrying me away from the black edge of death.

"Stay still and listen," he said now, the words in my head a low rumble. "I don't know how often they check the cameras. We need to get you through your first shift before they notice you're awake."

My pulse leapt, my heart stuttering as anxiety ran through my veins like battery acid. Out of nowhere, an image of my clinic flashed in my head. It was a tiny place, just a squat brick building on land no bigger than a postage stamp. I bought it from a veterinarian retiring after fifty years of practice, and the inside was full of outdated equipment better suited for the antiques market. But it was mine.

Or had been. A lump rose in my throat. All the work and sacrifice—all those months of eating PB&J and sleeping on the old sofa in the waiting room because I couldn't afford an apartment—was for nothing. I was going to die on a dirty mattress in a cold basement. How could I have been so stupid? My throat thickened, and tears pricked my eyelids.

“Doctor?” The man's voice flowed through my head like a current. “I need you to focus. Later, you can fall apart. You can rage and scream and freak out if you need to. But right now I need you to be strong.”

Be strong. The same thing Dad told me before he died. I'd had a hard time hearing him over the beeping of the machines and the oxygen mask covering his face, but he'd repeated it until I understood.

“Can you do that, Doctor?”

I swallowed. Then I dipped my chin.

Pride touched his voice as the current flowed again. “That's my girl. The first shift will hurt. I'm going to help you through it, but we need to move quickly. Look at me, Doctor.”

I blinked my eyes open, squinting as I adjusted to the white glare. He sat against the wall in a cell opposite mine, his forearm resting on one bent knee. He was a big man.

Scratch that. He was huge, with thick thighs and shoulders like a linebacker.

At first, it appeared he wore red clothing of some kind.

Then my vision sharpened, and I realized he was nude and the red was dried blood. His dark hair was matted with it, and more streaked down his arms and legs. An ugly, mottled bruise covered one side of his face. More bruises bloomed across his chest, and there were deep, angry-looking welts around his wrists. As if he'd been restrained and he'd fought his bonds.

They'd tortured him, Roman his men.

I started to shake.

"Stay with me, Doctor." He spoke sharply in my mind, his eyes gleaming in his bloodied face. Even with the distance between us, I could tell they were an unusual silver color. They penetrated my skull as surely as his voice, seizing my attention and grounding me when fear threatened to sweep me back into the feverish abyss.

Mindful of his warning not to speak, I gave another nod to let him know I was keeping it together. Sort of.

"You can't stop this first shift. It's like blinking or breathing. It's going to happen, and you can either wait for it or speed it along. I can help you with the second option, but only if you follow my directions. Once you've transformed, you'll be stronger." There was a pause, as if he hesitated. A muscle ticked in his jaw, and when his voice filled my head again, it was strained. "Injuries will heal faster."

My heart sped up. The tremors threatened to return, but I swallowed hard and kept my gaze on his. Moment to moment. That was how to survive a crisis. I couldn't think about the what-ifs when it came to Roman. I had to concentrate on right now.

“The transformation is going to rearrange your body. You can shift with clothes on, but having any fabric on your skin will hurt like hell.”

I blinked. He couldn't mean for me to—

“Strip.” I must have looked like a deer in headlights, because he added, “I'm a shifter. Nudity is a non-issue for us. Given enough time, you'll feel the same way. I should add that shifting with your clothes on will ruin everything you're wearing, which means you'll be naked in that cell when you shift back.”

My stomach did a queasy flip. I hadn't forgotten Roman's threat to give me to his men.

But was I really going to take off my clothes and do this? I didn't even know what this was. Part of me wanted to curl into a ball and retreat to the world I'd known before I drove into the North Maine Woods. In that world, werewolves only existed in books and movies, and the scariest thing in my life was my unpaid water bill.

But I'd seen the man across from me in beast form. And he just spent the past five minutes speaking without moving his lips, his words appearing in my brain like magic. So I was either suffering a psychotic break or he was telling the truth.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

His silver gaze was unwavering.

I didn't feel crazy.

“Quickly, Doctor.”

Hardly aware of what I was doing, I sat up and pulled my T-shirt over my head. Dizziness assailed me, and I had to brace my weight on a flat palm for a second before I could work on my jeans. My fingers were clumsy on the button, and it took me a few tries before I managed to work it through the fabric. When I did, I collapsed on my back with floaters swimming in my vision.

“The clock is ticking, Doctor.”

I jerked my head toward him, a sharp retort on my lips, but he shook his head.

“Don't speak. They don't know I'm strong enough to use telepathy. I'd like to keep it that way.”

Questions buzzed in my head. Why was he in the cell? What had he done to make Roman beat him so savagely? Was I taking directions from another bad guy? Could he read my thoughts?

As I caught my breath, I waited for a sign he could hear me. But he remained still, his expression unreadable in his blood-streaked face.

That was all the reminder I needed to finish undressing. Fatigue dragged at my limbs,

and my heart pounded in my ears, but I managed to toe off my shoes and wriggle my jeans down my hips. Despite his assertion that shifters took nudity in stride, my cheeks heated as I removed my bra and panties. Damp basement air touched my sweaty skin, reminding me how grimy and unkempt I was, and it somehow made everything worse. A dollop of humiliation on top of the uncertainty and fear.

“Look at me.”

He didn’t give me time to dwell on my nudity or descend into doubt. In the space of a heartbeat, his eyes went from silver to yellow, and his voice in my head throbbed with power. “Forgive me.”

I frowned. What did he—?

“CHANGE.”

My back bowed off the mattress.

And then my body caught fire.

4

CYRUS

The shift took the female fast. Her slender body contorted, her hips lifting as her back arched and the tendons in her neck pulled taut. A short, mangled screamed ripped from her throat.

I tensed, but there was no way for me to reach her now. Nothing I could do to help her, either. I’d given her wolf a direct command. She didn’t know it yet, but her inner beast had no choice but to obey.

She slammed onto the mattress, her pink nipples stabbing the air as her chest heaved. Her head tipped toward me, her eyes unseeing. There was a brief, shivering second, and then her skin bubbled. Ripples flowed down her arms and legs and across her face, the flesh appearing to boil like water on a stove. Her body swelled, her limbs puffing like someone was inflating her from the inside.

Bones cracked—pop, pop, pop—the sound like firecrackers on the Fourth of July. For a split second, her eyes focused, and utter terror showed in her expression.

She wouldn't hear, but I spoke to her anyway. "Stay with me, Doctor. I know it hurts, but stay with me."

There was a long, thick moment. Then the transformation began in earnest. More bones cracked. Her joints bent at the wrong angles. Skin slid and reformed. Her jaw bulged. More pops echoed around the basement. A wet gurgle emerged from her throat.

Guilt twisted my gut. I wasn't responsible for this, but it didn't matter. Worse, I was locked in a cage and helpless to do anything but watch.

She heaved onto her side as her face elongated, her nose growing black and then forming into a snout. Chocolate-colored fur sprouted across her body and quickly covered her skin. Her dark hair shrank into her skull as her human ears slid and reshaped themselves. For one sickening heartbeat, her ribs were exposed, the meat between them red and raw. Then the flesh shifted, bone and muscle sliding into place.

More pops. More fur. Her fingers withdrew, forming into furry paws with black pads and curving claws. Her jaw opened, showing a long, pink tongue and sharp canines.

Her eyes were the last to change. The green lingered...and then brightened to a glowing gold.

The agony clouding the air dissipated, leaving a deep, solemn quiet.

And where a woman once lay there was now a panting werewolf with glossy dark fur.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

I released a shaky breath and ran my eyes over her, checking for signs of injury or trouble.

My concerns quickly faded, replaced with admiration and maybe a hint of pride, as if by commanding her to change I was somehow responsible for the result.

Because she was beautiful. Her coat was a rich, solid brown, the fur thick and luxurious looking. Her tail curled around her body, and she rested her head on her front legs. Her nose was black as soot against her lighter-colored snout, and her ears were tipped with fuzz that made my stomach do an odd little flip. Her back rose and fell rapidly as she caught her breath.

“Well done,” I told her. “Take a minute to adjust. Then you can try standing.”

Instead of nodding, she lifted her head.

“Doctor? Do you understand me?” New wolves sometimes experienced an identity crisis when they first transformed. Their animal instincts competed with their human brains, which were much more complex. In rare cases, the instincts won, and the shifter went rogue, living as a beast. If their human half got too deeply buried, they ended up trapped, unable to shift back.

Alarm made me push away from the wall. I gritted my teeth and gathered power, ready to compel her attention. “Doctor—”

Her head swung toward the stairs. Then her lips peeled off her teeth as she growled.

A second later, the door upstairs squealed and footsteps rang out.

Multiple footsteps.

Roman clattered down the stairs, followed by Carl and a dark-haired male I knew only as Robertson. They reached the bottom of the steps in a clump, their expressions so dumbfounded I might have laughed under other circumstances.

The doctor snarled—then she locked gazes with Roman and ducked her head. She let out a canine whimper, as though she'd been hurt.

I spoke into her mind in a rush. “Roman is your sire. You won’t be able to look him in eye.” Or challenge him or resist his commands—at least not right away. But she would probably try, and he would almost certainly punish her for it.

Fuck, there was so much she needed to know. So much I needed to tell her. But shoveling information into her brain wouldn’t help, not when Roman was already stalking to her cage, his eyes alight with interest.

She curled into a tight ball, her tail tucked between her legs. Roman’s lackeys huddled behind him, vying for a glimpse of the new wolf.

Anger burned in my chest. She wasn’t an animal in a fucking zoo. A growl gathered in my throat.

Roman turned, pegging me with a triumphant look. He shouldered through Carl and Robertson and came to the door of my cage. “Seems we have a new female. I bet you can’t stand that, can you, Cyrus? You must feel disgusted sharing your prison with a werewolf.”

I felt disgust, all right, but not because of her. And unlike her, I had no trouble at all

holding his gaze. I never would. Not in a million years. Not if he became the most powerful alpha on the continent. In the goddamn world.

There was nothing Roman could do to change that. I let the certainty of it seep into my gaze, my eyes soaking up his triumph and reflecting it back to him.

His nostrils flared, and he staggered back, as if I'd hit him. The second he recovered, he pulled a key from his pocket.

Behind him, Carl's expression flared with alarm. "Roman, are you sure—"

"Shut up," Roman bit out. "Get the prod," he added as he unlocked the door and wrenched it open.

Maybe I should have lowered my eyes. A smart man would have. There was nothing smart about continuing to challenge the male who held my life in his hands, especially after he'd shown he was willing to drag me broken and bleeding to the edge of death. And part of me—a part I didn't like to acknowledge—shuddered at the mention of the electric cattle prod. That part of me was well-acquainted with pain.

But a bigger part of me refused to give Roman the satisfaction of seeing me grovel. Hell, it wasn't even refusal. I just flat-out couldn't. That part of me lived in my spine, and it was incapable of bending.

"Bring him," Roman said, then stepped aside.

Carl and Robertson entered, and my stomach clenched at the sight of the prod in Carl's meaty hand. They gripped me under the arms and hauled me up, then manhandled me out of the cell.

In her cage, the doctor kept her head down, as if she was too frightened to watch.

That was good. I couldn't stop her from hearing what was about to happen, but at least she didn't have to see it.

I braced myself for the men to drag me toward the I-beam that supported the ceiling. It wasn't the only beam, but it was the only one with two meat hooks embedded in the steel.

Instead, they flung me to the ground outside the cage. I caught myself on my palms and stayed down as my head swam and nausea burned my throat. Abruptly, hunger clawed at my guts. I'd thought I was well past that feeling now, but apparently that wasn't the case.

Roman's boots appeared in my line of sight, and his deep voice drifted over me, his tone mocking. "Such a mighty wolf."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

More booted feet moved around me, and then a cell door opened.

The female's cell. Carl entered it, prod in hand.

I jerked my head up, my heart rate kicking into overdrive.

Roman crouched next to me and swiped a fingertip across my cheek. He held up his bloodied hand and smiled. "Not so high and mighty now, Cyrus." His smile grew, revealing sharp fangs. "It turns out all that blue blood is red."

In the female's cell, Carl took up position behind her and let the prod dangle at his side.

No! I lurched forward.

Roman caught me, one forearm wrapped around my neck. He pulled me against him and spoke in my ear. "You like your new cellmate, Cyrus? I bet you feel some misguided duty to protect her, hmm? Or maybe you just like what you see. Your laws let you have any female you want, right? You could have some fun with her."

I fought his grip, but I was too weak to break it. My vision blurred, the female a hazy bundle of chocolate fur with Carl's body like a tall, dark shadow behind her.

"No?" Roman asked, his breath hitching as he contained my struggles. "I guess not. She's not quite good enough for one with such an impressive lineage. Your sperm is too precious for that."

The nausea burned higher in my esophagus, threatening to make me heave. Because I knew what Roman was up to now. And, suddenly, the unbending part of me was prepared to grovel.

Anything to stop him from carrying out his next move.

His arm tightened across my throat, and his hot breath touched my cheek. “Let’s test it, though, shall we?”

I clawed at his arm, but it didn’t matter. My claws were one of the first things he’d taken.

His free hand tangled in my hair, and then he yanked my head back, forcing me to look directly at the female. “Your choice, Cyrus. You can either fuck her, or you can watch her die.”

5

ABBY

Fear had gripped me since the moment Roman and his men came downstairs. I’d been paralyzed, unable to so much as glance at Roman as I struggled not to freak out at being trapped in a wolf’s body.

But when he pulled the bloodied male’s head back and rasped his ultimatum, I sprang into action.

Scrambling to my feet, I bolted toward the open door.

Pain exploded in my back, and my legs gave out. I hit the ground with a high-pitched yelp, my flanks shivering. The cattle prod. Carl had barely tapped me. I knew the

next jab wouldn't be as light.

Booted footsteps filled my ears, and then Roman gripped my ruff and forced my gaze to his.

Agony.

Every nerve ending screamed. My muscles seized, and my skin felt like I'd been dragged across rough cement. I tried to pull from his grip, but he was too strong. His yellow eyes bored into mine, holding me captive.

"Obey me, wolf."

Suddenly, my emotions flipped back and forth like a switch. On the one hand, the urge to please him—to do anything for him—was overwhelming. At the same time, I'd never loathed anyone more. I despised and adored him. Wanted to snap my jaws in his face and crawl into his lap and nuzzle his neck.

The rapid-fire changes played like a tug-of-war in my brain, adding to the pain flooding my central nervous system.

He seemed to feel some of the same conflict, because he rubbed a gentle hand over my snout, and his voice was almost kind as he murmured, "You turned out lovely."

Affection came out of nowhere, urging me to push my head into his hand. Confusion and revulsion swirled in my mind.

His eyes glowed brighter, and his next words rippled with power. "Change back now."

The transformation swept me at once, fire searing my veins like a lit match on

gasoline. My internal organs seemed to boil, and my jaw hung open as I gave a canine gasp. It was just as bad as the first time. Bones snapped. Tendons tore. I screamed as my vocal cords shredded and the taste of pennies filled my mouth.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

I must have blacked out for a minute, because the next thing I knew I was huddled naked on the concrete with my human fingers splayed on the ground and my hair streaming around my shoulders.

“Get on the mattress,” Roman said above me, his voice thick with power.

Love exploded in my chest.

Hate curled around my heart.

I couldn’t look up. Couldn’t meet his gaze as I shook my head. “I won’t—”

He grabbed a fistful of my hair and wrenched my head back, leaving me helpless to avoid his yellow gaze. “Do it. On your back and don’t move.”

The switch in my head flipped, and nothing was more important than obeying him. Pleasing him. Even as my mind protested, my body complied with his command. I scrambled to the mattress and lay flat, shame and fear swirling like poison in my bloodstream.

Outside the cage, the blood-streaked man still knelt on the ground, his silver eyes burning with rage. Cyrus. That was what Roman had called him. His breaths came in harsh pants, as if he’d just finished a sprint.

The dark-haired lackey yanked him to his feet and shoved him into the cage. Then Roman and the others forced him to his knees at my feet. His manhood lay heavy against his thigh, the thick shaft as big as the rest of him.

My body continued to submit, but revolt clanged like a bell in my head. I don't want this. But Roman had told me not to move, and something inside me would rather die than disappoint him.

But I didn't want it. I lay under the harsh lights like a butterfly pinned to a mat, my skin crawling as the men's gazes moved over me.

Tears trickled into my hair.

Roman rested a palm on Cyrus's bare shoulder, but he looked into my eyes as he said, "I'd have Cyrus start things off with a kiss, but he's a bit lacking in that department at the moment."

The other men laughed.

"Show her, Cyrus."

The bruised jaw clenched.

"Show her, or I'll let Carl and Robertson break her in first."

For a second, hate blazed so hot in Cyrus's eyes I almost cried out. Then he opened his mouth, and I gasped.

Where his tongue should have been there was nothing but a blackened stump.

Without warning, Roman shoved him forward, and over six feet of muscled male landed on top of me, forcing a grunt from my lungs.

The men's laughter fell around us as my throat burned with tears.

“I’m sorry,” Cyrus said in my mind.

I tried to shake my head, but I couldn’t manage it. Roman had told me not to move. There could be nothing worse than displeasing him.

But even as the thought materialized in my head, I knew that was wrong. Everything was wrong.

Nothing would ever be right again. Not now, not ever. My chest grew tight. I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t move. Laughter filled my ears, and a weight pressed me down...down.

“DOCTOR.”

The voice in my head boomed with power, jerking me out of my thoughts. Cyrus’s face was inches away, and his silver eyes stared into mine as he continued speaking in a voice only I could hear.

“It’s just us right now. Just you and me.” His eyelashes were black and spiky. Beautiful. His voice kept flowing, the current swift and cool. “I want you to think of your favorite place. Picture it in your mind.”

The ocean. Dad took me, and we laughed because he always ended up looking like a boiled lobster no matter how much sunscreen he applied. Later, I went by myself when I was stressed about vet school. My problems had always seemed so small compared to the waves.

Cyrus’s eyes gleamed. “You got it? Good girl. Keep that thought. Because you’re there right now, and it’s safe and just as you remember it.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

The current in my head flowed faster, and I could almost feel the sand under my shoulders. Cyrus stared down at me, and now waves crashed behind him as he brushed a gentle thumb over my cheek. His weight still pinned me, but he was warm like the Texas sun and his eyes were the color of the water as it rushed closer to shore.

“Just us,” he said. “We’re the only ones here.”

The heat spread, a combination of the sun and his body. He shifted a little, wedging his hips between mine. I opened for him, a lick of desire curling low in my belly.

His eyes darkened to pewter. He ran his thumb over my cheek again, then smoothed his hand down to my hip, leaving goosebumps in his wake. The sun shone behind him, its rays painting his shoulders gold.

My desire unfurled like a bloom, tendrils snaking through my body. A heavy ache settled between my legs, and my heart rate sped up.

Cyrus’s eyes went heavy-lidded as his words kept flowing. “We’re the only ones here. This place is just for us. It’s our island.”

It was. How did he know?

The heat built, but it was a good burn, and I suddenly needed more of it. My hips lifted and my lips parted as my breath came in little gasps.

“Just us,” he said, sliding inside me. He glided easily, and a groan rumbled from his

chest as my sex clamped around him. Shivers coursed over my skin at the way he filled me up, stretching me so taut I had nowhere to go.

But I didn't want to go anywhere else.

Then he started to move.

Pleasure swept me, the wave starting in my hot, swollen center and then rippling outward. He loomed above me, his face in shadow as the sun blazed hotter. The heat between my legs burned hotter, too, my hips rolling of their own accord.

He was right there with me, thrusting in a steady rhythm that rocked us both. Each pass brushed my throbbing, needy center, driving my pleasure to new heights.

“Just us.”

Just us. My world shrank to the beach and the sun and the man between my legs.

The waves crashed. Cyrus increased his pace, thrusting harder and deeper. The whole time, his gaze never left mine, the silver depths full of lust and another emotion there and gone so fast I couldn't place it.

My orgasm gathered, and my thoughts fled. The only thing that mattered was this and now and us. Just us. I clung to his arms and went over the edge, my soft cries echoing in my ears.

He followed, shuddering as he spent inside me, flooding me in a hot rush. After a moment, he buried his face in my neck. Our hearts thundered against each other, both trapped in bone and beating wildly.

Then Roman turned off the sun.

CYRUS

My father once told me that good leaders know when to retreat. That sometimes you have to lose first to win later. He'd been a shitty father but a good leader.

So I hadn't fought when Roman pulled me off the female after I'd emptied inside her. I'd smothered the urge to attack. I'd forced myself to cower. To retreat. Win now and fight later.

But now it was later, and I had to wonder if my retreat had been worth it. Because I sure as shit didn't feel like I'd won.

I was back where I started—propped against the damp wall with my gaze on the female in the opposite cell.

Abby. Her name was Abby. Roman had said it with a slimy familiarity when he'd replaced me between her thighs. My guts had twisted when he'd leaned over her, but he'd only captured a lock of chocolate-brown hair and rubbed it between his fingers.

“You're full of surprises, Abby,” he'd said in a voice thick with lust. “After you've whelped Holden's bastard, I look forward to having you in my bed.”

She'd turned her head away, her lips clamped tight.

He laughed, which was a signal for Carl and Robertson to laugh too.

And I stayed on the fucking ground even though Roman was right there and it would have been easy to charge him—to tackle the son of a bitch to the concrete and smash the lust in his expression to pieces.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

But I would have lost. Speaking mind-to-mind with Abby had sapped my strength. Black had hovered at the edges of my consciousness as my body toyed with the idea of passing out.

Quite the hero.

My fainting spell got Roman's attention off Abby, though, so I sagged when he ordered Carl and Robertson to drag me to my cell and I let my eyes roll back in my head when Roman followed, his brows drawn tight.

He must have decided I looked worse than usual, because he ordered Carl to fetch Abby's medical bag. I wanted to seize Roman and scream that I didn't need medicine. I needed food and water and twenty-four hours without some asshole using me as a punching bag.

But Roman didn't care about making me healthy. He just wanted me alive.

It wasn't much of a stretch to play half dead as Carl returned with the bag, but it was hard to pretend when Roman forced Abby to treat me again. He didn't let her dress, so she knelt nude and trembling as she injected me with another round of antibiotics. It wasn't lost on me that he was making her save the male who violated her. Fixing her tormentor so I could torment her again.

I'd tried to reach her—to tell her I wouldn't let it happen—but I'd been too weak to make a mental connection. So I'd stayed on the ground with the sting of her needle in my hip and nothing but deafening silence between us.

And even now, hours later, that silence remained. Not because I couldn't speak. Her drugs had worked well enough.

No, I was quiet now because I didn't know what to say.

She hadn't moved since Roman and the others left. She lay in her cage with her back to me, her knees drawn up and the curve of her spine a delicate line down her back. Rust-colored blood smeared her hips where I'd touched her, and the sight made Roman's taunt echo in my head.

"Not so high and mighty now, Cyrus. It turns out all that blue blood is red."

That was his twisted plan: force me to take Abby until she conceived. Then he could...what? Use my child as a weapon against me? Hold it for ransom?

I stared at the red on Abby's hips. For all I knew, she was already pregnant. A surge of protectiveness rose in my chest, the feeling so strong I caught my breath.

Two things were certain. She was not giving birth in this basement, and I was going to mount Roman's head over my fucking fireplace.

As satisfying as the second item would be, it couldn't happen until I figured out the first. I looked around for the thousandth time, willing my sleep-deprived brain to come up with an escape plan. I'd tested every bar of the cage, searching for weak points, but the steel was thick and the bars had been set in the concrete when the floor was poured. At full strength, no cage could hold me. But I hadn't been at full strength for a very long time.

The door upstairs squealed.

Fuck.

One set of boots stomped down. Carl. The lumbering gait gave him away before his shock of red hair appeared. He carried a plastic grocery bag and he trailed the scent of body wash as he went to Abby's cell and unlocked it.

"Hey," he called to her. "Get up. Roman says you have to eat."

She didn't move.

He swore and wrenched the door open. "You hear me?" He stepped inside and gave the bag a little shake. "I know you're hungry. That first shift kicks everyone's ass."

Nothing. She was so still, my heart leapt in my chest. "Abby?" Even speaking mind-to-mind, it felt odd to use her name. Too intimate, as if I hadn't earned the right to be so familiar. "Are you all right?"

Carl dropped the bag and stepped closer. "I can see you breathing. You're not fooling anyone."

Relief washed over me, but only for a second. Carl was stupid, but he just smart enough to know it and that made him mean.

He nudged her thigh with his boot. "If you don't eat, Roman will kick my ass when he gets back."

She stayed as she was.

Another nudge. Carl went to his haunches. He lifted a hand, and it seemed like he would touch her, but he only let it hover above her hip. He spoke in a murmur, his voice thick. "I have an idea."

Every single one of my nerve endings went on high alert. He'd showered for a

reason, the fucker.

No. Fuck no. This wasn't happening.

“I turned off the cameras,” he said, his breathing growing heavy. “Roman said you’re off limits until that cocksucker knocks you up, but I can’t wait that long. Watching you come made me horny as fuck.” His tone filled with resentment. “Knowing Roman, he’ll just take you for himself. He hasn’t stopped talking about you. That’s what he’s doing now, meeting with some other alphas so he can brag about his new female.”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

I started to rise, ready to do anything—to make any kind of noise—to get his attention off her.

He rubbed a meaty hand over her shoulder. “I’ll make it good.”

She rolled in a blur of movement, silver flashing as her arm streaked down.

Blood spurted. He fell on his ass and then flopped onto his back.

Abby shot to her feet, a scalpel in her hand. She plunged it down, stabbing his neck over and over, her blows so intense blood splattered the floor at my feet. Every time I thought she’d stop, she kept going, her arm flying up and down like it was spring loaded.

Carl’s body rocked. Then his head rolled away from his shoulders, the stump of his spine a white circle surrounded by bright red meat.

She stumbled back, her blood-covered chest heaving.

“No thanks,” she said. “I like my idea better.”

7

ABBY

Killing Carl was going to bother me later. At some point, and probably a lot sooner than I thought, I was going to lose my everloving shit at having murdered someone.

But that point wasn't right now.

Right now, adrenaline flowed through me like electricity, and I almost expected my hands to glow as I bent and snatched Carl's keys from the ground.

Cyrus stood at his cell door, his big body splattered with fresh blood.

Carl's blood.

Nope. Still not freaking about it yet.

Cyrus spoke in my head. "We have to hurry."

As if I planned on lingering. Carl could have been lying about turning off the cameras. Or about Roman being gone. I wasn't taking anything for granted.

"I don't have a plan," I told Cyrus, racing to his door. There was only one key on the keyring—one of those old fashioned skeleton keys that looked like something from a cartoon or a play about a murder mystery. But it worked, and I went lightheaded with relief as I opened the door and stepped back.

Cyrus wasted no time getting out of the cell and moving us to the stairs. At the base, he stopped me with his hands on either side of my face. "Do you trust me?"

"I..." My heart pounded. Did I? I had no choice. He was Roman's prisoner, which meant he was Roman's enemy. That had to be good enough. "Yes. I trust you."

"Stay behind me and stick to me as close as you can."

"Okay."

“Can I have the scalpel?”

My hand tightened around it reflexively, and I realized I didn’t want to give up my weapon. I’d grabbed it on impulse when I put the vial of antibiotics back in my medical bag, and I’d lived in terror of Roman spotting it as I tucked it against my forearm. But he’d been occupied watching Cyrus, and no one had noticed me slip my new weapon under my body as I’d returned to my mattress. I’d stayed as still as possible for hours, wondering if I possessed enough nerve to kill.

All it took was Carl’s breath on my neck to answer that question.

“Abby.” Cyrus’s silver gaze was steady. “I will get you out of here. I promise.”

I almost shook my head, because he couldn’t promise that. We might die as soon as we opened the basement door. But he’d created an ocean in my head. Something in his eyes told me he could do this, too.

I put the scalpel in his hand.

He nodded. “Stay close.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

Our bare feet were quiet on the stairs—or maybe I couldn't hear our footsteps over the sound of my heartbeat thudding in my ears. I thought Cyrus might pause at the top to whisper instructions or take a deep breath for courage. But he didn't slow. He simply opened the door and led me into a deserted hall with shiny mahogany floors. Sconces lined the walls, spilling soft light in a way that let me know it was nighttime.

The contrast between the gray, bleak basement and the ordinary home decor was so jarring that for a second my brain couldn't process what I was seeing.

Deep, masculine voices drifted from somewhere nearby.

Cyrus grabbed my hand and pulled me into a run.

Our footsteps thundered now, and my heart lodged in my throat as doorways and paintings flashed by. We burst into the foyer I recognized from the night I arrived.

Shouts sounded behind us.

Cyrus put on a burst of speed, his hand clamped tight around mine as we raced to the double doors. He released me long enough to fling them open, then grabbed me and we were off again, running down the steps and into the night.

Rain hit my face and splattered my shoulders. My feet splashed over wet concrete. I hardly registered any of it. I just kept running, my strides lengthening as I fell into a sprint.

More shouts. The unmistakable sounds of pursuit. We flew down a long driveway,

and then Cyrus yanked my hand hard and we veered down a grassy incline bordered by a brightly lit forest.

And it was only then I realized the forest wasn't lit up at all. My night vision was enhanced, letting me see each trunk and branch. I moved differently, too, clearing fallen logs with ease and dodging roots and low-hanging branches without slowing down.

But my new abilities weren't much use when the people chasing me could do all the same tricks. The shouts behind us were joined by growls. Something dark streaked past me.

Cyrus seized my arm and pulled me sideways. The ground disappeared.

For a horrifying second, I flailed in the air as I plunged into nothingness. Then my ass hit the dirt with jarring force, and I was sliding in the mud. Rocks dug into my back and leaves slapped my face as I slid faster, my jaw clenched against a scream.

The ground reared up. Cyrus grabbed me before I landed and yanked me straight into a sprint, our feet squelching in the mud.

Rain fell in sheets, soaking my hair and obscuring my vision. My breaths sawed in and out of my chest. A stitch formed in my side. Unable to see, I tripped and stumbled, crying out when rocks pierced my feet.

A growl split the air, and then a dark streak flew out of the forest.

It tackled Cyrus to the ground. He landed on his shoulder and rolled, grappling with a massive black wolf with glowing yellow eyes. They tumbled over and over, flashing black fur and pale skin. The beast's paw flew, and blood spurted from Cyrus's side.

I clapped a hand over my mouth and fell to my knees. Rain pounded the top of my head but I didn't notice. Oh God. This was it. Cyrus was going to die. Panic shot through me.

I can't lose him.

His muscles bulged as he fought the beast. They rolled in the mud, snarling and grunting. Cyrus let out a hoarse bellow and plunged his arm down.

The wolf roared.

Cyrus's arm stabbed down, silver flashing in the rain-soaked night. He sprang to his feet, grabbed the wolf by the top of its head, and buried the scalpel deep in its throat.

The beast jerked violently, giving a high-pitched yowl that lifted the hair on my arms. Cyrus straddled its shoulders, grabbed it around the neck, and twisted sharply.

A sickening crack made me jump.

The wolf went limp.

Cyrus staggered back, his shoulders heaving. Rain ran down his chest, washing away the blood and muck. As water sluiced off his arms, black markings appeared. Tattoos wrapped around his biceps and marched all the way to his fingertips. The rain washed the blood from his face, too.

And what it revealed made my breath catch.

He was gaunt, but underneath the sunken cheeks and pinched features was a stunningly handsome man. The rain plastered his dark hair to a high, broad forehead. His square jaw was just on the arrogant side of bold—a trait thrown into stark relief

as he bared white fangs at the wolf on the ground.

Not a man to cross.

I shivered, and it wasn't entirely from the rain.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

Cyrus's gaze shot to mine, and then he stepped over the wolf and strode toward me, his glowing yellow eyes piercing the night.

8

CYRUS

Abby's eyes swam with questions as I walked toward her, my feet squelching in the mud. I could only imagine what she was thinking. In the space of a few days, she'd been turned into a werewolf against her will, held captive, and plunged into a violent world she knew nothing about.

And there was, of course, what had passed between us in her cell. I wasn't fooling myself that her killing of Carl had erased that trauma.

I wanted to tell her I was sorry—and not just for that. She deserved an apology. Explanations.

But fighting the wolf had tapped my strength. His claws hadn't nicked anything important, but my side bled freely and the wound wouldn't close until I could find something to eat. In the meantime, I needed to conserve every bit of energy, which meant telepathy was out of the question. Fortunately, Abby didn't resist when I beckoned her forward, and she fell in beside me as I started to run.

I set a slower pace this time, partly because I had no idea where I was going and partly because we both hurt too damn much to go any faster. Abby didn't complain, but strain showed in her delicate features. Her brows drew together, and two spots of

color burned high on her cheekbones. The wind shifted, driving the rain into our faces, the drops like thousands of tiny needles.

But I welcomed the deluge, which covered our tracks and muffled our scents.

The forest seemed to go on forever, and in some places the trees huddled so closely together it was impossible to step without scraping against bark. The terrain was strewn with dead branches, which eventually forced us to walk. We went like that for hours, plodding through the rain as the stars shifted in the sky and the first purple hint of dawn appeared.

My vision blurred, the trees blending into a solid mass of green and brown. As I stepped over a fallen tree, my right leg gave out. I went down like a stone, bark shredding my shin.

“Cyrus!” Abby knelt beside me, her hand curled around my bicep.

I’m okay. I tried to push the thought into her head, but it was like grasping at sunlight playing over water. I could see the words in my head, but I couldn’t project them into hers.

So I had to settle for covering her hand with mine as I tried to convey my thoughts with my eyes.

Rain clung to her lashes, which were long and thick like black fans. Her green eyes were huge in her pale face, and she had a tiny beauty mark at the corner of her upper lip.

How had I missed that before?

A branch snapped, making us both jump and jerk our heads toward the sound.

Abby let out a shaky breath. “Just a deer.”

We stared as a buck picked its way over the ground, its antlers as broad as a man’s arms. It paused and looked in our direction, then leapt a fallen trunk easily and sprinted away.

Show off.

Abby stiffened. “What is that?”

I followed her gaze. Through the trees—just barely visible in the pre-dawn forest—was a cabin.

A breeze picked up. A second later, scents hit my nose.

Venison and kerosene. Gun oil and carbon. Hunters.

Humans.

Gritting my teeth against the pain in my shin, I pulled Abby to her feet and gestured for her to follow.

For the first time, she hesitated to obey, and her eyes were stark as she whispered, “Are you sure it’s okay?”

As I had at the base of the basements steps, I cupped her jaw and gave her the full weight of my gaze, silently asking for her trust.

She stared up at me for a long moment. Then her slender shoulders lifted as she drew a deep breath. “Okay.”

Something inside me loosened. I'd lived my whole life around fighters and dominant wolves. My kind trained to be fierce. To rush into battle regardless of the chances of victory.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

Yet I'd never witnessed courage as admirable as hers.

I brushed my thumbs over her damp cheeks, silently cursing Roman for leaving me with nothing but my eyes as a voice.

The wind shifted again—a reminder that we stood in the open with rain drenching us to the bone. I dropped my hands and motioned Abby to go slow.

I caught more scents as we approached the cabin. Vehicle exhaust and bug spray. Beer someone had poured on the ground. My apprehension lifted. The smells were old. Whoever owned the place hadn't used it in a while.

Abby must have sensed it, too, because she slipped a shoulder under my arm and urged me forward. "We need to get you out of this rain."

I hid a smile as she took some of my weight. No one ever ordered me around. On the rare occasions someone tried, my beast roared to the surface and let them know just how unwise it was.

But my wolf was quiet now. Deep in my head, the beast was content, as if he liked her fussing.

The cabin's door was unlocked, which didn't surprise me. There was little point securing a place so isolated. A trespasser could bust a window with no one but the deer to notice.

We shuffled inside and were immediately met by the musty smell of empty house.

But the cabin was by no means abandoned. The entire floor plan place was visible from the front door, and while the place was modestly furnished it was also neat as a pin. A plaid sofa and matching chair were situated around a wood-burning stove, and the tiny kitchen looked dated but functional. A darkened doorway revealed the edge of an avocado green toilet.

Abby spoke in the no-nonsense voice used by doctors everywhere. “Let’s get you to the sofa.”

I eased from her grip and limped toward the kitchen. Sitting held plenty of appeal, but it wouldn’t help me.

She stayed close, as if she worried I might fall. Which was good thinking, because my vision was swimming again.

The fridge was probably older than the Carter administration, but it buzzed with electricity. The main compartment was empty. The freezer was stocked with venison and frozen burritos.

I grabbed as many as I could hold.

Abby realized what I was doing and moved with brisk efficiency, producing a plate and loading burritos into the ancient microwave. While it hummed, she guided me to the sofa and settled a blanket around my shoulders. She wrapped another around her own and went to the kitchen. When she returned with burritos, I tried to pull her down beside me, but she knelt instead. “You eat. I want to look at your side.”

Once again, my wolf didn’t mind the order, and the beast stayed dormant as she lifted the blanket and prodded the edges of the claw marks.

Her ministrations were unnecessary, but it was easier to let her go as I focused on

devouring a freezer's worth of burritos. With every bite, my strength returned, the aches and injuries fading. Wounds knit together, the edges burning and itching as new skin formed.

She looked up sharply. "You're healing."

"Yes," I said in her mind, and her eyes widened at the return of my telepathy. "As long as my body has enough fuel to regenerate, I'm very difficult to kill. Decapitation could do it, but it would have to be a thorough strike." And, to be safe, anyone who wanted me truly dead would need to put a lot of distance between my head and my body.

A range of emotions flitted across her face, finally settling on curiosity. "Am I like you now?"

My stomach clenched, and it had nothing to do with freezer burned burritos. For the first time since Roman bit her, she seemed optimistic. I wanted to breathe oxygen on that small flame of hope. Instead, I had to snuff it out. Because any lie I told her would be temporary. She was already destined to hate me. I wasn't going to make things worse by deceiving her.

"You have some healing abilities, but you're not like me."

"Because you've been a werewolf longer?"

Pain shot through my mouth. I swallowed as the itching, burning sensation coalesced between my molars. "Because I'm a lycan."

Confusion swirled in her eyes. "I've heard that term before. Lycan is just another word for werewolf."

I didn't need oxygen to speak, but I drew a deep breath anyway. "Werewolves are bitten. Lycans are born. We were never human. Roman called you a werewolf because he made you, just as his sire made him. Our two sides have been at war for centuries."

She tensed. The cabin seemed to tense with her, the small room swelling with unease as rain pounded the roof.

I should have been grateful for the shelter—for surviving every torture Roman put me through. I'd endured each humiliation without breaking his stare. Yet I couldn't look Abby in the eye now. Not when I had to tell her the truth about what she was.

About what we were to each other.

So I stood and went to the window, my gaze on the forest just beginning to brighten with morning sunlight.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

She asked the question I'd known she would, her voice a thread of sound. "If you're at war, why did Roman want me to have your child?"

I kept my eyes on the forest as I answered. "I'm not entirely sure. Humiliation maybe. Or revenge. It's a crime among my people to mate with a werewolf. Those who break the law usually run. If they're caught, they're executed."

She gasped. "Roman didn't give either of us a choice."

"Our laws are strict. There are no exceptions." I should know. They were inked on my arms.

"So you'll run?"

I shook my head.

"But they'll kill you!"

"No, they won't."

"But you just said—"

"They won't execute me." I closed my eyes on a long blink as the burn in my mouth dissipated and my tongue finished regenerating. Then I faced her and spoke aloud for the first time since I made the mistake of trusting Roman.

"The lycans won't kill me, Abby. I'm their king."

ABBY

In veterinary school, we did a unit on recognizing trauma in dogs. There were various ways to define trauma, but my professor preferred the simplest: too much, too soon, too fast.

As I knelt on the cabin's dusty floor with Cyrus's declaration ringing in my ears, I knew I was hurtling toward a textbook case.

He must have seen it in my face, because he left the window and crouched in front of me, the blanket spreading around him like a mantle.

How appropriate.

"Abby." His silver eyes were full of concern. "I know you're scared. This is a lot to take in. But you're safe with me. I won't let anyone hurt you."

He spoke with quiet confidence, his rich rumble deeper now that it was outside my head. Seeing him like this, it was hard to believe he was the same bloodstained, emaciated man from the basement. All traces of the cage were gone, his skin smooth and muscled. Early morning sunlight streamed around him, giving him the look of a saint in a Renaissance painting. He was even more handsome now—a bronzed god with black hair and a strong jaw shadowed with dark stubble.

As my gaze lingered, a sudden thought popped into my head. "You should have a beard."

"What?" Wariness filled his eyes, as if he worried I might finally be losing it.

“We were in those cells for days, but your hair is the same.” And not just his stubble. His hair was also untouched by prison, the dark waves arranged in the casual disarray male models strove for. Meanwhile, my scalp itched and my own hair streamed over my shoulders in damp, tangled clumps.

He rubbed a palm over his cheek, his expression almost self-conscious. “Uh, yeah, that’s part of being a lycan, actually. Once we reach adulthood, we sort of lock in place. We also stop aging, but we’re not immortal. The average lifespan is about five hundred years.”

Too much, too soon, too fast.

“How old are you?” I asked.

He hesitated. “A little past ninety.”

“What’s a little?”

Another long pause. “One hundred and ninety-four.”

I couldn’t stifle my gasp. He was two centuries old? I searched his face, looking for signs of age or an indication I was talking to someone born before telephones or the Civil War. But there was nothing. Not a single gray hair among the black. And if what he said was true, it would stay that way for a very long time, his body healing any injuries he might suffer along the way. He’d never deteriorate. Never lie in a hospital bed clinging to a few more precious minutes because the six or so decades he’d been given weren’t enough.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Will I live that long?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

“No,” he said quietly. “It’s a bit shorter for werewolves, maybe because of your human blood.”

“How long do I have?”

“Around three hundred years. Females tend to live longer because they don’t fight for dominance. Werewolves have always lived in packs like wolves do in the wild. That kind of power structure means everyone is constantly jockeying for a better position in the hierarchy. Challenges are fought to the death, but females don’t participate. I’m not sure they’d want to, but even if they did it’s not allowed.”

“Why not?”

“It’s exceptionally rare for a human woman to survive a bite. Female werewolves are prized. Protected.”

I blinked. “I’m sorry, were we in the same basement?” Memories flooded back, along with anger so intense I couldn’t stay kneeling. I stood and pulled the blanket more tightly around me, my fists clenched in the thin fabric.

Cyrus stood, too, his body taking up most of the space in the tiny room. At five-foot-seven, I was taller than average for a woman, but he loomed over me. “I know you’re confused—”

“Can you stop telling me how I feel?” I snapped. “I know how I feel and, yeah, confusion is part of it.” My voice rose, but I didn’t care. “First I was mauled and turned into a monster. Then I was assaulted and forced to run for my life. Now you

claim I'm this rare prize. None of that makes sense, and if you expect me to understand any of it you're going to have to do better than we have always been at war with Eastasia!" I ended on a shout, my voice echoing around the cabin.

His nostrils flared, and a hint of yellow showed in his silver eyes.

And it occurred to me I was alone in the middle of nowhere with a male twice my size. A male who just informed me he was a king. I'd never met a town mayor, let alone a king, but something told me they didn't like being yelled at.

My cheeks heated, and I mumbled, "That's a quote from—"

"Orwell. I'm familiar with human literature."

Right. Of course. God, he'd probably read 1984 when it came out. Maybe he even met George Orwell. Or Abraham Lincoln. I shoved the thought from my head. If I let myself venture down that path I might actually go crazy.

Silence stretched, the only sounds the hum of the ancient fridge and the rain pattering the roof.

"You're right," he said finally. "I owe you an explanation, but the quote is more apt than you realize. Lycans and werewolves have always fought each other, and both sides have gotten very good at killing. Our history is built on bone and stained with blood."

The hair on my nape lifted. I'd seen what Roman did to him. That kind of cruelty didn't happen "just because." If I had any hope of accepting my new reality, I needed more information about the world I found myself in.

"All wars start from somewhere," I said.

He gave me a long look. Then he returned to the window, the blanket flaring around him. He stood in profile, his watchful gaze reminding me we weren't out of danger. Roman and his men were still out there.

"You spoke of fairy tales," Cyrus said, his gaze on the rain-soaked forest. "Our lore tells us there was once a human king. His kingdom and name are lost to history, but he had a mighty army led by brave knights. One of these was braver, fairer, and more beloved than all the others. He was also a lycan."

I held my breath, awareness prickling my skin.

"It was folly to mingle with humans. However, the knight had lived a lifetime already, and he was bored. The human king's court was a merry place full of dancing and distractions." Cyrus glanced at me over his shoulder. "And a beautiful queen."

The awareness thickened, and not even the rain-dappled sunlight slanting through the window could dispel the sense of doom building in my chest.

"The knight resisted the queen's advances," he said, "since he was forbidden to touch a human. But the queen was persistent, and the knight fell in love with her. They saw each other in secret, decades passing with no one discovering their affair. Then the queen fell ill. The knight could smell Death hovering just outside the door. So he broke the laws of his people and bit her, hoping to make her lifespan match his. He knew she was unlikely to survive."

"But she did," I said.

"She did." Cyrus faced me. "And she was restored to the bloom of her youth. The king was suspicious...and jealous. The most beloved knight in his kingdom was still handsome and strong, whereas the king was old and growing frail. And now the queen, who had been on her deathbed, was as lovely as the day they wed. The king

accused her of witchcraft so he could torture secrets from her. When she confessed the knight's true nature, the king wanted the gift for himself. So he forced her to bite him. When he turned, he killed her."

I flinched. The story might be "lore" as he called it, but most fairy tales were rooted in truth. Which meant that somewhere, at some time, a vindictive king had probably tortured his wife because she looked better than he did.

Cyrus continued. "The knight fled the kingdom, but the damage was done. The king took a blood oath swearing revenge. Legend says he bit the rest of his knights, creating an army of shifters who inherited his thirst for vengeance. It's a more colorful explanation than the truth, which is that werewolves hate lycans because we're stronger and—" He cut himself off.

I frowned. "Stronger and what?"

"Abby..." His gaze moved over me, his expression inscrutable. When he spoke, his voice was tight. "My people believe werewolves are an abomination. A pale imitation of the real thing. Turned humans are slower and weaker. They also struggle to control their beasts, probably because the human brain can't process animal instincts."

My heart pounded, the word "abomination" running through my head. "What are you saying? That I'll be like Roman?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

“No,” he said quickly. “Even knowing you for a short time, I don’t think that’s possible. Some werewolves are decent because they were decent human beings before they were bitten. But they’re outliers. For whatever reason, the type of people who tend to survive a werewolf bite are aggressive and violent to begin with. The shift exacerbates those qualities, which is why most packs are rife with power struggles.”

I gripped the blanket with icy hands. I should have died in the basement. Like the queen in Cyrus’s story, the darkness had come for me. And then Cyrus had taken the role of the knight, speaking directly into my mind and pulling me from human to animal. In a way, he was just as responsible for me being a werewolf as Roman.

“I didn’t ask for any of this,” I said, somehow managing to keep my voice from trembling. “I don’t want power. I just want my life back.”

He left the window, and for a moment I thought he might take me in his arms. But he stopped short, one fist holding the blanket together over his chest. Tattoos swirled around his wrist, the black lines forming an intricate pattern. Once again, disconnect swept me, my brain unable to reconcile his tall, muscled form with the wasted figure from before.

But his eyes were the same. The silver gleamed like metal, his gaze as steady as it had been in the basement. “You’ll have it. This I vow, and I never break my vows.”

Goosebumps prickled my arms. The old fashioned words should have sounded silly. Instead, they were imbued with power that brushed my skin.

“But you have to adjust to a new sort of life,” he said. “I don’t know if the story of the knight and the human king is true. What I do know is that werewolves and lycans kill each other on sight. It was that way in my father’s time and in his father’s time and every time before that.”

I frowned. “But you’re stronger. If werewolves are so inferior, how is there a war at all?”

“Werewolves are stronger, yes, but lycans are vastly outnumbered. Even if every mated pair had two children, the species would stay at zero population growth. When the werewolves lose a wolf, they can make ten others.”

Like Roman made me. The bite on my throat had healed when I shifted, but now it seemed to throb. “Why haven’t you killed me? If I’m a werewolf, then I’m the enemy.”

A hint of breeze was my only warning. One moment we stood apart. The next, he’d pulled me close and grasped my chin with gentle fingers. It happened so quickly I hadn’t seen him move.

“You saved my life,” he rasped, an odd look in his eyes. “And you might be carrying my child.”

My throat went instantly dry, and my heart hammered so hard I worried he could hear it. In the bloody escape from the basement and the long race through the forest, I hadn’t considered what might have resulted from Roman’s twisted punishment. I wasn’t pregnant. I couldn’t be.

“I-I’m not,” I said.

Cyrus brushed a light thumb over my cheek, which had gone hot. “We have to

consider the possibility. Once word of your existence spreads, the werewolves will want you. If they know there's a chance you're carrying my baby, they'll hunt you to the ends of the earth."

"What if I'm not pregnant? Will they stop hunting?"

His thumb on my cheek stilled. "Let's worry about whether you're pregnant first."

Ice slid down my spine. I pulled my chin from his grip and stepped back. "I need"—to be alone so I can lose my mind in private—"the bathroom."

Concern leapt into his eyes. "Are you sick?"

"I'm fine." I moved away before he could do something intolerable like carry me. I half expected him to call me back, but he was silent as I reached the darkened bathroom, hit the light, and locked myself inside. As I sagged against the door, I parted the blanket and looked down at my flat stomach.

Fuck.

10

CYRUS

I stood in the middle of the cabin with my gaze on the bathroom door.

The locked bathroom door. If that wasn't a fitting symbol of the state of things between Abby and me, nothing was. She probably didn't realize I could break the lock as easily as opening a soda can. Or maybe she was just too stunned to think straight. She'd gone white as a sheet when I brought up the possibility of pregnancy. Almost as if she hadn't considered it at all.

And it had taken every ounce of willpower I possessed not to pull her into my arms. It took even more to let her walk away, especially when she looked so fragile. But I had no right to touch her, and she probably wouldn't have welcomed it.

I also needed to get us the hell out of the forest. The rain would make it difficult for Roman to track us, but we were still in his territory.

The sound of running water drifted from the bathroom. A second later, steam emerged from under the door. At once, an image of Abby standing under the shower spray formed in my mind. As I gazed at the door, I saw nothing but her lithe curves and long legs. In the basement, she'd wrapped them around my hips as I plunged into her heat.

Desire shot south, making my dick perk up. I cursed and yanked the blanket more snugly around me, then made a beeline for the kitchen. I needed to find a phone, not daydream about an encounter I was better off forgetting. Even if Abby was interested in me as more than a former cellmate, there could never be anything between us. Now I just needed my dick to figure that out.

I also needed a goddamn phone, but there was no sign of one in the kitchen. A search of the cabinets turned up canned beans and a few mousetraps but nothing I could use to communicate with the outside world. Swearing, and with one ear tuned to the sounds coming from the bathroom, I returned to the living room—and hit pay dirt when a trunk in the corner turned up clothes, boots, and a satellite phone.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

“Come on,” I muttered, pressing the power button. The screen lit up, a green icon in the corner showing five percent battery. I dropped the blanket and was out the door in seconds. Sunlight hit my shoulders. The sky was cloudless and clear.

And a moment later, my steward’s familiar growl filled my ear. “Who the fuck is this and how did you get this number?”

Relief so intense pounded through me, my knees loosened. Actually loosened, like I might faint right there in the grass.

I gripped the sat phone in a hand that wanted to shake. “Garrick, it’s me.”

He sucked in a breath, and his voice held a tremble that let me know he was shaking, too. “My lord?” There was a creaking sound, like he sat heavily in a chair. “Jesus fuck, we thought you were dead.”

Despite my circumstances, a smile tugged at my mouth. “I’ve missed your rather colorful vocabulary.”

“Where the hell are you? There’s a delay on the line.”

“Satellite phone.” I scanned the trees, my ears pricked for any hint of sound. “As for where I am, my best guess is dead center of the North Maine Woods.”

There was a long pause. Then Garrick said, “You tried to negotiate a cease fire with Roman.” Almost to himself, he muttered, “The nobles aren’t going to like this.”

I didn't much care what they liked, but tradition said I was stuck with them. "Yeah, well, they'll be happy to know I failed in spectacular fashion." Before he could say anything else, I spoke in a rush. "I don't have a lot of time to explain. I need you to listen now and ask questions later. Got it?"

"Of course," he said, his tone mildly offended. His family's motto was "listen and protect." For as long as a Rothkilde king had sat on the lycan throne, a Magnusson steward had been at his side. Garrick took his role seriously. I'd ruffled his feathers, but I'd have to make it up to him later. Right now I had to get the hell out of Roman's territory.

"Roman ambushed me," I said. "I've been a guest in his basement. I'm going to transmit my coordinates so you can dispatch the Guard." I grimaced. "Send a small team. This is already going to be a scandal, and the less Foster knows about it, the better." The head of the Council of Nobles was as much a warmonger as my father had been. If Foster Carrington had his way, I would have never become king. Once he heard about my experiment in diplomacy, he'd use it against me however he could. His efforts probably wouldn't get anywhere, but they would make life annoying as shit for a while.

There was a sound of muffled typing over the line, then Garrick said, "I can have a team there in two hours, give or take ten minutes depending on your location."

"I'll send the coordinates." I swept my gaze around the tree line again before moving toward the cabin. "There's something else."

"Yes, my lord?"

A window on the cabin's front porch gave me a direct view of the bathroom door, which was still shut. A strip of yellow light showed at the bottom, and the sound of the shower drifted onto the porch.

“There’s a female with me,” I told Garrick. “Roman turned her against her will. Tell the Guard her safety is a priority.”

“You want...” He lowered his voice, as if he hesitated to say the next part out loud. “A werewolf, Cyrus?”

The phone beeped. Battery’s running out. “She’s under my protection. If anyone so much as touches—” I inhaled sharply as a surge of protectiveness flooded me. My gums ached, my fangs threatening to descend. I took a few deep breaths and pushed my beast down. Even so, my voice was like gravel. “Abby is not to be harmed.”

“Yes, of course. No one will hurt...Abby.”

The phone gave another warning beep. “Thank you,” I said, grateful for his ability to pivot seamlessly from me rising from the dead to me announcing I was bringing a werewolf home. “You’re the best of stewards, Garrick. Stand by for coordinates.” I ended the call and punched through the phone’s menu until I found the option to share my latitude and longitude. I entered Garrick’s private line and hit send just as the phone emitted a final beep and powered off. For a moment, I stood there, my gaze on the darkened screen as relief coursed through me.

The unmistakable sound of a woman’s sob brought my head up. In a blink, I was off the porch and knocking at the bathroom door.

“Abby?” I tried the knob. Still locked. “What’s going on? Are you sick?”

Her watery reply lifted above the hiss of the shower. “I-I’m f-fine.”

She wasn’t fine. She was crying. I walked away. Shoved a hand through my hair. Tossed the sat phone on the sofa. Stared at the bathroom door.

A muffled whimper drifted out.

I was back at the door in two steps. “Abby! I’m coming in.” I snapped the lock and entered, releasing a cloud of steam. She stood in an avocado green shower behind tempered glass, her eyes red-rimmed and her arms folded across her breasts.

I froze with my hand on the ruined knob, feeling like a brute. “I’m sorry. I’ll—”

“I can’t untangle it,” she said, her voice thick. She touched her hair, which lay over her shoulder in a clump. “There’s no conditioner a-and I don’t h-have a c-comb.”

I had the shower door open before she finished her sentence, and then I was inside and turning her around, urging her more fully under the spray. “Let me see what I can do.” I knew next to nothing about women’s hair, but it couldn’t be much different than untangling rope or a horse’s mane.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

She stood docile as I worked my fingers through the strands. Water pelted my face and chest, but I stayed where I was, forcing myself to go slow so I didn't tug at her scalp.

"Thank you," she murmured. After a second, her voice sank lower. "Sorry for the freak out session."

"You have nothing to apologize for," I said. "You should see me sort the mess of computer cords under the desk in my office. Whoever said men aren't supposed to cry never electrocuted himself while plugging a power strip into another power strip."

She laughed, which was what I'd intended, and I smiled as I tackled one of the more stubborn tangles. Up close, her chocolate-brown hair contained strands of deep red. I went knot by knot, until the freed sections streamed down her back, the ends dripping water onto her firm, rounded ass. More water sluiced down her legs, which were slender and well-toned.

And just like that, another vision of her arching under me formed in my brain. I shook my head to clear it, but my dick didn't get the message. Now I was hard as a rock and inches from temptation. Maybe if I moved quickly, I could hustle from the shower without her noticing my predicament.

But just as I started to withdraw my hands, her shoulders relaxed and she leaned into my touch with a contented sigh.

A groan shot into my throat. I'd told her nudity was no big deal to shifters, yet here I was with an aching cock and desire searing my veins. I stepped back, but my fingers

caught in her hair and I accidentally pulled her with me. My shoulders hit the shower wall at the same moment her ass bumped my groin.

We both froze. Fuck. There was nowhere to go. No graceful way to extricate myself from the mess I'd created. I braced myself for outrage or condemnation.

But when she turned, there was neither in her eyes. And where they'd been red before, now they were a bright emerald green. Pink tinged her cheekbones, and her pulse fluttered in her neck. She was gorgeous, her skin like porcelain and her full lips dotted with moisture. Water coursed down her perfect breasts, the tips as rosy as the blush in her cheeks.

Warning bells blared somewhere deep in my head, but it was hard to hear them over the sound of the water and my ragged breaths. This was a bad idea, and there were a dozen reasons why.

Except I couldn't seem to remember any of them.

Our gazes held.

There was a brief, shivering beat.

She lifted onto her toes just as I dipped my head. Our mouths met in a wet, passionate clash, both of us moaning. Her lips parted, and I plunged inside, sucking at her tongue as she ran her palms down my sides.

Desire shot through me, electricity hitting every pleasure zone. I turned her as I deepened the kiss, pushing her against the wall so I could explore her damp curves. She gave as good as she got, her hands roving over my chest and stomach as I cupped her firm breasts and pinched at her nipples.

Then she slid a hand to my cock and squeezed. White-hot lust struck all my nerve endings at once, yanking a groan from my chest. I broke off the kiss and rested my forehead against hers, my shoulders heaving as the shower spray pelted my skin.

“Abby...” My voice was gravel. I clung to her hips, need building like water behind a dam. “If you keep doing that, I’m not going to be able to stop.”

In response, she pumped my shaft, her wicked hand stroking me from root to tip.

My hands clenched her hips reflexively, my fingers biting deep. I pulled my head back, my throat so tight I barely managed to croak, “Abby—”

“I don’t want you to,” she said on a rush. Her green eyes were sheened with gold as she regarded me boldly, her head tipped back so she could hold my stare. She licked her lips, her pink tongue catching water. More water tracked down her cheeks and over her breasts. “I don’t want you to stop. I need to feel.”

I cupped her face in both hands, using my thumbs to wipe the water that fell like tears. She was so beautiful. And such a surprising contradiction. Delicate and strong. Soft and unbending.

She dragged in a breath, and her nipples brushed my chest. “Please don’t stop,” she whispered.

The dam broke. I gave in with a groan, crushing my mouth to hers as I pressed the length of my shaft between our bodies.

She melted under me, her pliant body molding to mine. Soft breasts mashed against my chest, and her hips lifted, urging her pussy against my cock.

Still kissing her, I snaked a hand between us, found her cleft, and made a lazy stroke

over her clit.

Her moan filled my mouth, and her nipples tightened against my chest. She slid a leg up my thigh, giving me more access.

I took it, plunging two fingers into her heat, then growling when her muscles clamped around me. Her moans kept coming, each one vibrating my tongue as her pussy squeezed and clenched.

She pulled her lips from mine, her breath hot against my cheek as she gasped, “More.”

I braced my free hand on the wall next to her head and dragged the tip of my cock through her heat, rubbing her clit. She grabbed my shoulders, her eyes heavy-lidded and burning with lust. I held her gaze as I pushed inside, ecstasy rolling through me as her muscles rippled up and down my shaft. She was wet and ready, and I glided easily, thrilling at the way she tightened around me. I withdrew halfway, then surged up, sheathing myself to the hilt.

She squeezed my shoulders, white teeth sinking into her plump lower lip.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

I hiked her leg higher on my hip and bent so my mouth brushed her ear. “You okay?”

“God, yes,” she gasped, her sex clenching so hard I sucked in a sharp breath.

When I could talk again, I kissed her neck. “You feel so fucking good. Like a hot fist around my cock.” She moaned in response, and I began to thrust, my face buried in her neck as I moved my hips against her. I braced a forearm against the shower wall and used my other hand to pull her leg even higher, angling my thrusts so I nudged her clit with each pass.

She shivered and clutched me tighter, grinding over my shaft. We fell into a rhythm, our gasps rising along with the steam. Pleasure suffused my shaft, each thrust taking me closer to the edge. I sucked at her neck, drawing breathy moans from her as I pumped harder, my water-slick skin slapping against hers. Her breasts jiggled between us, and I dipped my head to capture one tempting pink nipple in my mouth.

“Yes!” Her cry echoed in the tiny space, and her hands tangled in my hair, urging me closer.

I swirled my tongue over the taut peak, sucking and pulling as my thrusts grew faster and more disjointed. Then my balls tightened, my orgasm hurtling closer, and I had to release her so I could brace both hands above her head as I pumped my hips.

Our gazes locked, and I knew my eyes were as light as hers, both our wolves surging to the surface. My heart raced. The pulse in her neck throbbed. Her body shook as I thrust up and up, pounding harder. Water coursed over us, the spray gone cold, but it didn’t matter. All that mattered was here and now and the sound of her cries filling

my ears as I sank home again and again.

“Coming,” I growled. “Coming so fucking hard.” I squeezed my hands into fists, my jaw clenched as I thrust faster. Then she was coming, her mouth open on a long, shuddering cry as her sex spasmed around my shaft.

Just as my orgasm boiled up, I pulled out and gripped my cock, shooting my release on the shower floor. For a second, I could only stand there, my cock twitching as bliss flooded every pore. But as I settled back to earth, my gaze fell on my hand with its twisting tattoos that ran up my arm to my shoulder. Some swirls laid out my lineage, telling the story of generations of Rothkilde kings. Others spelled out sacred lycan laws.

Like how lycans were forbidden to mate with werewolves.

I wanted Abby. But I couldn’t have her, and my head knew it even if my body had chosen to forget for a time. If she wasn’t already pregnant, I couldn’t risk it happening now.

She made a soft sound, and I looked up to find her gaze on my arm. Her cheeks were flushed with the aftermath of desire, but her eyes were stark as she stared at the black markings.

I eased away from her. “I’m sorry. That shouldn’t have happened.”

“It’s all right.” She kept her gaze lowered, her emotions concealed beneath the thick fan of her lashes. “I...asked you to.”

Every part of me wanted to gather her into my arms, but that would have been a mistake—another atop the mountain I was accumulating with her. “I found a satellite phone and called my steward.”

She looked up at last. “Steward?”

“My second in command. He’s sending help. We should be at my headquarters outside New York City within a couple of hours. You’re under my protection. I’ll keep you safe.”

Even from me.

11

ABBY

It was warm in the cabin, but I shivered as Cyrus and I waited for his “help” to arrive. He hadn’t specified what that help was going to look like.

He also hadn’t said more than a handful of words to me since he left the bathroom. He’d barely looked at me, except to hand me a bundle of clothes when I emerged in one of the threadbare towels I’d found under the sink.

Now he stood at the window with his gaze on the forest outside. His sudden reticence probably had a lot to do with the danger that still surrounded us.

But as I huddled on the sofa in a hunter’s cast-offs, I couldn’t help thinking some of his coldness was due to regret.

Or disgust. Now that I’d had time to process them, his words from earlier sank in.

“Lycans and werewolves have always fought each other.”

“My people believe werewolves are an abomination.”

The last one echoed through my brain like a broken record. In Cyrus's mind, I was the same as Roman: undesirable. As if being turned into a monster against my will wasn't bad enough, I now had to live my life as some kind of supernatural second-class citizen.

No wonder Cyrus clearly regretted what passed between us in the shower. He wasn't just some superior, all-powerful lycan. He was a king.

Something inside me hardened. He wasn't the only one having regrets. I'd been forced into his world without my consent. I wasn't going to feel bad about ending up on the wrong side of a centuries-old battle I didn't understand. I certainly wasn't going to waste time on a man who regarded me as lesser. As soon as we got the hell out of this forest, I was going to carry on with my life. He'd promised to help me do just that.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

I stared at his back. Could I trust him? The scary part was, I wasn't sure I had a choice. And if I was pregnant...

I wasn't. We'd had sex one time.

Plus just now in the shower, a little voice reminded me. But he'd pulled out. God, what had I been thinking?

Just as panic threatened to rise, a distant thumping sound filled the air. In the kitchen, a glass on the counter began to rattle.

I stood, my heart in my throat. "What's happening?"

Cyrus turned. I must have looked ready to bolt, because he came to me and cupped his big hands around my shoulders. "It's okay. They're my people."

The thumping grew louder—and I recognized the unmistakable sound of a helicopter's rotors.

My lips parted. "Your people have helicopters?"

"Just one."

"Right," I said weakly. Just the one. Normal, regular people things. Wait until he heard how I closed my vet clinic on Fridays to keep my electricity bills down.

As the whole cabin began to shake, he grabbed my hand and rushed me outside.

Everything seemed to happen in fast-forward. Wind from the rotor blades threatened to flatten the trees. My hair whipped around my face, blinding me and forcing me to keep my head down. But I was aware of two large, black-clad men jumping from the helicopter and standing guard as Cyrus helped me enter and then take a seat.

In a way, the commotion was a good thing, since it stopped me from thinking about the risk of an attack. By the time I remembered to worry about Roman and his men, we were in the air. The cabin and the forest dropped away, quickly turning into a miniature world that didn't seem quite real.

But the events that had happened there were very real. My heightened senses and the fatigue dragging at my body were painful reminders of how much my life had changed since I answered Roman's house call.

The thrill of being airborne faded as I realized the two strangers were watching me. They were both big, muscular men—and obviously lycans. A tingling awareness at the base of my skull told me that. Their gazes were cool and impersonal as they took in my oversize clothing and tangled hair. Self-consciousness stole over me, and I focused my gaze out the window as the word “abomination” repeated in my head.

Cyrus was silent beside me. What had he told his people about us? About me? What could I expect when we landed?

I didn't have answers, and I was suddenly too tired to contemplate them. As my eyelids grew heavy, I leaned my head against the back of the leather seat and let sleep take me.

* * *

It seemed like mere seconds passed before a gentle hand was shaking me awake.

“Abby.” Cyrus’s deep voice penetrated my sluggish thoughts as my brain came back online. We’d landed, and the helicopter’s rotors were winding down.

And instead of a postage stamp landscape outside my window there was a large expanse of manicured lawn. Beyond it sat a palatial house with more chimneys than I could count. Two men and one woman stood in a half circle drive in front of it.

I was instantly awake—and my throat went instantly dry. Cyrus wasn’t just rich. He was mega-rich.

As the pilot flipped off switches, the two muscle-bound men exited the helicopter and stood at attention, as if they waited for Cyrus’s instructions.

Like servants did for kings.

My heart began to pound. There was a brick wall around the perimeter of the property. To keep people out...or keep them in?

“Come,” Cyrus said beside me, and his voice seemed deeper now. Rich with authority.

There was nowhere else to go. Nothing else to do but put my hand in his and let him help me from the aircraft and lead me across the lawn. My stomach fluttered with nerves and my heart threatened to beat from my chest. I focused on not tripping over my too-large pants as we crossed the lawn.

“Hold your head high,” my father had always said. “You’ve worked hard for everything you have.”

Tears pricked my eyes. He was right. I had nothing to be ashamed of. Four years of undergrad and four years of veterinary school. I’d worked hard for all it.

So I let Daniel Rowe's words wrap around me—and I squared my shoulders as Cyrus and I approached the group of people in front of the mansion.

All three were lycans. The woman was runway model gorgeous, with icy blond hair and clear blue eyes. She regarded me with obvious shock, her pink lips parting on a gasp she quickly smothered. The tall, blond man at her side was also clearly shocked but he did a better job of concealing it. His gaze made a rapid sprint down my body before he looked at Cyrus and bowed his head. "My lord. It's good to see you safely returned. We were all worried about you."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

“I’m sure,” Cyrus said in a tone cold enough to freeze a desert.

The blond man’s pale blue eyes flashed with irritation, which was precisely the same moment the second man stepped forward.

“Cyrus,” he said warmly, “it’s good to see you.” He shot a quick look at the blond man as if challenging him to say otherwise.

Cyrus’s icy demeanor thawed considerably. “Garrick.” He clasped the other man’s hand and pulled him into a brief embrace. “I’ve never been so happy to see your ugly mug.”

Garrick chuckled and pounded Cyrus’s back. He was far from ugly. He wore his wavy brown hair slightly long, and his warm brown eyes seemed permanently crinkled at the corners. Like every other male I’d seen since I answered Roman’s call, he was tall and muscular, but his size wasn’t intimidating. Maybe because he looked too friendly to use his bulk as a weapon.

As he and Cyrus parted, he looked at me. “You must be Abby.”

“Y-Yes.” I cleared my raspy throat. “Yes. I am. Abby Rowe.” New werewolf. Poor person. Trying to hold my shit together.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Abby.” Garrick exchanged an inscrutable look with Cyrus. “I know you’ve had a rough couple of days. I’ll show you to your room—”

“Have a servant do it,” the blond man said. He glared at Cyrus, and his tone

punctured the bubble of warmth that had swelled during Cyrus and Garrick's greeting. "You imperiled the entire race with your foolishness with Roman. And now you bring one of them into our midst."

Garrick's face went ashen. "Foster, this is uncalled for."

"It's very called for," the blond man said. "In fact, it's my right and obligation to call a meeting of the council, which I intend to do immediately."

Cyrus's hands curled into fists. The temperature seemed to drop several degrees. Gold rolled over his eyes as he stepped close to Foster. "Call your meeting, Carrington, but you'll meet with me first."

Foster didn't back down. "Lead the way."

"Garrick," Cyrus said without breaking Foster's stare, "take Abby upstairs and then meet me in my study. We're dealing with this right now."

"Of course, my lord," Garrick said smoothly.

Before I could protest or even think about what was happening, Garrick took my arm and steered me up the front steps and through the double doors. We passed through a series of elegant rooms before ascending a grand staircase. After multiple long hallways and several twists and turns, we reached a gorgeous bedroom.

Although "bedroom" wasn't really the word for it. This was a hotel suite, with a living room, sleeping area, and small dining room. I gawked. I couldn't help it.

"I apologize for that scene downstairs," Garrick said behind me. "And for Foster's insults."

I turned, unsure how to respond. My first instinct was to say “it’s fine” but it wasn’t. And I couldn’t say “I understand” because I didn’t. So I forced a smile and said, “The room is beautiful.”

“Make yourself at home. There’s an en suite bathroom and...” He hesitated, as if he was unsure what to say next. Finally, he cleared his throat. “I’m sure Cyrus will clarify this, but for now it’s best if you don’t leave your room.”

My stomach clenched. “All right.” I just stopped myself from looking to see if there were bars on the windows.

Garrick nodded. “It’s good to meet you, Abby. I’ll see you later.”

Then he was gone. And I was alone.

In another kind of prison.

12

CYRUS

Control. I clung to it as I faced Foster Carrington across my desk. He was a dick of the highest order, and his bloodline was ancient. For many lycans, those were the two most desirable qualities in a leader. No wonder so many on the Council of Nobles longed to see him on the throne.

But my bloodline was slightly more ancient. Nobler. Prouder. My lineage was pure, and that mattered to the nobles, too. The names of every lycan king whose ass had sat on that throne were inked on my arms, not Foster’s.

He despised me for it.

And now Roman had given him a shiny new weapon in the form of Abby. If anything happened to me, the aristocratic families that sat on the council would proclaim Foster king before my body was cold. Before today, he'd mostly kept his insults to himself. He'd stayed in his place, content to rule the council and make trouble from the sidelines.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

Apparently, that was all over now. Our cold war had gone hot.

Garrick entered and sat in the chair next to Foster's.

I looked at my steward. "How is she?"

"Fine, as far as I can tell. I told her to stay in her room."

"Good." I looked at Foster. "If you ever challenge me in public like that again, I'll break all your teeth."

"Fitting," he said, "since you've broken our laws."

I gripped the arms of my chair. "Abby is my business."

"No. She's everyone's business, Cyrus." Foster tilted his head, as if I was a mystery he struggled to understand. "Do you really think you can stuff her in a bedroom and everyone will just forget about her? First, you left without telling anyone where you were going. Then you disappeared for weeks. Now you're back and Garrick says you met with Roman in secret. Your father would have never—"

"Exactly," I said. "My father would have never met with Roman, or any werewolf alpha." Some of my anger ebbed. I looked at Garrick because I couldn't stand seeing Foster's face as I admitted how stupid I'd been. "I went to Roman to broker peace. He's the most powerful alpha on the east coast, and he's been turning wolves left and right. Soon, he'll have the numbers to overrun us. We can't beat him in battle. Diplomacy seemed like a wise alternative."

Foster scoffed. “There is nothing diplomatic about negotiating with a dog.”

“There is when the dog is tearing at your throat,” I snapped. “The werewolves are destroying us. Maybe it’s not kingly to talk with the alphas, but I for one am tired of burying lycans. I want peace.”

Garrick cleared his throat. “What happened in Maine, my lord?”

Memories of the basement flooded me. So many nights of pain and regret. Abby was the only bright spot in that darkness. I’d do whatever I could to shield her from Foster’s hate.

I turned my gaze to his cold blue one. Maybe if he knew how brave she’d been, he would treat her with the respect she deserved. “Roman set me up,” I said bluntly. “I was stupid to go alone, but those were his conditions. He ambushed me. I probably don’t need to go into detail about what happened after that. When things got dire and it looked like I might not survive, he summoned Abby. She’s a doctor. She kept me alive. And Roman bit her. He obviously didn’t expect her to turn.”

Foster’s expression stayed hard. “If Roman sired her, he’ll want her back. The werewolves covet females. And an alpha siring one? He won’t give her up, even if it means coming right to our doors. She’s a threat as long as she’s here.”

Any goodwill I might have felt toward him evaporated. “No one touches Abby. No one.”

He stood. “I’m summoning the council, and we’re putting this situation to the vote. Your pet can’t stay here. She puts us all in danger.”

I was out of my chair so fast it toppled backwards. I snarled over the desk. “Get your fucking votes. They mean nothing to me. I am king here.”

He held my stare. “For now.”

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s an observation. Your father was a realist, my lord. This war will only end when one side is eliminated. It’s werewolves or lycans. And now you’ve brought the enemy into the heart of our territory.” He offered a short bow and left the study.

Garrick waited until Foster’s footsteps had faded. Then he slumped in his chair and gave me a weary look. “I’m so sorry about him showing up today. I know you said to keep him in the dark, but I swear that fucker has a sixth sense. He showed up as I was readying the chopper and prepping the team. He threatened to withhold aid unless I filled him in.”

Fury rose, but I forced it down. It wasn’t Garrick’s fault Foster was a sanctimonious prick.

“Don’t worry about it.” I righted my chair and sat heavily. “Do you think he has the votes?”

Garrick appeared to think it over. “You have the nobles who were loyal to your father, but Foster will make a lot of noise. If he gets a decree, the council could make life unpleasant for Abby.”

“She might be pregnant,” I said bluntly. “With my child.”

Garrick paled.

“Roman...forced the issue.”

Silence reigned for a long moment. Then Garrick swallowed thickly. “The child

would be your heir...”

“Yes, which is why Abby isn’t going anywhere, regardless of what the council says.”
My blood simmered at the very thought of Foster and his cronies trying to throw her out. “The law is on my side when it comes to a child.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

Garrick nodded slowly. “It is. The council can’t touch the king’s children. In fact, you have almost unhindered authority when it comes to domestic matters. You can claim any female you wish, you can take a—” He sucked in a breath.

I frowned. “What is it?”

“You can take a concubine.”

I stared at him. “You don’t mean—”

“Take Abby as your concubine. It’s the only surefire way to protect her from Foster and the others.”

Everything in me recoiled. Garrick was right about the law. Historically and legally, lycan kings were permitted to claim any female they wanted, the idea being that siring an heir for the race was more important than any given female’s wishes on the matter. Our kind reproduced so sparingly, and childbirth was difficult for lycan females. More than one king had furthered his line through a concubine. Several of my ancestors had taken multiple women into their beds. Highborn or low, wed or single, it didn’t make a difference. If the king wanted her, he simply took her.

But it was an antiquated practice and had been since my grandfather’s time.

“I can’t do that, Garrick.” And yet, the thought of taking Abby—of marking her and claiming her for my own—unleashed something dark and primal inside me. I didn’t want to examine it too closely. But my dick tightened, and my blood heated at the mere idea of having her at my beck and call. Of knowing any male who looked at her

would immediately know she was mine.

Because taking her as a concubine meant marking her. Putting my brand on her. Property of Cyrus. That was what the world would see. And they would know I owned every inch of her.

And that was why claiming her as a concubine would save her from the council's vote. Because the king's property was untouchable. It didn't matter if she was a lycan or a werewolf. The law was silent on that issue.

Garrick's brown eyes were steady. Non-judgmental. That was his job: to give me the best advice possible without judgment. He wasn't backing down, and he wasn't offering any other solutions.

Because, dammit, his idea might actually work, and he knew it.

"She'll never forgive me," I told him.

"Maybe not, but she'll stay alive."

13

ABBY

I really, really wanted some clothes. Preferably my own clothes. I didn't own anything extravagant, but I would have killed for a pair of my worn out jeans and a soft hoodie.

Instead, I was swaddled in a robe in the corner of the sofa in my suite. It was beautiful, but none of it belonged to me. Not the plush furniture. Not the crystal chandelier. Not the comfortable bed where I'd slept for half the day. Not the glass

shower where I'd washed the last traces of the basement and the cabin from my body.

I didn't even have my own underwear—or any underwear. And while the robe covered everything I wanted covered, it left me feeling...vulnerable. One yank on the belt and I'd be naked. Cyrus had said nudity wasn't a problem for shifters, but it was still a problem for me. If I ever got out of this mess, I was splurging on a new wardrobe.

If. Wasn't that the operative word for my life now? If I got out. If I survived. If Cyrus ever bothered to speak to me again.

Because it had been hours and so far he was MIA. Maybe he had a lengthy list of king-related tasks to attend to, but I couldn't help feeling like I should have ranked a little closer to the top. I'd helped him escape, after all. We'd forged a bond in that basement.

At least I thought we had.

But at the first opportunity, he'd dumped me on his steward and tucked me in a bedroom.

My stomach growled.

Great. Now I was naked and hungry.

A soft knock interrupted my internal whining. I was so desperate for human contact, I rushed to the door and threw it open without thinking. And I'd expected Cyrus, so I was shocked to see the beautiful blond woman from earlier standing on the threshold.

If possible, she was even more gorgeous than she'd been this morning. She was dressed in slim-fitting jeans and a tight blue sweater that matched her sapphire eyes.

Her black stilettos looked sharp enough to double as weapons, and her makeup was flawless. She was a perfect doll.

And I was a bedraggled veterinarian in a borrowed bathrobe.

“Hi,” she said, offering a shy smile. And if she was acting, she was awfully good at it. Pink entered her cheeks, and she looked down as she spoke in demure tones. “I’m Celeste...Cyrus’s consort.”

My world collapsed under me. For a moment, I gaped at her, unable to string words together. When they finally came, they emerged from a throat gone painfully tight. “Cyrus is married?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

“Oh no, no.” She shook her head, and the pink deepened. “No, it’s not like that. Cyrus and I aren’t married. I was pledged to him as a child, but then my parents died and I came to live here. We grew up together, and by the time we were supposed to marry we couldn’t do it. I love him like a brother.” She shook her head again, and she seemed to wince a little this time. “I can’t be his queen, but he’s an honorable male so he won’t set me aside until I find another.”

My head spun as a flurry of emotions coursed through me. She’d just hit me with a lot of information, but the chief takeaway was that Cyrus had a childhood friend who was also his sort-of fiancée—whom he did not sleep with.

I wasn’t going to think too hard about how relieved that made me feel.

She lifted her arm a little and for the first time I noticed there was clothing draped over it. “I hope you don’t mind I brought you some clothes.”

“No. I mean, no, I don’t mind.” I stepped back. “Um, please come in.”

She entered, trailing a light, feminine scent as lovely as she was. “I’ll put these on the bed...” She lifted a microbladed brow. “Unless you prefer them somewhere else?”

“The bed is wonderful,” I said, as if I welcomed supermodels delivering clothes into my suite all the time. I followed her as she moved into the bedroom. Her platinum hair fell in soft waves down her back. How had Cyrus resisted this woman? I didn’t know many men who would have.

She patted the clothes in place and then faced me. “Foster...the blond man you met

downstairs? He's the head of the Council of Nobles. He said you were turned against your will."

My chest tightened. "Yes." Just like that, I was reminded of the staggering difference between us. I was a werewolf—a dirty, undesirable thing. I braced myself for her to say something offensive.

"I'm so sorry." Sympathy gleamed in her eyes. Her hand fluttered up like she might touch my arm, but then she lowered it. "This must be overwhelming for you, coming here."

"It is." The pressure in my chest increased. She was so lovely, and so seemingly sincere, a lump formed in my throat. I swallowed it. "Hold your cards close to your chest, squirt," my dad's voice said in my mind. I didn't know this woman—or her intentions. And she was a lycan, which meant she was predisposed to view me as an enemy.

Foster certainly did. He'd looked at me like I was dog poop on the bottom of his shoe. Then he'd demanded some kind of meeting. For a second, I considered asking Celeste about it, but I pushed the idea away. She might not be my enemy, but I didn't know if she was my friend.

"Abby?" She touched me now, her fingers long and elegant on the sleeve of my robe. "Everything is going to be okay, all right? Cyrus is a good male. He'll help you figure out where to go from here."

A dam inside me burst. "The only place I want to go is home." Words flowed before I could stop them. "I'm a veterinarian with a practice that's going to close unless I can get back to work. I stand to lose everything all because I got tangled up with a psychopath, and now I'm stuck here in this robe and Cyrus just left me here by myself with no explanation!" My shoulders heaved. A tear had tracked down my

cheek.

Celeste stared at me with wide blue eyes.

I dashed the tear from my face. “I’m sorry. That was quite the outburst.”

She recovered, and then she offered me a smile—a real one that cracked the porcelain doll facade and gave me a glimpse of someone far less than perfect. “You’re right to be upset with Cyrus. He shouldn’t have dumped you in here. I know he’s busy with Foster’s antics, but that’s no excuse for leaving you in the dark.”

“It’s fine,” I said, waving it off. Embarrassment heated my cheeks. “Thank you for the clothes.”

“Of course.” She eyed my body. “We’re nearly the same height, but you’re smaller through the hips than I am, so the jeans might be a little loose.”

I seriously doubted that, but I nodded. “I’m sure they’ll be great. Anything is better than a robe, right?”

She grinned, and I found myself grinning back. The first tentative wings of friendship fluttered between us.

“Can I get you anything else?” she asked. “Something to eat?”

“I would love something to eat.”

Her eyes twinkled. “You got it. Give me like thirty minutes.”

True to her word, she returned within a half hour with a plate groaning with food. There was baked chicken, creamy mashed potatoes, and a thick slice of chocolate

cake. She left me with a promise to “talk later” and then she was gone, leaving me to wonder if she was secretly some kind of lycan fairy godmother.

But there wasn't a pumpkin carriage waiting for me outside the (thankfully unbarred) windows, and none of the clothes on my bed were a ball gown. However, there were comfortable jeans and several high-quality button-downs, so I dressed and settled in front of the television with my feast.

I ate slowly, only half-watching a sitcom with an irritating laugh track. After a while, I flipped through the channels, shuffling from cable news to a show where a young couple tried to choose between three different houses they probably couldn't afford. It was so surreal to see regular humans doing mundane things like shopping for real estate, I turned the TV off.

Now that I knew life was far from mundane—and that humans were most definitely not alone in this world—I couldn't lose myself in mindless entertainment. For now, I was a prisoner in Cyrus's home. I was fed and clothed and comfortable, but I wasn't free to walk out the door. And if I was pregnant...

I placed a hand on my lower abdomen. What would happen to me? To my child? Fatigue swept me, which just ratcheted my fear even higher. Was my extreme hunger an early pregnancy sign? Was this tiredness a side effect of all the changes I'd gone through, or was I carrying Cyrus's baby?

I'd never given much thought to kids. I'd been too busy with school and then scraping together a practice I could be proud of. That Dad could be proud of.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

I tipped my head back on the sofa and stared at the ornate ceiling with its sparkling chandelier. “Oh Daddy,” I whispered, “I could really use your advice right now.”

No answer was forthcoming. Per usual. My father’s voice played often in my mind, but those were just memories. He never had anything new to say, because he was gone.

The bed beckoned. Sleep was safe. Easy. It was a choice, too—one of the few I had agency to make at the moment.

I dragged myself across the room and let the mattress swallow me. Oblivion beckoned.

I dove into it, grateful for the chance to escape.

14

CYRUS

Abby was sleeping when I entered.

It didn’t surprise me. It was fully dark outside now, and she was probably exhausted. Plus, I’d taken my time after my meeting with Garrick.

Even though I’d left my study resolved to mark Abby and make her my concubine, doubts had plagued me. Instead of going to her right away, I’d taken some time to think things over. I’d also showered and wolfed down a couple of rare steaks. I hadn’t

realized how accustomed I'd been to operating at less than full strength.

Now I felt reinvigorated even as worry gnawed at me. Abby wasn't going to like me very much if I went through with this. But what choice did I have? Foster liked to pretend lycans were a superior race that should remain unsullied by werewolf concerns.

The problem with that approach was that werewolf concerns were determined to invade our lives—and even end them. Lycan birth rates had never been stellar. Now that Roman and other alphas were making it their mission to turn new wolves and build shifter armies, I couldn't afford to live in an ivory tower. Foster refused to see that, and he endangered everyone with his willful blindness.

But I was determined to keep Abby safe from his ignorance, and if I had to put her in a tower to do it, then so be it.

Gazing down at her now, a rush of protectiveness filled me. Guilt too. I'd left her alone while I dealt with Foster and then my own indecisiveness. She must have been frightened.

"Sorry, sweetheart," I whispered as I reached down and drew a lock of glossy dark hair away from her face. She looked impossibly young and heartbreakingly beautiful in sleep. Her hand was curved under her cheek, and her soft, pink lips were parted. Her eyelashes were like silky fans on her glowing skin. Someone had brought her clothes...

Celeste. Alarm lurched through me. Fuck, I should have anticipated that meeting. Abby probably wouldn't understand my relationship with Celeste, who was only slightly younger than I and had been born in a time when most females were the property of their fathers only to become property of their husbands. Humans had moved past that era, but lycans lived a lot longer than humans. As a result, our social

habits could be...anachronistic. It was only within the last few years that Celeste had stopped being scandalized by women wearing pants.

Abby's brow furrowed, and she murmured something I couldn't catch.

I traced a chocolate-colored brow with my fingertip, remembering how her fur had been the same rich color. She was beautiful as a wolf. And she was so fucking strong to have survived what she had. She'd be a phenomenal mother.

My cock tightened, desire rising hot in my veins. Looking at her, I could picture her belly swollen with my child. I shouldn't want that. A pregnancy would make her more of a target than she already was. But the idea of her carrying my heir triggered every possessive instinct I possessed. It scared me in its intensity. My blood pumped harder, and the need to mark her had my gums throbbing as my fangs threatened to descend. I drew a ragged breath.

Her eyes opened, and she rolled to her back and gazed up at me with that brilliant green that always managed to surprise me. "Cyrus."

"Yes," I rasped. "I'm here." I should have been here sooner.

"I met your wife," she said in a voice husky with sleep. But there was no anger in it, and I released a shaky, relieved breath like the coward I was.

"Celeste isn't my wife."

"She called herself your consort."

I sat on the bed near her hip. "That's right. There are twelve noble families who make up the Council of Nobles. Celeste is from one of the oldest and most prestigious. Bloodlines are everything to lycans. We structure our marriages around them." I

pushed a hand through my hair, which was still slightly damp from my shower. “Lycan parents arrange pairings when their children are young, sometimes infants. It’s kind of an industry, actually. Genealogists pore over charts trying to determine which couple will produce offspring with the strongest beasts.”

Abby raised an eyebrow. “Sounds romantic.”

A smile tugged at my lips. “Hardly.” My amusement faded. “Celeste’s father was strong, but he lost control of his wolf. It happens sometimes. It was a bit of a scandal. Noble families can be uptight prigs, honestly.”

Concern shone in Abby’s eyes. “Did the scandal affect Celeste?”

I nodded. “She’s not very marketable when it comes to marriage. I know that probably sounds horrible, but it’s the way of our world, unfortunately. I’ve known her since I was a boy, and there’s never been any kind of attraction between us. But I still want the best for her. She has a home here for as long as she needs it.”

Abby sat up and placed a gentle palm on my cheek. “That’s one of the sweetest things I’ve ever heard. I’m glad you were there for her...and that you continue to be.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

An unfamiliar emotion rose in me. Then I realized it was bashfulness. Abby's praise was making me soft—and I was kind of into it.

My dick was definitely into it. It wasn't soft, though.

I cleared my throat. "I didn't do anything special. Celeste needed a male protector. I was happy to give her one."

Abby smiled. "It's the twenty-first century, you know."

"Ah, but I'm not from the twenty-first century."

She bit her lip, and the sight of her white teeth sinking into the plump pink almost did me in right then and there. She gazed at me with a mix of desire and confusion. "Why can't I control myself when I'm around you?" she asked, almost to herself.

"Do you want to?" I murmured.

The scent of her desire bloomed, and it stoked my need higher. Desire pumped through my veins. I needed her—needed to peel her clothes off and see her lithe body spread open for me. I'd never had her that way. Not yet. And I fucking needed it. Lust clawed at my insides like a wild animal thrashing to get out.

But I couldn't make a move without Abby. I'd come here to do something morally questionable. I was going to cross a line, and she didn't even know the line was there. Before I stepped over it, I had to be completely certain she wanted me. I had to give her that.

“Do you want to?” I asked again. “Do you want to control yourself around me?”

She swallowed, and her reply was more breath than sound. “No.”

It was enough. I unbuttoned her shirt—a prim, white button-down. Virginal. My hands shook as I worked the buttons through the fabric. Then I was easing it off her and staring at her gorgeous breasts rising above a lacy white bra. Somehow, seeing her this way was even more erotic than seeing her wearing nothing at all. She was like a present I got to unwrap.

I removed her jeans, my breath hitching when her panties slid down with the denim. I bent and kissed her hipbone...then the mound of her pussy. She was wet, her sweet slit shiny with arousal. But I didn't kiss her there just yet. No, I saved that for later.

Lust pounded me—a drumbeat galloping in sync with my heart. I'd had her before, but not at my leisure. Our first encounter didn't bear pondering. Our time in the shower had been desperate and rushed.

But this time was slow. Steady. Every moment was languid and stretched. This wasn't about fucking. This was about making her feel precious.

Once I had her completely bare, I made short work of my clothes. Satisfaction thrummed through me as she drank me in, her green eyes lingering on my chest and abs before sliding to my dick. I'd never given much thought to my body, but I was proud of it now because it pleased her.

When I couldn't wait any longer, I eased her onto her back and settled between her long legs. Her pussy was warm and soft against my dick, and I pressed my hips hard against hers, nudging my shaft between her lips and letting my length drag against her clit. Sweet, wet sounds greeted me, making the blaze inside me roar to an inferno. I rocked my hips, gliding up and down her cleft. Giving her a taste of what I intended

to give her. Because that was the inevitable conclusion to what was transpiring between us. I was going to be inside her. I was going to mark her and make her totally and completely mine.

“You’re so beautiful,” I said, my voice like gravel in my ears.

Her lips quirked in a smile with more than a hint of mischief. “Not so bad yourself.”

For a fleeting moment, shame almost had me pulling back. She trusted me, and she’d opened herself to me—literally. I was a thief at the gate, ready to take more than she’d agreed to give.

But then she arched up, her perfect tits crowned with puckered pink nipples, and I was lost all over again.

She was utterly gorgeous with her glossy dark hair spread on the pillow and that charming beauty mark at the corner of her lip. Her lips, her nose, her lush mouth. Her elegant brows and those glittering green eyes. How was I supposed to resist her?

I wasn’t. I couldn’t.

“I want to taste you,” I said, and I slid down her body with her soft moans echoing in my ears. I planted a featherlight kiss on her trembling belly, then another on her pink, swollen clit. Her pussy was as pretty as the rest of her—all pink, slick folds. I licked over her opening, and she shuddered and spread her legs wider.

“Delicious,” I said against her plump folds. Then I traced the tip of my tongue around her clit.

“Cyrus,” she gasped, arching again. Her hands slid into my hair and pulled.

I smiled against her pussy. “You like this?” I licked her again, circling her entrance. “I can’t tell.”

“Yes!” She lifted her hips, pushing against me. “I love it.”

“Then you’ll have more of it.” I tongued her clit, lapping at the hard little bud while she shuddered above me. When I sucked her into my mouth, she bucked so frantically I had to pin her slender hips down with both hands. I kissed and licked and suckled her, slowing down at times when her breathing grew too rapid. I wanted this to last. It might be the only chance I got to savor her.

“Cyrus...Cyrus,” she moaned. “I can’t...” Her breathy sighs floated around me on gossamer wings, each one sinking into my flesh with the sweetest hooks.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

I moved back up her body and braced myself on my forearms on either side of her head. My dick was leaking, my balls so tight I had to bite back a groan. “Are you ready for me?” I asked her.

She traced a fingertip over my mouth, gliding through her own wetness. “Please,” she said, and her plea notched another arrow of regret.

It loosed as I slid into her, the tip slicing the muscle I’d sometimes considered too cold and hard to ever beat this hard for someone else. I bled out as I moved within her, plunging hard and fast. I pounded her, plundering her pussy like the savage I was. Something raw and primal inside me threw back its head and roared. It wasn’t my beast. This was mine, all mine, and it was wholly new. Abby had drawn it forth.

She hooked her legs around my waist, trapping me in the most beautiful prison. Sweat beaded at my temples. I dropped my forehead to the soft, sensitive skin under her ear and kissed her, tasting salt and sin and candy. That was Abby. She was every dessert and everything forbidden.

My hips moved on their own, my dick so hard and aching. Her heat engulfed me. Swallowed me. Her perfect pussy grabbed at my shaft, sucking me in.

I never wanted to leave.

“Fuck,” I rasped, a plea in my voice. Forgive me. My fangs punched through my gums.

“Cyrus!” she screamed, her head thrown back and the tendons in her neck taut. She

came all over my cock, her pussy clenching so hard I actually had to pump harder to fight through her grip.

When my own release boiled up, I pulled from her and spilled all over her belly. My hips jerked, and my vision dimmed as pleasure ripped through me. I forced my eyes open, my jaw clenched tight. Because I was not missing this. I wanted to see my come splattered all over her soft belly and heaving tits.

And I did.

Then I plunged my face to her neck and sank my fangs deep.

She screamed—not in pleasure this time but in pain. And shock.

I bit harder. Blood coated my tongue. Electricity zipped down my spine as a sizzling connection was formed.

It was done.

Abby was mine.

15

ABBY

Agony streaked through my neck, instantly evaporating my post-orgasm haze. I went to shove Cyrus off me, but he was already retreating. He left the bed and strode away, his dark head bent and one hand on the back of his neck.

And damn if my body didn't still react to the sight of his tight, bare ass and the swirls of dark ink that ran down his arms.

Except wait a minute. He'd just gnawed a chunk from my neck. I hated him right now!

"What the fuck!" I scrambled to my feet and over to a mirror, where I shoved my hair aside and examined my neck. I'd expected a gaping wound, but it was already closing. The puncture points sealed before my eyes, leaving the white outline of Cyrus's bite. I rubbed at it.

"It won't go away," he said behind me. In the mirror, he was still turned around, his back to me. He sounded weary. Almost...resigned. "That kind of mark never fades."

I went to the living room and found my robe. After shoving my arms into it and belting it tightly, I returned to the bedroom and faced off with Cyrus. "What kind of mark? Why did you bite me like that?" The pain was gone. Now there was merely a faint tingling sensation. I resisted the impulse to scratch at it.

He went to his clothes and began dressing, his expression shuttered.

My jaw dropped. "Cyrus?" I moved into his line of sight. "Why did you bite me?" He hadn't used a condom, either. My face flushed. There was no excuse for such carelessness, especially when I absolutely could not have this man's child. He knew it, and I knew it.

But that was beside the point at the moment. I had a bad feeling about this, and the way he was acting wasn't helping.

He met my gaze at last, his silver eyes inscrutable. "I did what I had to do. When I met with Foster Carrington tonight—" He waved a hand. "He's the head of the—"

"I know who he is," I said impatiently. "Celeste told me."

Cyrus looked like he wanted to say something about that. Instead, he drew a deep breath and said, “Foster is calling a meeting of the council. He wants them to vote to remove you from this house...and from our headquarters here in New York. It would put you at the mercy of Roman and any other alpha who might try to claim you.” He took a step toward me. “I won’t let that happen, Abby. So I claimed you.”

My lips parted. The uneasy feeling in my gut grew stronger. “Claimed me how?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

“Our laws allow the king to claim any female he wishes. So I took you as my concubine.” His gaze flicked to my neck. “That mark is protection. No one can take you from me now.”

For a long moment, I was actually speechless. Concubine had one meaning, and it was unambiguous. I put a hand over the wound, as if hiding it might make it go away. “This isn’t protection. It’s property. You made me your property.”

“I had no choice.”

“There is always a choice!” My voice climbed. It was probably against the rules to yell at the king, but I didn’t care right now. The king was a liar, and he deserved every ounce of my anger. “I don’t belong to you, Cyrus, and I’m certainly not going to lie down and serve as your plaything. I just want to return to my normal life. I have a practice. People depend on me—”

“I understand that. But your patients will find other physicians. Other hospitals.”

Confusion swamped me. “I’m a veterinarian, not an MD.”

He blinked. Then his shoulders relaxed, and he almost looked relieved. “You’re not an actual doctor?”

Oh no, he did not just say that. I leaned close so there was no chance of him mishearing me. “I’m very much an actual doctor. Vet school is just as long as medical school. My patients are animals, of which there are thousands of different variations, in case you didn’t know.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you.”

It was too late for that. I swung around and headed for the door.

“Abby.” His deep voice boomed and then his hand clamped down on my arm. He spun me around. “Where are you going?”

“Home!” I tried to shake him off, but he wouldn’t budge. “You might not respect what I do, but that’s not going to stop me from living my life. It’s my life, and it belongs to me. Not you.” I tugged at his grip. “Let me go!”

“I can’t.” He pulled me close, until his silvery gaze was inches from mine. “Roman will never leave you alone. Don’t you understand that? Female werewolves simply don’t live on their own. You’re a commodity now, whether you like it or not.” He shook me a little. “Think about what that means, Abby. You say you don’t want to be a plaything. If the werewolves catch you, you’ll spend your life as precisely that, with men you don’t want between your legs.”

I glared at him, and my voice went deadly low as I said, “You mean like I did just now?”

Shock glazed his eyes. We stayed like that for a second, our harsh breaths mingling. With agonizing slowness, he released me and stepped back.

And it was like a death.

My voice shook. “You can’t keep me here. Not as your concubine. Not as your anything.”

“You’re wrong about that. You’re not going anywhere, especially when you might be carrying my child.”

I just stopped myself from touching my stomach—a protective gesture I had no business making. And he had no business talking about his hypothetical baby when he was only using it as an excuse to curtail my freedom.

I licked my lips. “I’ll take a pregnancy test. I’ll take one every day until my”—my face flamed, which made me feel ridiculous—“until my period comes. If I’m not pregnant, you have to let me go.”

His expression stayed hard, his eyes cold. “Have you been paying attention? I’m the king. I don’t have to do anything.”

“I’m a werewolf, not a lycan. I’m not one of your subjects. You have no rights over me.” Triumph flared in my chest, and I knew it gleamed in my eyes. See? I have been paying attention.

He pointed to my neck. “That bite gives me rights. It gives me every right. If I snap my fingers, you come running. Understand?”

Heat licked through me. Why, oh why, was my body such a traitor for this man? “I understand. But anything you want from me you’ll have to take by force. And that will make you no better than Roman.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. “Pregnant or not, you’re staying put.” He turned and stalked to the door. He opened it and stopped, and he didn’t turn as he added, “Don’t leave this room without permission.”

“You’re a tyrant,” I spat, “not a king.”

His shoulders stiffened.

He left, not quite slamming the door on his way out.

ABBY

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

In college, I once put off writing a paper until a week before the end of the semester. My whole grade was riding on it, so I locked myself in my dorm room, ordered takeout, and wrote for days on end. When it was all said and done, I got an eighty percent—and I also got an understanding of how solitary confinement can make someone go absolutely insane.

After a week in my room following Cyrus's betrayal, I was beginning to think I was well on my way to a padded cell. My suite was spacious, but I hadn't felt the sun on my face in days.

Cyrus's parting words to me replayed often in my head. "Don't leave this room without permission."

He hadn't said "don't leave this room." He'd given me an out. The problem was, it was obvious he meant I needed permission to leave from him.

And he could go right to hell.

I wasn't asking him for anything. If I had to stay in my suite forever, I would.

The scary part, though, was I starting to think he might be calling my bluff. Over the past seven days, servants had delivered regular meals directly to my door. The food was delicious, so I had no complaints there. Each meal was Michelin-star worthy. Not that I had any idea what it took to earn a Michelin star.

Celeste had visited, making me laugh and bringing me clothes. She kept my spirits up as much as possible. Garrick had stopped by too, asking if I needed anything and

avoiding speaking of Cyrus.

In fact, nobody spoke about Cyrus. He was absent from every conversation.

But I was ashamed to admit he was very much present in my dreams. More than once, I'd woken with my heart pounding and my body on fire. A few times, I'd even let my hand wander south so I could stroke my slick folds while I pressed my other fist to my mouth to muffle my cries.

My days had fallen into a sad routine. I rose and showered. I ate breakfast. Then I watched TV or read, followed by lunch and more reading or TV. By afternoon, I was so bored I usually slept just to make time pass more quickly. Then I ate dinner and tried not to think about how I was doomed to repeat the same schedule the next day.

At first, I'd plotted my escape. But I'd quickly abandoned that idea when I peeked my head out my door and saw a guard stationed at the end of the hall. The only thing that could be more humiliating than asking Cyrus for permission to leave my room would be getting hauled in front of him like a naughty child.

Or a disobedient concubine.

Out of habit, I wandered to the full-length mirror in my bathroom and examined the mark on my neck. Neither Celeste nor Garrick had mentioned it. Probably, they were too polite to bring it up. But it was hard to miss. Like a brand, it designated me the king's property.

I turned sideways and surveyed my stomach. Did it look fuller? Rounder? I smoothed a hand down my front.

This was silly. Even if I was pregnant, it was too early to notice any changes.

The sound of knocking brought my head up. It was a little past three—far too early for dinner. Could it be Cyrus at last?

Immediately, anger flared in my gut. What did I care if it was Cyrus? If it was, I would take great pleasure in opening the door just to slam it in his face.

I rushed from the bathroom, hellbent on doing just that. When I swung open the door, however, it was Garrick. He took one look at my face and stepped back. “Uh, hi... Is this a bad time?”

I couldn't be mean to Garrick. It wasn't his fault his boss was an egotistical jerk.

“Not at all,” I said, “I'm glad you're here.” I motioned him inside. “What's up?” It wasn't like him to stop by during this time of day. Normally, he appeared around meal times. More than once, he'd eaten lunch with me, which had made me feel almost normal again—

—until I remembered I was a werewolf trapped in the mansion of a lycan king who had turned me into a sexual possession without my consent.

For the first time since I'd met him, Garrick seemed unsure of himself. Even nervous. “Abby...I don't know how to say this, so I'm just going to say it.” He pulled something from his pocket and thrust it toward me. “Cyrus would like you to take this.”

I looked down at his hand. In it was a pregnancy test still in the package. “A pregnancy test?” I said stupidly.

“Yes. Cyrus mentioned making a deal with you.”

My heart skipped a beat. We hadn't made a deal. I'd demanded he let me go once I

got my period. He'd declared he was the king and didn't have to do anything I said.

Apparently, he'd changed his mind. I stared at the test. Did this mean Cyrus was willing to let me leave? A sinking feeling spread through me, and I wasn't sure why. This was what I'd wanted...

"It's too soon," I said. "It'll be another week at least until I can tell—"

"Not for us. It's different for lycans, and I'm fairly certain the same is true for werewolves. The hormones appear in the mother's system much more quickly. Cyrus said it might be a little too early to know about a pregnancy for certain, but he asked you to take the tests starting today."

Well, there was no arguing with that. It was, in fact, the "deal" I'd proposed.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

“All right.” I accepted the test, which felt like a ten-pound weight in my hand. “I’ll be right back.”

Garrick nodded, his expression more than a little mortified. Welcome to the club, I thought as I returned to the bathroom and opened the test.

I peed on the stick and placed it on the counter while I washed my hands. After several minutes, I went back to the living room, where Garrick still waited. “It’s negative.”

“Really?” He shoved his hands in his pockets, looking almost disappointed. Which was absurd and probably just a product of my weary imagination. After a week alone with mostly my own thoughts as company, I was a poor judge of other people’s emotions.

“Would you like to get out?” Garrick said suddenly.

My stomach did a little flip. “Out?”

“Like take a tour of the mansion. There’s a beautiful garden just off the back lawn. It’s within the walls, so you’d be safe there. A walk might be nice after all this time indoors.”

I chewed my bottom lip, thinking it over. “Cyrus won’t mind?”

Garrick’s gaze was slightly reproachful even as the kindness in it remained. “My family has served the Rothkilde kings for centuries, Abby. I don’t do anything

without Cyrus's permission or knowledge."

That meant this was Cyrus's idea. First the pregnancy test, now this indirect invitation to wander the grounds. A crack in his armor perhaps? Or maybe he'd grown sick of me and was looking for the most expedient way to give me the boot.

I had two choices: I could stay in the suite and try to unravel his motivations from afar, or I could go see something besides the same four walls I'd been staring at for a week.

I smiled at Garrick. "Just give me a minute to change."

* * *

A half hour later, my sides hurt from laughing. Garrick had a gossipy—and usually hilarious—story about every nook and cranny of the house. He showed me the fountain where a noble had gotten drunk, climbed in, and then insisted he was drowning. "Problem was," Garrick said with a lift of his brow, "the damn thing had been drained for cleaning the day before. The silly fool had pissed himself so badly he thought he was going down with the ship."

I put a hand over my mouth. "That cannot be true. Is he still on the Council of Nobles?"

Garrick's eyes gleamed. "Cyrus put him on the Water Safety Committee."

Mirth had me cracking up again. "Good for Cyrus," I murmured, and then I looked away when I noticed Garrick watching me closely.

He led me through galleries with walls lined with paintings and priceless works of art. He showed me a huge indoor swimming pool with a glass ceiling that let sunlight

sparkle on the water. We walked around the garden, which bloomed with roses and wildflowers. We never saw Cyrus, but I felt his presence everywhere. At times, I couldn't help thinking how much I wished he walked beside me. How I wanted him to point out things about the house no one else knew.

But that would mean accepting the role he'd selected for me. How could I go from being an independent woman and medical professional to a concubine? The word was just an outdated way of saying "mistress." I wasn't worthy to be his wife, but he was okay with me warming his bed—and all because he swore it was a way to keep me safe.

A tiny voice whispered in my ear. Would it be so bad to share his bed? I couldn't deny I'd enjoyed it. Sex with Cyrus was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. He only had to look at me and I was ensnared in his gaze. It had been like that since I opened my eyes and saw him in the cage across from mine in Roman's basement.

The sound of male voices yanked me from my thoughts.

"The training room is just up here," Garrick said. He led me toward the sounds of muffled grunts and masculine laughter. At the end of a long hallway, a spacious gym appeared. The floor was covered with mats. Various workout machines lined the mirror-covered walls. In the center of the room, two lycans sparred.

I immediately recognized them as the hard-eyed males who accompanied Cyrus and me on the helicopter. Once again, they were dressed in black, but this time they wore loose-fitting pants and tank tops that showed off their ripped chests and powerful arms. They were also barefoot, and they circled each other, both clearly waiting for the other man to make a move.

One lunged. His opponent slapped him away. This went on for a few more seconds, with one darting or feinting and then snapping out a punch, just to get it blocked.

Their movements were fluid and graceful, almost like a dance. And they definitely weren't hard to look at. Both men were handsome and well-built.

But neither was Cyrus. A small sound escaped me before I could stop it. Why couldn't I get him out of my head? I hadn't spoken to him in a week and here I was thinking of him when I should have been ogling the hot guys right in front of me.

Without warning, they ceased their halfhearted battle and turned toward me. They both bowed in my direction before walking toward a bench that held water bottles.

My breath caught. Why on earth would a pair of lycans bow to me?

"They honor you as Cyrus's concubine," Garrick said quietly at my side.

I jerked my gaze to his—and I barely stopped myself from slapping a hand over the mark on my neck. "You can't be serious."

"It's not an insult, Abby. In previous eras, lycan kings chose concubines with strong wolves. We don't have a lot of children." His brown eyes turned thoughtful. "Some scholars who study these things believe it's because we have such long lifespans. Sort of like nature's way of keeping the supernatural population in check." He glanced at the two males. "Your story has been circulating. Everyone knows you saved Cyrus's life...and killed one of your captors. Cyrus says your beast is strong. It would have to be for you to survive a bite. The vast majority of human women don't."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

“Yes,” I said, following his gaze to the two guards. “Cyrus said that.”

“He’s not your enemy.”

That brought my gaze back to Garrick. I touched the mark on my neck. “He put this here without asking me.”

“Would you have said yes?” His eyes held more than a hint of challenge.

“I...”

“Things are rarely black and white, especially in a king’s world. Cyrus is bound by the law, and he found a way to turn it to his advantage. Foster has influential friends on the council. He also lusts for power. He would have pushed for a vote to remove you simply because it would have hurt Cyrus.”

The males began sparring again, this time executing a series of evasive maneuvers that looked designed to disable an opponent rather than take them down. One of the men grabbed the other around the neck, only to grunt and double over when the first man seized his wrist and squeezed. The second man’s hold loosened, and the first man danced away with a grin on his face. It was a move I could have used in the basement with Roman and Carl.

“I wish I knew how to do that,” I said under my breath. I never wanted to feel helpless again.

The man who had danced away looked at me. He seemed to make some kind of

internal decision, because he walked over and said, “I could teach you.”

I hesitated. Could I really take him up on it? I glanced at Garrick, who gave me a mild look that seemed to say, “Why not?”

Yeah...why not? It wasn't like I had anything else to do. I lived in a violent, unpredictable world now. Like it or not, I was probably going to end up defending myself again—and I wouldn't always have access to a scalpel.

“All right,” I said.

The males were respectful and kind as they walked me through the defensive maneuver I'd just watched. The bigger one introduced himself as Kirnan. With his dark buzz cut and square jaw, he looked like something out of a military recruitment poster. The shorter one was Rolf.

Kirnan stood behind me and wrapped a loose arm around my waist. “Okay, you're going to grab my wrist, but that's just a decoy. When my attention is on my wrist, you're gonna stomp your heel on my toes. It sounds kind of dumb but it's actually effective because most guys are too arrogant to think a female will know how to fight.”

A grim smile spread in my mind. He was certainly right about that.

He tightened his grip around my waist. “Got it? Go.”

I squeezed his wrist as hard as I could. When he began to fight, I brought my heel down.

“Good, but don't hold back. The goal should be broken toes.”

“You want me to break your toes for real?” I asked incredulously.

Rolf guffawed from the sidelines. “I’ll pay money to see that.”

I could almost feel Kirnan roll his eyes. “As if you have any.” In my ear, he murmured, “Don’t trust him. He still owes me twenty bucks from last week.”

My shoulders shook as I laughed.

Suddenly, the temperature in the training room plummeted. At the same moment, a tingling awareness spread through me. Behind me, Kirnan stiffened. Then he released me like I was on fire.

I looked toward the doorway, but I didn’t really need to. Because I already knew what I would find there.

Cyrus filled the space, and his face was a mask of fury.

17

CYRUS

I’d felt plenty of rage in my life—at my father, at Roman and his ilk, at Foster. But I had never felt anything like the white-hot fury that gripped me as I watched Abby laugh with Kirnan and Rolf. She seemed so free and unguarded, her beautiful green eyes alight with happiness. Then Kirnan wrapped a casual arm around her waist, and I saw red.

Garrick had said nothing when I arrived, and he stood off to the side now, his expression frozen in a mix of worry and regret.

Appropriate. I'd told him to coax Abby from her room, not throw her into the arms of my guards.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

The guards in question stared at me now. Kirnan dipped his gaze. “My lord. We, uh...”

“We were practicing,” Rolf supplied. “Self-defense.”

I let the silence hang heavy in the air for a moment, partly to let them squirm a bit and partly because I didn’t trust myself to speak.

Finally, Abby came to me. She stopped just out of arm’s reach and lifted her chin, as if daring me to act. “Kirnan and Rolf were kind enough to show me how to defend myself.” She left it unsaid that I hadn’t bothered to do the same.

Which was true, of course. Instead, I’d tucked her in a room like a doll, only taking her out when I wanted to play with her. Then, when someone had threatened to take my toy, I’d stamped my mark on her.

In other words, I’d royally fucked up. Now I had to face the consequences—and they came in the form of a slender beauty who looked ready to eat me alive and then dance around my bones.

Fair enough, but I didn’t have to take my punishment in front of witnesses.

“Leave us,” I said without taking my eyes off Abby.

With rustling movements and quick footsteps, Kirnan and Rolf made a hasty exit. Garrick went too, and then it was just me and Abby—and resentment so thick I could have cut it with a knife.

“I’m pleased to see you out of your room,” I told her.

She pressed her lips together and continued giving me a stony stare.

Ah. So this wasn’t going to be easy.

I’d thought maybe putting some distance between us would help cool my lust. I should have known that was a fool’s errand. Because she looked more beautiful than ever. Her black leggings hugged her thighs, and her cream-colored sweater hung off one shoulder, exposing a pale pink bra strap. I wanted to slide it down—and keep going until I freed her luscious breasts with their pert nipples. I wanted to put my hands all over her.

And I knew it was wrong, but I wanted to see her in nothing but the mark I’d pressed into her skin. Like lycan kings of old, I wanted to strip her and tuck her in my bed. I wanted her to spread for me on command, but only because she knew how good I would make her feel.

And I would. If she gave me another chance, I would never stop making things up to her.

Her temples were damp. She’d caught her hair back in a low ponytail, and loose tendrils had escaped to frame her face. A bead of sweat trickled down her neck, tracing an alluring path I longed to follow with my tongue.

My hands twitched with the need to touch her, so I turned and walked around the room instead. “Did you learn anything useful with Kirnan and Rolf?”

She turned slowly, as if she wanted to keep me in her sights. And she took her time answering. When she did, her words were careful, like she suspected I was laying a trap with my question. “Yes. I want to be able to defend myself if I’m ever in a bad

situation again.”

I stopped. “You don’t have to worry about that. You’re protected here.”

“You won’t always be able to protect me.” She hugged her arms around her waist, and she looked so vulnerable I wanted to close the distance between us and gather her in my arms. “Once I leave here,” she said, “I need to be able to look out for myself.”

Protests pushed hard against my chest. I struggled to hold them back, but then I simply couldn’t. “Do you really want to leave, Abby?”

We faced each other on the mats, our bodies reflected dozens of times in the mirrors around us. Heat arced in the space that separated us. It always did. It always would. I knew that now. There was no way to stifle the attraction between me and Abby Rowe.

“Do you want to leave me?” I asked her again. Not here. Not this place. Me. Let her go on the record saying she wanted to walk away from me.

“Yes,” she whispered, but there was a whole world of uncertainty in her voice.

Taking a risk, I moved toward her.

She stood her ground, but her pupils were dilated and her heart rate picked up. The sweet scent of her arousal teased my nose.

I didn’t stop until I was toe to toe with her. “I think you’re lying,” I said gruffly. Her breasts rose and fell as she struggled to control her breathing. I watched the firm swells for a moment before running a fingertip down the center of one stiffened nipple. It poked through her sweater like the point of a spear. “Tell me,” I said, “have you touched yourself thinking of me this week?”

She made a sound deep in her throat. Her eyes had darkened with desire, and now they glittered like the finest emeralds.

I made another stroke down her breast. “I think you have. I think you’ve spread those gorgeous thighs and plunged your fingers into your wet pussy. I think you’ve circled your aching clit, imagining it was my tongue.” Another stroke, and I lowered my voice. “I think you’re imagining it now.”

She closed her eyes. “Cyrus...”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

“I’m sorry,” I said directly into her mind. The most intimate form of communication I knew.

Her eyes flew open.

I nodded and repeated it out loud. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, for marking you without your consent. It’s been hell staying away from you this week.”

Her tone was surprisingly light considering the sexual tension swirling between us. “Then why did you?”

“Would you have welcomed me if I came to you?”

“Do I have a choice?” She didn’t withdraw from my touch, but her gaze fell on the tattoos that traveled the back of my hand. “Your laws seem to say no.”

I cupped her chin. “You always have a choice. From this day forward, you always, always have a choice. I’ll never deceive you again.”

Several heartbeats passed. I held my breath, balanced on the precipice while she decided if I was worthy of a second chance.

“All right,” she said finally. “Then...yes, I would have welcomed you, Cyrus.”

Joy burst inside me. It took everything I had not to sweep her into my arms and carry her straight to bed. But she deserved wooing. She needed more from me than sex right now. She needed to know how much I cherished her.

“Have dinner with me tonight,” I said. “Please.”

She smiled, and it was staggering in its sweetness. “I’d love to.”

18

ABBY

Cyrus’s private dining room was as opulent as the rest of his house. The windows stretched from the floor to the ceiling, letting streams of purple evening light spill onto the polished hardwood floors. Candles flickered on the table, which was covered in an array of mouthwatering dishes—most of which had names I had no hope of pronouncing correctly.

I sat back in my chair with a grimace. “If I keep eating like I have this week, you’re going to end up rolling me back to my room.”

Cyrus smiled. He looked insanely handsome in black suit pants and a starched white dress shirt open at the collar. Silver cufflinks at his wrists matched his eyes. “I asked Garrick and Celeste to find out all your favorites so the chef could prepare them.”

I blinked. “You told them to spend time with me?”

“Not like you’re thinking,” he said quickly. “They both like you. They wanted to be there and would have visited regardless. I just couldn’t bear the thought of you spending so much time alone. I wanted you to be happy, even if it meant just eating the kinds of food you like.”

I absorbed this explanation even as I tried not to get distracted by the way the candlelight flickered over his face, highlighting all the planes and angles. He was more than recovered from the ordeal Roman had put him through, and his masculine

beauty took my breath away. Dark ink swirled over his hands and disappeared under his sleeves. But I knew what the tattoos under his shirt looked like. I'd stroked my hands over them as he plunged into me, his thick cock possessing me in a way I couldn't get out of my mind.

His apology in the training room had been direct and simple—and delivered honestly. He'd said it in my head first, and there was something deeply touching about that, as if he'd wanted to return to the way he'd first spoken to me when I was dying and he saved my life.

“Can other lycans speak telepathically?” I asked him now.

He shook his head. “It's a gift exclusive to my bloodline. My father could do it, and his father before him and so forth.” He pushed his plate away and settled back in his chair. “Some say it's what originally made my ancestors kings.”

I quirked a brow. “That and your penchant for taking concubines.”

His expression sobered. “I know I can't make things up to you, Abby, but I'm going to try.”

Out of habit, I touched the mark on my neck. “Can you reverse it?”

“No, sweetheart. The mark is permanent, along with our connection.” His gaze drifted from the bite to my chest, and his voice grew husky. “You look beautiful tonight.”

I glanced down. I felt beautiful, but that was almost entirely because of the dress. I'd found it on my bed after I emerged from my shower this evening. A diamond pendant necklace and matching earrings had been tucked in a velvet case beside it. There wasn't much to the dress, but it probably cost more than I made in a month. The ivory

color glowed in the soft light, and the slinky material clung to my body in a flattering way. The low neckline made it impossible to wear a bra, so I'd gone without, figuring no one but Cyrus and maybe a servant or two would see me.

Now that my nipples were stiffening under his regard, I realized that might have been an oversight on my part. Heat pooled between my legs, making my panties instantly damp. Wet with desire and dressed in expensive jewelry and a slip of a gown, had I become the concubine Cyrus had made me?

Or was this Stockholm Syndrome? I'd grown accustomed to my cage...and the way my captor made me feel. I'd spent so many years scraping by as I tried to make my vet practice work. Cyrus offered me a luxurious way out. All I had to do was sleep with him.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

But no, I thought as my gaze fluttered to his. That wasn't right. He'd stayed away for a week, and he hadn't once invaded my space or made any demands on me. Instead, he'd worked behind the scenes to make me comfortable.

And he'd protected me. He'd gone about it the wrong way, but he'd ensured Foster couldn't toss me out simply because I was a werewolf.

And I was a werewolf. I couldn't pretend otherwise just because I didn't want to face the truth. I'd seen what Roman was capable of.

Looking at Cyrus now, I knew he'd never hurt me that way. Not even close. He didn't want to own me like Roman did. Cyrus was possessive, but he was also honorable. "I never thanked you for saving my life," I said. "For helping me through the transition."

Surprise flared in his silver eyes. His voice was like gravel. "You're a beautiful wolf when you shift." His gaze moved down my body again. "But I find I prefer you in this form. Any male would kill to have you."

The liquid heat between my legs flowed faster. I touched the mark on my neck, but this time I let my fingers trail down my throat to caress one of my taut nipples through the silk of my dress. "I thought I was already yours."

The surprise flared again...and quickly turned to heat. "Yes, I suppose you are." Slowly, deliberately, he crooked a finger at me. "Come over here."

I moved as if in a dream, sliding my chair back and rounding the table. He'd given

me strappy shoes to go with the dress, and my heels clicked softly. I'd worn my hair down, and it teased the small of my back where the dress plunged to just above my ass.

He caught my wrist and drew me between his spread thighs. Then he splayed his big hands across my hips as he gazed up at me with naked admiration. "You are perfection," he rasped. He reached up and slipped the thin straps of my dress off my shoulders, letting the whole gown drop to the floor in a puddle of silk. I'd known it was coming, but I still gasped as I stood before him in nothing but my thong, stilettos, and jewelry.

And his mark. It seemed to throb on my neck, even though it was long since healed.

I throbbed other places, too. My breasts felt heavy and lush, my nipples tingling as desire pumped hard through my veins.

Cyrus growled. With a brutal twist, he ripped my thong away. His eyes locked on my pussy, and he groaned—a helpless sound that loosened my knees. "Turn around," he bit out, as if it hurt him to speak.

I obeyed, and I didn't resist as he settled me on his lap and spread my thighs wide. My pussy opened, all my secrets revealed. Damp heat touched the curve of my ear, and I moaned as the tip of his tongue teased my skin.

"Do you know," he murmured, "what the old laws said about concubines?"

I shivered. "No...my lord." The title flowed naturally from my lips. My knees were hooked over the arms of his chair, and cool air caressed the heated flesh between my legs. I should have felt exposed. Instead, I let my head rest on his hard shoulder as I tried not to squirm with need.

His big hands came around and cupped my bare breasts, testing their weight. His warm breath tickled my ear. “Under the old laws, a concubine could only accept what her king gave her.” He rolled my nipples between his fingers, squeezing gently. “If he wanted her naked, she stayed naked.”

My breath hitched. An image formed in my mind—me wriggling nude on his lap in the middle of some huge, ancient banquet, hundreds of eyes watching me battle back an orgasm as he stroked my clit. In my mind’s eye, he showed no mercy, his fingers fondling my pussy under the rapt gazes of his subjects.

I wished he would touch me there now. I wanted to plunge my hand between my thighs and assuage my need, but something about waiting for his direction heightened my desire. I could only wait, splayed out and panting, until he decided what came next. He was the king, and I served at his pleasure.

He brushed his fingertips over the diamond pendant that lay on my chest. “If the king wanted his concubine in nothing but diamonds, she wore diamonds. Or sapphires or emeralds. Maybe a pair of golden clamps just here”—he pinched my nipple—“and here”—he pinched the other. “Maybe a jeweled plug between her cheeks.” He lifted his hips, nudging his hard cock against my most sensitive place. Between that and the erotic picture he painted, I whimpered with need.

“He could do anything he pleased with her.” Cyrus trailed languid fingertips down my stomach and let them rest gently over my sopping entrance. “He could pierce her here”—he stroked my clit— “and put a pretty ring through her pussy so he could keep her on a leash.” He nuzzled under my ear. “Can you imagine it, sweetheart? Being led about by your clit? Just the slightest tug and you’d know to spread for your lord.”

Wicked desire curled through me. I was so wet I was dripping. I chanced a look down and saw that my clit was red and engorged. My nipples poked lewdly. Cyrus’s filthy

history lesson had me ready to come and he'd barely touched my clit.

"Please," I moaned, lifting my hips.

His chuckle vibrated my back. "A concubine took from her king and only her king." He plucked a grape from the table and held it to my lips. "A concubine could only eat from the hand of her lord. Open."

I opened, and he placed the grape in my mouth. As the juices burst on my tongue, he reached between my legs and rubbed my clit. My eyes fluttered shut, and I arched helplessly.

"Yes, sweetheart," he murmured, "open wide for your king." He slid his fingers down to my entrance and plunged inside me. He pumped in and out, and the sound of my wetness filled the air.

Lust sizzled through me. My whole body was a pleasure zone, each nerve ending crackling with need. I rolled my hips, fucking his fingers shamelessly.

"Good girl," he crooned. With his free hand, he fed me another grape. The cool juices were a surprisingly tantalizing contrast to the heat blistering between my legs and across my skin. I bucked hard against his fingers, desperate for more.

"Please," I gasped. My breasts bounced with my movements. I was bucking so hard now, I had a fleeting thought I might topple the chair.

Cyrus pulled his hand from my pussy, and I cried out at the loss. But my torment was short-lived, because he grasped my hips and turned me so I straddled him, my tits on level with his face and my pussy lined up with his cock. The scent of my arousal swirled thickly around us. His fingers on my hips were damp with my juices.

“Yes,” I gasped, gripping his shoulders. The diamond pendant brushed my skin. My pussy throbbed, my swollen flesh hot and aching. “Yes, my lord. I need...”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

“Tell me,” he ordered, his eyes like mercury. His voice was firm but there was a tremor in it that told me he wasn’t quite as in control as he pretended. “Tell your king exactly what you need.”

“Your cock. Please, my lord, give me your cock. I need it so badly, my lord.”

“You wish to ride, sweetheart?”

“Yes, my lord. Please.” I arched my back, thrusting my stiff nipples closer to his face. I wasn’t above begging. In fact, I reveled in it. Because that was part of this game. This was about seeking and claiming pleasure, and both Cyrus and I understood the rules.

He freed his shaft and urged me up so he could rub the bulbous head of his cock up and down my slit. “Sit then, baby,” he growled. “Take your king’s cock.”

I sat, and we both groaned long and loud as my pussy enveloped his shaft. I didn’t stop until I’d taken him to the root. He filled me completely, invading and stretching me. I was well-prepared for him, but his girth still burned a little. After a moment, the ache faded, replaced by a wicked pleasure that spread through my body. I clenched my inner muscles around him, savoring the feeling of being completely possessed. As our gazes held, I could see the wonder I felt reflected in his eyes.

“Ride me,” he murmured, urging my hips into motion.

“Yes, my lord.” I rocked forward, and our gasps mingled between our bodies. I fell into a slow, sensual rhythm—forward and back and up and down. Over and over until

we were both shivering and breathing heavy. Every plunge stroked my clit, sending wild bursts of sensation firing over my skin.

“Abby,” he rasped in a voice full of awe. He gripped my hips with tight fingers and bent his head, seizing one of my nipples between his teeth. He sucked it into his mouth, switching between languid licks and sharp little tugs that made me moan.

Through it all, I rode his dick, bouncing and grinding until the world disappeared and we were the only two people left. My orgasm caught me by surprise, slamming into me like a hurricane. I mashed myself down on his dick and ground my pussy against his shaft until my clit buzzed with pleasure so intense I screamed.

“Yes,” he grunted, patient while I came in a series of low, plaintive moans. When I was still shivering from aftershocks, he took his own pleasure. He gripped my hips tightly and thrust up and up, pounding me from the bottom. My tits jiggled furiously. My skin slapped his.

At last, he threw his head back and shouted. His dick pulsed, and his release flooded me with heat.

When it was over, a great lassitude swept me. I couldn’t even think about moving, so I leaned forward and lay my head on his shoulder. His big arms came around me, and he exhaled into my hair.

For the first time in a long time, I felt like I belonged.

Because he felt like home.

When I woke the next morning, I stared at a ceiling that was both familiar and unfamiliar. Then it hit me: I was in Cyrus's bed.

Naked in Cyrus's bed.

Alone.

I rolled to my side and found a note scrawled in masculine handwriting that could only be his.

Sleep in. I have meetings this morning but I'll be back in time for lunch...and anything else you might want to do.

Heat entered my cheeks. I'd been uninhibited last night—to say the least. I'd also been half conscious when he carried me to his bed and then returned with a warm cloth. He'd tended to me and then crawled in bed and tucked me against him.

I'd slept better than I had in a long time.

Rolling onto my back, I stretched my arms over my head, feeling a sweet ache between my thighs. He might have marked my neck before, but last night he'd left an entirely different kind of mark. I was going to feel him all day.

And I was...okay with that. More than okay, actually. Cyrus and I had turned over a new page. I wasn't sure what the next chapter of our lives looked like, but I wasn't afraid to move forward anymore.

More importantly, I knew I couldn't stay in the holding pattern I'd been clinging to. My life had changed the moment Roman bit me. Cyrus had tried telling me things could never be the same, but I'd been too stubborn to listen.

My dad's voice entered my thoughts. "Everything changes, Abby. You can either fight it or adapt."

I had to adapt. With Cyrus at my side, it wasn't going to be a hardship. I wasn't kidding myself that everything was perfect now—or that I wouldn't face prejudice from his people—but I felt capable of tackling whatever challenges my life threw at me. At us.

I slid from the bed and spied my crumpled dress on the ground. It was my only clothing in the room, which meant I was going to have to do a walk of shame back to my suite. For a second, I contemplated borrowing something of Cyrus's but decided parading around in his clothes wouldn't be much better.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

Besides, no one was going to see me.

I was two steps from my room when Garrick melted out of the shadows.

“Shit!” I jumped and slapped a hand over my racing heart. “Garrick, what are you doing out here?”

“Sorry.” He gave me a sheepish look. “I was just bringing this.” He waved a pregnancy test in the air.

I froze. Another test? Cyrus was sticking to the program even after last night? Dark thoughts gathered in my head. He’d spoken of how difficult it was for lycans to further their lines. How kings had resorted to taking concubines for just that purpose. He’d made it a point to say my wolf was strong. The mark on my neck began to ache.

Was I still just a womb to him? A means to an end?

Concern shaded Garrick’s brown eyes. “Are you okay?”

Somehow, I nodded and smiled, and I must have murmured something appropriate, because he handed the test over and waited in the living room while I went to the bathroom.

I avoided my reflection in the mirror. I didn’t want to see the hurt in my eyes.

The dress that had felt so sexy last night now seemed tawdry and demeaning as I hiked it above my hips and hovered over the toilet. I gritted my teeth and thrust the

stick between my legs, trying not to feel degraded.

Fail.

When I was finished, I tossed the test on the counter and didn't look at it as I washed my hands. What I needed was a hot shower. As soon as I got rid of Garrick, I was going to scrub Cyrus's scent from my body so I could think straight.

I grabbed the test from the counter so I could toss it in the trash.

Two pink lines. Positive.

No fucking way.

A memory from undergrad biology filtered through my head. First morning urine was the best for pregnancy tests. The pregnancy hormone was more concentrated. I hadn't peed since before dinner last night. I'd been too busy begging Cyrus to fuck me.

The test shook, and I realized my hand was trembling. A wave of dizzying crashed over me. I gripped the edge of the counter so I didn't topple over.

Positive. I'd probably conceived the very first time Cyrus and I were together, when he'd created the ocean in my mind. I'd been pregnant this whole time. My head spun, but I dug my fingers into the counter to stop myself from flying apart.

Triage. In vet school, I'd been trained to prioritize needs when faced with a cascade of complications. Right now, my first priority was to get rid of Garrick. Yesterday, he hadn't demanded to see my pregnancy test, which meant he was unlikely to now.

Moving quickly, I wrapped the test in toilet paper and shoved it to the bottom of the bathroom trash can. Then I looked in the mirror and tried to school my features into

something resembling nonchalance. I had to be convincing. Garrick was unquestionably loyal to Cyrus. If he suspected something was up, Cyrus would be breathing down my neck within minutes.

With my heart in my throat, I went to the living room, where Garrick was pacing like an expectant father.

“Negative,” I said.

He stopped. “You’re sure?”

I put a hand on my hip. “Garrick.”

“Sorry. Of course you’re sure.” He glanced at a small clock on the fireplace mantel. “I have to go check on breakfast preparations. Is there anything special I can bring you?”

“No, thanks.” I kept my smile plastered on my face and tried not to think about things like morning sickness and food cravings.

Somehow, I managed to stay calm until he left, but it only lasted until the door closed behind him. Then I staggered to the sofa, sat, and put my head in my hands.

I’d woken deliriously happy. Now I was terrified. A baby well and truly made me Cyrus’s prisoner. I didn’t need to know much about lycan history to know he would never relinquish an heir. The thirst for dynasty was something common to kings everywhere, human or wolf.

But I was a werewolf, which meant my child would be...a halfling? Would my son or daughter inherit the throne or be relegated to some kind of in-between status? Before, when pregnancy had seemed a distant and unlikely possibility, I’d regarded a

potential child as something that might shackle me to Cyrus. I hadn't given much thought to how that child would be treated if they ever actually existed. Cyrus's parents had matched him with Celeste at birth because her wolf was strong. That was the sort of backwards world I was dealing with.

And now I was going to bring a child into it

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

As anxiety threatened to overwhelm me, I stood abruptly and went to the bedroom, where I changed into jeans and a T-shirt. I scraped my hair back into a ponytail and retraced my steps through the suite. I needed fresh hair. Walking often helped me clear my head. As I moved through the living room, I caught my reflection in a mirror.

The woman who stared back at me looked a lot different than the woman who dined with Cyrus last night. There was nothing regal about my jeans or makeup-free face. Without Cyrus's finery and fancy gown, I was just...me. Ordinary.

Even if Cyrus and the other lycans accepted my child, I could never be Cyrus's queen. I would never be anything other than his concubine, and that was unacceptable to me. Role playing at dinner was one thing. Living out that role on an everyday basis was another.

Tears burned my eyes. Before I could watch them fall, I left the suite and made my way downstairs. Fortunately, I didn't see anyone as I navigated the mansion's labyrinthine hallways, and I made it outside without incident.

The rose garden was truly lovely, but I hardly noticed the flowers as I strode up and down the manicured paths. I was so engrossed in my thoughts, I didn't realize I'd left the garden and wandered onto a wide expanse of lawn until I was on top of it.

I gazed around. This was the spot where the helicopter had brought Cyrus and me to the mansion. If I'd been smart, I would have refused to leave the aircraft. I would have insisted on the pilot flying me as far away as possible. Somewhere like the moon, maybe.

“Abby?”

I turned to see Celeste approaching. She was beautiful as always, with a serene smile on her face. Kirnan was with her. But he wasn’t smiling.

On the contrary, he looked much the same as he had when I first met him in this very spot. He stared at me with cold, emotionless eyes.

Ice slid down my spine.

“Is everything okay?” I directed my question to Celeste even as I kept my gaze on Kirnan’s.

“Of course,” Celeste said, her voice soft and refined as usual. But there was something...off about her smile. It was just a little too big. It got even bigger as she tipped her head to the side—a wolflike gesture I’d seen on more than one canine over the years. “Did you enjoy your stay?”

“What?” My heart started to pound. I took a step back. I hadn’t missed the past tense in her question.

Growling to my right stopped me in my tracks. Slowly, I turned toward the sound. A wolf with dark fur crouched in the shadow of the mansion, its golden eyes fixated on me. Rolf. I recognized him even in wolf form.

“I asked you a question,” Celeste said, and now her voice was hard. The change in tone was even more jarring because it slipped from a mouth still stretched in a menacing smile.

I swallowed. “I don’t know what you mean.”

She motioned to Kirnan. “That’s all right,” she said as he stalked forward. “You will.”

I turned to run just as Rolf pounced. Paws struck my side, sending me flying. I hit the ground shoulder first and rolled. Before I could recover, rough hands grabbed me and hauled me up.

I opened my mouth to scream, but Kirnan was fast. His fist flew, clipping my jaw.

I went flying again.

And everything went black.

20

CYRUS

I couldn’t return to Abby fast enough. I finished my work in record time and practically ran up the stairs as I made my way to her suite. I probably looked like a lovesick fool, but I didn’t really care.

Because I loved her. I’d loved her for a long time, but last night had brought my feelings into undeniably sharp focus. The only thing left to do was tell her.

I arrived at her door at the same moment Garrick did. We both stopped.

Because her door was open.

My gut clenched. Abby was a private person. It wasn’t like her to leave her suite wide open.

A deep sense of foreboding filled me. I shoved into the room with a racing heart.
“Abby!”

Garrick was hot on my heels. He was saying something and it took a minute for my panic-soaked brain to comprehend it.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

“...disturbance outside,” he said. “One of the guards thought he heard a scream.”

I rushed to the bedroom. Abby’s bed was rumpled but she wasn’t in it. Her dress from last night was draped over the arm of a nearby chair.

“Abby!” I shouted again, already on my way to the bathroom.

Celeste met me at the door. She held something in her hand.

A pregnancy test. Even from where I stood, I could see the two bold, pink lines.

My stomach dropped somewhere around the region of my knees. “Celeste. What are you doing?”

She ignored me, her attention solely on Garrick. “You didn’t check the test?” She made a tsking sound. “That was a careless oversight, steward. Now Cyrus’s bastard is goodness knows where.”

As she spoke in an oddly cheery tone, a horrible recollection crept over me. I’d heard that tone before, but not from her.

No, I’d heard it from her father. When I was a boy, I’d witnessed him spiraling out of control. Before he’d completely lost control, he’d sounded almost normal—as long as you didn’t listen too closely to what he was saying.

“Celeste,” I said quietly. I lifted my hands so she’d know I wasn’t a threat. “Where is Abby?”

She seemed to consider the question. Then she shrugged. “Does it matter?” She waved the test, and the two pink lines flashed across my vision. “I saved you from yourself, Cyrus. You should thank me.”

I didn’t dare look away. I had to keep her talking. If I could keep the conversation going, I might drag Abby’s location from her. Because there was no question Celeste was behind Abby’s disappearance. And I was a fucking fool because I hadn’t seen her instability. Celeste didn’t love me. I was certain of it. Whatever animosity she harbored toward Abby had nothing to do with jealousy.

This was madness, plain and simple. And that was why it was so goddamn dangerous.

My heart thudded like a hammer in my chest. “Why should I thank you? What did you do, sweetheart?”

She rolled her eyes—a careless gesture from a female who was never careless. She was always flawless. Perfectly composed. When she met my gaze again, her irises were bright gold. “Oh Cyrus, don’t you understand? I never wanted to be your queen. I wanted your throne.”

In my peripheral vision, Garrick startled.

“You’re weak,” Celeste said. “Foster is a fool, but he’s right about you in that regard. You met with Roman alone. My father would have never done that.” She smiled. “He and I spoke about it recently. He told me the werewolf slut you brought home was probably pregnant, but I already knew. Women have a sense for these things.”

I swallowed my shock. Celeste’s father had been dead for over a century. My father had snapped his neck and scattered his ashes across two continents to stop him from rising again. Celeste’s bloodline was ancient, but the rumors of madness—and her

father's very public display of it—had kept her single. I'd always defended her. Pitied her. Now I knew those rumors had more merit than even I'd realized.

Celeste looked down at the pregnancy test. "Roman might try to use your bastard against you, but it doesn't matter. No lycan would ever accept some werewolf brat as king." She lifted her eyes. "Really, Cyrus, this is for the best. With any luck, Roman will toss your little plaything to his wolves and the trauma will rid her of the child. See? Two problems solved."

I did my best to keep a neutral expression as I lowered my hand to my side. I didn't dare look at Garrick as I flashed a subtle hand signal. Stay back.

I could only hope he was paying enough attention to get the message.

"Celeste," I said, and this time I let the full force of my power fill my voice.

She staggered back. Her lips peeled off her teeth, and for the first time since I'd known her, she looked ugly. She snarled, her face twisted in an unsettling expression. "You're finished, Rothkilde."

"I think not." I was on her in a beat, my hand wrapped around her slender throat. I lifted her up, and I spoke calmly as her face turned red and she sputtered through her rage. "You'll never sit on any throne, Celeste. But Abby will."

Behind me, Garrick hollered for the guards. A second later, booted feet pounded through the suite.

I shoved Celeste into the arms of my men. "Take her downstairs to the cell," I told Garrick.

"Yes, my lord."

I ripped my shirt over my head.

His eyes widened. “What are you doing?”

“Shifting. Then I’m going after Abby. I can track her through the mark on her neck.”
But the connection was a short-range sort of thing, and it didn’t always work.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

“I’m sending men with you,” Garrick said.

“Fine. But we’re leaving now.” Naked, I strode to the door.

“Cyrus!” he exclaimed behind me. “This is dangerous. You’re no match for Roman—”

I’d rounded on him and grabbed him by his collar before he’d finished his ill-advised sentence. “Abby is my life. She’s also pregnant with my child. I’m not just a match for Roman. I’m going to tear him apart.”

21

ABBY

I opened my eyes and everything hurt. As I blinked through the pain, my first thought was that I was back in Roman’s basement. But no, this place was different. Still, it wasn’t any place I wanted to be.

The air was damp, and the smell of misery hung thick in the air. And Roman was definitely nearby. I could sense his presence. The connection between us made my skin crawl but I couldn’t deny its existence. It was like a thread was anchored in my chest and it trailed off into the distance with Roman on the other end of it.

Panic threatened to overwhelm me—and then I remembered my child. Panic wasn’t an option right now. Survival was. Taking a few deep breaths, I took stock of my surroundings.

I lay on my side on a twin bed with a threadbare blanket draped over my legs. Which meant someone had tried to make me a little bit comfortable. That was a good thing, right?

The room was small and sparsely furnished, with old shag carpeting and a dusty lamp on a scarred dresser. The lamp was the room's only source of light. Through a window, the sky was just beginning to go dark.

How long had I been here? I sat up and rubbed my jaw, expecting to find it sore. Kirnan hadn't held back. That dick. Apparently, our sparring session hadn't been the friendly icebreaker I'd imagined. Cyrus's people hated me, and they'd thrown me to the wolves. Literally.

So how did Celeste figure in all this? What connection did she have to Roman, of all people? She'd engineered the mess I was in, which meant she wasn't as indifferent to Cyrus as she claimed. Either that or she was as much of a purist as Foster and the other nobles on the council. But it was strange that she hadn't simply ordered Kirnan to kill me. Judging from the look he'd given me just before he struck me, he would have had no problem carrying out such an order.

I stared at the ugly carpet as my head spun with theories and possibilities. It was all too much to deal with right now. Just as I began to look around the room for a weapon, the door opened and Roman entered.

He was just as handsome as I remembered. But now I knew his inside was hideous.

Instinct compelled me to shrink back against the headboard, but I forced myself to stay where I was. I couldn't quite meet his eyes, so I pinned my gaze on his chin—and secretly wished I had the guts to get up and smash my fist into it.

He closed the door and surveyed me for a long moment. The feeling of connection

between us sparked, which made nausea rise in my throat. “Stand up,” he said in the deep voice I’d hoped to never hear again.

The string in my chest tugged, and I was on my feet before I could stop myself. Worse, part of me wanted to obey him. It was the twisted bond that came from his bite, and the most enraging thing about it was that the affection I felt for him was entirely involuntary. It was like someone had opened my brain and shoved another person’s emotions into my skull.

He approached, and I held my breath as he looked me over. When he lifted a hand, I flinched away, anticipating a blow. But he just laughed softly and brushed my hair back. My fear seemed to please him.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said in an affectionate tone. “You’re far too valuable.”

I stayed silent and tried not to throw up at the lingering feel of his touch. Out of nowhere, a deep longing for Cyrus filled me, the strength of it so intense I nearly cried out.

Don’t think about him. If I did, I might cry, and I refused to cry in front of Roman.

Besides, it wasn’t just myself I had to protect. I had my child to think of. Mine and Cyrus’s child.

“Nothing to say?” Roman stroked my hair again. “I’m afraid that just won’t do, Abby. You’ve been living with Cyrus.” His voice deepened. “Sharing his bed.”

Saliva pooled in my mouth as another wave of nausea swept me. The things I’d done with Cyrus were sacred. Roman didn’t get to ruin that.

I forced my gaze to his. “Fuck you.”

His lips twitched, as if he found my defiance cute. Somehow, that was worse than his anger.

In a lightning fast move, he tangled his hand in my hair and yanked my head back sharply. I felt individual strands of hair rip from my scalp.

Okay, so his anger was worse than his amusement.

My eyes watered as he tightened his grip. His voice was soft. “Fuck me? Don’t worry, we’ll get to that. But first you’re going to tell me everything you know about Foster Carrington’s maneuvers. My sources tell me he’s been plotting a coup.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

I swallowed. “I don’t know anything about that.” Briefly, I considered making something up. But he obviously already knew certain things about the council’s inner workings. If I fed him false information, he might punish me for trying to mislead him.

“Bullshit,” he snapped. “Men always share information with the women they’re fucking.” He leaned close and inhaled, taking in my scent. “And you’re definitely worth fucking. I’m sure Cyrus couldn’t wait to get back between your thighs. He was so enthusiastic about it last time. I can understand why. You put on quite a show that night.” He leaned close and brushed his lips over my throat. “You’ve got one wet pussy, Abby. I can still hear the sound of it echoing around my basement.”

I bit the inside of my cheek so I wouldn’t jerk from his hold and spit in his face. He was probably trying to make me angry so he had an excuse to hurt me. I had no information to give him, but maybe I could turn the tables on him. “How long have you been working with Celeste?” I asked.

“I haven’t.”

“Bullshit.” I flung the word back at him. It was stupid to taunt him, but he seemed inclined to talk about this, so I plowed ahead. “She turned at least two of Cyrus’s guards against him. And I’m here now, so she must have contacted you.”

Roman released me, only to grasp my chin in a brutal grip. He forced my head back so I had no choice but to look at him. Pain streaked through my skull. It was agony holding his gaze. “Wrong, sweetheart. I don’t know anything about Cyrus’s highborn bitch except that she’s obviously unhappy about having you around.” He narrowed

his eyes, as if he was debating how much to tell me. “I got a call from an unlisted number saying you were being dumped in a forest near this place. I assumed it was a trap, albeit a stupidly obvious one. But there you were, bound and unconscious.” He put his cheek against mine. “Ripe for the plucking.”

I tried to yank my face from his grip, but he was too strong. His fingers tightened—and then he stilled.

“What’s this?” He angled my head to the side.

Cyrus’s mark.

I tensed.

Men’s shouts boomed through the door, following by the unmistakable sounds of fighting. A second later, the door burst open and there was Cyrus—nude and more terrifying than I’d ever seen him. More naked men clustered behind him, their eyes sheened with gold.

I blinked, scarcely able to believe the sight in front of me. I was safe. Cyrus had come for me.

In another fast move, Roman clamped a hand on my arm and spun me in front of him. He clamped an arm around my shoulders so my back was plastered to his chest. I felt the sharp bite of steel against my throat.

“Not another step, Rothkilde,” he said at my ear. “Or I’ll cut her fucking head off.”

My lungs burned from the mad sprint through the forest. I wasn't certain how long I'd run or even how I'd managed to find Abby. But the connection between us was strong, and my beast had guided me true.

Standing in the doorway now, my wolf pushed hard at my skin, desperate to rip through bone and sinew so it could eliminate the bastard who held my female. I was losing the battle to keep the beast in check. My fangs descended, filling my mouth with blood as they ripped through my gums. My men huddled at my back but I ignored them. I didn't need any help taking down Roman.

I knew without question that if he hurt Abby, I wouldn't be able to control my animal. I'd turn and rip him and every werewolf in this rotten house to shreds.

Abby gazed at me, her green eyes shining with emotion. There was fear there, yes, but also relief. She was happy to see me.

And she was pregnant. God, I wanted to talk to her about it. I wanted to make sure she was okay with carrying my child. The threat of pregnancy had loomed between us from the start, but I didn't want it to be a bad thing. It was a miracle. She was a miracle.

"Roman," I heard myself say, "it's me you want, not her. Let her go."

He flashed a vicious smile. "You really think highly of yourself, don't you, Cyrus?" He nosed Abby's hair and inhaled deeply. "She's already mine. Her wolf knows its master, even if the woman needs a reminder now and then. But that's not a problem. I know how to get my point across." He thrust his hips hard against her backside, lifting her onto her toes.

She whimpered and squeezed her eyes shut.

Red-hot rage boiled inside me. Every instinct I possessed pushed me to rush him. But I couldn't risk him hurting her. The knife in his hand was sharp, and the blade was long enough to do serious damage. Her body would most likely heal, but she might lose the pregnancy if she lost too much blood.

"My men have subdued yours," I said. I'd torn through them in minutes, with my guards taking out the wounded in my wake. "This fight is already over. Let Abby go and I give you my word you'll have safe passage to anywhere you want to go." And I'll be waiting for you when you get there.

He tightened his grip on the knife, and Abby winced. "I don't have to bargain with you, lycan. I've got all the leverage I need right here." He bucked against Abby's ass again. The knife pierced her skin. Blood trickled down her neck.

She reached up and seized his wrist.

"What—?"

She slammed her heel onto his foot. There was a sickening crunch.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

Roman screamed and staggered backwards. As he did, his arm around Abby's neck loosened.

I lunged just as she slipped his hold. In a blur, I shoved her aside and launched myself at Roman.

And then I showed him why lycans were different than werewolves. He had numbers, but I had strength. I grabbed his head and twisted sharply, snapping vertebrae.

He wailed and tried to bring his arms up, but it was too late. His spinal cord was severed.

I shoved him face first onto the bed and put a knee in his back. "Knife," I barked.

Someone put it in my hand.

Decapitation was messy work, but the beast within me welcomed the gore and the spray of blood. This male had touched my female. He'd hurt her and assaulted her and put her life in danger. Blood flowed and my rage flowed with it. I hacked through Roman's bone, severing his head. Then I stepped back, chest heaving, and roared.

The mist of fury faded little by little. Eventually, I turned to see Abby standing in the knot of my men. She was pale but strong. I could tell she'd watched every second of Roman's demise.

I wiped blood from my brow, which only succeeded in smearing additional blood around. To my men, I said, "Take him outside and finish him." Abby was capable of

dealing with violence, but euphemisms seemed appropriate here. Roman was unlikely to regenerate, but I wasn't taking any chances. My men would cut his body into pieces and burn his corpse to ash to ensure he stayed dead. It was a grisly task I didn't want Abby to see, let alone hear about.

As soon as my men and Roman's body were out of the room, I had her in my arms. I was covered in blood and probably shouldn't be touching her, but I couldn't help it. I had to hold her to make sure she was okay.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" I pulled back enough to search her face.

"Yes. I'm not hurt."

"Where the hell did you learn a move like that?" She'd probably broken every single one of Roman's toes.

"Your guards." She grimaced. "The one who were secretly working for Celeste. She was behind all of this, Cyrus. She hates me and—"

"No." I gathered her close again. "She hates me." I told her of my eerie conversation with Celeste and how it was painfully clear Celeste had inherited her father's illness. "I suspect she wanted Roman to kill me. She saw you as a conduit for luring Roman close enough to my territory to put himself in danger. Celeste is smart, which makes her mental state even more dangerous. But she didn't anticipate how strongly my beast would react to you being taken from me."

Abby made a soft sound. "What will happen to her?"

I hesitated. I didn't want to tell her the truth, but I'd also vowed to never lie to her again. "Celeste is unstable in human form, but her wolf will obey me. I can force her shift. Once she's in wolf form, I'll guide her into the forest. When she's distracted,

I'll snap her neck." I stroked Abby's back. "It's the humane thing to do, sweetheart. She's a lycan, not a human. If she can't control her beast, she could end up killing a lot of people."

Abby nodded against my chest. "I know," she whispered. "But it's still heartbreaking."

I held her for a while longer, then eased her away from me and put a hand over her stomach. "Were you going to tell me about this?"

Tears streaked down her face. "I wasn't running away. I promise. It was just a shock and I was confused. I thought you might only want me for the children I might give you."

"Hey." I curled a finger under her chin and tipped her head up so I knew my words would reach her in the most direct way possible. "You are so much more to me than a pregnancy." Holding her gaze, I repeated it out loud. "I asked Garrick to give you the test because I wanted to take care of you. You've been through so much in such a short period of time. I planned on pampering the hell out of you anyway, but I was going to get absolutely stupid about it if I found out you were pregnant."

She laughed, as I'd intended her to. "Absolutely stupid?"

"Like onion layers of stupidity. You're going to hate me before this baby is born."

"No," she said softly, "I could never hate you, my lord. Not when I love you the way I do."

My breath hitched. "You love me?"

"Yes." She placed a hand on my cheek. "I love you, Cyrus. More than anything."

Now, will you please take me home?”

Home. She meant my home, which she obviously considered hers now, too.

“Nothing would make me happier,” I murmured, and then I kissed her.

23

ABBY

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

When Cyrus and I entered the mansion, Foster and a group of lycans were waiting for us. I knew without asking that this was the Council of Nobles. Mostly male, they were impeccably dressed. They looked young, but that was probably deceptive given how slowly lycans aged.

None of them looked happy to see us.

I was instantly self-conscious. My clothes were covered in blood and I looked like I'd been dragged through a forest. Which, of course, I had.

Cyrus was in even worse shape. Not only was he covered in blood, he was stark naked. Unlike me, however, he didn't seem bothered by his lack of formal wear. The second he saw Foster, he put up a forestalling hand. "I don't care what you have to say."

Foster stepped away from the crowd. Now, he and Cyrus faced off in the middle of the elegant foyer. They couldn't have been more different: Cyrus with his dark hair and muscular body, Foster with his pale hair and slender build. Cyrus was stark naked and spattered with blood and gore. Foster wore a tuxedo without the jacket. Any outsider seeing them would probably assume Foster was the king.

However, as I observed the way Cyrus stared him down, I wasn't so sure my initial assessment was correct. Foster radiated contempt. Cyrus radiated raw power.

Foster stood his ground. "You'll care what I have to say when I tell you the council is prepared to vote. The past week's events, along with the scuffle today, just further cement how erratic you've become." He flicked the briefest glance in my direction.

“Did you really think taking her as your concubine would circumvent our votes? We have an obligation to keep the race safe. Consorting with the enemy does the opposite. Today is proof enough of that.”

Cyrus didn't answer right away, which was plenty of time for doubts to worm their way into my head. Roman might be dead, but there were other werewolves out there. I was always going to be a liability.

And, bottom line, I wasn't a lycan. I didn't have a bloodline or a prestigious family history. I was the daughter of a small town Texas sheriff and I had under a hundred dollars in my bank account.

Just when it seemed Cyrus might stay silent forever, he spoke in a deep voice that carried around the cavernous space. “Abby isn't my concubine. She's my queen.”

Shocked gasps echoed off the marble walls. One of them was mine.

Cyrus turned and grasped my hand. I tried to dig in my heels, but he tugged me to his side and laced his fingers with mine. “Her wolf is one of the strongest I've encountered. She saved my life.” He squeezed my hand. “She saved it more than once, actually. And now she's carrying my child. Boy or girl, the baby is my heir.”

More shocked gasps. More than one set of eyes dipped to my stomach.

“I won't have any other queen,” Cyrus said. He lifted his voice, addressing the council. “Go ahead and have your vote. If you want Abby gone, I'm going with her. I'll abdicate the throne and you can have Carrington for your king.”

My jaw dropped. I tugged at his hand, ready to argue with him, but he ignored me. “Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going upstairs to wash the blood of our enemies from my body.” He leveled a scathing look at Foster. “Try not to wrinkle your shirt when

you sit at the head of the council table and tally the votes.”

He turned and left, pulling me with him and leaving a stunned silence in our wake. He didn’t speak until we were in his suite. The second the door closed, he pushed me against the wall and cupped my face in his hands. “I’m so sorry you had to hear that garbage.”

I gripped his wrists. “Cyrus, you can’t give up your throne for me.”

He shrugged. “I’m fine with it.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Crazy about you.”

“I’m being serious.”

“So am I.” He rested his forehead against mine. “If I can’t rule with you beside me, I don’t want to rule at all.”

Tears burned my throat. “You were born to be king. You can’t give up your heritage for me.”

His eyes grew stark. “I almost lost you today. There is no kingdom more precious than you. We met in a prison, Abby. But if we leave here, we could be truly free.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “You make it sound like you actually want to abdicate.”

“It could be fun,” he said lightly. “I’ll become a plumber or something. Goodness knows I’ve spent enough time dealing with Foster’s shit. I’d probably be great at it.”

I laughed. This silly side of him was so endearing, I was in danger of falling under his spell completely.

Although who was I kidding? I was already charmed.

His eyes gleamed. “You’re really dirty. Filthy, actually.”

Heat licked through me. “I know.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

“Come with me in the shower and I’ll get you even dirtier.”

My heart sped up. “Promise?”

He lowered his mouth to mine, and he spoke in a warm river in my head. “Cross my heart.”

EPILOGUE

ABBY

I gave the male in the corner a skeptical look. “Are you going to behave yourself or do we need to have another talk about your claws?”

His golden eyes narrowed.

“Not the answer I was hoping for.”

Nothing.

“What if I promise you a treat?”

His whiskers twitched. After a second, he stalked across the room and twined around my legs.

I smiled down at him. “You’re getting hair all over my pants.” I picked him up and scratched between his ears. “But you’re so handsome I’ll let it slide.”

The cat in my arms purred. A beat later, the baby in my belly gave a mighty kick.

I gasped, then laughed as I carried the cat to the exam table. “I think you’ve made a friend.”

The checkup took about five minutes. As promised, my feline patient kept his claws to himself—and I upheld my end of the bargain by rewarding him with a treat from the canister in my office. His owner was late, so I took him to the garden and watched him roll in the grass in the sunshine.

I shook my head. “For someone who pretends to be dignified you look absolutely ridiculous right now.”

He ignored me.

Typical. Cats had been ignoring humans—and probably everyone else—since Egyptian times.

“Oh!” A breathless lycan guard skidded to a stop on the edge of the garden path. “My lady, I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

I smiled. “Sorry, Landon. I should have left a note. Bart here loves the garden, so I thought I’d let him explore for a bit.”

Landon’s face melted as he watched his cat arch in the sunlight. “How did he look?”

“Perfectly healthy. I’d like to keep him on the heart medication I started him on last month. I think we finally found the right prescription.”

“That’s a relief.” He went to the cat and scooped him up, and I got to watch the somewhat surreal sight of a six-five lycan guard cuddling his ten-pound cat like a

baby. “You’re a good boy,” he crooned, “aren’t you, Bartholomeow?”

Bart yawned. With his luxurious mink-colored coat and deep golden eyes, he was used to being admired.

I heaved myself off the stone bench and put a hand in the small of my back. “Bart is my last patient of the day, so I’m going to head upstairs.”

Landon was at my side in an instant. “Let me help. It’s my fault you had to sit out here on that bench. If I’d been on time for Bart’s appointment, you wouldn’t have had to wait.” He paled. “The king is going to kill me.”

I patted his arm. “Cyrus is not going to kill you. And I didn’t mind waiting. I don’t get a lot of time to myself these days.”

“Still, I can at least make sure you get up the stairs okay.”

Exasperation swelled in my chest. One thing I’d discovered about lycan males was they were downright ridiculous when it came to pregnant females. The only way to handle them was to be firm.

I pointed down the path leading out of the garden. “Take Bart home. I’ll handle Cyrus.”

Landon frowned. “Are you sure, my lady?”

“Yes, and please call me Abby.”

He grinned. “No problem, my lady.”

I tried to look stern, but I ended up smiling as he walked away with Bart blinking lazily at me over his shoulder. I was fighting a losing battle when it came to convincing Cyrus’s subjects to use my first name. Once word got around that I’d helped kill Roman, the lycans had afforded me a deference that never failed to surprise me.

I still didn’t feel like a queen. Of course, it didn’t help that I spent most of my days in scrubs and a lab coat covered in animal hair.

And I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Mama?” The voice that flowed through my head was sure and strong—and adorably high-pitched as only a five year old’s could be. “Can I have one of those cookies in the pantry?”

I shook my head as I left the garden and made a beeline for the kitchen. When I arrived, Max was perched on a barstool with a big glass of milk. He was a carbon copy of Cyrus with his dark hair and silver eyes. The only difference between them was Max currently had a chocolate mustache and a cookie crumb beard.

“Maximilian Rothkilde,” I said, “you know you’re not supposed to eat snacks before

dinner.”

“I asked!” my son said.

I tapped the side of my head. “You know I can’t reply, you stinker.” Not only had Max inherited the telepathy that ran through Cyrus’s bloodline, he’d displayed the gift surprisingly early. For a while, I’d worried Cyrus might actually burst with pride.

“I left a cookie for you,” my son said. Because he was his father’s son and he already understood that diplomacy was one of the most powerful weapons a king could wield.

I went to him and ruffled his hair. “You’re not getting out of eating your vegetables, you know.”

The prince of the lycans sighed glumly. “I know.”

A deep voice spoke behind us. “What about me?”

I turned—and I probably melted just like Landon seeing Bart. “You’re finished early,” I told Cyrus.

He smiled as he took me in his arms. “Not really. I just canceled the rest of my meetings for the day. Told Foster to go fu—” Cyrus glanced at an extremely attentive Max. “Uh, I told him to go find something else to do besides bother me.”

I put my fingers over my lips so I wouldn’t laugh. “And how did he take that?”

“Probably like he takes everything else. But he doesn’t have many options these days.”

Well, that was true enough. Foster had seriously overplayed his hand by pushing the

nobles to throw me out. As a result, they'd voted to remove him as head of the council. His power was greatly diminished—a situation that seemed permanent.

I chewed my lip now. “You don't think he'll do anything...” It was my turn to glance at Max. “Bad?” I really meant “murderous” but I wasn't about to say that in front of my five year old.

“No,” Cyrus said, his rumbling voice confident. “Foster is a pain but he's not plotting a coup.” That was one of the things Roman had been wrong about. Celeste might have claimed it, but she'd been out of her mind and fixated on removing Cyrus by any means possible. She'd seen Roman as a convenient way to make that happen, so she'd cooked up a story and fed it to him—with me as bait.

Cyrus reached over and pretended to steal Max's nose, making Max giggle. Then he smoothed the hair off my forehead. “I'm not worried about Foster, sweetheart. I believe he's been sufficiently declawed. And if not, I know a really good veterinarian who can finish the job.”

Happiness spread through me like the sun's rays. Shortly after our marriage, he'd surprised me by transforming a section of the mansion into a clinic. I treated animals for the entire race. Cats, dogs, birds. Even a couple horses. It was everything I'd ever wanted.

I stood on tiptoe so I could kiss the underside of his bristly jaw. “I don't think that will be necessary. You're a strong king.”

He smoothed his hand over my rounded belly, where our second child was trying to roundhouse kick his or her way out of the womb. “Busy in there today, huh?”

I sighed. “Every day. Twenty-four, seven.” Max had been a fairly chill baby. This one was going to give us a run for our money. I assumed it was a girl.

Cyrus bent and spoke quietly in my ear. “I’ll help you relax tonight.”

Shivers coursed through me. “Promise?”

He kissed my temple, then slid his lips to my mouth and kissed me there, too.
“Promise to make you come until you scream,” he said in my head.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am

Gagging noises intruded, and we sprang apart to see Max pretending to throw up.

Cyrus raised a brow. “Don’t think I’m unaware you’ve been sneaking in here and eating cookies before dinner.”

Max raised his hands like he’d been wrongly accused of an egregious crime. “I asked mommy!”

“Mmhmm,” Cyrus said. “I bet.”

“Oh, leave him alone.” I brushed cookie crumbs off Max’s cheek. “He just wanted something sweet.”

Cyrus took my hand and guided it to his lips. “Don’t we all, my queen.” He kissed my knuckles. “Don’t we all.”

I raised a brow. “You mean you don’t have enough sweetness in your life?”

“Oh yes.” He pulled me closer. “It’s a sweet life, indeed.”

* * *