



# Claimed by the King's Gamma (Lycan Luna: Abbie & Gannon #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** She was freed from death, only to become a servant in the King's castle. Until one man saw her for who she truly was.

Abbie never wanted to be saved. Because sometimes, survival feels like another kind of prison.

When King Kyson intervened on the day of her execution, she was given a choice—become a servant in the Valkyrie Kingdom or be left to die at the hands of her alpha. She chose to live. But living has never felt so empty. Trapped in a castle that will never truly be her home, Abbie is haunted by her past, her trauma, and the scars no one else can see.

Until Gannon—the King's Gamma—sees her.

Gannon is cold, unreadable, and terrifying. He is everything Abbie should fear. And yet, in his presence, she feels something she hasn't in years. Safe.

But safety is an illusion.

Because when Abbie's fated mate appears—a man who will stop at nothing to claim her—she must decide:

Trust the man who terrifies her?

Or submit to the one who swears she belongs to him?

Sometimes, the worst mistake is choosing wrong.

**Total Pages (Source):** 50

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

I've never felt heavier as I open my eyes to a world of pain; every muscle throbs as if I have been trampled.

Memories flood back in a rush - fur sprouting from my skin, bones cracking and reforming, and howl's tearing from my throat.

Pain is all I remember, not that pain is something I'm not used to.

This was a different kind of pain, agonizing yet freeing, only to be trapped again with Mrs. Daley in this dreadful place.

Last night, I hoped the pain would end me, prayed the suffering would end in the darkness of oblivion; at least I would be free of Mrs. Daley.

However, the thought of leaving Ivy and Tyson with her has guilt tearing me apart.

A soft voice cuts through the fog of confusion and despair. I turn my head, finally noticing the gentle fingers tangled in my hair.

Ivy's face comes into view, her raven hair falling in messy tangles around her shoulders.

She's perched on the edge of my threadbare mattress, gently stroking my hair as she sings.

But something is wrong. Her blue eyes are dull and unfocused.

Angry red welts crisscross her arms, disappearing beneath the torn sleeves of her faded dress that are a size too small and older than her.

Peering around at the room, I take in the long, angry claw marks marking the wood, which has me staring at my fingertips.

Did I do that? Groaning, I stare up at her, noting the same claw marks scratching her chest. Did I do that to her?

I whimper at the thought of hurting her.

“Ivy?” I croak, my voice raw. “What...?”

She blinks slowly, seeming to come back to herself. “Oh, Abbie. Finally, you’re awake.” A sad smile flickers across her face. “How are you feeling?”

I try to sit up, wincing as she helps me. “Like death warmed over. What happened?”

Ivy’s expression changes to one of sadness, and I truly take in her form.

Now, sitting up, I can see the damage: her dress is barely clinging to her, my claws having shredded most of it.

Mrs. Daley will make her pay for that ruined dress, and I know it will be my fault.

Her legs are covered in grazes, and those welts—the true horror of the damage from Mrs. Daley’s cane, show on her skin.

“Oh my gosh, Ivy, your clothes.” My hands wave about frantically as I try to cover her bruised and broken skin as if I can somehow stitch my best friend back together, along with the torn fabric.

“It’s okay; I can barely feel them,” she murmurs as she moves.

At least they are no longer bleeding. I take in the huge welts, knowing I didn’t cause those, but she wasn’t covered this badly last night when we were locked inside our attic bedroom.

Sure, she has always had scars; we both are covered in them, but these are fresh. She winces at my touch.

“I’m fine, Abbie. It’s nothing, just a few scratches,” she tells me, and I stare at her as if she is absurd. It’s more than a few scratches; she looks like she has been put through a cheese grater.

“Did she do that to you because of me?” I ask. Ivy swallows thickly and fiddles with her fingers, which are covered in blood—hers or mine, I’m unsure.

“Mrs. Daley. She heard you last night. During your shift.” The mention of my shift triggers memories that flood back. Yet I recall Ivy’s voice, promising it would be okay, telling me to be quiet because she was right there with me.

The memories sharpen. Mrs. Daley’s shrill voice cuts through my pain-filled haze. The whistle of her cane through the air and the swishing sting, but it didn’t last long. Looking at Ivy now, I understand why—because she took the brunt of it.

“I tried to calm you, but you were...” Ivy trails off, that vacant look returning, and she abruptly changes the subject.

“You did well, Abbie. You finally shifted!” She forces some excitement into her voice before it dies off.

“Your wolf was magnificent; I wish you could have seen yourself.” I don’t feel an

ounce of excitement at getting my wolf, knowing not only what it means but also knowing Ivy was punished for my inability to remain quiet.

“She did that because of me,” I whisper.

Ivy nods, her eyes welling with tears. “I tried to stop her, to shield you.”

I reach out, gently touching one of the angry marks on her arm.

“You shouldn’t have.”

She shakes her head fiercely. “Of course I should have. More than my life, remember?” Her vacant expression returns, and she resumes her soft singing, tugging me back down; I rest my head back in her lap, her fingers tangling in my hair.

“Ivy,” I whisper, my voice trembling. “You know what this means, right?”

Ivy’s singing stops abruptly. She meets my gaze, her blue eyes suddenly sharp with fear. “I know, Abbie, but we have time.”

I swallow hard; my mouth is as dry as a desert.

“I don’t want to leave you.” The words are bitter on my tongue; I hate to think about what will happen to her once I’m gone.

Or what would become of Tyson. The mere thought of his name has my eyes watering; he won’t survive Mrs. Daley—especially once Ivy is gone.

I know she’ll protect him as long as she can, but her eighteenth birthday isn’t far off, either. And then what?

Ivy nods grimly. “But we have time,” she says, a spark of hope in her voice. “Alpha Brock is away on pack business; he won’t be back for a few weeks. I overheard Katrina speaking with Mrs. Daley.”

“A few weeks?” I echo, hardly daring to believe it.

“Yes,” Ivy confirms. She takes my hand, squeezing it tightly. “And Abbie... When the time comes, I’m going to ask to be tried with you.”

I gasp; and shock jolts through me. “Ivy, no! You can’t?—”

“I can and I will,” she interrupts. “We came here together, and we’ll leave it the same way—if they want to execute you, they’ll have to kill me, too.”

Tears spill down my cheeks as I stare at my best friend, my other half. “But you haven’t shifted yet; you still have a chance?—”

Ivy shakes her head, her expression resolute. “A chance at what? A life without you? That’s no life at all.” She cups my face in her hands. “We die together or not at all; that’s the deal—more than my life, Abbie; more than my life—I have no purpose without you.”

I want to argue, to beg her to reconsider, but I know that look in her eyes.

There’s no changing her mind. Instead, I pull her close, burying my face in her shoulder as we cling to each other.

The moment is short-lived when I hear the sharp rap on the door and Mrs. Daley’s voice screeching at us from the other side of the door.

“Get up! You have chores!” The sharp edge of her voice slices through the tense

quietude of our room. My fingers tighten around Ivy's, my nails digging into the soft flesh of her palm. She doesn't flinch; instead, she squeezes back just as hard.

"Coming, Mrs. Daley," Ivy answers for both of us while I'm suddenly struggling against the fear that claws and gnashes in my stomach at having to put up with Mrs. Daley for another day.

Ivy eases herself up first, wincing as her legs take her weight. She turns back to me, trying to give me an encouraging smile. Ivy falters when she sees my worried expression.

"It'll be okay," she insists quietly, reaching for a clean dress hanging on a peg by the small window.

"It won't," I insist, but it's a fight we've had a dozen times; there's no point in it now. I push to my feet, my body aching violently. I feel like a shadow of myself like something vital has been ripped away.

"Now, Rogues, these kids need feeding!" Mrs. Daley bangs on the door while Ivy rushes to change, knowing walking out in her torn clothes will get her another whipping.

Ivy slips into the brown, worn-out dress in seconds, not caring for her modesty in front of me; we've been together since we were children, what haven't we seen of each other?

Once dressed, she hurries over to me and helps me get ready.

I'm more than just weakened by my first shifting - the emotional turmoil of what it means is taking its toll.

“Stop worrying so much,” Ivy whispers, helping me pull on a similar ragged dress. Her voice is barely above a whisper, afraid Mrs. Daley might overhear our conversation. Ivy places a hand on my bare shoulder, giving me a reassuring squeeze.

“You’re stronger than you think, Abbie,” she says, her blue eyes meeting mine through the mirror in front of us. “We’ll make it through this together.”

The banging on the door continues. Each thud resounds in my head and sends my heart racing. There will be dire consequences if we don’t comply with Mrs. Daley’s demands quickly.

Ivy gives me one last reassuring glint in her eyes before she opens the door to let Mrs. Daley in. The elder woman’s hardened gaze sweeps over us; there’s no room for sympathy in those cold eyes of hers.

“Get your lazy bones moving,” she snaps before turning on her heel and leaving us to race against time once again.

We step into the bustling kitchen filled with young children who are each in a state of neglect. Mrs. Daley reserves her worst treatment for us, but all the kids here are malnourished and neglected.

“Quit your dawdling!” the sharp tone comes again, demanding and potent with impatience.

“All right, all right!” Ivy calls, slipping into her apron with hurried movements. I am quick to do the same when I see Mrs. Daley’s hand tighten around the tip of her cane. She looks like she is itching to use it. The first whack of the day is always the worst.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

A Few Weeks Later

The stillness of the hallway presses in on me as I drag the damp rag across the wooden railing.

The aged floorboards creak beneath my slow steps.

A distant clock ticks steadily, marking the fleeting seconds.

My hands tremble as I clean, but not from the morning chill or exhaustion.

No, my mind is far from this place, these walls that cage me.

It drifts to him, the one I can't bear to leave behind.

Tyson, too vulnerable, and too young, leaves me no hope for his well-being once I am not here to protect him from her.

Through the smudged window at the end of the hall in the backdoor.

I see him in the backyard, right where he always is this time of day.

He's crouched in the old sandpit, digging away with a pointed stick, lost in a world of his own making.

Little Kimmy sits beside him, her blonde matted hair moving with the icy breeze in the rising light as she pats a mound of dirt with her small hands.

I stood at this very window not an hour ago, watching them play.

Tyson's round face streaked with grime yet split into a grin so pure and joyful that it pierced my heart.

A rare sight, that smile. A treasured gift in this bleak place.

And now, as I gaze out again, memorizing the slope of his nose and the unruly curls that tumble over his ears, an ache builds in my chest, so sharp I can hardly breathe.

This is the last time I will see that precious face, the last chance to witness one of his unburdened smiles. After today, memories will die with me—blurred images that will dull and fade alongside my last breath.

I squeeze my eyes shut against the burn of tears, curling my fingers into the damp rag until my nails bite into my palms. Each breath shudders in my chest teetering on the edge of a sob.

I want to run to him, gather his sturdy little body in my arms and run with him.

To breathe in his scent of grass and sun-warmed skin and promise him everything will be alright, that I will always keep him safe.

But I can't. Because the painful truth is, I have failed him.

Failed to protect him from the cruelties of this life.

Failed to shield him from the ugliness lurking in every shadowed corner of this place.

So I stand frozen, watching my sweet boy through a pane of glass, close enough to see the freckles that dust his upturned nose, yet separated by an unfathomable chasm

that feels like it is growing so large it will never end.

Mrs. Daley's sharp voice slices through my thoughts like a blade.

"Rogue!" I flinch, my fingers clenching around the damp cloth as her heavy footsteps thunder down the hallway behind me.

The floorboards groan under her weight, echoing the dread that settles in my stomach.

"Finish scrubbing that railing, then get to the bathrooms," she barks, her words harsh as they always are. "The king doesn't visit filth."

I bow my head, letting my hair fall forward to hide the resentment that surely flashes in my eyes. "Yes, Mrs. Daley."

I mutter the submissive words knowing any other words will get me beaten with the cane I want to so badly shove up her scrawny old ass.

I can feel her glare boring into the back of my skull, seething disapproval radiating off her like heat.

She has always despised us. To her, I am nothing more than a burden, a slave, someone to take her frustration out on, not that I can complain; she hates Ivy more and it shows with the way she uses her dreaded cane on her; I don't think Ivy has much skin left that isn't scarred besides her face.

But for Tyson's sake, I force myself to stay silent. To swallow the defiant retorts that burn in my throat and numb myself to her cruelty. Because as long as I am here, I can protect him. I can absorb the worst of her anger and shield him from the brunt of her hatred.

So I scrub harder, my knuckles turning white as I grip the rag with bruising force. I picture Tyson's face, his toothy grin and the way his eyes light up when he sees me, and I let that image flood my mind instead of thinking of the trial that awaits me and Ivy today. Just a little longer.

Because deep down, I know the truth. There is no escape from this life. No happily ever after waiting for us on the other side of these suffocating walls. There is only death.

The click of Mrs. Daley's heels fades into the distance as I stand frozen, the damp rag hanging limply from my fingertips. A shudder runs through me, shaking loose the paralyzing fear that grips my heart whenever she's near. Slowly, I turn my head, scanning the hall with wary eyes.

A flicker of movement catches my attention, and Ivy emerges from behind a tattered armchair, her expression solemn but unsurprised. She's seen this scene play out a hundred times before: The way I shrink into myself, becoming a ghost in my own skin; The way Mrs. Daley scares the hell out of me.

Ivy steps closer, her footsteps whisper-soft against the worn floorboards.

"He'll be alright, Abbie," she says, even as she glances at the backdoor; I can tell she is saying that to try to ease my anxiety; we both know he is as good as dead once we are gone.

"Stop thinking the worst; it won't help anything. "

I swallow hard, my throat tight with unshed tears. "I can't help it," I whisper, my voice cracking around the edges. "Every time she yells, every time she raises her hand, all I can think about is him; about what will happen to him when I'm not here to protect him."

Ivy's hand finds mine; her fingers interlacing with my own. "I know," she murmurs, her voice heavy with understanding."

"I don't want to leave him," I say, my voice barely audible over the pounding of my own heart. "He needs me, Ivy. Without me, he'll be all alone in this godforsaken place. We're the only ones who care about him, the only ones who understand him."

Ivy sighs, her shoulders slumping under the weight of my words. "I know," she says again, her voice tinged with the same sadness I feel.

I swallow hard, my throat constricting with emotion.

"I need to see him, Ivy. One last time. I can't... I can't leave without saying goodbye; he'll think I abandoned him to her." The words tear from my throat and crack horridly.

"If she catches you..." she glances down the hall then chews her lip nervously.

"Then go," she says, her voice soft. "I'll cover for you. Where has she put you?"

"The bathrooms once I finish here," I admit and she nods, taking my rag. "Go, be quick and don't get caught!"

In that moment, I'm reminded of just how much I owe this girl, how many times she's put herself on the line for me without a second thought, how I'd be dead if it weren't for her.

"Thank you," I whisper, the words greatly inadequate but all I can manage.

Ivy just nods, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Go," she says again, giving my hand a final squeeze before releasing it. "Before Mrs. Daley comes back."

I don't need to be told twice. With a final glance at Ivy, I sneak past the kitchen, my heart pounding in my chest as I make my way down the narrow hallway. The floorboards creak under my feet, each step a risk I'm taking but one that is worth it.

The cold air hits me like a slap as I step into the yard, the wind whipping strands of hair across my face. I tuck them behind my ear with a shaking hand, my eyes scanning the overgrown grass for any sign of Tyson; he's since moved from the busted sandpit.

There, by the old oak tree, I spot a flash of movement. My heart leaps into my throat as I make my way toward him, each step feeling longer. He's crouched in the dirt, his little hands digging furiously as he mutters to himself in a language only he knows.

As I draw closer, I can hear his little puffs and grunts of frustration.

"Tyson," I call softly, not wanting to startle him.

His head snaps up, his wide blue eyes meeting mine. For a moment he just stares at me. Then he's on his feet, running toward me with a speed that belies his tiny frame.

I drop to my knees just as he reaches me, catching him in my arms and pulling him close. He buries his face in my neck, his small hands fisting the back of my dress as he clings to me.

Tears prick at the back of my eyes as I hold him tighter, breathing in the scent of dirt and sweat. "I'm here," I whisper, my voice cracking. "I'm right here."

He pulls back just enough to look at me; his eyes searching mine with an intensity that steals my breath as if he knows something is wrong and my lip trembles.

I swallow hard; the weight of that single word settling heavily in my chest.

His face breaks into a smile; a sight so pure and radiant that it momentarily chases away the shadows lurking in my heart. He presses his forehead against mine; his breath warm on my cheek as he pats my face with his hands; his way of saying 'I love you.'

I feel the hot sting of tears as they slip down my cheeks; mingling with dirt and grime. "I love you, too, Tyson," I choke out, my voice raw with emotion. "So so much."

From the corner of my eye; I see Kimmy watching us; her small face etched with a sadness no child should know. She understands; perhaps better than she should, what today means for me and Ivy.

I pull back, cupping Tyson's face in my hands as I try to memorize every detail - the curve of his cheek, the dimple in his chin, the way his eyes crinkle when he smiles. "I need you to be brave for me, okay?" I say softly, my thumb brushing away a stray tear. "Can you do that?"

He babbles something that makes no sense, which only breaks my heart. How can life be so cruel?

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

A sob catches in my throat, and I pull him in for one last hug, pouring the last ounce of love and strength I possess into that embrace, hoping it is enough for him to understand that I don't want to leave him.

"Never forget how much I love you," I whisper, my lips brushing his ear.

"Never forget that, no matter what." I pull away, trying to get his full attention.

"Tyson, I need you to listen to me," I say, my voice trembling but firm. "I need you to be a big boy now, okay? Can you do that for me?"

He nods, his little face so solemn and serious I almost laugh. Almost.

"I have to go away for a while," I continue, my throat constricting with emotion.

His tiny brow furrows as he tries to make sense of my words. His hands fist my skirt, yanking on it.

I swallow hard, fighting back the tears that threaten to consume me. How can I explain this to him? How can I make him understand that leaving him is the last thing I want to do, but the choice isn't mine.

"Somewhere far away, but I will always be right here," I say softly, poking his chest; he giggles, thinking I am tickling him. Sighing, I brush a stray curl from his forehead.

He clutches his blanket tighter, his bottom lip trembling as he leans closer, burying his face in my chest once more.



I hold him close, my heart shattering into a million pieces. “I know, sweetheart. I don’t want to go, either. But sometimes... sometimes we have to do things we don’t want to do.”

He sniffles, his tiny hands fisting the fabric of my blouse so tightly I think it might tear.

I stand on shaky legs, my heart shattering with each beat as I look down at his tiny form. His eyes are wide and wet, his bottom lip trembling.

“Tyson,” I say, my voice cracking as I kneel back down to his level. “I need you to promise me something, okay?”

“Promise me you’ll stay away from Mrs. Daley,” I whisper, cupping his cheeks with my trembling hands. “Promise me you’ll try to stay out of her way.”

A sob catches in my throat, and I squeeze my eyes shut trying to memorize the feel of him in my hands, the scent of his skin, the sound of his breath.

“I have to go now, sweetheart,” I say softly.

And then, I release him, rising to my feet on shaky legs knowing if I don’t, I will remain here and take the beating off Mrs. Daley.

Unfortunately, that puts him at risk too since she would blame him for distracting me.

He stares up at me; his eyes shine with a love and adoration I pray will never fade yet knowing this place and knowing her it will.

“Be good,” I manage to say, my voice barely above a whisper. “Listen to Kimmy and stay out of trouble. I’ll... I’ll see you soon.” I tell him if only he knew it means in

another life because I won't have one after today.

It's a lie, but he doesn't understand anyway, clutching his torn and holey blanket to his chest as he watches me back away. Kimmy steps forward, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"You have to stay out of Mrs. Daley's way. Do you hear me? You have to stay quiet, okay? Stay hidden if you need to. And listen to Kimmy?—"

"I'll look after him," Kimmy's small voice interrupts. She steps forward, her chin raised despite the fear that flickers in her eyes. Her hands, usually fidgeting with the frayed hem of her dress, are steady at her sides.

I tilt my head, my heart swelling even as it splinters further. "Kimmy, I?—"

"I know," she says softly, her gaze unwavering. "I'll keep him safe, Miss Abbie. I promise."

The conviction in her young voice nearly undoes me as I reach for her; she slams into me, her arms wrapping around my waist.

She nods, her small hands gripping the back of my dress like a lifeline. "I promise, Miss Abbie," she says, her voice quivering but never breaking. "I'll make sure he's okay."

The weight of her words settle on my shoulders, a burden and a blessing all at once. This little girl, so young and yet so brave, is willing to take on a responsibility far beyond her years. For Tyson. For me.

"You've always looked after us. Now it's my turn to look after him," Kimmy whispers.

A sob catches in my throat, tears blurring my vision.

“Thank you,” I manage, pulling her into a tight embrace.

Kimmy nods, a tear tracing down her cheek as she peers up at me. “We love you, Miss Abbie. Forever and always.”

The distant sound of Mrs. Daley’s shrill voice breaks through our fragile bubble, a harsh reminder of the reality we face. I pull back reluctantly, cupping both their faces in my hands.

“I have to go,” I say, the words like shards of glass in my throat.

Tyson whimpers, his little hands reaching for me, but Kimmy grasps them gently, pulling him to her side. She meets my gaze, a silent understanding passing between us; she knows what fate awaits him if Mrs. Daley gets her hands on him.

With a final kiss to each of their foreheads, I force myself to walk away. Each step is agony; the weight of their eyes on my back is a physical ache. But I keep going, even as my heart screams at me to turn back, to gather them up and run, to never let them go.

As I slip through the gate, the cold metal biting into my palm, I risk one final glance back. They stand hand in hand watching me go; their faces etched with a sorrow far beyond their years.

“I love you,” I mouth, the words carried away in the bitter wind.

And then I am gone, the gate swinging shut behind me with a finality that echoes in the depths of my soul.

I jog up the steps, listening for Mrs. Daley before slipping inside, narrowly making it past her as she exits the dining room.

I rush up the steps to help Ivy with the last of our chores, stopping by the linen cupboard to grab some fresh linen.

I burst into the room, my heart pounding from the near miss with Mrs. Daley.

Dropping the stack of fresh linens on the lower bunk, I snatch up the feather duster and attack the chandelier, trying to calm my nerves.

The urgency of the day weighs heavily; we have twelve rooms to prepare, and not a minute can be wasted.

“She almost caught me,” I gasp out, the fear of the encounter still fresh. A tear escapes, tracing a path down my cheek. I quickly wipe it away, no time for tears.

Ivy, ever the pillar of strength, reassures me from across the room. “He’ll be fine, Abbie,” she says, but I catch the slight tremor in her voice. We both know the kind of person Mrs. Daley is, and my heart sinks for little Tyson.

Trying to refocus on the task at hand, I start stripping the beds, my movements quick and efficient. Ivy pauses and stares at me, her face troubled. “Mrs. Daley... she told me...” her voice trails off, and I can tell she’s struggling to deliver the news.

“What is it?” I ask softly, dreading her next words.

Ivy swallows hard, her eyes meeting mine with a grave intensity. “The butcher will be there. He’s hoping we’re auctioned and not killed.” Her words hit me like a cold wave, and I feel a shiver despite the sweat on my brow.

A lump forms in my throat as I process her words. I try to push back the panic rising within me. “More than my life, Abbie,” Ivy whispers, a solemn promise in her gaze.

The weight of her words anchors me, and I find a shred of courage.

“I can’t promise that; not this time, Ivy.

I’d rather die than let him touch me again,” I manage to say, my voice cracking.

The memories creep up, threatening to overwhelm me.

“Don’t make me break a promise,” I whisper, another tear rolling down my cheek.

Ivy nods, understanding the depth of my pain. “More than my life,” she repeats, affirming our pact—a pledge deeper than any simple ‘I love you’.

“No, I won’t allow it,” I stammer

“More than my life,” she reaffirms, knowing Ivy will stand by me no matter what comes and nothing I say will change her mind.

I wipe my tears and nod slowly, my bottom lip quivering as I look at her.

“More than my life,” I whisper reluctantly before turning back to my task.

Ivy responds with a nod, her own eyes misty.

We share a look before returning to our tasks, then we focus on pulling back the heavy drapes, letting in a sliver of cold morning air. As I move to help strip the beds, the physical exertion takes a toll. Mrs. Daley’s inspections are always rigorous, and any mistake can mean the whip.

“Pillows,” I sing out to Ivy behind me as I toss them her way.

She catches them and begins placing them on each freshly made bed, ensuring everything looks perfect.

We straighten the dark rugs, make sure no toys are left out, and adjust everything meticulously. We can’t afford any mistakes—not today.

With only a couple of hours left and more rooms to clean, the pressure mounts.

Today we’re supposed to learn our fate in the town square, a day we’ve both dreaded for eight long years.

As the reality of our situation sinks in, I know we might choose to face the lashes rather than be late for the Alpha, whose decision is final.

Rushing to the next room, the routine starts again. Each passing moment has us moving quicker, as we continually glance at the clock, the sinking feeling in my stomach grows. We’re running out of time, with over a hundred sandwiches still to make for the children.

The click of heels on the wooden floor signals Mrs. Daley’s approach.

Straightening, Ivy and I flatten our aprons, fix our hair, and stand ready, hands clasped behind our backs.

As Mrs. Daley enters, her presence dominating the room, I steel myself for what’s to come.

Her eagle eyes scan every corner, looking for any reason to unleash her cruelty.

As she inspects the room, I hold my breath, preparing for her verdict.

She begins her inspection, her eyes scanning for any imperfection. I hold my breath, praying she finds nothing amiss.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

A Few Hours Later

We have run out of time. The clock has ticked the end of lives away so cruelly.

Today is the day; one I knew was coming but didn't believe I would live long enough to see.

However, Alpha Brock will finally put an end to my misery.

I turned eighteen a few weeks ago, and I was surprised he didn't jump to put me down that very day.

Luckily, he was out of town because it gave Ivy enough time to ask to be tried alongside me.

Death is the least of my fears. No, my biggest fear besides leaving Tyson in Mrs. Daley's hands is being put up for auction and sold to the butcher.

He's a vile man, despicable. I shudder at the thought of his hands on me and suck in a deep breath, trying to slow my racing heart.

I will kill myself before I ever let myself be placed in his hands again.

No, Doyle will not have me, won't be allowed to violate me further, and I know Ivy will understand she will have to.

She knows the pain he caused me, though we never speak of it; she knows what he



did.

If only she hadn't climbed on that chair next to me and pulled the noose around her neck, too.

Perhaps then the rope would have held my weight, and my misery would have ended that fateful day.

Although, the very thought of leaving Ivy with our headmistress, Mrs. Daley, makes bile rise up my throat.

She's a wicked old woman. I can't stand her, especially after what she just did to us.

My back stings, but I know the markings that mar my skin are nothing compared to the whipping Ivy just got.

All because she gave us too many chores—more than usual—because the king is visiting today, and she wants her yearly donations.

He is the reason we are in this mess; he makes the laws.

As if we care if the stupid king is visiting the pack today; he would just be another to torment us if given the chance.

I flinch as I place the rag doused in medicinal herbs on her skin.

Ivy tries not to move or cringe, but I know it must be burning like crazy.

I remind myself it will be over for both of us very soon.

Eight horrendous years later, and we are finally going to be free of this place, this

life.

Death.

Most would think it morbid to wish for death, but death will be more pleasant than the life we are living in this orphanage—forced by the very pack that killed our parents. The Alpha slaughtered them right in front of us mercilessly.

Grabbing a bandage, I start wrapping it around her torso. Ivy shudders and grips the comforter on the bottom bunk, fisting it, trying to hide the pain she is in. I sniffle, trying to stop myself from crying. Goddess knows Mrs. Daley would punish us worse if she saw a tear.

Once I finish dressing her wounds, I reach for her blouse and help her pull it on, untucking her raven hair as it bunches up inside it.

I smile sadly at her, hoping the herbs will help remove some of the pain for her.

Standing, Ivy swallows and nudges me, taking the leftover rags and tapping me in a silent message to turn around.

Ivy dabs the wounds on my back with a wet cloth to clean them; though mine are just raised skin and sting a little—hers are deep gashes.

When she finishes, she squeezes my arm gently and I pull my blouse back on hissing as my shoulders move.

Ivy watches me and silence falls between us.

If I have to go out, I'm glad I have Ivy by my side.

I would be lying if I said I'm not a little scared, though; however, I can't help but wonder if I will be reunited with my parents.

Gosh how I miss them! It has been so long; I've almost forgotten what they looked like or even the sounds of their voices—it feels like a lifetime ago.

Reaching my hand out, Ivy places her calloused one in mine and glances around our orphanage bedroom—the room lined with bunks for the children we cared for, for more than eight years.

I will miss them but not this place.

I give Ivy's hand a squeeze and she tightens hers back.

I don't let go as we walk out of our bedroom and up long corridors passing each room.

It saddens me knowing there will be no little faces tomorrow for us; no little hands dragging us from our bed to make them breakfast.

The children here are the only good thing about this place.

As we pass each room, I slow, hesitating at Tyson's door.

I'm worried—who will look after him? He is non-verbal and has a severe learning disability, but Mrs. Daley refused to have him tested.

Will he get fed or will Mrs. Daley lock him away again like some animal?

He is such a sweet boy, just misunderstood.

Emotions threaten to choke me as I stare at his little bed; the little bed I would sometimes climb into in the middle of the night to soothe his night terrors. The little bed filled with his scent.

If I wasn't going to my own funeral, I would take him with me, but death is no place for him.

He deserves the world, and I hope one day he will have it at his little fingertips.

It takes all my willpower to keep walking.

This will be the last time we walk these halls; the last time we see the little faces we helped clean and the little hands we held.

The corridors are silent as we descend the spiral staircase to the floor below.

As we reach the bottom, the weight lifts off me. We are finally free—free of this life and free of Mrs. Daley. I will no longer have to hide whenever the butcher comes to drop off meat; I will no longer have to see his face again after today.

With that thought in mind, I glance at Ivy, knowing she's feeling the exact same thing as me. We've endured enough and today our suffering ends along with our lives.

"Let's go home," I whisper to her.

Ivy pushes on the double doors leading to the small courtyard out front.

The porch creaks under our feet and I see the kids playing out front on the run-down play equipment.

I've lost count of the number of times I have had to patch the kids up after falling

from it or pulling splinters from tiny feet and hands.

We step out into the bitterly cold air, though the cold has never really bothered me.

I spent most of my life on autopilot, anyway, barely feeling anything.

It's one thing I can say Mrs. Daley taught me: emotion gets us nothing; pain and tears won't save us; she taught me just how easily someone could break when she locked me in that damn basement with the butcher.

After that day, I learned it was better not to feel, just switch it off – it is what it is.

So, I hold that thought as I step outside.

The day is overcast, clouds hiding the sun, making it gloomy. The gray clouds are low, and it looks like it will rain later in the day.

The kids stop what they're doing and rush over, grabbing and reaching for us, wanting us to play.

Tears threaten to bubble and spill but I fight them back looking for my boy and enjoying seeing them one last time when a car pulls up and parks on the curb.

It is sleek and black, with windows tinted so darkly we can't see who is inside.

Yet I don't care because I notice Tyson coming over to me.

His plushie in his hand is missing an eye that I have sewed on one too many times before giving up.

His eyes are glassy, and Kimmy stands not far, his ratty blanket tucked over her arm.

Besides Kimmy, the kids have no idea where we are going.

But looking at Tyson's little face, I feel he knows now – like he can feel the sadness bleeding out of me at leaving him.

He knows I'm not coming back, and seeing the distress on his little face breaks my heart as I scoop him up.

“Shh, don't cry, don't cry,” I whisper, kissing his temple.

He is skinny and fits perfectly in my arms. “You be a good boy, try to stay away from Mrs. Daley okay, and stay with Kimmy or wait for Katrina. Katrina is good, remember,” I tell him, and he nods sadly, clutching my neck.

Ivy brushes her fingers through his hair.

Both of us have a soft spot for Tyson. He was only a few days old when his parents were killed, and he was a colicky baby.

The first year of his life, I hardly slept, and when I did catch a few moments, it was because he was on my chest. Now I'm leaving him to this horrid woman.

I inhale deeply, soaking in his scent one last time, savoring it as I silently pray to the moon goddess to not let anything happen to him.

Ivy nudges me, telling me we should go, and I place him down before noticing the car is still parked by the curb.

The passenger door opens, and two men hop out. They are dressed well, in clean crisp clothes, not a hair out of place and look picture-ready. Neither looks like what I expect so-called royalty to look like. Mrs. Daley rushes out in a hurry.

She looks like a mutton dressed up as a lamb.

The old hag has changed into a super tight pencil skirt and blouse, having popped the first two buttons open as if either of these men would be interested in her wrinkling, old floppy tits.

They look like golf balls in socks; I've seen her naked once and can tell you she had old floppy tits and sported a 70's afro that would need a hedge trimmer.

It scarred my eyeballs, and Ivy and I snickered about it for weeks afterward.

I try not to laugh and let Ivy tug me along to meet Alpha Brock.

Mrs. Daley stares over at the two men as they approach the small brick fence surrounding the place.

"You must be..." she stops trying to figure out who they are.

"I thought the Lycan King was coming today?" Mrs. Daley asks, looking slightly upset.

I nod toward them, and Ivy shrugs, looking them over with the same curiosity.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

“He couldn’t make it, so he sent us instead,” says the man who hopped out of the driver’s seat.

He is tall, dressed in a suit and has blond hair that shapes his face.

Another man gets out of the car behind that one; he has darker features.

His lips set in what looks like a permanent scowl, and his jaw is clenched tight, hands fisted at his sides.

He moves to the back of his car and lights a smoke.

I watch as he draws back on it and nearly stumble over my own feet as Ivy pulls me along.

For some reason, I find him intriguing but shake my head and push the thoughts away.

There is something dark and sinister about that man.

His dark eyes look me over before they meet mine.

The endless pools of darkness stare back at me; he smirks making me tear my eyes away from him and pay attention to where I am walking.

Lycans are different from werewolves; they remain upright when they shift and are more powerful, faster, and can turn another werewolf into a Lycan; werewolves can’t



change people and aren't anywhere near their caliber.

We are practically dogs compared to them; which is why Lycans rule over all of us.

Werewolves, like myself, are considered half-human; I shifted on my eighteenth birthday—what a horrific experience that was—especially when Mrs. Daley would come in to beat me when I was too loud; unfortunately she also beat Ivy for my pain.

Lycans are purebloods and lethal beasts; they are immortal though a dying species — go figure! Apparently they can die but their lifespan is endless unless mortally injured.

As we step out of the gate, a man I hadn't noticed before steps into Ivy's path.

Ivy freezes, and I hear her breathing pick up beside me.

This man commands attention seemingly without trying.

His suit does nothing to hide the bulk of muscle pressing tightly beneath it.

His silver eyes glow as he stares at Ivy.

I want to cower away from him, yet Ivy stares back seemingly mesmerized by him.

He cocks his head to the side watching her.

I grab Ivy's arm, giving it a shake, knowing Mrs. Daley will whip her extra good before we leave if Ivy embarrasses her by stealing this man's attention.

"We should go," I whisper. I don't want to leave Alpha Brock waiting; he will make our death particularly heinous, and Ivy nods to me.

Another car pulls up, but as we pass, both men are gazing at her.

We walk out of the small gate when the man with silver sparkling eyes grips Ivy's arm tugging her to him, and I gasp as his eyes flicker.

Movement out of the corner of my eye moves my gaze to the man who is smoking.

He tosses his cigarette to the gutter with a curious expression on his face as he watches the man holding Ivy's arm. "

"Rogue?" the man says, and my grip on her hand tightens; the way he looks at her is as if he wants to devour her.

He turns his attention toward Mrs. Daley and lets her arm go before glancing at me, and I quickly drop my gaze.

We both duck our heads in submission. The man growls, and Mrs. Daley bumps me, making my back arch as she moves closer. I don't miss the way she sneers at Ivy.

"Yes, sir, they are just on their way. Run along, girls," Mrs. Daley says, and we both nod, and I jerk on Ivy's hand.

Without uttering a peep, we make our way into town. This side of town is run-down; the lawns are overgrown, litter fills and clogs the gutters, and leaves coat the ground as we walk. Most of the houses have been destroyed by a storm that blew through town a few months ago, leaving most abandoned.

There is only one way in and out of this town as it's high up in the winding mountain ranges.

The forest surrounding it is vast and dense, keeping us secluded from any human

towns.

Packs tend to stick to themselves and after years of hiding, humans eventually forget about werewolves, and we become folklore or myth.

Yet all myths and legends start somewhere, usually with a version of the truth.

Both Ivy and I gaze at the forest longingly; if only we could escape.

I sigh; the only freedom we will get is with death, foolish to run, though I can see that Ivy desperately wants to do so, too.

However, a quick death is what I can live with—if we run, Alpha Brock will tear us apart piece by piece personally believing we have suffered enough.

“Come on,” I tell Ivy before she gets any ideas; we wouldn’t even make it to the forest edge before they caught us.

We stride toward Town Square where we can hear people in town getting ready for the Alpha.

He rarely comes to town having no need with servants at his beck and call; however today his presence is required.

The Alpha gets to decide our fates; those wishing to join the pack are herded once a month to Town Square and put on display by Alpha Brock who decides whether you can join.

Other options are to cast you out or kill you.

I shudder at the latter. The last option is being sold.

But I don't let my mind even go there, knowing the butcher would be the first one to raise his hand.

My heart is set on either death or the unlikely miracle of being cast out.

The hustle and bustle echo loudly as we enter the square while pack members go about their day like we aren't about to be slaughtered by their Alpha. When rogue children turn eighteen, the Alpha gets to choose their fate. It is cruel. You'd think killing parents is enough for him.

I know he will never let us go. Ivy isn't eighteen yet but once Mrs. Daley declared I would be going before the Alpha, she begged and pleaded to have her case heard at the same time.

Mrs. Daley said she would see what she could do but only if she did all her chores.

For weeks she busted her ass despite me telling her not to.

She wanted to die with me. We have a pact; it is probably silly but where one goes the other goes, even in death.

Mrs. Daley, though, is all too excited to get rid of us, and when Alpha Dean visited next, who is Alpha Brock's father, he granted Ivy's wish.

After today there will be no rogue orphans.

All the orphans are pack members' children who have been lost in various pack wars.

Yet despite everything, I'm grateful that I am able to stand up on the podium with my best friend and have someone to die with.

Though I can't imagine a world without Ivy in it, and I suppose she feels the same.

She is like my sister; we grew up together and I would lay down my life in a heartbeat for her if I could, but she would never allow that.

She would lay beside me; that's how it has always been and how it will be today.

People step away from us as we enter, giving us disgusted looks and a wide berth.

Rogues have a particular scent to pack wolves, alerting them to intruders, and that's how those here in the town square look at us—with judging, unwelcoming gazes.

I squeeze Ivy's fingers tighter as she slows, taking in those around us.

People watch as we make our way to the stage and take our seats next to it.

The wind is cool and moves my hair in the breeze.

Townpeople stare at us, spit at our feet—one even kicks my foot as he passes us.

I can feel a set of unwanted eyes on me which has me nervously glancing around and I instantly find the culprit: The butcher.

Peeking at him, he waves and blows me a kiss, and I close my eyes sucking in a deep breath fighting the memories of what he did to me away—the way he violated me and destroyed me. It's almost over Abbie; almost over and we will be free, I remind myself.

My wolf sense can pick up his pungent scent from here, and I try not to let it in—try to stop it from assaulting my nose.

Silence falls over the crowd of busy shoppers and those who came to watch our fates.

Everyone rushes to take their seats. Usually, Town Square is an open space, but someone has lined rows of chairs for people, some still standing around when we hear car doors in the distance.

Then Alpha Brock strolls down the aisle between chairs.

He looks to be in his thirties and only took over for his father a few years ago.

He has been cruel since he took over. No rogue has lived, so we know we are doomed.

We are outsiders, apparently, which is a good enough reason to hate rogues.

It's instantly assumed that without a pack, rogues are seen as unsafe or defiant against Pack hierarchy.

I swallow as he approaches. He sneers at us before climbing the steps and addressing the crowd.

He isn't bad-looking but his cruelty makes him deeply unappealing.

He is arrogant and also friends with the butcher.

Good friends. I have seen them together speaking vulgarly, which only eggs the butcher on—even more so when I was younger.

However, nothing will ever ruin me like that day when Mrs. Daley sold me to him.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

The Alpha calls us up to the stage, and the butcher snickers as he takes a front-row seat.

I refuse to look at him, focusing on the small cafe with blue and white umbrellas out front.

“Ah, choices. Now, what should I do with these filthy rogues?” The Alpha laughs.

He knows exactly what he is going to do with us.

He is just taunting and dragging out the inevitable.

I clutch Ivy’s fingers when the Alpha grabs her arm and tears her away. My lip quivers, and the Alpha motions to the butcher as he climbs the stairs. I feel his presence behind me as he yanks the hessian bag over my head like the Alpha did to Ivy.

“Brock, let me keep this one,” the butcher says, gripping my shoulders behind me, and my entire body tenses. “What do you want her for?”

“She has a tight ass,” he says, squeezing my shoulders as his hands trail down my arms. I am thankful for the Hessian bag so that I do not have to see him touching me. Knowing is bad enough; I don’t think I can handle seeing his face as the last thing before I die.

The Alpha huffs, “No, I want them gone. Besides, you can have any of the girls at the brothel. Why would you want rogue pussy?” I hear him tell the butcher, and I let out

a breath of relief.

The butcher makes a strange noise behind me before I feel him bump his crotch against my ass. “All you baby, god you make me hard,” he whispers before shoving me away, tears spilling down my cheeks.

The Alpha gives his usual speech about what a great Alpha he is and how the pack will thrive without rogue presence here to tarnish this great little town before handing down his sentence. The relief I feel upon hearing it is like no other.

“I now sentence you both to death by beheading,” the Alpha says, his voice ringing out loudly across the crowd. The crowd cheers, acceptance settling over me, and tension leaving my body. Finally.

Blindly, I reach out and find Ivy’s hand and clutch her fingers, letting her know I am right beside her, and we will go together. “Don’t cry. They don’t deserve your tears,” I whisper to her, hoping she hears me. She must have because she squeezes my fingers back and tames her emotions.

The Alpha rips her away from me, and I have to stop the whimper trying to escape me. I can just see through the Hessian bag enough to see him shoving her over the stone block. I swallow. I want to go first; I do not want to witness her death. Calm, Abbie; it will be over soon, I tell myself.

The sound of the blade dragging across the stone makes my teeth ache, and I clench them trying to stop tears freely flowing down my face and dripping onto my chest.

“What do you think you are doing?” a deep voice says, silencing the crowd. I hold my breath trying to peer out through the tiny gaps of the Hessian bag before hearing a collective gasp.



“Putting this rogue out of its misery,” Alpha Brock says.

“She is not even of legal age for this. Free her now,” comes the voice loud and clear; his aura menacing and stronger than any werewolf aura.

“Under whose authority do you have the right to demand that of me?” Alpha Brock asks, sword sliding off the stone block and hitting the ground.

“Are you questioning me, Alpha? If you do not heed my warning and let her go, I will be forced to take your life. Now free her and hand her over to me,” comes the voice with a rush bursting out from him.

The stranger’s aura bursts out, and I hear the Alpha take in a sharp breath; my knees shake as pain ricochets up my spine under its pressure.

“Lycan,” Alpha Brock gasps; though some pressure lifts the aura remains.

“Correct, it is about time you recognized your superior, Alpha,” the man says.

“Pack law says we are allowed to decide how we choose to handle rogues,” argues the Alpha.

“Yes, rogues of age; she has no wolf or else I would have sensed it. Now free her,” says the voice drawing closer with nervous laughter from the Alpha.

“You have no authority here. This is my pack,” Alpha Brock stammers.

Idiot, I think. Lycans rule, they are the superior species, and my Alpha is treading dangerously into uncharted territory.

Despite being the Pack Alpha, Lycans, no matter their status, overrule any werewolf

and can do whatever they liked.

“You dare speak to a Lycan like that? Have you forgotten your place on the chain of command, Alpha?” comes another voice. You could hear a pin drop, and I am suddenly too scared to even breathe loudly.

His aura is even stronger, and I forget how to breathe under it. I thought the pain was bad before, but this is something else and if I was frozen in place under it, I know I would be on the ground writhing in agony.

“I, King Kyson, order you to free her now!” the deep voice sounds threatening, despite how calm he spoke.

Alpha Brock whimpers before the sword falls from his hands, clanging loudly on the wooden stage beside us.

Footsteps move up the steps before I feel a presence move behind me and over to where Ivy is, yet the aura coming out of whoever it is makes me tremble violently.

“You dare speak out against my Beta. Who do you think you are?” the voice booms loudly.

His anger makes his aura stronger and my knees hit the ground hard, my kneecaps feeling like they are about to split down the middle. The air is suddenly sucked from my lungs, and I am suffocating under the pressure of it.

I hear movement and a whimper as Ivy is dragged off stage and a tear slips down my face. At least she will be saved and free of this place. It is clear the man only wants her and that is reassuring, though I hope it isn't with ill intentions.

Suddenly the pressure is lifted when the man drops his aura.

For a few seconds nothing remains but impenetrable silence.

Then the Alpha growls on stage. My startled shriek is loud as Alpha Brock grabs me in his tight grip dragging me toward the stone block.

He bends down and snatches his sword from the ground and shoves me over the block.

I close my eyes, this is it, I am going home. I let out a breath waiting for the sword to slice through my neck.

“No,” I heard Ivy cry out. It’s okay, Ivy , I think to myself, just go and live. I never wanted her to die with me, I wouldn’t be a good friend if I did.

“Please, please don’t let him kill her,” she begs someone, and I worry she will get herself in trouble.

“Please, just let him kill me. I want to be with her,” Ivy begs, and tears burn my eyes at her words.

“Stop, I want the other girl, too,” his voice booms, and I gasp.

“Hand the girl over, you heard the king,” the King’s Beta says.

Alpha Brock growls but grabs me, hauling me to my feet, then shoving me down the steps.

I stumble before hitting someone. Hands grip my arms and whoever it is growls at the Alpha.

The Hessian bag is suddenly lifted off my head and my eyes instantly go to search for

Ivy.

She's by another man who is watching her.

I don't understand the look in his gaze, but I understand the expression on her face, relief and I rush to her.

I throw myself at her, clutching her. Ivy squeezes me and I can't help the tears. I wanted death and this man wants her but where will that leave me now? Will I be cast away without Ivy? Death I can handle, but the unknown without her I can't?

"Thank you," I whispered though I wasn't sure if I should thank him yet, still I bare my neck to him, and he nods once before his eyes fall back on Ivy.

"Follow me," he says. Turning on his heel, he starts walking. I glance at Ivy before his Beta stops next to us.

"You heard the king, follow him," the man says, staring at us both on the ground, though his words were soft, which I didn't expect of him. We scramble upright, rushing after him and ignoring the shocked expressions of the town's people.

We follow the king back to the orphanage and Ivy peers around nervously, as do I.

What does he want with us? Or her, anyway; the only reason I'm here is because she begged him to spare me.

The king walks rather quickly; we have to jog to keep up with him.

His Beta follows behind us a few steps before we stop.

Mrs. Daley is standing out the front and rushes over, staring with her mouth open,

gaping at us.

“Hurry up, girls. Get inside,” she says, clearly shocked, but recovering quickly. We go to do what she says when the king opens the car door of his sleek black car and steps into Ivy’s path. He grips her arm, stopping her from passing him.

“Get in,” he says, and we stop. I clutch Ivy’s arm tightly while Ivy’s fingertips hold the side of my shirt, not willing to let me go, either.

“Your friend can come, but you are coming with me, so get in the car. I don’t like repeating myself,” he says to her sternly. I swallow, worried she will anger him.

“Gannon, sir, may I ask what is going on?” Mrs. Daley speaks up.

“No, you may not,” the king snaps, but I could have sworn he said his name was Kyson. She went to speak again when the Beta spoke behind us as we climbed in the car.

“Be wise to close your mouth, lady, the king doesn’t like to repeat himself,” his Beta warns.

“King?” she squeaks, as I slide across the leather seat.

“Yes, King Kyson,” the Beta confirms, and she drops her head. Instead, the king pays her no attention, he reaches inside the car and leans over Ivy. Instinctively I lean away from him, but he only pulls on a strap and clips it in beside her waist.

“Seatbelts,” he says before pointing to the other beside me. I quickly copy what he did and clip it in, Ivy peers at me and I stare out the window to find the man who was smoking leaning against the car door beside me and I quickly glance away.

The king speaks to his men outside the car, and I nervously glance around.

“What’s going on?” I whisper before tangling my fingers through Ivy’s and dragging her hand onto my lap.

“Maybe they are casting us out,” Ivy whispered. I squeeze her fingers when the Beta gets in the driver’s seat, and the king in the passenger’s.

The car starts moving and I clutch my seat in panic and accidentally squeeze Ivy’s fingers too tightly. She tries to pull away, making me loosen my grip so the circulation returns to her fingers.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

The drive to the castle was long, and I fell asleep along the way, only to be awoken by Ivy as we pull up.

She shakes my arm, jostling me awake to find we have stopped.

The castle is something out of fairy tales, and for a few moments, I forget about the man who had gotten in the car with us after the king became annoyed and pulled over.

It is the man I saw smoking earlier. He is quiet and doesn't say much, but it gives me a chance to peek at him.

He has dark hair and equally dark eyes, or maybe that is just because of the dim lighting with the tinted windows.

He is built big and has sharp features. His lips are full and seem to sit in a permanent frown.

I wonder briefly if he ever smiles—if this cold stony face is his usual demeanor, and if it suits his personality.

One thing is certain—he is a man of few words.

He didn't speak at all during the drive, just stared off.

His job was clearly to watch us, not tell us where we were going.

However, neither of us was willing to ask either.

Ivy, I knew, had been focused on her breathing as she searched for a comfortable position to sit in without ripping apart her wounds more.

I offered her my shoulder so she could press hers against it, so she didn't have to lean back against the hard leather seat, though every movement she made, he watched, scrutinizing her every move or twitch.

His scent had filled the space, though it didn't creep me out the way the butcher's did.

His scent is rich, yet the smell of cigarette smoke hung heavily in the air along with a smoother fragrance underlying it; kind of how the forest smells after it rains.

He remained so silent, and a few times I was startled when he moved, having forgotten he was sitting across from us, which is ridiculous because the man is huge. Still, he just stared.

Once we had been driving for a few hours, and I realized he wasn't going to murder us, I dozed off until Ivy woke me.

It was the first time he had spoken. He asked which of us was injured, though I had a funny feeling he already knew.

But when Ivy hissed in pain, he seemed to become angry that she had denied it.

Neither of us knew how to answer, so used to the punishments Mrs. Daley would give us, we didn't know how to respond.

However, once we get out of the car, he quickly speaks to the king, who says he will handle it.



Ivy glances at me just as unsure as I about what to expect.

I kind of expect the king to dump us on the side of the road.

So why did he bring us to his home? Either that or kill and dispose of us along the way.

Either I would have been okay with. Anything is better than the unknown.

Following the king, we are introduced to the head woman in charge of the servants.

I peek at Ivy, unsure of what is happening.

Clarice seems nice, but most people do until you get to know them—know their intentions.

One thing I have learned over the years is no one's intentions are ever pure in nature.

The king proves that when he forces Ivy to change in front of him.

I half expect him to order me to be killed when I beg for her.

Though it shocked me when he tended to her wounds, I could tell Ivy did not know how to react, and neither did I.

Seeing him care for a rogue's wounds, who he made a servant look absolutely bizarre, yet if it helped her, I wasn't going to question.

When we are separated, however, I question Clarice.

"Can't I stay with Ivy?" I ask, watching as Ivy walks in a different direction after

retrieving a mop bucket from the closet on the bottom floor. She was in such a rush she didn't even notice me.

"No, the king asked for her specifically," Clarice explains.

"Why?" I blurt before I have a chance to stop myself.

Clarice doesn't answer, so I sigh and drop my gaze, knowing better than to question my superiors.

Clarice shows me to the other side of the castle.

This place is huge, like a maze. One could easily get lost by taking a wrong turn, and I wonder how long it will take me to memorize the layout.

Most of my morning is spent in the kitchen while Clarice shows Ivy where she is being placed. Now I am being led to new quarters, though I instantly become nervous when I find out it's for the Beta.

I want to stay with the other female servants. Learning only the Beta and the king's private guard reside on this side of the castle makes me nervous. I don't like the idea of being surrounded by so many men.

Clarice has explained to me it is the closest quarters to Ivy, yet it feels farther away than the servants' quarters. We climb the stairs to what appears to be some sort of loft area, which actually opens up to a vast space.

"This is Beta Damian's room. You won't have to do much. Beta Damian is quite clean and hardly stays here, mostly changes and leaves," she tells me.

The room is quite nice, with a bathroom and wardrobe, yet the Beta doesn't seem to

have much in the way of belongings besides his clothes.

Everything is clean, and the bed looks like it hasn't been slept in.

Heavy dark blue drapes hang from the windows, and a huge white rug lay on the floor, not a speck of dust in sight.

Am I expected to keep it this clean, or is Clarice right that he hardly comes in here?

The place doesn't look lived in; in fact, it looks empty.

Clarice leads me to a set of doors and stops, turning toward me. "And finally, his little library, which has been turned into a gym that all the men use," Clarice tells me. I peer inside to find heaps of gym equipment.

"Now, the floor below you will be in charge of cleaning, too, but stay out of everyone's rooms, especially the two far rooms," Clarice explains, leading me back downstairs and showing me around the quaint room that separates the two sides in the middle of the guard's quarters.

Then she shows me around this floor. There are twelve doors lining the walls before a separate area with a small sitting room containing three armchairs, a TV, and some artwork comes into view. There are two more doors at the end.

"Now, the other rooms you can clean except these two.

" She points at them. I glance at them and then at her wondering why they're off-limits.

"Don't enter into these two rooms unless asked to do so, and maybe stay away from that one completely.

Liam can be somewhat unhinged at the best of times," she tells me, and I chew my lip.

"Liam?" I ask nervously.

"Oh, you won't see much of him. The man is as silent as night, but this one," she points to the other door.

"Gannon likes his privacy. You met him in the car earlier," Clarice says, and I nod.

So his name is Gannon. I hadn't paid much attention to names other than Clarice's since she is in charge of us.

"Gannon is moody and temperamental, so steer clear and don't speak unless spoken to," Clarice says. Well, I have no intention of conversing with anyone of the opposite sex, so that is okay with me.

"So, how many people stay in these quarters?"

"Just the King's Guard, so Beta Damian and the king's Gammas,"

"Shouldn't there only be one Gamma?" I ask her, trying to remember how the pack hierarchy works.

"All the king's guards are Gammas, but they still have rank.

Gannon is third in charge, while Dustin and Liam lead as fourth together.

It depends on the trials; those I mentioned are the highest ranking in the Royal Guard.

Trey is a bit touchy, so try to avoid him, too.

The rest come and go depending on their shifts, but yes, they are all Gammas.

You only need to worry about Beta Damian, Gannon, and Dustin.

They will probably be the main ones you run into while staying here. "

"So basically, I should avoid all of them." Clarice nods. Great, not only am I the only female, but all the men on this floor appear unapproachable and anti-social. Great!

"So everything is understood? I need to get back to the kitchen," Clarice asks, and I nod.

"Okay, well, dinner is at 6 PM for the servants, so make sure to head down then, and your room is this one," she says, wandering down the hall.

She points to the door we didn't enter, which I assume is a cleaning closet, so I have to clean this floor and share it with the men here.

I would have preferred the bunked servants' quarters.

Clarice cups my cheek in her hand. "You'll do very well. They are a friendly bunch. Just stay out of their way," she says before turning. Yeah, they sound super friendly after telling me not to go near pretty much all of them!

"Wait, when can I see Ivy?" I ask, and Clarice stops.

"When the king allows it," Clarice says, and I furrow my brows. Wait, what is the king doing with her?

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

Two days have passed, and I have hardly been able to talk to Ivy.

I've only seen her in small intervals, here and there when we pass each other in the corridors.

The king keeps her ridiculously busy and spending so much time in these quarters by myself is incredibly boring.

The men on this floor are hardly here, and I find myself wishing they were so I would have something to clean.

My days are becoming repetitive and blurring into one.

Mopping floors that are never dirty or wiping non-existent dust from chandeliers and lamps.

There is only so much one can tolerate and looking at the walls while listening to the emptiness of this place is beginning to bother me.

Filling my mop bucket, I drop in some cleaning chemicals and grab my mop.

I struggle under the weight of the sloshing water as I make my way from the laundry, passing Clarice in the kitchens, who is busy making lunches, and out to the foyer.

Water sloshes over the sides, spilling onto the floors.

I curse as I set the bucket down and use the mop to clean up the mess I just made on

the steps.

With a groan, I reach for the bucket, but another hand grabs it for me; I have no idea where he came from and didn't even hear him sneak up the steps behind me.

He grabs the bucket without a word and starts walking up the steps.

He says nothing, and I glance at Gannon, who doesn't even look back and continues carrying the heavy bucket to his quarters.

Once we step inside the guard quarters, he sets it down on the top step and keeps walking.

"Thank you," I call after him, but he doesn't even acknowledge me, instead just continuing toward his bedroom.

He slips into his room and closes the door.

With a sigh, I start scrubbing the clean floors.

I don't see him come back out of his room, and the floor is so quiet I am sure he must have slipped past at some point.

Clarice eventually sends lunch up with Ester.

She has blonde hair, and her servant's uniform is far too tight.

Sometimes when she bends over, I can see her ass cheeks poking out from the bottom.

I think it is a little inappropriate given how many men lurk around here, though they

don't seem to mind her half-clad body and her boobs busting out her uniform.

She thrusts a plated sandwich at me. "Here, I haven't got all damn day.

Some of us have real work to do," she snaps. Well isn't she a joy to be around, I think.

I set my dust brush down and reach for the sandwich when she drops the plate.

I don't understand what her problem is. It is clear she doesn't like Ivy and me.

The entire castle heard about her ranting and raving about Ivy taking her job.

I have done nothing to her personally. The plate shatters on the ground, and she huffs, checking her nails.

I shake my head and bend down to clean it up when she speaks.

"Fucking clumsy half-breeds! Seriously get it together," she snaps, sashaying her hips as she walks off.

I sigh, grabbing the dustpan and broom to clean up the broken glass, choosing to ignore her.

It isn't worth the argument and even I know better than to speak back to authority.

And her being a Lycan, she holds more status than I can ever dream of.

"Ester!" a booming voice growls behind me, making the woman stop. Her entire body tenses as she reaches the stairs.



Footsteps behind me make me peek over my shoulder to see who it is.

So I am startled to see Gannon is still up here.

I for sure thought he had snuck out when I returned the mop bucket to the laundry.

His footsteps stop, and I peer up at him to find his imposing body standing beside me.

Instinctively, I shy away from his anger and swallow, dropping my gaze back to the task at hand.

"Yes, Gannon," Ester purrs in a sickly-sweet voice.

I roll my eyes, and it is clear the woman is a power-hungry whiny brat.

I pick up the ruined sandwich, dumping it in my little bucket before grabbing the dust broom when it is snatched from my hand, making me jump.

He grabs my arm and hauls me upright, and I peer up to find him holding it.

"Clean it up," Gannon growls at her. The order rolling off his tongue makes my knees buckle, but his grip on my arm keeps me upright as my legs threaten to go out under his command.

Gannon holds the dust broom out to Ester, and I gasp.

Ester pins me with a glare that threatens to burn me before pursing her lips.

Yet even Ester doesn't appear stupid enough to challenge this man.

Instead, she stalks forward and snatches it from him before bending down to clean up

the broken glass.

Her ass cheeks poke out from under her skirt, and Gannon growls menacingly, making me glance at him to see him look away from her.

His grip on my arm tightens as he pulls me away from her.

"And fucking find a longer dress. No one wants to see your ugly ass on display," Gannon snarls at Ester as he pulls me toward the stairs.

I swallow, wondering if I am in trouble because he still hasn't let my arm go.

Was he taking me to Clarice to tell her about my clumsiness?

Or maybe about me and Ester not getting along?

Unease pools in my stomach as he trudges down the steps.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to," I tell him when he stops abruptly on the steps. He stares at me and seems to realize he is still holding my arm.

"Sorry," he mutters, letting me go. I stand awkwardly while his eyes run the length of me before his gaze settles back on mine.

"You shouldn't let her speak to you like that.

Ester can be a bitch, but she holds no more authority in this castle than any other servant, so don't put up with it, or she will walk all over you," he warns, and I glance back up the stairs.

Did he not realize I am only a werewolf?

She definitely holds more authority than me and could rip me to shreds.

I am not stupid enough to cause confrontation, especially with a Lycan.

"Come on," he says, and I furrow my brows, but I don't move. I am stationed to remain in the Beta's quarters.

"Now, Abbie," Gannon calls as he steps down a few steps.

"But I have to?—"

"I said now, come on," he says, stopping and looking at me expectantly.

I chew my lip, wondering where he is taking me, but I know better than to refuse.

I follow him, and he leads me to the kitchens.

He gives me a nudge through the doors ahead of him, where Clarice peers up at me and smiles brightly.

"Finished already, dear," she smiles before her brows furrow when Gannon comes up behind me. Her eyes widen, and Clarice wipes her hands on the tea towel she is using.

"Gannon, love. I am sure whatever she did," Clarice quickly defends me, but he says nothing.

Instead, he steps past me and walks toward the pantry.

Clarice rushes over to me. "You didn't go into any of the forbidden areas?"

" she whispers, and I shake my head when he returns with bread and condiments. He points to a stool beside him.

"Abbie, sit!" he says, and Clarice and I glance at him and then at each other. She quickly nudges me to do what he asks. My hands shake as I use the bench to climb up onto the high stool. I sit there playing with my fingers.

"Is everything alright, son?" Clarice asks, touching his shoulder.

"Fine, Ma," he says to her, pulling bread out of the bag when Ester comes in, dumping the dustpan and broom in the cleaning cupboard with an audible huff. Gannon growls at her and she glares at him.

"You can finish mopping the entire floor and take Abbie's duties for the day," Gannon says to her without looking up from making his sandwich. Ester growls, but he doesn't even glance at her.

"Either that or I will make you shovel shit with Peter in the stables, Ester, so choose," Gannon says, and she huffs but storms out. Clarice looks after her and glances between Gannon and me.

I shrug, unsure what to make of it when Gannon sets a BLT sandwich in front of me, cutting it in half and then cutting his own.

"Eat," he says, tapping the plate. I peek at Clarice, and she nods to me telling me it is okay while Gannon takes the other stool beside me, eating his own sandwich.

"Is Ester being troublesome?" Clarice asks, wandering back over to the sink. She grabs a dish towel and dries the dishes on the rack. Gannon grunts in answer and Clarice sighs.

"Well, since you are free then, Abbie, you might as well come into town with me," Clarice says, and I stop mid-bite.

"Is that allowed?" I ask her, shocked I can leave the castle grounds.

"Yes, why wouldn't it be? You're not a prisoner here," Clarice laughs, shaking her head while I stare at her in confusion. Wait, I can leave the castle grounds? It makes no sense that rogue servants can come and go as they please.

"I am off for a few hours. I will come with you," Gannon says with a shrug, and Clarice looks at him, her eyes narrowing slightly. She lifts a finger, pointing it at him accusingly.

"You want to grocery shop with us?" Clarice asks, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Or you can give me the list, and I will take her," Gannon says, finishing the last bite of his sandwich before taking his plate to the sink.

Clarice watches him for a second, then shrugs.

"Works for me. I wanted to send Ester, but seeing as she is now preoccupied and you're willing, you can go with Abbie. "

She retrieves a pen and paper; she scribbles on it and hands it to me before handing me a keycard. I have seen one before but never used one. Mrs. Daley usually sent us with a list into town but never gave us money. The townspeople would just take the list and bill her at the end of the month.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

"Just grab these things. They weren't on the delivery," Clarice says with a sigh.

She holds the list out to me, and I take the list and glance at her cursive writing, and gulp.

I chew my lip, wondering if I should tell her I can't read it, yet I don't want to embarrass myself, either.

So I remain quiet, and I figure I can just ask the clerk at the store.

I put the list in my apron pocket as Gannon walks off toward the doors then stops, waiting for me.

"Are you sure I can leave?" I whisper to Clarice, not wanting to get into trouble with the king.

"Gannon is with you. And as I said, you're not a prisoner here, Abbie. If you want to go to town, you only have to ask," Clarice says, confusing me further. Ask? Is it possible for me to request to leave, too?

"Abbie," Gannon says, and I hurry over to him, not wanting to anger him. Gannon leads me out of the castle, and I follow a few steps behind him so I don't get in his way.

"I'm not walking. Come on. I will drive us," he says, gripping my arm and leading me to some garages at the back of the stables. He rummages in a small cupboard full of keys, finding the ones he is after before shutting it.

I pause as he moves toward a car. I'm nervous about getting into the car with him.

Not that he has given me any reason to fear him.

He's just... powerful and imposing. And Clarice knows where I am and who I am with, yet unease creeps over me at the thought of being in a confined space with the intimidating man.

He opens the driver's side door before glancing at me. "Abbie?" he says, and I chew my lip, glancing at the doors we came through. He sighs, walking over to me.

"I don't bite," he says, grabbing my hand, but I pull away from him. His brows furrow. I know these sorts of niceties, and they always lead to some repayment or expectation.

I know that better than anyone. The butcher was kind at first, then he started stealing touches, then forcibly taking them.

Until one day I refused to help him unload his truck.

Mrs. Daley told me if I didn't assist him in the basement, she wouldn't let us eat.

She promised us food if I just helped him.

Panic courses through me. Is that why he is being nice?

Clarice said to steer clear of him, so I find it odd he is trying to be near me. What are his intentions?

"I won't hurt you, come on," he says, stepping away and toward his car. He walks around the other side and opens the passenger door.

"Abbie, please get in the car," he says, and I glance at the roller doors leading in. My mind wanders to what my chances of escape were. I knew it would be pointless, though. If I upset him, what if that got Ivy in trouble? So I reluctantly do as he asks.

Gannon shuts the door behind me, and I jump at the bang. He strolls around the other side of the car and climbs in.

I glance around his car to notice duct tape, rope, and some other equipment that makes my heart race faster.

You idiot, Abbie, I should have run. My fingers tremble as I reach for the door handle as he starts the car.

My movement does not go unmissed by the man, who quickly looks at me before following my gaze to the things on the floor.

Gannon leans over, grabbing the crowbar from the footwell just as I click the door handle.

His hand falls on my knee, and my lip quivers as I find him staring at me.

"Sorry, I should have checked the car beforehand," he says, leaning down and snatching up the rest of the stuff in the footwell.

My hands tremble as he gathers the things in his arms before opening his door. "Just work equipment," he says, getting out and moving toward another car where he opens the back door. He tosses the stuff on the back floor while I try to calm my racing heart.

What kind of work did he do that requires duct tape, rope, and a bloody crowbar? Gannon climbs back into the car. My hand is still on the door handle when he leans



over, pulling my hand away that has a death grip on it. He sets my hand on my lap and quickly leans over, closing my door properly.

"You spook easily," he mutters more to himself. He clips in his seat belt and turns his attention back to the front. I fiddle with my fingers as he pulls out of the garage while playing with the radio.

"Do you like music?" he asks, and I nod, chewing on my fingernails. I know it is a terrible habit, but I find comfort in it while he finds a station he likes.

I stare out at the scenery as he drives. The drive to town is awkward and silent, and I hadn't noticed I had chewed one cuticle from my fingertip with my nervousness until Gannon stops the car and snatches the hand I am chewing on, which makes me jump. The man curses under his breath.

He growls, holding my hand up and examining it while I gasp at what I mindlessly have done, not realizing I had chewed it entirely down to the flesh beneath.

He clicks his tongue and curses before reaching into the glove box, where he pulls out a tissue.

Gannon wraps it around my fingertip, firmly pressing down on it.

"You didn't feel that you had bitten it off?" he asks. Disapproval is evident on his face. I don't answer. I hardly feel pain, especially mediocre pain like that. It is merely a flesh wound, and it will heal quickly enough.

He checks my finger, and it has stopped bleeding.

So he pockets the bloody tissue and shakes his head.

I watch as he glares out the window and goes to speak but then climbs out of the car.

We've pulled up at some kind of general store.

I quickly climb out of the car just as Gannon reaches my door.

I step away from him immediately to put some space between us.

"Have you got your list?" he asks, and I nod, pulling the folded piece of paper from my apron.

He nods, walking ahead and opening the glass shop door.

A bell sounds as we enter, and I see aisles of stock lining the store and a friendly enough-looking woman behind the counter.

The woman says hello to Gannon and quickly waves him over.

"Hey, Leisha," he says, nudging me toward the aisles and passing me a basket. I take it while he wanders off to speak with the friendly clerk he seems to know. She is an older woman about Clarice's age.

I open the note Clarice had given me, glancing between the paper and the things on the shelves.

I try to match the cursive writing to what is written on the products.

However, after a few minutes, I still haven't found a single thing that matches her handwriting.

Soon, I feel a presence behind me. The warmth of his chest seeps into my back as he

leans down behind me and peers over my shoulder at my empty basket.

"What are you doing?" he asks curiously. Heat floods my cheeks as I show him the list. He takes it, looks at it briefly, then peers down at me. My cheeks burn with humiliation, knowing I have to admit I can't read it. I avert my gaze to the back of the store.

"I... I can't read," I whisper to him.

"Pardon?" he questions as he leans closer. My entire body heats with embarrassment.

"I don't know how to read," I repeat, and Gannon seems taken aback as he stands.

"Why didn't you say so? I would have helped you," he whispers, taking my basket and grabbing my hand.

Gannon looks at the list before glancing around and dragging me to a different aisle.

He reads each thing out, grabbing it from the shelf and placing it in the basket.

He finds everything in a matter of minutes, and we are briskly striding back to the counter.

The woman scans and bags everything and tells me the total.

I go to hand the woman the card when Gannon takes it from me and taps some small box on the counter. The woman behind the counter smiles, and Gannon hands me the card before using his own to buy smokes while I stand there awkwardly, not knowing what to do next.

"We just have to go to one more store, then I will take you back to the castle,"

Gannon tells me, and I nod, gathering up the bags, but he swiftly takes them from my hands. I wave to the woman, and she smiles softly, saying goodbye as we walk out to the car.

Gannon loads everything into the trunk and then grabs my hand, dragging me across the road to some candy store.

"Liam likes licorice, so I might as well grab it while I am here," he tells me, and I nod, following him inside the store. A man stands behind the counter with a huge smile on his face. It is clear he knows Gannon, and Gannon knows the store.

Gannon leaves me near the counter and walks off toward the back of the store after the man tells him what he's looking for is in the back.

"Are you one of the new servants at the castle?" the man asks. I nod, as I look at the color display of candies when he holds a jar out to me. "Try these. I made these last night," he says, but I shake my head.

Mrs. Daley would get so angry if she found out I accepted candy, I think to myself before remembering she isn't here. Still, I can't bring myself to accept the offer. Thankfully, Gannon returns. The man frowns when I refuse him.

"Kyle has won awards for his candies. Try one," Gannon tells me, and I chew my lip before taking one of the sponging red clouds from the jar. It's covered in sugar and smells delicious. After popping it into my mouth, my mouth salivates from the explosion of flavor.

"Is it good?" the man asks. He seems genuinely interested if I like his candy or not. I nod, licking my lips, and Gannon chuckles.

"Here," he offers me another one, but I shake my head.

"No, thank you, I shouldn't," I tell him. The man named Kyle seems disappointed when Gannon sets the licorice on the counter.

"And the clouds," Gannon tells him. The man nods, bagging them in little paper bags while I wait. We leave the store and return to the car. I climb in while Gannon puts Liam's candy in the trunk. Only when he gets in the car, he drops the paper bag of candy clouds on my lap.

Before I have a chance to look at him, he speaks. "They're for you," he states, starting the car.

"No, you didn't have to," I tell him, trying to give them back, but he pushes the bag back toward me.

"I know I don't have to, Abbie. I wanted to. I could tell you liked them." His words confuse me. Did he expect something in return for them?

"No, I shouldn't," I tell him, and he looks at me confused.

"And why is that?" he asks, reversing out of his parking space. I don't answer. How can he ask that? His question is stupid. He knows why. Everyone knows why.

"You didn't answer," he says, navigating around the streets.

"Because I am a rogue!" I tell him.

"What has being a rogue got to do with candy?" he asks, his brows furrowing.

"Rogues don't deserve sweets. We should be grateful we're allowed to live," I find myself reciting Mrs. Daley's words before I can stop myself. Gannon growls, making me jump.

"Which twit told you that?" he demands. His anger startles me. I lift my hand when Gannon grabs it before I can chew on my thumbnail, not realizing I am about to do it.

"Eat the candy, Abbie," he says, then lets go of my hand. I offer him one.

"Will you try one?" I ask him, feeling odd eating them in front of him as he pulls into the castle grounds.

"Are they sour?" he asks, and I shake my head.

"You haven't tried them?"

"No, I mostly go for Liam's licorice," he answers as I dig one out of the bag for him and hold it out to him.

Yet instead of taking it from me, he leans over, plucking it from my fingers with his lips.

He sucks my fingers into his mouth with it before pulling back.

I stare at him, shocked, when he laughs, sending me a wink.

I chuckle, my face heating up as I laugh at his playfulness. He chews on it before swallowing it.

"It's very sugary," he says, licking the sugar from his lips. I offer him the bag, not wanting to lose my fingers, but he shakes his head. "No, you enjoy them," he says, pulling into the garage.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

I had just dropped Abbie back to the castle and left her with Clarice when Liam finds me.

He is leaning against my door as I walk toward my room.

Liam smiles when he spots me. He has cold and calculating eyes.

"Looking for me?" I ask, and a smirk slips onto his face. His presence alone intimidates most people. You can tell there is something not quite right with Liam. He is unhinged. Despite his boyish good looks, nothing instills fear more than this man among the King's Guard. Some call him the King's Mad Dog, and based on the things I've seen, it's an apt description.

"No, I figured I would just lean against your door because I am not waiting for you."

I grunt and shake my head. Danger emanates out of him.

He has an air of superiority and seems to relish the power he has over others, just like he relishes cutting them into tiny pieces.

The man is a psychopath, but then again, so am I.

So his crazy compliments mine, which is why we are best friends.

"And where were you?" he drawls, and I roll my eyes at him.

"I thought we were heading to the bar," he asks, pushing off my door frame, twisting

the door handle, and waltzing into my room.

I growl at him when he jumps onto my bed, making himself comfortable.

He runs his fingers through his blond hair and falls back on my bed.

"Something else came up," I tell him. Liam rolls over, pulling his knife from his pocket. He picks at my duvet with the tip before twirling his knife between his fingers and eyeing me suspiciously.

"Does it have anything to do with the pretty little redhead I saw you in town with earlier?" I peek over my shoulder at him as I grab two beers from the mini fridge in the corner of my room. I chuck him one.

"If you already know where I was, why are you asking?"

He shrugs, popping the lid off with his knife and propping himself up with one elbow.

"The girl reminds me of?—"

I growl, warning him not to mention her name.

"Is that part of the allure you have toward her because she reminds you of your dead mate?" Liam questions, and I eye him, swigging from my bottle.

"She is nothing like her," I tell him, and Liam shrugs.

"That may be true, but you must admit they have an uncanny resemblance, don't you think?"



" he taunts, and my hand moves before I realize what I have done.

My fingers find the blade I always keep strapped to my hip.

It whizzes through the air, embedding itself in the headboard of the bed mere inches from his head.

Liam doesn't even flinch. He just lifts an eyebrow at me.

"Apparently, I'm right," he chuckles, yanking the blade from the headboard.

"I wonder if sweet little Abbie would enjoy your fetish for knives," he muses, examining it before moving so quickly I only just see the blade coming toward my face.

I catch the blade before it hits me square between my eyes.

The edges slice my palm and fingers as the knife slides between, cutting through my flesh, the point just nicking my skin between my eyes.

Liam chuckles, sipping his beer and leaning back against the headboard.

"Or are you envisioning carving her up like your mate, slicing that tender flesh and watching her bleed out the way you did her?"

"Fuck off, Liam, you know nothing," I tell him.

"Ah, but I do; I was there, remember? And I know you... and that girl is a timid little thing and so jumpy. Scared of her own shadow, she is."

"What are you getting at?" I snap, grabbing an old shirt to clean my bleeding hand.

Liam shrugs. "Just curious, Gan. I don't want you to break her. It would be a shame really; I don't mind watching her prance around in her little uniform." His words cut off when I launch myself at him, my hands locking around his throat, and he cackles his head off, laughing like a maniac.

"Seems I'm right. You like the girl," Liam laughs.

"I don't. I took her to town, and that is it. I took her for Clarice," I add.

"I can smell lies, but if you wish to tell yourself that, we can pretend," he says, sending me a wink, and I growl, shoving him back on the bed and climbing off him.

"I took her to town, Liam, nothing more," I tell him, wandering off into the bathroom. I wash my hands and remove my clothes, drop them in the hamper, and step into the shower, shutting the door. Liam leans on the doorframe, watching me.

"If that is so, why were you by her door last night and the night before, or better yet, what were you doing watching her from the old guard towers? You know, the ones? The ones that look directly into her bedroom window?"

"Explain to me why you are following me?" I retort, turning the water on and stepping under the water spray.

Turning, I stare at him as his eyes wander the length of me. I know he is bisexual. His sexuality has never bothered me, and I am used to his comments and wandering gaze. However, he also knows I don't swing that way.

"Was curious about why you stood me up last night, for one. And then this morning you vanished and ever since she got here." He shrugs.

"Why, are you jealous, Liam?" I laugh.

"Always. You know I am not good at sharing," he jokes, and I chuckle.

"Don't worry. You won't have to share me. I am not interested in the girl," I tell him.

"We'll see, though it wouldn't hurt if you were, as long as it isn't for nefarious reasons, Gannon," Liam says, and I swallow.

"Yes, she reminds me of my mate, but that isn't why." I shake my head. I am not interested in her. It's hard to imagine even having a conversation with her with how timid she is.

"I am leaving to run an errand for the king. Join me or don't," Liam states with a shrug, glancing out the bathroom window toward the forest surrounding the castle.

"She is a beauty, though," he mumbles, and I nod.

Abbie is striking with her dark auburn hair and soft, sensual features.

She is small and petite, and I like that about her.

I like the way she stares curiously at everything around her.

Like she is deciphering codes, genuinely curious about people yet soft-spoken.

She is an observer. That much I have noticed.

She exists without being seen and doesn't like the attention, but notices everyone else like she is waiting for something to jump out of the shadows at her.

"Hasn't she shifted yet? I could smell she has a wolf," Liam asks curiously, still peering out the window.

I lean around to see what he is looking at.

Abbie is hanging out washing yet stares vacantly toward the forest. I furrow my brows, and I watch as she steps toward the trees, looking longingly at them, when I hear Clarice sing out to her.

She pauses, glances over her shoulder, and rushes back to the clothesline as if she thinks she will get into trouble.

"To me, it seems she wants to go for a run," Liam says with a shrug, passing me a towel off the rack. His eyes are trained on the girl. I swallow because I had noticed she hasn't shifted once since being here. And I know she is of age. It makes me wonder what her wolf looks like.

"I'll cover for you if you wish," Liam offers, but I shake my head. No, I need to get away from here and slice some poor sucker who is dumb enough to capture the king's attention. It seems like the perfect excuse to leave.

"No need. I need to get out of here," I tell him.

"Out of here or away from her?" Liam asks. I growl, and he smirks.

"I'll meet you in the car, and I drive," he says, and I huff but let it slide. Liam is my best friend and the only one who truly knows me. We are alike in more ways than one.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

I stare at the forest surrounding the castle, wishing I could shift and feel the air in my fur and the dirt beneath my paws.

However, I was actually never able to shift.

Mrs. Daley forbade it. The only time I did was in our room back at the orphanage, and Ivy would keep a lookout.

Not that Mrs. Daley came up to our room much, so I used to laze by the window where I could see the moon and feel its rays on my fur.

I guess that is where the legend of the moon and werewolves, etc.

, came from for humans. I've always felt drawn to the moon and night in general.

I used to imagine what it would be like to ?roam freely and explore the woods, but instead, my paws only knew the floorboards of our tiny room, except for that one time.

Yet so close to the forest, the urge to run free is overwhelming. I take a step toward the forest, feeling my body tense with the urge to change and realign so I can take my werewolf form. There is nothing more freeing than the shift, yet it is also painful because I rarely do it.

"Abbie!" Clarice calls out to me, and I rush back to the towels I was sent out to hang.

"Yes," I call back, staring toward the laundry door. Clarice emerges and peers over at

me.

"Once done, come help me prepare for dinner."

I nod to her quickly and rush to finish hanging the washing out, wondering if maybe I can sneak out while everyone is asleep to shift.

Clarice did say I can leave if I want. But I quickly dismiss the thought.

The guards may stumble across me and think I am trespassing.

I shudder at the damage they could cause to my tiny wolf form.

After dinner and wandering back to my room, I find myself drawn to peer out the window.

So I give up avoiding it and sit on the windowsill staring at the castle grounds below.

My skin itches with the need to shift. It is a clear night yet as I watch from the window, I see the guards walking the forest edge and sigh.

Despite the promise of the forest, I realize once again, my only place of solace with my wolf will be this room.

So, I strip my clothes off, I get to my hands and knees, and a violent shudder ripples up my spine.

I feel the first snap and clench my teeth as my bones start breaking and realigning into position.

My hands become paws, skin turns to fur and my nose and face elongate.

I am careful not to let my claws scratch the floor as I stand on my hind legs and jump onto the sitting nook of the window ledge.

I press my nose to the glass and lay down along the window, wishing I could run through the forest, wishing to know what it truly means to be a werewolf.

My mother used to tell me how freeing it was to run on four legs, zip through the trees, and feel the air and heat blow through her fur. I guess I will never know what that truly feels like. It is foolish to miss something I have never experienced and probably won't ever experience again.

I end up falling asleep on the window ledge.

It isn't until I hear a knock on the door that I wake up and crash to the ground with a thud.

My entire body shakes when I hear the door handle twist, and I know I am going to be caught.

Lowering my body to the ground, I try to fit under the bed, yet my furry body is much too big.

Stupid Abbie, how could you fall asleep?

"Abbie?" Clarice's voice reaches my ears, and I peer around the edge of the bed. She gasps, and I quickly shift back, reaching for the sheet on my bed to tuck around me.

"I'm sorry, I promise I was careful and didn't scratch the floor.

" Tears burn my eyes, and I peer down at the mess on the floor.

"I promise I will clean up the fur," I quickly tell her, covering myself.

Clarice stares at me, and my cheeks burn with embarrassment.

I wonder how many lashes I will get for my selfishness.

"You're not in trouble, Abbie. I noticed you didn't come down for supper," she says, placing a food tray with a slice of pie on the bed.

"Sorry, I will get changed and come down," I tell her. She stares at me for a second before nodding and heading toward the door. She pauses just as Gannon and Dustin walk past my door.

"You know, Abbie, if you want to shift, you can go into the woods. Just let the guards know you're out there so they don't think you're a stranger." Clarice says, and I tug the blanket tighter when I notice Gannon has stopped and is staring past Clarice at me. I drop my gaze, unable to meet his.

"It's okay, it won't happen again," I assure her.

"Abbie?" she speaks softly, and I lift my eyes to hers. Her brows furrow, and she glances at Gannon behind her.

"I'll take her for a run," Gannon offers, but I shake my head.

"No, it's fine. I think I will just take a shower and clean up the mess I made," I tell them. Gannon goes to say something but closes his mouth. With a swift nod, he walks off. I let out a breath and Clarice watches him leave. Clearly, my shifting inside has angered him.

"Try to get some rest, but if you want to shift, you can go to the woods to do so.



I have told you, Abbie, you aren't a prisoner here," Clarice says kindly before leaving me. She says that, yet I cannot see Ivy or even go to that floor. I don't much feel like tempting the Lycans by doing something, even if allowed.

Mrs. Daley used to like to play those games, get our hopes up, and say we could have a break.

The moment we did, she beat us bloody. Or like the time she said we could eat with the children at the dining table, only to humiliate us when we sat with them.

She tossed our food on the floor and made us eat like dogs.

After that, when the children begged for us to sit with them, we never asked again. We were only twelve at the time.

We had finally given in to the children and thought for once we would ask; it sucked because the kids always asked.

We only asked once because it was Mrs. Daley's birthday.

We spent all day preparing the cake and making sure we had a delicious meal prepared for her.

We thought if we worked extra hard and made her happy, she would let us join her and the other children.

She had promised us that if we baked her favorite chocolate mud cake, and cooked a roast we could celebrate with her and try the cake we painstakingly created for her.

We were so excited, and when the other kids sat, we served them food.

Then we gathered our own plates. Usually, Mrs. Daley gave us whatever scraps the kids didn't eat or sometimes if she thought we were being lazy, she gave the scraps to the pigs, and we went without.

We were on our best behavior, she promised.

Even Katrina was excited for us and helped us bake the cake.

Yet as we plated our food and went to take our seats, she snapped at us.

"What are you doing?" she snarled, and we both froze and peeked at Katrina who stared at her in confusion.

"They're going to join," Katrina says before she is interrupted by Mrs. Daley.

"Dogs don't sit at the table," she said, rising.

"I said you could join us because I was feeling generous, but filthy rogues eat like filthy rogues," she said, snatching our plates. She emptied the plates onto the floor.

"Now sit and enjoy your meal," she ordered us. The humiliation and sadness at the broken promise nearly made me cry, but I held it back, knowing what tears earned us. With one last glance at Katrina, we saw her lips quiver, and she tossed her napkin before storming out.

I nudged Ivy as I went to sit on the floor.

Ivy, I could tell, didn't want to eat it, though the floors were clean, we would know.

We clean them daily. She had just glared at Mrs. Daley, and I had to nudge her, giving her a look to remind her we hadn't eaten in two days, and she had fainted the

day prior.

Who cares if it was ruined? We still needed to eat; Ivy especially.

She always got less than everyone. Mrs. Daley was exceptionally cruel to her.

I would always sneak her food scraps when I could, knowing she wouldn't receive half of what I got or anything at all.

"Please," I whispered to her, nudging her with my elbow. Ivy glanced at me then dropped her gaze to the floor. She then sank down beside me and scooped up a roasted potato from the floor and nibbled on it.

Now, staring at the slice of pie on the tray makes me wonder if Ivy has eaten.

Maybe I can sneak it over to her. Ivy is always too shy to ask for food.

She has copped one too many beatings for it, so my conscience gnaws at me about how much I have eaten since being here, realizing she may not be eating at all.

I quickly change, scoop up the plate and peer out the door, trying to sneak into the king's quarters. But it doesn't take long before Trey, one of the guards stationed there, spots me and sends me away.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

### The Next Day

The only time I get to see Ivy is in small glimpses or brief—very brief—words before being called back for my chores.

However, after finishing the washing, I hang it out.

I woke up extra early this morning, hoping to get my chores finished early.

I had been building up courage all day, and now it is nearing. I am already talking myself out of it.

As I set the basket down on top of the empty washer, I wander into the kitchens to see Clarice. She is going over staff rosters.

Stopping next to her, I glance around at the cooks preparing for dinner. Even though I know I have two hours before I am needed back here, I still hesitate, chewing on the inside of my lip, trying to find the words.

The entire time, all I can think about is Mrs. Daley's reaction when I asked her, and the punishment I received for thinking stupidly that now that I had shifted, she would allow it. As much as I despise remembering that place, I find myself sucked back into the past.

"Mrs. Daley?" I whispered behind her, making her jump as she stood at the kitchen counter sipping the fresh brew I had just made her.

“What is it?” she snapped, and I flinched at her bitter tone. Her eyes narrowed at me, and I instantly regretted thinking of asking for anything.

“I um... I wanted... I,” I stuttered terribly, trying to force the words out.

“What is it? Spit it out before I lash you,” she snarled.

“I wanted to know if I might be allowed to shift and go for a run. I will be quick, and I will stay close to the orphanage,” I whispered, dropping my gaze to the floor. Mrs. Daley laughed and gripped my shoulder, making me peer up at her.

“Where is the other rogue?”

“She said she would cover afternoon tea for me if you allowed it. And I finished all my chores, even changed your bed linen and made you that banana pie you like, it’s in the fridge,” I told her, hopeful.

How fucked up is hope? It will destroy every desire you ever have when you are repeatedly shown how cruel one can be. Now I always question the intention behind every good deed because they never go unpunished.

“Oh, in that case, of course. Go on.” Mrs. Daley looked at the clock above the door, and so do I. Excitement bubbled within me, and I felt giddy. She was really going to let me go!

“Be back at 4 PM for afternoon tea; you earned it,” she told me.

“Thank you, thank you, Mrs. Daley.” I almost cried at how happy I felt as I rushed off to tell Ivy. Ivy told me not to ask, that she would never allow it, but I had to try so she agreed to cover for me if needed, and Mrs. Daley felt generous. It must have been knowing that we made her favorite pie.

“Stay close to the forest line, Abbie. Don’t wander,” Ivy told me with worry in her eyes as I stripped my clothes off behind the garden shed. Ivy stared back at the orphanage worriedly.

“She said yes,” I reminded her.

“I know, but it isn’t like her, Abbie. Maybe you should stay.”

“Probably because she knows next month, we won’t be her problem and is feeling generous,” I tell her, too excited to find fault with Mrs. Daley’s permission.

I shifted and darted toward the trees while Ivy went to finish the afternoon tea for the kids.

However, when I returned, Mrs. Daley was waiting.

I could see my clothes waiting in a pile behind the shed.

Happy, I moved toward her, seeing Ivy in the kitchen window, who waved and smiled at me.

Only then did we both spot the patrols rushing up the side of the orphanage building.

Their sight made me halt, and my tail tucked between my legs.

“There she is, she tried to run, filthy fucking mutt tried to run, and now she has come scampering back,” Mrs. Daley said, pointing to me.

My eyes widened when I saw they had the kids skipping ropes in their hands.

I whimpered, backing up and glancing at the window to see Ivy’s horrified expression

in the window as they stalked toward me.

I turned my gaze to the four patrolling men and backed up when they used the kids' skipping ropes as whips, caging me in and giving me nowhere to escape, and I couldn't even shift, or I would be naked.

My wolf yelped and whined as they lashed me repeatedly when I heard Ivy's blood-curdling scream reach my ears.

"No, no, stop. Stop! She didn't do anything!" Ivy screamed.

Lifting my head, my fur was ripping out everywhere, the grass-covered in white, gray, and brown fur when the skipping rope lashed across my snout and eye.

I yelped loudly before weight crushed. Ivy had tossed herself over the top of my cowering form.

Yet, they didn't stop, and they just whipped her too while Mrs. Daley laughed and told them to hit us harder.

A hand grips mine, jolting me out of the memory. "Abbie, are you okay, dear?" Clarice asks.

"Yes, sorry," I tell Clarice, staring back at her. I go to walk off, losing my courage as memories assault my mind.

It isn't worth what will happen. I will shift later in my room .

Turning away, Clarice doesn't let go of my hand. Instead, she pulls me back to her. "Abbie, what is it? Did someone hurt you? You're as pale as a ghost," she says, peering up at me worriedly.

“No, it’s nothing. Want some help?” I ask her, looking at what she is doing.

“No, but you finished all your chores, so you can have some time off. Are you sure there isn’t something you need?” Clarice asks. I nibble my lip, trying to remind myself Clarice isn’t Mrs. Daley.

I open my mouth to ask but close it again.

“You want to go for a run?” she asks, and I nod, wondering how she knows.

“I have seen you looking at the forest every time you have gone out there. You don’t have to ask Abbie if you want to go.

Just tell me, and I will let the guards know so they can make sure you’re safe.

There are bears out there, so remain in the guard’s perimeter,” she says. I swallow, glancing at the door.

“You won’t punish me when I return?” I ask, hating how pathetic I sound.

She looks appalled. “Honey, why would I punish you?” she chuckles, shaking her head.

“No reason. I just wanted to make sure it was okay. I don’t want to get in trouble,” I admit.

“Go for a run, Abbie, and if anyone tries to punish you for it. They will deal with the king and me,” Clarice says. She nudges me toward the doors leading to the clothesline.

“Go on, have fun. I will let the guards on duty know you’re out there,” she says.



I nod, yet I refuse to get excited. Instead, I am still hesitant.

Even as I approach the forest's edge. Glancing around nervously, I wait a few minutes to see if any guards suddenly rush into the forest to search for me and drag me back, but I see no one.

Stripping my clothes off, I lay them on a nearby fallen tree.

Falling onto my hands and knees the dirt squishes between my fingers as I focus on the shift.

Feeling the first tremor, it slivers up my spine, fur grows along my naked body then starts twisting and morphing as I take shape and body of my werewolf form.

My hands, and feet are replaced with paws and claws, my face elongates, and my tailbone twitches as my tail zips out.

Shaking out my fur, I stare at my paws before becoming distracted by the swish of my tail.

It takes me a good five minutes to stop from chasing the damn thing as it eludes my teeth.

Stretching, I sniff the air. The scent of pinecones and damp soil invigorate my senses, and my hearing perks at the crickets and tiny insects in the forest. I shoot off, darting between the trees and jumping over logs.

Nothing feels more refreshing than feeling the dirt beneath my paws, the air brushing through my fur as I rush through the forest, cackling my head off. I feel free, alive, and so energized.

After about ten minutes of running, however, I hear the foliage move, and the wind changes direction, making me halt. I pick up an unfamiliar yet familiar scent that is harder to pinpoint since my sense of smell is ridiculously strong in this form.

Twisting, I look for the intruder while scampering backward when a huge Lycan steps out from between the trees.

I drop my head before turning it, baring my neck to the beast. I feel like I am about to wet myself when the huge, terrifying thing walks toward me, making a whimper escape me as I shrink lower to the ground.

“Don’t be frightened, Abbie, it is only me,” the voice says, and my ears twitch.

His voice is gravely and distorted from him being in this form.

As I lift my gaze, he crouches before me, pulling a backpack from his huge furry shoulder.

He unzips it, and still, I can’t place where I recognize the voice.

I back up when I see him open the bag and reach inside.

“I won’t hurt you,” the Lycan says. Hearing a wrapper, I peer at his hand in the backpack, and he pulls out red candy clouds. Gannon? I think.

“Recognize me now?” he chuckles, and I bob my head as he opens the packet. He pinches one between his claws and holds it out to me, and my wolf instantly sniffs it before licking it.

Gannon laughs as my tongue swipes his fingers.

Then I realize what he is doing when my nose brushes his furry knees.

Overrun by my senses, I don't realize he is drawing his hand closer to himself until I am practically between his legs.

I freeze, and he sits leaning against the tree when his hands suddenly grab me, making me yelp loudly in fright.

"Shh, I won't hurt you," he grouches and I quickly quieten. He sets me on his lap, his claws running through my fur as he brushes it.

"Well, aren't you a little ball of fluff," he laughs, stroking my fur like I am a damn pet, yet his claws feel nice raking through my thick coat.

After a few minutes, I relax, realizing he is just petting me, and not going to punish me.

I find the burly scary man comforting for some reason, yet I can't explain it.

I simply feel safe with him near. Although, when he rubs my ears, I start purring like a damn cat and try to scramble off his lap, only for him to drag me back and nip at my ear with his sharp teeth.

"Stop; I don't care if you purr. I can purr, too," he laughs, purring at me, the noise rumbling from his chest is loud. My wet nose presses against the center where it is loudest before I can stop myself, feeling its deep vibration, then his fur goes up my nose, making me sneeze.

Gannon laughs, and I lick his chin, mortified at what I did. I freeze, which only makes him laugh harder.

“It’s fine, Abbie; she-wolves are attracted to dominant males; I expect you to act accordingly,” he laughs. “It doesn’t bother me,” he says before licking my face and my eyeball, making my lashes stick together, and I have to blink to un-stick them.

“See, it doesn’t bother me,” he says. My nose picks up the delicious scent of the clouds when I lay my head across his lap, my nose sniffing the air before my face is in his bag, sniffing around.

I am never shifting again! Urges are impossible to control, I merely have to think something, and I am acting on them.

My teeth pull the candy bag out, my tongue slips in the little bag, licking up the sugar when Gannon takes the bag, pouring some in his hands, my wolf side going berserk on the damn things, even licking his fingers and claws clean like a pig.

Gannon doesn’t seem to mind, his hand on my rump while he lets me lick the sugar from his palm and pouring more in his hand.

“Want to run to the river with me?” he asks when I finish eating the entire bag. I look up at the sky, knowing I should be heading back. Gannon looks up as well.

“The men can get their dinner. I already told Clarice you’re with me and told Damian. They said it is fine,” Gannon tells me. I listen, my ears trying to gauge how far away the river is.

I can barely hear the water, so I knew it is a fair distance, but he is already getting to his feet, and I slide off his lap.

“See if you can keep up,” he says, grabbing his bag and tossing it over his shoulder. He then shoots off between the trees, laughing. Instinct kicks in, and suddenly; I’m darting after him as if he is my prey.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

Her tiny wolf tries to keep up, but she easily loses track of me, so I decide to double back, coming up from behind her.

When I find her, Abbie's wolf is sniffing the ground, trying to pick up my scent.

She is by the river's edge, and her head swivels from side to side, glancing among the trees as she tries to locate where I went.

However, doubling back and the added breeze is confusing her as she follows her nose before giving up and dropping her rump to the ground as she sits staring at the river.

Still, I don't step out of my hiding spot.

Instead, I watch her like some damn creep for a while.

Curiosity gets the better of me, and I want to see if she will try to escape being this close to the border.

I don't know why I want to see if she is tempted to; maybe because my fascination with the girl is quickly turning into an obsession, and I don't want her to leave.

After a while, she wanders closer to the water's edge, dipping her head, trying to drink from it. It is pretty shallow there, so I'm not sure why she won't just wade in. Maybe she doesn't want to get wet?

As she attempts to get closer, her front paws slip slightly, and Abbie rears back,

scooting further away from the bank.

Her heart rate is easily discernible as it thumps erratically.

She nervously glances around as if she is trying to figure her way back before she huffs and yawns, then lies down.

Stepping out from the treeline, and the tree I was watching her from, her ears perk.

She instantly gets to her feet. Spotting me, she rushes over and zips between my legs, rubbing herself on my legs.

Shewolves are amazing in their wolf form, unrestricted for the most part.

They have no control, and that is when they were predominantly closest to my species, baser instinct kicking in, just not as strong as a Lycans urges.

Leaning down, I brush my fingers through her soft, thick fur, my claws bumping over the ridges of her spine.

She is skinny—too skinny—for a werewolf.

I briefly wonder how many times she has shifted because her wolf side should have the bulk of hard muscle, yet even through her fur, I can feel nothing but skin and bone.

My touch, however, seems to make her snap back to herself, and she drops to the ground as if commanded, the rational part of her brain retaking control of her actions. A whimper escapes her as if she thinks she shouldn't have behaved in such a way.

The she-wolves I know are always submissive to those of stronger potency, so it is

not surprising she thinks she would be in trouble for her actions.

She reminds me of Ivy in this sense. Both girls are unusually submissive, as if over the years, any sense of themselves was slowly beaten out of them until they were nothing but compliant to others' whims. I am not surprised Abbie would fight her own instincts even in this form.

Crouching beside her, she instinctively turns languid, flopping on her side and showing me her belly.

I chuckle, knowing Abbie must be internally cringing at her wolf side's actions. Yet if Abbie is anything like Ivy, she won't understand her own instincts or werewolf and Lycan heritage for that matter. I've seen the way Kyson struggles the same with Ivy and her timidity.

Abbie whines as I rub her belly and chest before I scoop her up, making her yelp loudly. My heart lurches in my chest, thinking I have hurt her as I drag her into my lap.

"Did I hurt you?" I ask worriedly. That wasn't my intention, but sometimes I forget my strength.

Yet she shakes her wolfy head from side to side and I know I startled her, as I cross my legs beneath her.

She rests her head on my knee, but she pants as if thirsty.

I look at the river, wishing she could answer me back in that form.

Lycans can speak in either form whereas werewolves can't, though they do have pack mindlinks.

But she is a rogue, so wouldn't even have that.

"You can drink from the river. Clarice won't care if you get wet," I tell her, rubbing her ears softly.

She looks over at it and lets out a huff.

I furrow my brows. I know the water here is fresh because I have drank from it.

When I move, she crawls off my lap, and I move to the river edge where the water is deepest and dive in.

When I breach the surface, I find her wolf has moved closer and is sitting on the edge of the bank.

She stares down at her reflection in the water then she tilts her head from side to side, sniffing the air.

Swimming over to her, she lifts her head and watches me.

I splash her, but she doesn't react. "Come in. You won't get in trouble," I tell her, but she shakes her head. Her bright green eyes watching me curiously.

"Are you thirsty?" I ask her, and she nods. I furrow my brows as I swim closer to her, cupping my furry palms in the water and lifting them so she can drink from them. Her tongue laps at my hands thirstily, and I cup them again so she can drink more.

Once she has her fill, she bumps my hand with her wet nose and backs away from the edge a little more.

It's not as if I am naked, not that I would shift in front of her.



I don't want her to get the wrong idea, and I know she would have questions if she saw me naked.

I don't exactly have war scars gracing my body. You could tell they are self-inflicted.

Glancing up at the darkening sky, it isn't cold, so that can't be it. Realization hits me, her potent fear. She can't swim.

"You can't swim?" I ask, wanting to be sure. She nods her head once, looking back at me.

"Shift; I will try to teach you," I tell her, not that I have ever taught someone to swim before.

My own father taught me by throwing me in deep water and saying kick or drown.

I learned quickly because I knew the bastard wasn't coming in after me.

Yet somehow, I know she will drown if I try that with her.

"I won't look, I promise," I tell her, turning around yet moving closer to the bank where she can reach me.

The water is shallow here, or maybe it is because currently, I stand over seven feet tall in this form.

However, I am surprised when I hear her shifting behind me. I honestly didn't think she would.

Yet I don't hear her get in the water. Turning slightly, I hold my hand out to her, making sure not to turn my head. Her fear is strong in the air as if she is unsure of the

water or maybe me.

I can't be sure, but I have to hold in my gasp when I feel her tiny hand slide into mine.

I grab her hand, my claws sliding over her wrist, when I hear a splash before both of her hands suddenly grip my outstretched arm, and she coughs.

Her fingers pull the fur out along my arms, and I turn quickly, using my other arm to wrap around her waist while her legs latch around my hips in a grip that would be crushing if I were human.

She continues to cough and sputter for a second before rubbing her eyes with one hand and then opening them.

"Are you sure we won't get in trouble?" she asks, her hands moving to my chest, where she grips my fur tightly like she is afraid I will let her drown. I move further out to where not even I can stand.

"You're with me. Why would you get in trouble?" I ask. Abbie says nothing, and I try to unwrap her legs. Her grip on my fur tightens, her nails digging into my skin.

"What are you doing?" she shrieks.

"I won't let you drown, Abbie," I tell her, gripping one of her wrists and prying her grip off me. I set her hand on my shoulder, and her other hand moves to grip the other.

"Use your legs, and kick them under the water," I tell her, and after some prompting, she eventually unlatches them from my waist. I swim backward as she moves, her legs treading water.

We lose track of time after a few hours.

It is pitch black, yet she seems to be having fun until I notice her teeth chattering.

Although, I am confident enough that if she falls into a body of water, she will be able to get herself out, I still wouldn't trust her to go swimming alone, especially if there is a current.

Abbie grips my shoulders as I swim back to the bank. I try not to laugh at her white legs and ass. She doesn't need to know I can see her completely because I can see beneath the water. I move to lift her back onto the bank when she whispers.

"Gannon, I'm naked," she says when I grab her waist to hoist her up. I don't have the heart to tell her I could see her the entire time. The water is far from murky, though I know to her eyes it would have looked like it. For me, I can see every part of her.

So for now I will allow her that sense of privacy. Besides, I have seen her change plenty of times in her room when she doesn't know I'm watching her.

"I'll close my eyes," I chuckle, and she nods. I lick her cheek, lifting her onto the bank. When I don't hear her shift, my ears prick.

"Abbie?" I ask because I can hear her heart beating and her breathing.

"Don't look. I am having trouble. Just give me a second." Minutes pass, and still, I do not hear the crack of her bones, and I can hear her frustrated breathing as she tries.

"You haven't shifted much, have you?" I ask her.

"I have, but this is only the second time I have gone for a run," she admits, and I sigh.

“Abbie, I am going to have to open my eyes,” I tell her, and her heart rate quickens.

“No, I can do it, just give me a second,” she panics.

“Abbie, you should have told me you didn’t go for runs often. I wouldn’t have worn your wolf out,” I tell her.

“Huh?” she asks.

“Your wolf side needs stamina. Had I realized, I wouldn’t have taken you so far from the castle. In my bag is a shirt you can put on,” I tell her. I hear movement and her rummaging around in the bag.

“Are you covered?”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

“Ah, kind of,” she murmurs, and I open my eyes to see her trying to tug my shirt down her legs. As I climb out, I notice her normally wavy red hair is straight as a pencil from being wet. She steps back as I approach her.

“I have no pants on,” she squeaks.

“I know,” I laugh, holding my hand out to her. She looks at it before sighing and taking it as I scoop up the bag, tossing it over my shoulder.

We start the long trek back to the castle, but the longer we walk, the slower she becomes as mosquitoes attack her flesh.

Her hands swat at her naked legs as she tries to stop them from biting her.

We are at least another thirty minutes from the castle at this pace.

Stopping, I adjust the bag on my shoulder.

Grabbing her under the arms, she squeals as I pick her up.

“What are you...”

“Wrap your legs around my waist,” I tell her, but she doesn’t, and I growl when she remains stiff as a plank in my hands. Hugging her closer, I crush her against my chest before lifting her legs around my hips and placing my arm under her butt. She squeaks, shoving off my chest and thrashing.

“Are you done; stop hitting me,” I tell her, nipping at her neck and she freezes though I am curious about her strange reaction to me pulling her closer. I lick her cheek. Her heart hammers against my chest, her skin is ice cold, and she is shaking.

“It’s quicker, I can run with you.” I pull my face back to look at her.

“Just run?” she gasps, looking at me. I stare at her, wondering what she thought I was going to do.

“What else?” I ask her. She looks away, and I growl when I feel her dig her knees into my ribs as she moves up higher.

I hoist her up before realizing where her pelvis was resting before.

Surely she didn’t think—not only was that impossible while I was in this form, I would never force her but did she think I would?

Shaking that thought away, I start walking.

“Wrap your arms around my neck,” I tell her. Abbie does, glancing over her shoulder at the trees when she turns back. Her nose bumps into mine, and she giggles.

“Sorry,” she mutters, her cheeks reddening, and she glances around before peering down. “Gosh, you’re tall,” she stammers as if she has only just noticed that as I duck under a tree branch.

“And fast, so you may want to tuck your face into my neck,” I tell her, pushing her face into my shoulder with one hand. I feel her breath move through my fur, and her arms squeeze tighter around my neck.

“Ready?” I ask her, and I feel her nod. I take off running through the woods.

Her squeal turns to laughter and makes me run faster as we zip through the trees heading home.

The warmth of her body is comforting, and for once, I feel warm inside instead of the cold feeling that usually churns within me.

She is like fresh air after so many years of having the oxygen stolen from my lungs.

As much as whatever trauma taints her, she did not wilt and wither away as I did.

It has not turned her cold and uncaring; she still has life within her, and I find I crave seeing that on her face.

Seeing the way she lights up with excitement, the way she comes out of her shell when she thinks no one is watching.

When the castle lights come into view through the gaps in the trees, I slow.

Some part of me expects her to try to make me put her down, but instead, she remains in my arms. A place I suddenly never want her to leave.

Yet as we got closer, I know I have to set her down and leave her side.

A place I want to remain but can't because she is not mine and I am not hers, but for a second, I can pretend.

Pretend she is the mate I was destined for.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" I ask her, and she purses her lips, lips that I desperately want to taste.

“Going into town with Clarice,” she answers as I brush a fern away so I can step through the gap in the trees. I hoist her up higher, making her bounce in my arms as she scrambles to grip on to me, so she doesn’t fall backward.

“You don’t want to go?” I ask her.

“I want to see Ivy. I hardly see her anymore.”

“You and Ivy are close,” I tell her.

“She is all I have,” she says. I nod.

“What about you?” she asks, and I can hear the curiosity in her voice before she blushes.

“You don’t have to answer. Sorry, that was rude,” she says, and I nudge her with my nose.

“Why is it rude?” I ask her as I start to climb the hill to the cemetery.

“Rogues should know their place, speak when spoken to or not at all.” She shrugs.

“I was raised in the kingdom, alongside the king and Beta Damian and the rest of the royal guard. My father was the King’s Gamma, and my mother was a maid, though Clarice basically raised me,” I answer her.

“You were raised by Clarice?”

I laugh because Clarice raised nearly everyone in the castle. She was like the universal mother.



“Yes, like most of the king’s guards, the titles are usually handed down, then we competed for the best places. All the guards are of Gamma blood or higher,” I answer her.

“Higher?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“But there is only one Beta.”

“Liam is of Beta blood, but we can only have one Beta and he doesn’t want it,” I tell her.

“So, how do you compete?”

“The trials, Liam, could match Damian, but he is a little unhinged and always drunk.”

“Could he beat you in the trials? Aren’t you third in command?” she asks, and I hum.

“If he wanted to, I suppose, but then again, I train daily with the guard, so probably not, but if it came to orders and he chose to use his aura, yes.”

“Doesn’t it bother him that he is of lower rank than you since he is Beta blood.”

“No, he is like my brother, just like Damian and Kyson. Packs are family, united. It doesn’t matter where we fall. We all have each other’s backs where it counts.”

“Sounds like me and Ivy—more than my life,” she says, and my brows pinch together at her words.

“And what does more than my life mean to you?”

“Means I fight, you fight, we fight together, we die together,” she says simply, yet the far-away look she gets, I feel it means more than what she claims.

“I will speak to Kyson and see if he will allow her to see you. We are going away soon. I need to go to one of the neighboring kingdoms with the king.”

“There is another kingdom?” she asks curiously.

“Yes, but it’s a fallen kingdom; the Landeena Kingdom.” I tell her and she nods slowly.

“So why are you going there?”

“The king wants to look back into the old case; they were supposedly murdered by hunters, but they had a daughter who was never found. One who was promised to the king when she came of age.”

“How long ago did the kingdom fall?” she asks.

“About sixteen years ago, usually Damian would go with him, but the king is paranoid this time since he intends to take Ivy with him.”

“Why?” she asks, and I feel the rapid beat of her heart thumping erratically against my chest. I don’t answer because I can’t, yet her worry makes me regret mentioning it.

“She’ll be fine. I won’t let anything happen to her.”

“Yes, but why is she leaving? What does the king want with her? She should be with me. We have never been separated. She—” she sucks in a breath and kicks her legs, wanting to be put down. I let her slide down as she moves to climb the hill.

I catch her hand to stop her. “Abbie?”

“I should go inside; I have chores to do,” she says while trying to tug down the shirt she is wearing as if her nudity bothers her.

I think it odd. She is the first werewolf I have met that is afraid of showing her own skin.

But then again, I was scared to show her mine, not because I am shy, that definitely isn't it, but because I don't want her to pity me.

“She will be fine, Abbie,” I try to reassure her, but she doesn't look like she believes me.

“Yeah, and that's what Alpha Dean said when he brought us to the orphanage, that we would be fine.

No one tells you their intentions Gannon, not really.

Not until they have what they want from you, and by then, it's too late,” Abbie says, rushing off and leaving me dumbfounded. Are we talking about the same thing?

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

It's early morning when I wake the next day.

I can hear rummaging outside my door, and I hardly slept a wink.

Restlessness and anxiety over the upcoming trip consume me.

I'm anxious about leaving Abbie, anxious about security.

Every time the king leaves the grounds, he becomes a target, and now with Ivy going, the fear of missing something gnaws at all of us.

Liam hasn't slept either—I can feel it. He wants to come along, but the king needs him here to watch over the castle.

Knowing Liam isn't coming with us puts me on edge.

He's one of our best men, but I understand the reasoning.

The Royal Guard will be gone, and the castle needs to remain protected.

Liam could hold this place down by himself if it came to that.

We can't fail. I refuse to lose another royal family. Kyson is the only royal bloodline left, and with Ivy by his side, her safety is paramount. Even above the king's. We swore an oath to protect his mate and now we are sure that's who she is.

The future of Valkyrie would be destroyed, her and Kyson marrying and producing

an heir is the only way to ensure the future of the kingdom.

Kyson wouldn't survive losing her—not after Claire.

And he still needs to tell Ivy she is his mate, which now we have confirmed that, I now not only have to protect the king but his mate ,while remembering not to disclose that information to anyone.

Only a few select people in the castle know and that is the Royal Guard and of course Clarice.

Not even Abbie knows who she is to the king.

I get up and head to see what's causing the noise outside my door.

Pulling on my robe, I tie it securely around my waist. When I open the door, I find Abbie stacking clean linens and toiletries into a basket she dropped.

I usually find a fresh basket at my door every morning, though I never knew it was her doing.

I thought it was Clarice. I know Abbie cleans the other rooms here, but Liam and I have always taken care of our own. I don't like anyone in my room.

Abbie jumps, startled, and backs up. "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you. I was trying to be quiet," she murmurs chewing her lip nervously like she thinks she will be in trouble for waking me.

I rub a hand down my face, and look to the windows, trying to gauge the time.

The windows in the corridor are dark, signaling it's still early, but the sharp smell of

cleaning chemicals tells me she's been at work for a while.

The night guards' doors are open, and the scent coming from those rooms confirms she's been cleaning them because they reek heavily of bleach.

"Abbie!" Damian's voice booms from down the hall. She jumps, startled, then freezes, staring over her shoulder at him.

"I'm nearly done, sir," she stammers.

"Clarice told you to stay quiet in that section. Just leave it," he scolds her. That explains why I never hear the supplies being dropped at my door in the mornings anymore. I thought Clarice was still handling it.

Abbie nods, looking deflated. "I asked her to help me," I blurt without thinking. Damian pauses, folding his arms and tilting his head to the side, he knows I am lying, the man can read me just as well Liam sometimes.

"You asked her to help you?" he presses, skeptical.

I know he's aware of how out of character this is for me.

I never let anyone in my room. But the thought of Abbie being scolded for breaking a rule Liam and I set doesn't sit well with me.

If she hadn't woken me, I would've assumed Clarice had been here.

Liam strolls in behind Damian, fresh off his night shift. He claps a hand on Damian's shoulder as he passes.

"Brother—Abbie, I told you just to let yourself in," Liam says, winking at me as he

moves toward his room, clearly having heard the conversation on his way up the stairs.

Damian gapes at him. “Since when? I’m not even allowed in your damn rooms, but you’re letting a servant—” Damian shakes his head in disbelief.

“That’s because you’re not as pretty. Last thing I want is you rifling through my underwear drawer, Beta,” Liam teases, unlocking his door and tossing his key to Abbie.

“My lady,” Liam adds with a purr. I glare at him.

Abbie fumbles to catch the key, her face a mix of confusion and unease. I can tell Liam overheard Damian scolding her and decided to intervene by backing her up, too.

Damian mutters something under his breath and shakes his head. He’s all about order, and if he believes Abbie is disrupting that, he won’t hesitate to pull her off this floor. I step closer to Abbie as she clutches Liam’s key.

“See, no harm done, Beta,” I tell Damian.

“Pack light, Gannon. We leave tomorrow,” Damian tosses over his shoulder as he stalks toward the king’s quarters.

“You didn’t have to lie for me,” Abbie says softly.

“Well, I didn’t lie for you,” Liam interjects from his doorway, leaning casually against the frame. “I just went along with what Gannon said. If he trusts you in his room, then it’s fine by me.”

Liam's smirk deepens as he glances between us. "Or should I be worried about having her in my room, Gannon?" he asks, deliberately baiting me.

"No, of course not," I snap, stepping aside to let Abbie into my room. She hesitates but grabs the basket and rushes past me. Liam chuckles, grabbing his own basket and retreating into his room, his laughter echoing as he closes the door.

Inside, Abbie heads straight to the bathroom to start cleaning. I hurry to tidy up, hiding the weapons scattered around my room. By the time I finish, I find her restocking supplies and picking up my dirty laundry.

"Sorry," she mumbles.

"It's fine. What time do you go into town with Clarice?" I ask.

"When I finish this floor," she replies, scooping up a towel.

"Let me get changed, and I'll take you," I offer.

"You want to come?" she asks, surprised.

"Yeah, I have errands in town, anyway," I lie, heading to the closet. Once changed into my black uniform, I step out to find her opening the blinds and windows. The bed is made, and the room feels unusually bright. I squint at the light.

"What are you doing?" I ask as she sprinkles dried lavender into what looks like a bowl of potpourri.

"If you don't like the smell, I can remove it," she says, stepping forward to take the bowl.



“No, it’s fine,” I tell her, placing the bowl back on the windowsill.

“We used to do it at the orphanage. It helped the kids sleep,” she explains.

“You looked after all the kids?” I ask. Her eyes light up briefly before dimming so I know she must care deeply for them.

“Yes, there was one—” She stops, shaking her head. “I should go,” she says quickly, her expression falling; she looks on the verge of tears making me feel guilty for asking.

“Come on. I’ll drive you,” I say, leading her out.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

I rush out of Gannon's room, carrying his dirty laundry and grabbing Liam's basket, which is neatly set outside his door. As I rummage through my pockets to slide Liam's key back under his door, Gannon speaks, startling me.

"He gave it to you, Abbie. That means he doesn't want it back," he says.

I pause, staring at the key in my hand. Reluctantly, I nod and pocket it, but before I can move, Gannon holds his hand out.

"Here," he says.

I open my palm, and he drops a key into it. "My room key," he adds simply, grabbing the basket beside me.

I try to take it from him, not wanting to get in trouble with Clarice, but he shakes his head and starts walking. I follow him, quickening my pace as he turns toward the kitchens when I see Beta Damian also on the bottom floor talking to Clarice.

"Beta Damian, I'm sure she wouldn't have gone in his room without permission—" Clarice's voice cuts off as Gannon bumps into my back, coming up behind me. "Morning Abbie," she says awkwardly so I know Damian was demanding to know why I was near their doors this morning.

"Gannon, dear," she says warmly, smiling brightly at him.

"Hey, Ma," he greets, stepping past me to peck her cheek before heading to the laundry. Clarice watches him go, then turns back to me with a raised eyebrow as

Damian stalks off.

“Is everything alright? Damian said you woke Gannon this morning and?—”

“She’s allowed in mine and Liam’s rooms. She has the keys,” Gannon interrupts, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Clarice blinks at him, clearly surprised.

“I can move her to a different floor. I know how you and Liam like your privacy,” she offers cautiously.

“I wouldn’t have given her my key if I was worried about my privacy, Ma, she can come and go as she pleases, she also has Liam’s key,” Gannon replies, throwing me a small smile.

My cheeks heat as Clarice frowns, but she eventually nods, turning to the clipboard hanging on the wall. “Abbie said she has to go in town, I will take her,” Gannon says and Clarice’s lips tug slightly.

“Is that right, son?” She questions and my brows pinch in confusion wondering why she is staring at him like that.

“The king has asked me to go into town to collect some orders. While I grab the garments, you can pick up the supplies from the store with Abbie then,” she says, handing Gannon a list.

Gannon takes the papers, glancing over them before folding them.

“Or I could take Abbie by myself and grab everything for you,” he suggests.

“Gannon, I don’t expect you?—”

He pecks her cheek again, cutting her off.

“I’m taking her. We won’t be long. Come on, Abbie,” he says, grabbing my hand and ignoring Clarice’s protests.

“I don’t think I should... She?—”

“Abbie go, it’s good to see Gannon leave this place besides to go with Liam to slaught... never mind, dear, have fun,” she says quickly. I glance at Gannon who winks at me, his fingers lacing through mine.

“Oh and don’t forget the garments! The king needs them before tomorrow!” she calls after us.

“I know, Ma. I’ll be back soon,” Gannon assures her, leading me to the garage.

At the garage, Gannon retrieves his keys from a locker near the door and points to his car. I hesitate, chewing my lip as I walk over. When I reach for the handle, his hand covers mine, opening the door for me.

With a sigh, I climb in. Gannon strolls around to the driver’s side, hops in, starts the car, and cranks up the music.

The drive to town is filled with loud, upbeat music that seems to match his mood this morning.

I, however, feel slightly uneasy. Surely it’s not normal for him to spend so much time with a servant like me?

“So, what do you need to get in town besides the stuff for Clarice?” I ask as I unclip my seatbelt. But before I can move, Gannon is already at my door, opening it with that lightning-quick Lycan speed.

“Actually,” he admits, scratching the back of his neck, “that was a lie. I don’t need anything from town.”

I stare at him, caught off guard. “Then why would you take me?”

He shrugs, his expression unsure. “I wanted to spend time with you.”

“Why?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

He hesitates, looking almost sheepish. “I don’t know,”

“Hmm. Well, it saved me from walking,” I reply, stepping past him toward the store.

Gannon chuckles and follows me, taking the basket and marking off everything on Clarice’s list. Once we finish, he leads me to a small shop with garment bags hanging in the windows.

The bell above the door jingles as we enter, and moments later, a woman appears from the back.

She greets Gannon warmly, like they’ve known each other for years.

She disappears briefly and returns with a suitcase.

“Pressed and folded, ready for the king’s trip. Measurements should be spot-on—I checked them myself,” she says.

Gannon thanks her, and we leave. As we head toward the car, he tugs me toward a candy shop.

“Liam ate all that licorice already?” I ask.

He laughs. “No,” he says, pulling me inside. He buys a bag of strawberry clouds and chocolate Freddo frogs, handing the bag to me.

“You didn’t have to buy sweets,” I tell him.

“You like them,” he says simply.

“Well... what do you like? Do you like flowers?” I ask, curious about his strange behavior. “Everybody likes flowers,” I add quickly.

“Not everyone. I don’t. Pollen makes my nose itch,” he replies with a grin.

“Then what do you like?”

His expression darkens slightly, and he smirks. “Probably best if you don’t know what I like. It might scare you,” he says.

The way he says it sends a shiver down my spine, and I decide it’s probably best not to push for an answer.

Back at the car, Gannon opens my door again. I climb in, shaking my head at the thought that he might think I don’t know how to open doors myself. Once he’s in the driver’s seat, he glances at me.

“So, what did you and Ivy do for fun at the orphanage?” he asks.

I think for a moment, memories flooding back. It wasn't always bad. We loved the kids and their paintings. I loved drawing, and Ivy used to sneak me paper whenever she found some the kids hadn't scribbled on. I also enjoyed baking, though we rarely got to try the treats we made.

"I like drawing and baking," I say with a shrug. "Mostly, we played with the kids."

"You like kids?" Gannon asks.

I nod. "Yeah, they were great. When Ty—" I stop, my throat tightening. Just thinking about him makes me want to cry, and I don't want to risk any lashings for showing tears.

"I like these," I say quickly, pulling a cloud from the bag to change the subject. He stares at me for a moment, but I focus my gaze out the window.

Gannon touches my hand gently, making me jump. "Are you okay?" he asks softly.

"Yep. We should get back. Clarice is probably wondering what's taking so long, and I still have linens to hang," I reply.

He looks like he wants to say more but stops, starting the car and driving us back.

Once we return, I thank him before rushing to the kitchen to put away the groceries. Afterward, I head to the laundry, unloading the washers into my basket and starting another load. When I reach down to grab the basket, it's gone.

I glance around and spot Gannon standing nearby, holding it. The man moves like a ghost, appearing out of nowhere. I stare at him, then at the floor wondering how I didn't see him grab it.

“Come on, I’ll help you,” he says, and I chew my lip, glancing toward the kitchens. I wonder if I’ll get in trouble with Clarice for letting him help; he is the king’s guard, not a servant.



## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

When I asked Abbie what she liked in town, she sounded distant, like what I asked upset her.

That thought alone has me watching her and I can't bring myself to leave her side.

She peels the skin from her fingertips, a habit that bothers me because she doesn't even seem aware she's doing it.

The entire drive home, she was lost in her own world, trapped in her thoughts, tearing her fingers to pieces.

After we returned, she headed to the laundry room to start the washing like she couldn't get away quick enough.

I followed her silently, watching as she loaded the washer, her focus entirely on the task in front of her.

She didn't notice me standing behind her until I walked over and picked up the basket.

"Come on, I'll help."

She looks unsure but eventually sighs. "You don't have to help me," she says.

"I want to," I reply, carrying the basket over to the clothesline. I set it down and retrieve the pegs. Since I have the afternoon off to prepare for tomorrow's trip with the king, I decide I'd rather spend the time with her than doing anything else.

“What chores do you have next?” I ask as she hangs a pillowcase.

“Staff bathrooms, then mopping, and whatever Clarice sends me to do,” she says.

“After that, I have to head back to the guards’ floor—your floor—to do the afternoon sweep of the rooms, restock supplies, mop the floors again, then help with kitchen prep before serving.

After dinner, I’ll clear the rooms again, do the dishes, and check the laundry for any extra loads. ”

“How long does all that take you?” I ask, frowning.

She glances at me over her shoulder. “Tonight’s a full roster, so...probably until around 10 PM.”

I furrow my brows. “What time did you start this morning?”

“4:30,” she says with a shrug.

“AM?” I clarify, and she nods, grabbing more linens to hang.

“Why so early?” I ask, shocked at the insane hours she’s working.

“Damian likes the gym cleaned before the men go in for training. Do you train with them?” she asks.

“No, I don’t. Damian handles mornings, and Liam and I alternate nights. Lately, Liam’s been taking most of the night shifts. His paranoia keeps him awake,” I tell her, handing her some pegs and grabbing a sheet to hang.

“Yeah, he seems a little...” She trails off, hesitating.

“Unhinged,” I suggest with a smirk.

She peeks at me, chewing her lip, then shrugs. “He’s nice, though,” she says.

If only she’d seen him in his element. Nice wouldn’t be the word she’d use—psychotic, dangerous, maybe even manic—but definitely not nice.

“I’ll speak with Damian. Does he know how late you’re working?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I don’t think so. But I don’t mind. It’s not every night I work this late, and I don’t want to get into trouble.”

“Why would you get in trouble?”

“For not working enough,” she says simply, pegging the last set of linens on the line and grabbing the empty basket.

“How about this,” I say, “I’ll help you finish your chores, and when we’re done, we can go for a run. I’ll clear it with Clarice and Damian.”

Her eyes light up, darting toward the forest. “Really?” she asks, her excitement obvious.

“Really,” I confirm.

“But it’ll be late by the time I finish,” she says, looking longingly at the woods.

“I’ll get someone to cover your afternoon shift. Show me where to start,” I tell her, nudging her toward the laundry doors.

“Are you sure? It’s pretty boring. I’m sure you can find better ways to spend your time,” she says, setting the basket on top of a washer and checking the machines still running.

“Hmm. I’d rather spend time with you,” I say, grinning as her cheeks flush.

“Why?” she asks, grabbing cleaning supplies.

“You’re prettier than Liam,” I tease, snickering.

She raises an eyebrow at me. “Where is Liam, anyway? You two are usually inseparable,” she says as we head upstairs.

“Probably harassing someone while working. Or maybe he’s with Dustin,” I say with a shrug.

We spend the next couple of hours completing her chores together. When we finish, I tell her to grab a bag for her clothes while I go clear things with Clarice. I find her in the kitchens and before I can even ask, she speaks.

“You like her, don’t you?” Clarice teases, a knowing smile on her face.

I roll my eyes but sigh. “Maybe.”

Clarice chuckles and waves me off. “Go on, then. I’ll get Ester to cover for her. Have fun,” she says.

Once done, I inform the guards of our plans and let Damian know before heading upstairs to shift and pack a change of clothes. Once I’m ready, I knock on Abbie’s bedroom door.

“What did Clarice say?” she asks, nibbling her lip nervously as she peeks out. She startles when she realizes I am already shifted.

“Gannon?” she asks, sniffing the air slightly.

“Are you expecting another Lycan in your room?” I ask her. She sighs in relief.

“My sense of smell isn’t as strong in this form.” she reminds me.

“Clarice got someone to cover for you, so we’re free to go,” I tell her, stepping inside to grab the small bag sitting on her bed. I take her hand, leading her downstairs and out into the woods.

Abbie wanders toward a tree, then shifts, carrying her uniform in her mouth as she pads over to me. I crouch down, stuffing the clothes into the bag before running my claws through her fur. She purrs, zipping in and out between my legs as I stand.

I laugh as she jumps up, placing her paws on my stomach and rubbing her face against my chest. Pressing my wolfish head against hers, I whisper, “I’ll race you.”

Before she realizes what I’m doing, I lick her face and take off into the woods. Her surprised growl quickly turns into the sound of her paws thundering after me.

Abbie’s excitement is contagious as we run together. This time, I bring her clothes, knowing how quickly her wolf gets caught up in the moment and exhausts her.

After running, we go for a swim. Despite her initial hesitation, she seems to enjoy herself.

Out here, away from the castle, it’s like the weight of the world melts off her shoulders.

She looks carefree, unburdened by the role she's forced to play at the castle.

But I've noticed the moment we're back on those grounds, she retreats into the servant role she's grown accustomed to.

I hate seeing her stuck in that position.

Earlier, I spoke to Damian about making her my personal servant, a role that would give her more freedom.

He told me I'd need to speak with the king, though I doubt the king would object—if Abbie agrees.

I plan to raise it to him when we visit the Landeena castle.

"Turn around," Abbie squeals as she paddles toward the water's edge. I laugh, turning my back to her.

She has her bra and panties on this time, so I don't know why she's so self-conscious. Besides, I've already seen her naked—not that she knows that. When I hear her grunt, struggling to climb the embankment, I turn back and grip her hips to help her.

"Gannon!" she squeals as I lift her up and settle her on my lap at the edge of the water, our feet dangling. Her pale skin stands out starkly against my dark fur, yet she doesn't seem to fear me in this form.

"Why don't you shift back?" she asks.

I nuzzle her neck, and she drops her chin, but staying in place on my lap.

My hands rest on her waist, and as I glance down, I notice her bra is completely see-

through.

Her pink nipples peek through the damp fabric, and I realize just how scarred her body truly is.

Deep claw marks mar her breasts, the angry lines vibrant against her pale skin.

I've seen the lashings on her back before, counted them when she wasn't looking in the water, but I didn't notice these marks until now.

Resting my chin on her shoulder, I glance at her thighs and hips, where similar scars are etched into her flesh, as though someone had gripped her too tightly and lost control.

"Did Mrs. Daley do these?" I ask without thinking, brushing my clawed thumb over one of the scars on her breast.

Her entire body stiffens on my lap. Realizing her bra is see-through, she scrambles off me, her arms wrapping around herself as she rushes to grab her uniform from the bag. I internally curse, knowing I've upset her.

She pulls on her uniform hastily, buttoning it up as I get to my feet.

"I didn't mean to upset you, Abbie," I say softly.

"You should've told me it was see-through," she snaps, her hands fumbling with the buttons.

"Where did the scars come from?" I ask, ignoring her frustration.

"Same place the rest did. The orphanage," she replies curtly, her tone shutting me

down.

“They look like claw marks,” I say, reaching for the bag to grab my own clothes. I shift back quickly and pull on my shirt, keeping my chest hidden. As I put on my shorts, I turn back to see her finishing the last few buttons on her dress.

“We should head back,” she says, scooping up the rest of her things.

Her mood has shifted completely. I don’t understand why she’s so upset about the bra—it’s not like I haven’t seen scars before. Her silence bothers me as much as the tension in her shoulders.

As she ties her hair into a bun, I notice a scar on the back of her neck, partially hidden beneath her hair. It runs across her neck and behind her ear. Reaching out, I trace it with my finger, and she jerks away.

“Ivy has a similar scar,” I mutter, mostly to myself. “It’s on the opposite side, though.”

Abbie touches the back of her neck self-consciously, avoiding my gaze. She grabs the bag and slings it over her shoulder, but I take it from her.

“What did I do? Why are you in such a rush?” I ask, gripping her hand. She pulls away, her gaze distant, as if she’s looking right through me.

“Abbie?” I prompt, trying to get her attention.

She blinks, snapping out of whatever thought she was trapped in.

”What do you want with me?” she asks, her voice robotic, devoid of emotion.



“Pardon?” I ask, confused and she seems to realize what she said.

“Never mind. We should head back,” she says, walking off before I can press further.

“Abbie, what do you mean?” I ask, catching up to her.

I grab her arm, jerking her to stop. She sighs but I can tell she is not only humiliated by something but on the verge of crying.

“Your intentions,” she says flatly. “Everyone wants something. Everyone takes something. So what do you want? Why are you always being nice and why are you hanging out with a servant?”

Her words hit me like a punch. She doesn’t even look at me as she speaks, but I notice the way her nose twitches, subtly sniffing the air as if preparing to run.

“I just like hanging out with you. Why is that so bad?” I ask.

“Because you’re a man. You’re a Lycan. And I’m a servant. A rogue,” she replies, scanning the trees until she finds the track and starts following it.

“I don’t want anything from you, Abbie,” I tell her honestly.

She glances over her shoulder at me.

“Tell me—where the scars come from? Why do you and Ivy have matching ones?”

Her hand instinctively touches her neck. “More than my life,” she murmurs.

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“It means exactly that,” she says, brushing past me and walking ahead when I try to move in front of her.

The rest of the walk back is filled with tense silence. Her mood weighs heavily on me, and I can’t figure out what I’ve done to upset her. The moment the castle comes into view, she rushes ahead.

“Abbie!” I call after her.

“I have chores to do,” she calls back, her voice sharp.

That’s a lie. I cleared her afternoon with Clarice. Frowning, I follow her scent back to the stairs and see her slip into her room, shutting the door firmly behind her.

I stare at the door for a moment, debating whether to knock, when Damian’s voice echoes through the mind link. “Gannon, I need you in the king’s office.”

“I’ll be right there,” I reply with a groan, turning away from Abbie’s door. Whatever’s going on, I’ll have to speak to her when I get back from the trip.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

### THE FOLLOWING MORNING

I walk out of the billiard room down the corridor, and my eyes light up when I spot Ivy coming toward me.

I am about to run to her when I realize the king has come around the corner and is next to her.

He has a hold of her hand. Ivy, also noticing me, smiles and moves toward me before freezing, yet my gaze is on the possessive way he grips her hand as if he is afraid she will run off. Ivy pauses and I frown.

However, the king looks down at her and says something while I wait to see if she is allowed to come to see me.

He glances down at her before bringing her hand to his lips.

My eyes widen. Why is he being affectionate toward her?

My breath lodges in my throat as worry courses through me for her.

Surely, he isn't forcing her to be his sex slave.

The thought horrifies me. I know it happens, but she is my Ivy.

I don't know if I can live with knowing she is suffering like that.

The guards don't even bat an eyelash at his outrageous affections toward her as if they expect it, yet whatever he says has her rushing over to me. Her body crashes against mine as she embraces me, and I squeeze her tight. It feels as if it has been ages since I last saw her.

Upon colliding against her, a sob bursts from my lips as I smother her in my hug. The relief I feel upon realizing she is okay, or as okay as she could be given her situation, is as if a weight has lifted. Ivy squeezes tight, proving she missed me just as much as I missed her.

Pulling away, I see tears streaking down her face and I wipe her tears, and she wipes mine. "I was so worried when I didn't see you for a few days; I thought they got rid of you," I murmur, remembering to keep my voice out of earshot.

I don't want to see her punished for my words, and I also don't want to be reprimanded. Holding her at arm's length, I glance over at her, looking for fresh lash marks or bruises, but I find none. She appears to be okay.

"Where is your uniform?" I ask her, noticing she isn't wearing the usual staff uniform all the servants wear.

"I have to go with the king somewhere. He told me to wear this," she says, and my brows furrow.

Wait, where is he taking her again? I glance over at the king to find him talking to his guards and Clarice.

Panic makes me worry she has done something wrong.

Is he shunning her from the castle or selling her?

I feel my stomach pool with dread at the possibilities.

“You’re leaving the castle?” I ask, unable to hide the panicked sound in my voice. Ivy glances over her shoulder at the king then looks back at me, and nods.

“But you’re coming back, right?” I ask. I feel the blood run from my face as I glance down at her clothes again.

If he is getting rid of her, I want to go with her.

I don’t want to remain here without her.

We have a pact, and Ivy is all I have left, I refuse to go on without her.

I can’t. She is the only reason I didn’t kill myself.

The goddess knows how I tried to end it. If it weren’t for her, I would have.

“Yes, I will bring her back, Abbie,” the king says, pulling me from my thoughts, and I quickly straighten just as Mrs. Daley taught us, making sure not to meet his gaze. I give a little curtsy, not wanting to be whipped for disrespect, and turn my neck in submission.

“It’s time to leave,” the king says, placing his hand on her hip. My eyes dart to his hand before shifting to Ivy, wondering if she is okay when he suddenly pulls her away from me and toward the guards at the end of the hall.

“I love you,” I blurt out, she needs to know I love her, and the king stops when she looks back at me. Ivy lets his hand go and rushes back to me, her arms wrapping tightly around my neck, and I fight back the tears. She pecks my cheek, and I squeeze her extra tight, not wanting to let her go.

“I love you, too,” she whispers to me. I don’t care if I’ll get scolded for it or even whipped.

I hold on just that a little bit longer.

I need that last hug in case it turns out to be my last one from her.

If she doesn’t return, I will follow and give up and find a way to end myself to be with her.

“So much, more than my life,” I whisper in her ear, and my voice cracks as my throat becomes clogged with emotion.

“More than my life,” she whispers back, letting me go.

The king watches us curiously, and it is hard for me not to demand where he is taking her as she walks back over to him.

My lip quivers as I pray to the moon goddess to return her to me.

Moments later, I see Gannon walk past and before I can stop myself, I grip his wrist. He stops and looks down at me briefly then watches the king and Ivy leave out the doors.

“He won’t hurt her, will he?” I ask him, looking up at him to realize I still have a hold of his wrist. I jerk my hand back. “Sorry,” I murmur, dropping my gaze. It is clear he is busy and going with them, and I am obstructing him.

Gannon sighs, gripping my chin and tilting my face up, and my face heats, knowing we are drawing the attention of the guards in the hall.

“What are you talking about?” he whispers.

“The king, where is he taking her? Is he selling her?” I ask him, and Gannon seems taken aback by my words.

“No, of course not. I won’t let him hurt her, Abbie; I promise she will be back, we are going to the Landeena Kingdom, remember?” I suck in a breath and nod.

“I will be back in a few days. You still have the key to my room?” I nod, and he brushes his thumb along my jaw.

“She’ll be fine, and I left a present for you on my bed,” he says, shocking me with stepping closer.

He hugs me quickly and kisses my forehead before walking off, leaving me stunned as he leaves.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

The drive to Landeena is tiresome and I miss Abbie already. The car weaves around yet another sharp bend, and I hear Ivy retching in the backseat again. I wince, my hands gripping the wheel tightly when Kyson forces the mindlink.

“Pull over, Gannon,” Kyson orders, his tone sharp and I can’t help the snort that escapes me hearing his frustration.

“Already on it,” I reply, steering toward the side of the road. I glance at Damian in the passenger seat, who is holding back a smirk.

“She’s going to puke her guts out before we even reach the castle,” Damian mutters, crossing his arms.

“I don’t why he thought it was a good idea; he should have just commanded her to answer.” I tell him. Apparently Ivy lied to him and the king’s genius punishment was to force her to get drunk knowing she doesn’t drink, or in this case get violently ill.

I pull the car to a stop, and in the rearview mirror, I see Kyson hop out, followed by Ivy who all but nearly falls out the door. Damian snickers beside me, and I can’t help but grin as we watch Kyson trying to hold her hair back while she pushes him away, clearly mortified.

“Oh he’s definitely pissed she lied to him.”

“No, he’s whipped, you watch him come sniveling back to get in her good graces now,” Damian says with a chuckle, shaking his head.



“The sniveling?” I try not to laugh. I’d pay to see that.

“More like panicking now he’s given her damn alcohol poisoning,” I say, pulling a cigarette out of my pocket and lighting it while we wait. “I’ve never seen him like this over anyone before. She’s got him wrapped around her little finger, and she doesn’t even know it.”

Damian smirks. “Not that he’ll admit it.”

“Not a chance,” I reply, blowing out a stream of smoke as I lean against the car.

“He’d rather chew off his own tail than admit a little werewolf girl has him under her spell.

” Damian sighs moving toward the king with bottled water and a little bag.

I watch but remain by the car not feeling like being puked on.

Eventually, Kyson and Ivy climb back into the car.

I quickly flick my cigarette and climb back in and start the engine again.

Thar is when I see Ivy flop onto the seat and lie down under the air-conditioning vent through the limo window, her face pale.

Kyson slides in next to her, clearly frustrated.

“Ivy, your seatbelt,” Kyson says, his tone firm.

Ivy ignores him, turning her face into the seat like she’s pretending he doesn’t exist.

“Ivy,” Kyson says again, more pointedly this time.

Damian snickers beside me, muttering under his breath, “Oh, here we go.”

“Ivy!” Kyson’s voice grows sharper, and I can practically feel the tension radiating from the backseat as his aura ripples out slightly.

Ivy groans dramatically, and I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing.

“Is she... growling at him?” Damian asks, his voice filled with disbelief. “Hmm seems we gotta get her drunk for her to put him in his place.” Damian snickers.

I glance in the mirror just in time to see Ivy giggle and shake her head, clearly amused with her drunk self. Kyson’s expression, on the other hand, is less than amused. He looks like he is seconds away from putting her over his knee and spanking her.

“You did not just growl at me,” Kyson says, his voice low with warning.

Damian leans closer to me, his shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter. “And that’s what he gets for forcing her to drink,” he whispers.

“One,” Kyson says, starting his infamous countdown but we both know he won’t hurt her.

“One and a half,” Kyson growls, and Ivy responds with a noise that sounds suspiciously like a purring meow.

That’s it. Damian laughs over, while I try to keep the vehicle steady on the winding road.

“You laugh now but won’t be when he chucks a tantrum and you have to deal with him,” I say, shaking my head and biting my lip to hold back my own laughter as I listen to the king scold her.

“Are you seriously being disobedient over a seatbelt, Ivy? You do not want me to get to three,” Kyson warns.

“Two,” Ivy says casually, ignoring his tone.

“Now she’s pushing his buttons,” Damian pulls a face glancing in the back, but I slap his chest reminding him to keep his eyes forward.

“Well, aren’t you in quite the mood?” Kyson says, his tone dripping with exasperation. “If I didn’t know your werewolf side was slowly coming forward, I would have spanked you by now.”

“Oh, that’s going to go over well,” I say, glancing at Damian, who’s trying his hardest to ignore them in the back.

“Put your seatbelt on, Ivy,” Kyson says again, his patience clearly wearing thin.

“Put yours on, then,” she snaps back.

Kyson growls low and deep, the sound reverberating through the car. Ivy, undeterred, growls back, though it’s more of a whine this time.

“I like her drunk.” I admit. Damian looks at me with a silly smirk on his face.

“Sorry,” Ivy blurts out suddenly.

“You’re lucky I’m patient,” Kyson mutters, his voice dripping with irritation. “If you

were anyone else, Ivy, I would not put up with this attitude. Hormones and werewolf instincts or not.”

There’s a scuffling sound from the backseat, followed by a startled yelp from Ivy. Damian and I both turn to look, making sure he hasn’t lost his temper with her. But he only rips her onto his lap, clipping his belt around her.

“Ivy, now your seatbelt is on,” Kyson says smugly, clipping the belt across both of them as she squirms to fix her pants.

Ivy huffs, clearly embarrassed, while Kyson leans back with a satisfied grin, resting his chin on top of her head.

Damian shakes his head, still laughing. “Well I’m glad I don’t have a mate, they seem like hard work.” Damian mutters.

“Yeah,” I say with a chuckle. “The poor bastard doesn’t stand a chance.”

The sound of Kyson’s purring fills the car, and Damian raises an eyebrow. “He’s purring now?”

“Hopefully she passes out soon, or I may go back and beat him if I have to listen to that the entire drive.” I chuckle as Damian looks at the directions and what’s along the route.

“Well, check that hotel, I don’t wanna drive through the night. Pull over at the next rest stop. I need to inform the King and let a few guards drive ahead to check it before we arrive.” Nodding, I speed up.

After pulling over at the rest stop, I switched out drivers with a couple guards in the car behind us.

Now I sit in the back of the car with Kyson and Damian, watching as Ivy sleeps against him.

She looks so small and fragile in his arms, her skin pale and marked with scars that tell a story none of us fully know yet.

Kyson is tracing those scars now, his fingertips moving across her back under the thin blanket Damian handed him earlier.

Damian clears his throat, drawing Kyson's attention. "We may need to take an alternate route. I don't like the Black Forest—too many hiding places for an ambush," he says.

Kyson sighs, glancing down at Ivy before nodding. "It'll add an extra half-day's drive," he says reluctantly.

"I'm sorry, but it's not a risk I'm willing to take," Damian says firmly, his eyes darting toward Ivy briefly.

Kyson's expression softens, and he nods again. "You're right. Whatever is safer," he says. Relief washes over Damian's face, and I know he and I both worried Kyson would argue. But when it comes to Ivy's safety, he doesn't take risks.

Damian shifts in his seat, addressing me. "Did you find out more about her history? Her last name? Anything?" Making me realize I forgot to tell him I contacted her old Alpha.

I shake my head. "Not yet, but I reached out to the old Alpha. He said he'd dig up her files, and I can collect them next week."

"I'll come with you," Kyson says, and I nod in agreement.

“He was curious why we wanted to know about her,” I add.

“What did you tell him?” Kyson asks, his tone sharp.

“I told him I wanted Abbie’s files, too. Said we needed to assess if they could be trusted among the other servants,” I reply.

Kyson nods, satisfied with my excuse. I glance at Ivy’s sleeping form again, her thin frame making her look even more vulnerable.

Kyson’s fingers are still tracing her scars, his expression darkening.

“He said she was young when she came to the orphanage. Her parents put up a fight. Apparently, her father killed the headmistress’s mate,” I tell them.

Kyson growls low in his throat. “That would explain the cruel punishments. But why let her remain with the headmistress, knowing that?”

I growl in agreement, shaking my head. “It doesn’t make sense. And when I asked why there were only two rogue children there, he got nervous. I think he’s covering for his son.”

Damian nods. “I got the same vibe when I spoke to him.”

Kyson’s head snaps toward him. “You weren’t assigned to look into it. Gannon was. So why did you talk to him?”

Damian meets his gaze without flinching. “Same reason as Gannon. I needed to know if she was a threat to you. It’s my job as Beta.”

Kyson’s expression softens slightly, and he peers back down at Ivy. “Well, is she?”

he asks, a chuckle slipping out.

Damian smirks. “She is,” he says.

Kyson raises an eyebrow, clearly not expecting that answer.

“Don’t tell me it wouldn’t break you if she suddenly left,” Damian says, challenging him.

Kyson growls at the suggestion, his hold on Ivy tightening. “She’s not leaving me. I won’t allow it.”

“My point is proven. Physically, she’s no threat, but she could break you in other ways,” Damian says with a laugh.

“She won’t. I won’t allow it,” Kyson snaps back, though the tension in his voice betrays his worry.

“But she could,” Damian presses.

Kyson sighs, tugging Ivy closer and burying his face in her neck. Damian chuckles while I try to stifle a laugh.

“Shut up, both of you,” Kyson growls, though his tone lacks real venom. I know he’s aware of how amusing we find his obsession with Ivy, but he doesn’t see it that way.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

“Don’t get your panties in a knot just because you realize she holds all the power,” Damian teases.

“I am still the king,” Kyson snaps.

“And she is your queen,” I say, nodding toward Ivy.

A small smile tugs at Kyson’s lips. He doesn’t deny it, but his expression shifts.

“I’m still the king,” he repeats, more to himself than to us.

Damian smirks knowingly. “So you keep saying.”

“My word is law,” Kyson insists, though his tone lacks conviction.

“For now,” I tease, and Damian snickers.

“I could always keep her as my servant,” Kyson says, but there’s no weight behind the words.

Damian folds his arms, giving him an incredulous look. “I didn’t say I would,” he says flatly.

“I know you won’t,” Damian says, his tone certain.

“Unless, of course, she did something bad,” I add, earning glares from both of them.



“Now, why would you say that? What bad bone does the girl have in her body?”  
Damian asks, frowning at me.

“I’m just saying,” I reply with a shrug.

“It would have to be something horrendous,” Kyson admits, his voice softening as he glances at Ivy again. “Even then, I’m not sure I could...”

He trails off, a small chuckle escaping him. I raise an eyebrow at him.

“Something funny, My King?” I ask.

“No, Gannon. I’m just thinking about her birthday. When she realizes I’m her mate,” he says, leaning his head back and closing his eyes.

ABBIE

The rest of the day after they leave for the Landeena Kingdom, I am in a sour mood. I worry for Ivy no matter how many times Clarice reassures me she will be fine. After a while, she sends me upstairs. I think she got sick of my never-ending questions about the king’s intentions with her.

I am about to open the door to my little room when I remember what Gannon said, and I fish the key to his room out of my apron pocket. Moving toward his door, I place the key in and twist it. Pushing the door open, I glance around quickly stepping inside.

On the center of his bed is a paper bag, and I giggle, already knowing what it is.

Opening it, I find candy clouds, chocolates, and a wrapped present beneath the brown paper bag.

Confusion washes over me as I unwrap it, removing the decorative wrapping to find an art book, charcoal pencils, and some pastels.

I stare at it, shocked he remembered. Yet why would he buy it for me? I smile before hesitating. Wait, does he expect something in return? I wonder.

With that thought in mind, I swallow, setting it back on the bed and rushing out of the room, leaving everything behind.

No one gives you something without expecting some form of payment, and I know the sort of payment that comes with food and niceties.

Rushing to my room, I step inside and lock the door. I won't make that mistake again.

## TWO DAYS LATER

For two days, Ivy is gone, and when Clarice finally tells me she's on her way back, I remain by the front door for hours.

I need to make sure she's okay. When I hear the crunch of tires on the cobble driveway, I am excitedly bursting at the seams. I see the limo pull in and I rush out the door.

The king says something to Ivy before she rushes over and hugs me.

I squeeze her tight, relieved she is okay.

Grabbing their luggage, Ivy helps me haul it to the laundry room. "Abbie, I have something to tell you," Ivy says, nudging me as we walk down the corridor. She has a guard following closely behind her.

As Ivy and I walk down the corridor, I can't help but notice the delicate patterns on the wallpaper, something I never noticed before but this wing I don't usually clean.

The intricate designs lend an air of sophistication and elegance to our surroundings.

The sound of our footsteps is softened by the plush carpet beneath us, and the warm glow of the sconces on the walls casts a welcoming light.

"What?" I ask, glancing nervously at her. The excitement in her eyes is contagious. Her cheeks are flushed with a rosy hue. I see her lips tug up in the corners slightly before she leans into me. "The king wants me to be his mate," she whispers, and I stop dead in my tracks.

I take a moment to absorb the news, my heart pounding in my chest like a wild animal, desperate to break free. "Mate, as in his mate? He wants to make you his queen?" I ask, my voice trembling with emotion. I blink back tears that threaten to spill over, joy and disbelief clouding my vision.

"Means we will be free; we won't have to go back, Abbie.

We can stay here for good," she tells me, her voice full of hope.

As Ivy whispers the news of the king's proposal, a myriad of emotions wash over me.

Surprise, joy, and an overwhelming sense of relief mingle together, creating a tidal wave that threatens to engulf me.

The tears that brim in my eyes cast long, dancing shadows on the walls.

"We can stay?" I ask, the words sounding like a dream as they leave my lips.

She grabs my arm, tugging me along as the scent of fresh flowers wafts through the air.

She smiles and nods, leaning her head on my shoulder as we walk through the kitchens.

The kitchen as we pass through is in absolute chaos of activity.

The aroma of freshly baked bread and savory spices fills the air, tickling my nostrils and making my stomach rumble in response.

Cooks and kitchen staff bustle about, their faces flushed with the heat and exertion as they prepare the evening meals.

When we reach the laundry room, the hum of the washing machines fills the space, providing me some comfort that it will be hard to overhear us.

We talk about the king and how he wants her as his queen.

How he hopes to change her once she shifts.

Yet as we talk about Gannon, my cheeks grow warm, and Ivy notices my reaction.

“I know it’s a shock, but Gannon even told the king he would change you if I agree to also be changed to a Lycan.” Ivy tells me.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, her brow furrowing with concern.

“Nothing, but are you sure Gannon will want to change me?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

When Ivy mentions Gannon, I can't help but feel a warmth blossoming in my chest, accompanied by a flutter of butterflies in my stomach.

I struggle to tamp down the rising tide of emotions.

However, the thought of him wanting to change me and caring enough to say he would, fills me with a giddy sense of hope that I will be allowed to remain with Ivy.

I can't believe our luck. Just a couple weeks ago we thought we were as good as dead.

Ivy shrugs, her eyes sparkling with determination. "If not, once the king changes me, I will ask him how to change you and do it myself, but I think Gannon will change you," she tells me, her confidence bolstering my own.

As we move to load the clothes into the washer, Ivy leans in next to me, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"I think Gannon likes you," she giggles, her laughter like music to my ears yet her words have my face heating.

No, I'm a servant, I'm sure she has it wrong and is mistaking him for being nice.

Yet I keep replaying her words; the idea of Gannon liking me is both thrilling and terrifying, making my pulse race and my cheeks flush with heat, besides I'd be useless to a man.

I still I can't help but ask, "What makes you say that?" I laugh, my heart skipping a beat at the thought.

Ivy grins, her eyes gleaming with mischief.

“Just something the king said. He mentioned that Gannon has never shown interest in anyone. He also asked Damian and him if he could have you as his personal servant. Gannon doesn’t want you working as a servant anymore, he knows you need to work,” she explains, her excitement for me evident in her voice.

We stand there for a moment, the implications of her words sinking in.

“We would be safe here, Abbie. I think the king is a good man, don’t you think?”

” Ivy asks, her expression earnest. I nibble my lip, considering her question.

The king has been nothing but kind to us, even though his presence is always intimidating and rarely lets me see Ivy but she is in good health and seems to really like him.

“I do,” I agree. The words feel like a weight is lifting from my chest. “He’s done nothing to harm us, and if he can offer us a real home, a life here, then maybe we should take it, especially if it means we can remain together.”

Clarice’s entrance brings new energy to our conversation as she comes to check on us. She smiles warmly at us, and we eagerly share our good news. As we speak, I notice the way the light catches in her eyes, her genuine happiness for us shining through.

I can’t help my excitement that I can stay with Ivy and that she will become the king’s mate. This was the best news we have received in eight years, and it is like all our missed Christmases came at once.

“You have your chores, Abbie,” Clarice tells me. I almost forgot with my excitement, and I rush to grab my cleaning supplies; Ivy comes to help me.

“Ivy, the king has told me you are no longer his servant,” Clarice says, making us stop.

“But I want to help Abbie with her chores,” Ivy tells her.

Clarice looks at Ivy’s guard, who also doesn’t know what to say.

He only frowns. Ivy had introduced him as Dustin, and he has remained silent only watching us.

But I already know who he is; I have seen him sneak into Liam’s room and Liam into his a few times.

“I’m sorry, Ivy, but I can’t let you wear that uniform unless the king allows it. Those here would treat you like a servant in that uniform, and I don’t want any staff killed for that mistake,” Clarice explains. Ivy looks at me, and her shoulders sag.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

“It’s fine; I can just wear this, I guess. I will speak with the king later,” Ivy tells her. Clarice glances at the guard nervously, clearly thinking she will get into trouble. Dustin shrugs, and Clarice sighs, wiping a hand down her face.

“Very well, but you make sure you tell the king you want to help. I don’t want to be scolded for making you work,” Clarice tells her, and Ivy rocks on her back heels excitedly. My heart gives a flutter of excitement, knowing I can spend the day with her.

“But what else is there to do except work?” Ivy asks, and she is right. It would be damn boring sitting in my room all day. I would rather work, and I know Ivy feels the same.

“Live,” Clarice answers, squeezing her shoulder gently and strolling off.

Ivy and I stare after her.

It’s late by the time Ivy’s guard finally speaks. “Ivy, the king, is looking for you; we really must go; he wants you back to your chambers,” he says. Ivy’s shoulders drop, and she presses her lips together, wanting to stay but I shoo her away.

“Go, maybe the king will let you hang out with me while I work tomorrow,” I tell her, and she sighs.

“I will ask. Hopefully, he will say yes. He did say he had to go away tomorrow, so I don’t see the harm in it,” she says, a glimmer of hope in her eyes as she glances at Dustin.



As Ivy leaves, I feel a pang of sadness, but it's quickly overshadowed by the anticipation of what she told me. I turn back to my chores, determined to finish them quickly.

I'm nearly done when Gannon appears, sticking his head into the sitting room in the guard quarters where I'm dusting.

"Abbie?" he says, his voice deep and rough. I turn to face him, my heart racing as I wonder what he wants. He waggles his finger at me to come to him, and I wander over, my stomach fluttering with nerves, wondering if I did something wrong or if he wanted me to clean something.

As I approach him, I notice the way the light from the room casts a soft glow on his features, highlighting the strong lines on his face and the intensity in his eyes. He reaches out, gently taking my hand in his.

"You didn't take your presents," he states, his voice gentle yet firm as he walks me to his room.

The air between us is heavy with anticipation, and I can't help but chew my lip nervously.

I glance up at him, and I'm met with his piercing gaze.

He sighs, his breath warm against my skin as he pushes his door open, revealing the gifts he bought me, still sitting untouched in the center of his bed.

"Did you not like them? Are they the wrong ones?" he asks me, his eyes filled with concern. I'm struck by the earnestness in his voice, and I quickly shake my head.

"I can change them," he offers, his tone gentle and reassuring.

“No, no, it’s not that, I just...you shouldn’t.” I suck in a breath when Liam waltzes into the room, his footsteps light and graceful as he falls onto Gannon’s bed. He props his arm behind his head and smiles slyly, an impish glint in his eyes. Gannon shakes his head at him but turns back to face me.

“What is it, Abbie?” Gannon asks, his eyes searching mine for the answer. I tear my gaze from Liam, my heart racing as I try to find the words.

“You shouldn’t buy gifts for a servant, Gamma,” I tell him, using his title since Liam is around.

“Gannon, not Gamma. You don’t address me by title. We have been over this. And why can’t I, Abbie?”

“Because it is wrong,” I tell him, feeling the weight of their stares on me. He looks at me as if I am absurd, his brow furrowing in confusion.

“Wrong, how?” he asks, his voice soft and patient. I feel Liam’s eyes on the side of my face, his presence adding to the tension in the room, making me even more nervous as he watches us.

“It’s just a gift,” Liam chimes in, his voice light and teasing.

“Yes, but servants don’t get gifts, not for free,” I tell him, my voice wavering slightly.

“What do you mean? That is what a gift is, or have I been doing gifts wrong all this time? Gannon? I don’t understand this one; I bought Dustin some boxers with my face on them the other day.

Maybe I should have asked for something in return,” he chuckles, his laughter filling the room like a warm embrace.

“Liam, give me a moment, geez, go annoy Dustin,” Gannon says, his voice firm but not unkind.

“Gladly, I might be able to con him into sucking my dick,” Liam says, sending me a wink. I cringe at his vulgar words, feeling warth creep up my cheeks. Liam gets up and pats Gannon on the back as he passes.

“Don’t forget you leave early tomorrow,” Liam reminds him.

“And yes, I can cover your shift if you want to spend time with Abbie,” he calls over his shoulder as he walks out, leaving Gannon and me alone in the room.

Gannon turns his attention back to the presents he bought, sitting on the edge of the bed.

The soft rustling of the bags seems to fill the room, and I can’t help but watch him, his every movement deliberate and graceful.

He reaches over and grips my hand, his touch warm and comforting.

“Dustin told me earlier that Ivy told you the king wants to change her and make her his mate?” Gannon says, his voice low and serious.

I nod, my stomach twisting with a mixture of fear and excitement at the thought.

“What if I said I wanted to do the same with you?” I can’t help but chuckle at his question, my laughter tinged with nervous energy.

“You barely know me,” I respond, attempting to hide the uncertainty in my voice.

“And the king barely knows Ivy, Abbie. It is no different, not really, anyway,”

Gannon counters, his tone soft and persuasive.

“But what if you find your mate?”

“I won’t and it wouldn’t matter even if I did.”

“Why would you want me, though?” I ask, my heart pounding in my chest at the unexpected revelation. He scratches the back of his neck nervously, his eyes locked on mine.

“Because I like you. Why else?” he says, a hint of vulnerability creeping into his voice.

“Liking someone and loving them are two different things.”

“We could learn to love each other, Abbie. We would have all the time in the world,” he says, reaching forward and tugging me between his legs. He wraps his arms around my waist and gazes at me intently. Even sitting face to face, his height is imposing.

“Will you think about it?” he asks, his voice a gentle whisper. I chew my lip, my mind racing. Ivy did tell me Gannon would change me, and I do like him, but the thought of taking such a leap is daunting.

“But what if I find my mate?” I ask him, my voice barely audible. He sighs, a hint of sadness in his eyes.

“Well, I am hoping you don’t, but if you did, and you wanted to be with them, I would let you go if that is what you wanted.” I nod, my heart aching at the thought of leaving Gannon behind. He lets me go, turning back to the bags filled with presents.

“Please take your gifts, Abbie. I got them for you, and I expect nothing in return. I just wanted to see you smile,” he says, his voice warm and sincere. I can’t help but smile at his words, my cheeks heating when he reaches up, brushing my cheek with his hand.

“There it is,” he says, a gentle smile playing on his lips before cupping my face in his hand.

“I have to go with the king tomorrow to your old pack,” he says, switching the subject.

“You’re going back?” I ask him, my voice thick with emotion. He nods, his eyes filled with determination.

“I have a bit of a strange request to ask, and you can say no if you like,” he says, his voice tentative.

I furrow my brows, curiosity piqued. “What is it?”

“Can I count how many lashes are on your back? The king wants to know. He counted Ivy’s while she slept, but he wants to punish Mrs. Daley, and he needs to know what charges to bring against her,” Gannon tells me, his voice laced with anger.

“He wants to punish Mrs. Daley?” I ask, shock registering in my voice. She has always been this figure who I believed could never be punished.

“You and Ivy never should have been treated like that. I have counted the ones on the back of your legs,” he says, looking away as if he did something wrong.

“But can I count the ones on your back? As I said, you can say no?”

I swallow hard. It's not like he hasn't seen my back before or my butt. I chew my lip, considering his request.

"You just want to count them, that's it?" I ask, my voice wavering yet trusting Gannon.

"That is all, Abbie," he says, sincerity shining in his eyes. The thought of Mrs. Daley being held accountable for her actions is thrilling, and despite my reservations, I nod.

Gannon taps my thighs, gets up, closes the door, and returns to sit on the bed.

Turning around, I unbutton my dress before pulling my arms out and only leaving my waist covered.

Gannon pulls me to sit between his legs, and I feel his fingers tracing my skin gently.

His touch sends shivers down my spine, and my face flushes when I feel his lips press tenderly against my shoulder.

"Thank you, Abbie," he whispers, and I turn my face to look at him. He helps me pull my arms back into my dress before turning me. I stand to help. When I button the last one, his hand bunches my dress on my hip as he tugs me closer.

"I promise she will be punished," he whispers, and I nod.

Any punishment was good enough for me. She needed to know the error of her ways, and I wished death upon her.

What she let the butcher do would forever haunt me; bruises and lashes heal, yet what he did scarred my mind, and she allowed it. Tainted my dreams and haunted my soul.

“Can you check on the kids?”

“I can try if the king allows it. We will be in a time crunch. The king wants to get back so he can change Ivy and take her as his mate,” he tells me, and I sigh. I would love to know how my Tyson is, but if the king is genuinely going to punish her, maybe that would make her change her ways.

“What’s wrong?” Gannon asks, genuine concern in his voice.

“Nothing, I just worry about the children, especially the younger ones,” I admit. Gannon brushes his knuckles across my cheek, his touch gentle and reassuring.

“Maybe one day I can take you back to see them,” he says, and I smile, hope kindling in my heart.

“Really?” I ask before my smile fades. What if I run into the butcher? Panic begins to rise within me. I can’t go back. What if he takes me, keeps me like he always said he would?

“If that is what you want,” Gannon says, his voice steady and supportive. My skin itches at the thought of the butcher, and I scratch the back of my neck, only for Gannon to capture my hand.

“One day, you will tell me what makes you so nervous,” he says, his eyes searching mine as he kisses my fingers.

“Maybe one day,” I tell him, a soft smile playing on my lips as he tilts his head to the side, observing me.

I observe him back when he leans in, and I hold my breath, wondering what he will do when his lips brush mine softly.

I gasp at the sensation, and he tugs me closer, yet he doesn't deepen the kiss or press for more.

When he goes to pull away, I gather my courage.

It's just a kiss, I tell myself, trying to remind myself I like Gannon.

So I kiss him back. I feel him smile against my lips before feeling his tongue sweep across my bottom lip, not forcibly.

He is seeing if I will invite him in, and I do.

My lips part when his hand moves to the nape of my neck.

His fingers massage the back of my neck before tangling in my hair.

His tongue brushes mine, and his taste overwhelms me as I kiss him back.

When I eventually pull away from him, he sucks on my bottom lip but allows me space, and my face flames at what I let him do. Yet I like kissing him, and he appears to like it, too, because he smiles at me before pecking my cheek.

"I have work to do, but can I come to see you later?" he asks, and I nod, my heart pounding as I wonder if more kissing would be involved. I turn to walk out when he grabs my hand and tugs me back. He nods to my presents.

"Draw me something," he says, his voice gentle and expectant.

I chew the inside of my lip, feeling a mix of excitement and nervousness.

I nod, accepting the gift before rushing out, and I hear him chuckle as I close the



door.

I race back to my room and shut the door, hearing him leave a few moments later.

As I settle down in my room, I open the gifts Gannon has given me.

The art supplies he has chosen are of excellent quality, making me appreciate his thoughtfulness even more.

I let my fingers glide over the smooth, cold surface of the sketchpad, feeling the potential of the empty pages, waiting to be filled with my thoughts and emotions.

I take a deep breath and start drawing, something I haven't done in ages.

The world around me fades away, leaving only the scratching sound of the pencil on paper.

My hand moves with a life of its own, guided by my heart and memories, and I find myself pouring all of my feelings and experiences onto the paper.

Time seems to stand still as I work on the drawing, completely immersed in the process. It isn't until I put the finishing touches on the piece that I realize how much time has passed. I take a step back to look at one of my creations, a mix of nervousness and vulnerability fills my chest.

The drawing depicts Gannon and me standing under a tree, our fingers intertwined.

The sun filters through the leaves, casting a warm golden light over us.

Our expressions convey happiness, and I can't help but feel a twinge of longing for the future we might have together.

But that nagging voice reminds me. I am a rogue; he will see that, turn me away, and toss me aside.

Rogues don't deserve kindness. I'm about to tear the paper up when I hear footsteps approaching my door; I quickly hide the drawing in my sketchpad and turn to face the door.

Gannon walks in, his eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"Did you draw something?" he asks, his voice filled with curiosity and excitement.

I chew my lip, and he tilts his head to the side.

His eyes go to my fingers and the pastels that cover them.

"Will you show me?" he asks.

I hesitate for a moment, feeling vulnerable as I hand him the sketchpad. He flips through the pages until he finds the drawing I just completed. His eyes widen as he takes in the image before him, and I watch as a slow smile spreads across his face.

"This is beautiful, Abbie," he says softly, his voice filled with emotion.

"Thank you." He carefully closes the sketchpad and hands it back to me, his eyes never leaving mine.

As we stand there, our hands touching, I can't help but feel hope and warmth in my heart.

### THE NEXT DAY

The nauseating tension that has been building since we left the castle doesn't let up, and I know Kyson feels it, too. He hasn't stopped glancing out the car window or fidgeting with his cuffs. Leaving Ivy behind has him more on edge than usual, though he tries to mask it.

We're an hour into the drive now, the road twisting through thick forested terrain. I grip the wheel tightly, focusing on the curves, while the king stares out at the passing scenery. His silence is heavy, filled with thoughts he hasn't voiced yet, but I know his mind is on Ivy. It always is.

Damian is back at the castle, keeping an eye on her and ensuring her safety while Kyson and I deal with this trip.

The meeting with Alpha Dean is important, especially if it sheds light on Ivy's lineage, but the king's patience is wearing thin.

He's itching to return to her just as I am itching to return to Abbie.

I glance at him in the mirror. He's leaning back in his seat, one hand on his temple, the other tapping against his thigh. I know that look. He's already calculating the fastest way to finish this meeting and get back.

"She'll be fine, Kyson," I say, breaking the silence.

He huffs but doesn't respond, his jaw tightening.

“Damian will keep her safe,” I add. “You know he’d throw himself in front of an army if it meant protecting her.”

Kyson finally speaks, his voice low. “It’s not just her safety. I hate leaving her.”

I nod, understanding better than most what he means. Since finding his mate, the king has been calmer, more focused—when he’s with her, at least. But when she’s out of his sight, that calm shatters, and the predator in him surfaces.

We drive in silence for a while, the rhythmic hum of the tires filling the void.

My thoughts wander to the reason for this trip.

Alpha Dean claims to have found something about Ivy’s parents—something alarming.

I’m not sure what he means, but I don’t like the sound of it.

But I also want to learn more about Abbie.

Find out where she came from and how she and Ivy ended up together.

Their bond is unshakeable. Eerie in a sense I’ve never seen friends form a bond like that but they have; they fret without each other, always worried about the other but never themselves.

And then there’s Mrs. Daley, the headmistress from the orphanage.

That woman has been on my radar since the day I learned about the scars on the girls’ backs. Kyson’s, too. He hasn’t said it outright, but I know he’s planning to deal with her personally. Her days of terrorizing innocent children are over.

“Do you know what Alpha Dean wants to see me for?” Kyson asks, breaking my train of thought.

“No idea,” I reply. “I called him this morning, and all he said was that it’s about her parents. He seemed... cagey, though. Whatever it is, he didn’t want to discuss it over the phone.”

Kyson nods, his brow furrowing. “Anything on the children yet?”

I know he’s talking about the other rogues from the orphanage, the ones who vanished without a trace.

“Not yet,” I say. “But I think it has something to do with that no-good son of his.” My tone darkens as I think about Alpha Dean’s son.

Alpha Brock. Trouble seems to follow that man wherever he goes.

Kyson grunts in acknowledgment but doesn’t press further. Instead, his gaze shifts back out the window, and I know his thoughts are on Ivy again when I feel the mindlink open; he questions Damian about her.

“She’s helping rake leaves in the garden,” Damian’s voice echoes through the mindlink, pulling me back to the present.

I feel Kyson’s energy shift instantly, his protective instincts flaring. He growls softly. “Why is she working? She’s spent her entire life working, and now, when she has the freedom to do as she pleases, she’s still acting like a servant.”

I suppress a smile at his frustration. Ivy’s habit of falling back into work isn’t surprising, but it clearly grates on Kyson’s nerves.

“Make sure she’s in bed by eight,” Kyson orders Damian. “She needs to sleep before tomorrow night.”

Damian’s response is calm, as always. “I was going to tell her to come in soon, anyway. It’s getting overcast. How far out are you now?”

“An hour,” Kyson replies before cutting the link.

I glance at him briefly. “You going to be able to keep it together during this meeting?” I ask, half-teasing.

His lips twitch, but his expression remains serious. “I want answers, Gannon. If Alpha Dean knows something about her parents or her past, I want to know everything.”

I nod, my hands tightening on the wheel. “You’ll get them, Kyson. And after that, we’ll deal with Mrs. Daley.”

A dark smile plays on his lips. “I plan to do more than deal with her. That woman’s back will bear the same scars she gave my mate. If I’m merciful, I might let her live, but I make no promises.”

His tone is calm, but the menace behind his words is unmistakable. I smirk, knowing he means every word. “I called ahead,” I tell him. “Figured you’d want a word with her. The Alpha has her strung up in the town square, waiting for you.”

Kyson’s eyes flicker with satisfaction. “Good.”

The rest of the drive passes in tense silence, both of us lost in our thoughts.

As much as I want to deal with these issues swiftly, I know Kyson is counting the

minutes until he can return to Ivy, while I'm counting mine down to get back to Abbie.

When we finally reach the edge of Alpha Dean's territory, I slow the car, my senses sharpening as we approach the gate.

The guards step forward, recognizing the king instantly, and wave us through.

Kyson's demeanor shifts the moment we enter the pack's territory.

His usual commanding presence takes on an edge of coldness and his aura promises violence.

Whatever Alpha Dean has to say, I know Kyson will handle it swiftly.

so Alpha Dean better have a good excuse for dragging us here or Kyson may just lose it.

The sun dips low in the sky as we near the decrepit little town where the king first discovered his mate.

I hate this place. It reeks of decay, neglect.

The buildings lean precariously, their facades cracked and crumbling, while the streets are littered with broken signs and scattered debris.

It's a cesspool of despair, a fitting backdrop for the events that led to Abbie's suffering.

As we pull into the town square, my gaze immediately lands on Mrs. Daley, tied to a wooden post in the center.

Her bony wrists are bound tightly above her head, and she shivers as the cold wind tears through her tattered clothing.

Gone is the proud, tyrannical woman who terrorized Ivy and Abbie.

In her place is a trembling, pitiful creature, her eyes darting around in desperation.

The sight stirs no pity in me. If anything, her fear only fuels the dark satisfaction brewing in my chest knowing I'll most likely get to deal with her. I've waited for this moment since the day I learned what she did to those girls, and now, justice will finally be served.

Alpha Dean and his son, Brock, wait nearby.

Dean steps forward to greet the king, extending a hand, while Brock hangs back, his head bowed submissively.

I can smell the fear rolling off him, sour and thick.

He knows something, I think to myself, but that will come later.

Right now, my focus is on the trembling woman before me.

"Tied and waiting, as you requested, My King," Alpha Dean says cautiously. "May I ask what she did wrong?"

Mrs. Daley's whimpering grows louder, her wild eyes pleading with the Alpha.

Kyson's voice is icy as he replies, "I think the question is what she did right because there is no reasoning that could explain why you would leave a cruel, spiteful woman in charge of raising innocent children," Kyson tells the Alpha, his tone icy and



unyielding.

Dean pales but nods slowly. “Right, of course. I can see to her punishment if I know what she did wrong,” he stammers, casting a wary glance at his son. Brock’s guilt is written all over his face.

“Punishment is already decided, Alpha. I wanted to do it myself, but Gannon has volunteered so that we could get this over with quickly. He even brought his own whip.”

I step forward, uncoiling the leather whip from the back seat. Mrs. Daley’s face drains of color, and she thrashes against her restraints, her panicked cries echoing through the square.

“How many lashings did we count on the girls’ backs?” Kyson asks, his voice calm but lethal.

“Seventy on Abbie’s,” I reply coldly. “And at least one hundred thirty-five on Ivy’s, though many of their scars overlap, so the true number is likely higher.”

“My King, 200 lashes, she won’t be able to stand. She couldn’t possibly heal fast enough,” Alpha Dean interjects, his voice laced with unease. Mrs. Daley’s pleading eyes meet theirs pleadingly, but I remain unmoved. It’s not like Abbie and Ivy were ever able to heal.

“Quite right, we can’t have that,” the king muses.

The Alpha lets out a breath, seemingly relieved. While Kyson turns to me, his voice cold and firm.

“Double it; I don’t want her standing at all.”

The woman screams and thrashes against her restraints, her desperate cries echoing through the run-down town square. The two Alphas look at the king in horror.

“Shall we get this meeting over with?” The king motions toward the pack house. Both Alphas hurry ahead, their shoulders tense and their steps quick.

“Gannon?” the king calls out before climbing the steps inside.

“Yes, My King?” I respond, peering up at him.

“Make sure you swap arms. I wouldn’t want you to get a cramp or tire out.”

“Of course, My King,” I nod before stalking toward the cowering headmistress.

Mrs. Daley screams, her voice shrill and grating as she begs for mercy. Her pleas fall on deaf ears. I flick the whip in my hand, testing its weight, and step closer to her trembling form while Kyson disappears with Alpha Dean and Alpha Brock.

“Make sure you count for me, I wouldn’t want to miss one,” I tell her before the first crack of the whip slices through the air. It lands with a satisfying snap across her back, and her scream pierces the silence.

The small crowd that has gathered to watch, stare in horrified silence as the lashing continues, each strike drawing fresh blood and tearing through the thin fabric of her dress.

She thrashes and wails, her cries turning hoarse as the punishment drags on.

But no amount of screaming will erase the memories of what she did to those girls.

Her back is soon a crisscross of angry red welts, blood dripping down her sides, and

still, I don't stop. Each strike is a catharsis—a release of the rage that has been simmering within me since the day I saw Abbie's back.

“Please, enough, I've had enough,” she whimpers, her voice barely above a whisper.

“You think this is enough?” I hiss at her, pausing for a moment to catch my breath and change arms. Kyson was right because this shit is tiring. “You think this even comes close to what you put them through?”

Mrs. Daley sobs, her body sagging against the ropes. She can't answer me, but I don't expect her to. She deserves worse than this, but this will have to suffice. For now, I think as I bring down the whip on her back.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

All day Ivy and I work around the castle.

Clarice is in an excitable mood, and the place seems to buzz with energy.

Clarice even let me choose my own chores halfway through the day, as long as I kept Ivy away from the kitchen area.

I thought the request a little odd, but agreed, so we spent it outside raking while throwing the leaves at each other.

It was the most fun, and even Peter and the gardener joined in for a little bit before Damian scolded them and told them to both get back to work.

Both Ivy's guard and Damian followed Ivy like they were her shadow, but even Dustin and Beta Damian joined when we had our leaf fight after Peter left.

It was great spending the day with Ivy. The day was very relaxed, but like everything, it eventually came to an end when Beta Damian called out to Ivy.

"My Queen, it is time to go in. I think a storm is coming, and it is best you come inside before it rains," he states, turning his attention to her.

"Just a while longer, please?" Ivy begs him, but he shakes his head.

Looking to the sky, I notice the clouds rolling in, and it did indeed look like a storm is approaching.

Even the wind has picked up, blowing the leaves around the garden area.

Thunder sounds in the distance and a few streaks of lightning.

“I’m sorry, My Queen, but I must insist. The king wants you in bed by 8 PM,” Beta Damian tells hers. Ivy looks a little disappointed but knows she can’t go against the king.

“Fine, but stop calling me your queen,” Ivy says. Damian snorts and clicks his tongue.

“As you wish,” he says, giving her a nod.

Ivy and I say goodbye, and I no longer know what to do with myself. I join the other servants for dinner. After dinner, though, Clarice is still buzzing with excitement, and I watch as she hums excitedly.

When the servants leave to go about their duties, I go to see if there is anything I can help with, and she shakes her head.

“No, Abbie. Maybe go see if the cleaner needs help,” she offers, and I wander off, yet they all tell me no. It is too early for bed, and I can’t see Ivy, so I wander back to Clarice, who quickly puts a sheet over whatever it is she is working on.

“Clarice?” I ask as she makes herself busy. Whatever she is working on is pretty big. Clarice sighs.

“I do need a little help actually, but you must promise not to tell Ivy. It is a surprise,” Clarice says and I beam; a surprise for Ivy? I bounce on my heels.

“The king asked me to make a cake for her birthday tomorrow,”

“Wait, her birthday isn’t for a few more weeks.”

Clarice shakes her head. “No, she is showing signs of shifting earlier than anticipated. The king noticed. We believe her birthday is tomorrow, or maybe the next day, but the king wants to throw a party for her tomorrow when he returns.”

My eyes light up. Ivy and I have never had a party before, and I’m excited to help. Ivy, I know she will love it.

“Promise not to tell Ivy. I don’t want her surprise ruined,” Clarice asks.

“I promise; I can’t wait to see her face,” I tell her, and Clarice smiles.

“Neither can I. I have been working on this cake all day, and I am making petals for edible flowers, so you can help if you want, we have to work on the decorations next.” I nod eagerly, watching as she finishes up with this part of the cake.

I would do anything to help bring a smile to Ivy’s face.

Once done, I follow Clarice to the store room.

“Abbie, grab those ribbons and come with me,” Clarice calls, her arms laden with a bundle of fabric. I quickly do as she asks, following her out of the kitchen and down the hall toward the ballroom.

When we step inside, I gasp. The room has been transformed into something straight out of a fairy tale.

The chandeliers sparkle, their crystals catching the afternoon sunlight and casting tiny rainbows across the room.

Long, flowing drapes in deep blue and silver—the king’s colors—are hung along the walls, and the tables are covered in pristine white cloths adorned with ornate candelabras and glittering silverware.

“All this for her birthday?” I ask, unable to keep the awe out of my voice.

Clarice smiles knowingly. “Yes, for Ivy’s birthday tomorrow. The king wanted something special, and I intend to deliver.”

My heart swells at the thought. Ivy deserves this—every bit of it. After everything she’s been through, she deserves to feel cherished and celebrated.

“Now,” Clarice continues, handing me a stack of silver ribbons, “start tying these around the chair backs. I’ll check on the cake.”

At the mention of the cake, my excitement doubles.

Birthdays were never celebrated at the orphanage—not for us, anyway.

Mrs. Daley made sure of that. The children might have gotten a small cake if they were lucky, but Ivy and I were usually stuck in the kitchen making it, only to watch it disappear without getting so much as a crumb.

As I tie the ribbons, I can’t help but imagine what kind of cake Clarice has in mind. Knowing her, it will be exquisite. She never does anything halfway.

Once I finish with the ribbons, I hurry back to the kitchen to find Clarice standing over a work of art.

The cake is enormous, at least three tiers high, each layer covered in smooth fondant the color of a winter morning—soft blues and whites with delicate silver accents.

Intricate sugar flowers cascade down the sides, their petals so realistic I almost expect them to flutter in the breeze.

Tiny edible pearls are scattered across the cake like drops of dew, and at the very top is a delicate crown sculpted entirely from chocolate, dusted with edible silver to make it gleam.

My breath catches as I take it all in. “Clarice,” I whisper, “it’s beautiful.”

She beams, clearly pleased with my reaction. “It’s for Ivy. She deserves to feel like a queen on her special day.”

I nod, blinking back tears. “She’s never had a birthday cake before. Mrs. Daley never let us celebrate.”

Clarice’s face softens, and she reaches out to squeeze my shoulder. “Well, tomorrow she’ll have this one. And I want you to make sure you have a slice, too. A big one.”

I grin, my excitement bubbling over. “I’ll have two slices,” I say, and Clarice laughs.

The rest of the day is spent putting the final touches on the ballroom.

Clarice has me help arrange the flowers—elegant arrangements of white lilies, blue hydrangeas, and silver-tipped roses—and set out trays to place the delicate pastries and finger foods on.

The scent of freshly baked bread and sugary sweets fills the air, and I can’t stop myself from sneaking a few stolen bites when Clarice isn’t looking.

By the time the preparations are done, the ballroom looks like a dream.



Candles flicker softly on the tables, their light reflected in the polished silverware and crystal glasses.

The cake sits on its own table in the center of the room, its crown glinting in the light.

It's perfect, and I can't wait to see Ivy's reaction.

As I step back to admire our work, Clarice places a hand on her hip, surveying the room with a satisfied smile. "That'll do," she says. "Now, all we need is the guest of honor and I got a few cupcakes to finish for the bottom of the cake."

"Ivy's going to love this," I say, unable to contain my excitement.

Clarice chuckles. "She'd better. Otherwise, I'll have a bone to pick with her."

We share a laugh, and for the first time in a long while, I feel a sense of hope. Tomorrow will be Ivy's day, and I'll make sure she knows just how loved and celebrated she is. If anyone deserves a moment of happiness, it's her. And I'll be there to make sure it happens.

So we set to work making the last of the cupcakes late into the night.

Clarice even lets me scrape the icing with a spoon and eat while she puts on the last finishing touches. I can't wait to see the look on Ivy's face when she sees it. We have made matching cupcakes that sit along the different tiers.

When we are finally finished with the cake, I help decorate the ballroom, and by the time I climb into bed, I'm exhausted but excited for what tomorrow will bring.

I'm also excited to see Gannon. Buzzing with excitement, I find it impossible to sleep, so I pull the sketch pad and pencils.

I'm so absorbed in my drawing I don't realized it is 1 AM when Dustin knocks on my door.

He pushes the door open just as I close the sketch pad.

I was drawing a picture of Gannon's Lycan side.

"Beta Damian requests your presence in the king's quarters," he tells me, and I jump to my feet.

"Is Ivy okay?" I ask in a panic. However, Dustin says nothing, just holds the door open and nods for me to follow him.

I don't even bother to put my shoes on, instead racing after him to the king's quarters.

Suddenly I hear Ivy crying out from behind the door.

I burst through the door and stop dead in my tracks when I find her writhing on the bed holding her tummy.

Damian hovers nearby, speaking softly to her and trying to calm her down.

"What's wrong with her?" I ask, rushing to her side, but I don't think she realizes I'm here as I caress her hair away from her face.

"She is fretting for the king," Damian tells me.

"Fretting?" I ask, staring between Dustin and Beta Damian, who both nod.

I have no idea what they were talking about, yet it is apparent Ivy is in pain.

I try to soothe her and for a while, she calms as I spoon her.

Eventually her breathing evens out and we fall asleep after she cries herself to sleep.

It isn't until the early hours of the morning when I feel hands scoop me up. I woke to find Liam picking me up.

“Go back to sleep,” he whispers, and I glance around and yawn. “Is Gannon back yet?” I ask him and he purrs before staring down at me. “Go back to sleep,” he orders and my eyes snap shut, and I am sucked under only to awaken in Gannon's bed around lunch time.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

I count every strike against the old hag's back, watching as she hangs limp in the restraints.

My eyes wander to the pack house from which the king has yet to emerge.

I furrow my brows, glancing around at the guards.

I am so preoccupied with dealing with Mrs. Daley I don't realize the king is still inside the pack house.

I wipe my hands on my jeans, which are drenched in blood from the back spray from off the whip. "Is he still in there?" I ask one of the men standing guard by the doors. He nods.

"Yes, Gamma, we tried to go in, but he told us not to disturb him," the man speaks, and I raise an eyebrow at him as I climb the steps before shoving the rickety old door in. Alpha Dean and Alpha Brock are sitting on the steps in the hallway.

"Where is the king?" I ask before Alpha Dean lifts a shaking finger and points toward the basement door.

"He told us to get out and wait up here," Alpha Dean says, and by how pale he is, something has scared the life out of the old man. As I open the door, I can hear the king muttering, and I curse at myself for leaving him on his own.

Trudging down the steps, I can tell he isn't in the right state of mind because of his aura, which makes my knees shake and goosebumps raise every hair on my body.

That is proven more the moment my feet touch the concrete floor, and I peer over at him where he stands by a table in the center of the dusty old room.

The place is floor-to-ceiling high in boxes and files.

His entire body tenses as he senses the incoming intruder. Everyone is petrified of this side of the king. The monster that lurks beneath the skin of this man. In this form, he is a predator—the biggest predator—a lethal beast, and he shows it within seconds of me spotting him.

One minute, he is standing by the table under the hanging light. The next, his hands grip my shirt's front, and I am airborne as he tosses me. The air fizzles in my lungs as I hit a stack of boxes.

“Kyson!” I choke as his fist connects with my head. I growl before it's cut off by his hands around my throat. I grip his wrists, only for him to lift and slam me onto the table that he was standing over when I came down here.

Damian usually deals with him when he is in fits of rage, and usually, the king keeps this part of him locked up tight until it explodes as it has now.

“Kyson!” I choke out as his grip tightens; his eyes are black and plagued with the horrors of his past, where he couldn't protect his sister—a past full of bloodshed and unimaginable horrors.

A place he is currently trapped in, like the nightmares that plague him, and I have yet to figure out what has triggered him.

I tilt my head to the side just as his fist comes down on the table before punching him in the ribs.

His grip never wavers as he hits me again, and I hear the wood crack as my head smashes back against the table.

He will forgive me because I'm not taking a pounding from him, and he wants to burn off some anger.

He raises his clawed fist again, and I shift under his grip, his tight grip making the transition painful as my neck elongates and the bones in my face break and move, my jaws lock around his fist catching it. I jam my claws in his ribs.

He grunts, stunned by the sudden pain he feels, that momentary distraction making his grip on my throat lessen, and my claws slip free of him as he staggers back, allowing me to roll off the table. Only this time, I am ready and prepared for his attack.

By the time he comes back to his senses, I don't think an inch of either of us isn't torn, scratched, or bruised. His anger diminishes as his eyes settle on me, the king returning, and, damn, next time, Damian is going with him. Every part of me aches and stings.

The king gasps, blinking. His eyes return to normal as he sits up from where I have tossed him off. The basement is destroyed, and I take comfort in knowing I won't be cleaning it.

"Gannon?"

"My King," I reply, baring my neck to him, hoping not to set him off again. We both breathe heavily, and I feel every bit of the 411 years I have spent on this earth.

"You want to tell me what that was about?" I ask him, trying to catch my breath as he shifts back.

He leans back against the bench and crooked shelf, bracing his arms on his knees.

I still don't shift back, not yet. He is unpredictable at the best of times, an emotional, ticking time bomb running off pure instinct.

He clutches his hair in his fists, and I leave the question instead of getting up and upturning what is left of the table, the papers scattered across the floor.

I am nearly tempted to drag Alpha Dean down here when he doesn't answer.

I spot some photographs. One of the women I barely recognize because she is ripped apart, but the two orphanage photos of the two little girls I recognize instantly.

"This has something to do with Ivy?"

"She belongs to that monster," Kyson breathes, and I glance over my shoulder to find him resting his head back on the shelf and staring at the swinging light.

I turn back to the paperwork, picking up scattered pieces and trying to figure out his words when I spot a photo of a woman I recognize to be Marrissa Talbot, the woman responsible for killing his sister.

It doesn't take long before I realize what he means: Marrissa is Ivy's mother.

"Fuck!" I curse, knowing full well what that woman's crimes were.

"I can't be with her, not after knowing who mothered her."

"We don't know for certain," I mutter, picking up more files only to stumble across Abbie's. I stack the documents in a pile.

“I’m certain she isn’t her mother, Kyson. How you could even entertain the idea of them being the same is beyond me. Besides, that girl was a child and not part of her mother’s crimes if she is, in fact, her daughter,” I tell him.

“And if she is, what do I do with her?” Kyson asks me.

“Does it matter? She is your mate!” I tell him while gathering all the documents.

“I won’t have a monster for a mate!”

“Ivy is not her mother! You can’t blame her for the crimes of her mother. She was just a child then.”

“I can’t punish her mother for her crimes, yet she left behind a daughter who I can!” he growls before storming out of the basement.

“Fuck!” I curse, gathering everything and moving after him. This is not going to end well, I think, feeling my ability to handle this situation slowly slipping away.

The dingy basement is destroyed, as if someone has set off a bomb downstairs.

Shaking my head at the mess, I follow after the king.

I hear him barking orders at his men, demanding to leave.

I turn to Alpha Dean as he rises from where he still sits on the steps.

“Couldn’t you have told us this over the phone or faxed this crap?”

” I ask, shaking it in the jerk’s face. He says nothing, and I glance at his pathetic son.



“You’ll need to retrieve a broom,” I tell him.

If it were me, I would lock the door and declare the basement no longer exists, as there’s probably no fixing this place.

Kyson is still arguing with his men about hurrying and securing the place.

I better get up there, I think, knowing members of his guard may not be as prepared to deal with him in this state.

He is impatient and wants to leave, but we have protocols to follow before that is possible.

I snap my fingers at the driver, who jumps into the front seat.

Glancing around at the men, I say, “Forget it. Mark, go ahead of us. We leave now unless you want him tearing this pack apart.” The man runs to one of the cars.

The king isn’t going to wait, and I sure as hell don’t feel like chasing him on foot if he decides to run out his anger.

Climbing into the car, I slide across the seat and shut the door.

The car takes off immediately, and the king looks for clothes.

After dropping the documents on the seat, I lean forward and lift the bench seat with the storage underneath.

I toss him some clothes, taking a pair of shorts and a tank top out for myself.

I pull them on, jerking sideways as the limo goes around corners before tugging the

shirt over my head.

The king's aura is suffocating in the small space, and Damian will kill me when he finds out, but he isn't the one sitting with him.

So, I reach into the fridge and pull out a liquor bottle.

I try to hand him a glass, but he twists the cap off and puts the bottle to his lips before I can.

Liquor dribbles down his chin, and he pulls the bottle from his lips, wiping his face on the back of his hand, and he sighs.

We all know he is an alcoholic. He has been since his sister died, and right now, I'm not helping the issue, but I can handle him drunk; it takes the edge of.

I don't feel like going round two with him right now, and it sure as hell won't be the first or the last time I watch him find himself at the bottom of a bottle or two.

Halfway through the third bottle, he passes out drunk.

It is a long drive back, and I am relieved to watch his eyes grow heavier before his head slumps forward.

Sighing, I take the bottle from his grip and sit beside the two empty ones.

I tap on the screen between the driver and me, causing the driver to roll down the window.

"He's passed out?" the driver asks, sounding as relieved as I feel. Toward the end, his aura makes me queasy, so I know he feels the same. "Thank God!" he answers when

I see his eyes dart to the mirror.

We chat a bit, and he pulls over briefly, allowing the cars behind us to catch up and drive ahead while I hop out for a smoke.

I retrieve a blanket from the trunk, and the driver goes in, tucking the king in like a child.

Usually, that is done by Damian, but today, I task the driver, Bill, with it.

He always feels regret the days after or embarrassment, but I have a feeling this won't be the last of his anger.

I briefly wonder if I should mindlink Damian to warn him of the storm that's coming their way.

I shudder to think what's going to happen next.

The driver hops back in just as three cars pull up behind us, which now travel ahead of us.

I toss the last of my smoke, climbing back in with the king. Retrieving the files, I decide to go over them to find out more about Marrissa and take a peek at Abbie's files.

Not much is said about Marrissa because, by the looks of it, Alpha Dean isn't even aware of who his pack has killed.

Shaking my head, I set that file aside before pulling out Abbie's.

I open it to the orphanage photo, which must have been taken the night they were

found.

She looks petrified as she stares at the camera, her childlike eyes wide with fear and blood drenching her clothes.

Turning the page, I nearly drop the files when I find her parent's ID.

More importantly, when I find her mother's. That's impossible... I watched her die. I knew she was dead because I killed her myself.

I blink down at the picture; her face is exactly how I remember it, similar to Abbie's. The resemblance is uncanny, yet when I look at the name, it is wrong except for the last name.

This woman looks exactly like my mate. Identical, and now I figure out the allure I had to her. Liam is right. I can no longer deny it, and now I know why they share such a resemblance. I have a feeling the woman I am staring at in the photo is my mate's twin.

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

It takes a while for the king to wake up from his drunken stupor, and the moment he does, he reaches for the bottle.

I snatch it, needing him to come to his senses, needing his word that he won't hurt her.

Which, in turn, would hurt Abbie. He loves Ivy.

Everyone in the castle is aware of his affection for the girl, and for once, the castle and everyone in it can finally breathe.

We have all lived through his depression, his anger, and relentless torment.

I've watched him destroy himself more times than I can count.

None of us want to see him return to that dark place, and I also worry he will lose his kingdom if he can't see past who her parents were. This would no doubt divide people.

Kyson reaches forward to snatch the bottle, but I pull it away. "I'll give it to you. First, we need to talk," I tell him. He's far too drunk to cause me any real damage, his eyes bloodshot, and he reeks of liquor.

We still have a couple more hours left before we reach home, and he needs to either get his frustration and anger out now or talk it out.

Either one I'm okay with. Everyone back home has prayed for the miracle that the

king would find his mate, find someone to help tame him, and bring him back to us, and Ivy is doing that without even knowing it.

"Gannon!" Kyson growls, but I fold the bottle in my arms as I cross them over my chest. He sighs. "Fine, I'll talk but give me the damn bottle."

I raise an eyebrow at him.

"No, talk first, then, depending on how I feel about your mood afterward, I will decide whether I will return it," I tell him.

He presses his lips in a line. He could command me, but I know some piece of him knows he needs me to prevent him from letting the monster inside him out; his father would command anyone and everyone.

I don't remember holding a normal conversation with that man; it was best to steer clear of him and avoid his inevitable wrath.

Even though Kyson respected and loved his father, we all know that's why he hated commanding his men.

However, he seems to get a kick from using that and his calling on Ivy.

At first, it shocked Damian and me. We both put it down to it being a mate thing and his Alpha instincts to keep her under his control and safe.

One thing I like about him being king is he will give you a chance to answer, only using his command when needed or if you genuinely piss him off.

Rarely will you see him use it. He doesn't need to use his aura most of the time because he earned the respect of his people, and they answer truthfully, though

sometimes I wonder if he's a little too trusting.

He strives to be a better man than his father, who was a right prick, not that anyone told Kyson that. We dance the line when it comes to mentioning his father. Kyson had always looked up to him, despite him putting so much pressure on his son when he was alive that it almost killed him.

Growing up, he endured his father for his sister's sake, so she didn't have to.

Since her death, I've lost count of the number of times Damian, Liam, and I have had to pull him back from the brink of madness and stop him from ending it, and oh, how he has tried.

His sister was his to protect, and he believes he failed her because of Marrissa Talbot, and now he has a constant reminder in his mate.

If I had known this was what Alpha Dean wanted to speak to him about, Damian and I would have covered it up so he never found out.

This piece of information isn't needed and will only cause harm. Staring at Kyson, I can tell he wants to hurt Marrissa in the only way he can now, and that is through Ivy. It would've been better for everyone if he never learned of this.

"She isn't her mother," I tell him, and the low growl that leaves him makes me clench my jaw, feeling his aura wash over me.

"Alpha Dean could be lying," I continue when he says nothing.

"What reason would he have to lie?"

"Kyson, you know the pact you had us all make. It may have been years ago, but it

hasn't changed. We can't allow you to kill her. We will put you down if you try."

"I'm not stupid, Gannon, I know that. I wouldn't kill her, anyway."

I let out a breath of relief that is very short-lived.

"Because if I did, I would only be killing myself, and that means that bitch won in eradicating the royal families."

I groan. That's not the answer I wanted to hear.

"Let me double-check with Ivy. I don't want you near her until we are sure, and you need to speak to Damian about this. Her safety depends on it," I tell him. His eyes flicker, turning black as coal. His canines slip out.

"You won't hurt her," I tell him.

"Then what? I can't keep her, either; I don't fucking want to look at Marrissa's spawn every damn second."

"Well, you can't keep her locked up in the fucking dungeons; I won't allow it."

"It isn't your choice, she is my mate, and I am fucking king!" he bellows.

"Right now, the only thing you are is a fucking idiot. Now, you need to pull yourself together. You need to see past who her mother was!" I snap at him when he growls, leaning forward on his seat.

His claws slip out, cutting into the leather upholstery, and I curse, knowing what he wants. He wants to forget, wants to drown himself with the bottle, and clearly, I'm not getting anywhere and need to hope Damian gets through to him because I can't.



"Promise me you won't do anything stupid. Promise you won't destroy your bond."

"I can't promise that," he says, and I grit my teeth.

"At least promise to speak with Damian before you do anything you will regret, Kyson.

You're upset, and if you break the little trust you have built with her, you will regret it.

You don't want to harm her!" I don't finish.

He knows what will happen if he tries to kill her.

We all took the same pact—a pact he made us take after losing his sister.

A pact that ensures his queen's safety, no matter the circumstance.

If his future mate's life is in danger, we are to choose her over him, every time, no matter what.

If it comes to her and him, we take a bullet for her and let him die.

We chose to take that pact, and he begged us to take it.

That goes for him, too. He tries to kill her, and we will be forced to put him down to save her.

He can order us to stand down. Technically, until he marks her, the pact won't be in full swing, not until his mark lies on her neck.

Yet we will still honor it, knowing who she is to him.

"I promise I will speak to Damian first," Kyson tells me, and I suck in a breath of relief.

"You go straight to Damian. I want your word. You won't sneak off to your office. You won't look for her. Give me your word, Kyson, that you will go to him." He's furious, but he also knows I'm right. Damian is his calm place.

Those two are more like brothers who have some strange understanding.

Kyson is like my brother, but those two are synced oddly.

They are an extension of each other, being raised like brothers, enduring the same torment at the hands of Kyson's father.

Damian is also the only one who, if I can't talk him down, usually can.

"Fine, just give me the drink."

"I want to hear you say it."

"I will go straight to Damian, okay?"

I sigh before I relent and pass him the bottle.

He takes it, and I don't miss the tremble of his hands as he twists off the cap.

Usually, that only happens the few times we try to get him sober.

It never lasts long before we give up. His tremors are always terrible, and we hate

seeing him like that.

The king is an alcoholic, and everyone knows it, yet with Ivy, we see hope because it is apparent he tries not to drink himself into a stupor while with her.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

The kitchen is buzzing with excitement as Clarice and I finalize the last details for Ivy's surprise birthday celebration. The cake is a masterpiece, the ballroom looks like something out of a fairy tale, and everything feels perfect.

I smile, picturing Ivy's wide-eyed expression when she sees the towering cake covered in sugar flowers and topped with a chocolate crown. "She'll love it. This is her first real birthday celebration, you know?"

Clarice's smile falters, replaced by a look of sadness. "I still can't believe she never got to celebrate her birthday."

I shake my head. "Not even a little. Mrs. Daley never let us celebrate. Ivy and I used to bake cakes for the other kids at the orphanage, but we were never allowed to have any. This... this will be the first time she's celebrated her birthday properly."

Clarice presses a hand to her chest, looking more determined than ever. "Then we'll make sure it's unforgettable."

I'm about to respond when the sound of raised voices and heavy footsteps echoes through the hallway outside the kitchen. Clarice and I exchange a worried glance before stepping into the corridor to investigate what the commotion is.

When I spot Ivy being dragged toward the castle's front doors by two guards, my heart drops into my stomach. Blood is dripping from her hand, staining the floor in her wake, and her face is pale, her eyes wide with shock.

"Oh my gosh, Ivy!" I cry, rushing toward her. "What happened? What's going on?"

I grab her arm, but the guard hauling her away—Trey—doesn't stop. Clarice is right behind me, her hands flying to her mouth when she sees the state of Ivy's hand.

“Wait, stop! She's bleeding everywhere!” Clarice exclaims, her voice frantic. “Let me wrap her hand first!”

The guard doesn't even slow down. “I have orders to escort her out immediately.”

“What?” Clarice gasps, stepping in front of him. “Do you have any idea who this girl is? The king will have your head for this!”

Trey's expression hardens, and he glances at Clarice before answering. “The king was the one who gave the orders. She's no longer welcome in the castle.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. “What are you talking about? She's his mate!” I snap, grabbing Ivy's other arm.

Trey's jaw tightens. “Does his mark lay on her skin?” he counters coldly.

The question makes my blood run cold. Dustin, the other guard, steps forward, his face filled with regret as he takes the bandages from Clarice.

“I'll wrap her hand,” Dustin says quietly, his voice strained.

Clarice argues with Trey who is trying to drag her off.

“I'm sorry,” Trey replies, his tone clipped. “But my orders are clear. She's to be taken to the stables.”

“The stables?” Clarice echoes, her voice breaking.

I stare at Ivy, hoping for some kind of explanation, but she seems just as stunned as the rest of us. Her lips tremble, and tears brim in her eyes, but she doesn't say a word.

Clarice's hands tremble as she hands over the first-aid box. "At least let me wrap her hand properly," she pleads.

Dustin takes the bandages but shakes his head. "I'll do it. She has to go now."

Trey tugs Ivy toward the doors, and Clarice and I are left standing in stunned silence. "This can't be happening," I whisper, watching Ivy disappear down the corridor.

Clarice grips my arm tightly, her nails digging into my skin. "We have to talk to the king. This isn't right. What the heck happened while he was gone."

"But he gave the order," I whisper, my voice cracking. "Why would he do this to her? What did she do?"

"I don't know," Clarice says, her voice shaking with emotion. "But we're going to find out."

As the doors close behind Ivy, I feel a wave of anger and helplessness wash over me. Whatever happened, whatever she did—or didn't do—she doesn't deserve this. Ivy has been through enough.

"Don't worry, Abbie. I'm not letting this go," Clarice states firmly. "Not until I get answers even if I have to beat them out of the king myself."

We turn back toward the kitchens, but my thoughts are already racing ahead.

Ivy's birthday was supposed to be a celebration, a moment of happiness after everything she's endured.

Now, it feels like the world is crumbling around her again and all I can think is this is by far her worst birthday even above Mrs. Daley.

If only she knew how close she came to having a proper one.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

I don't know when I fell asleep, but I woke up to Liam shaking me. I am still in the limo and jump, startled, glancing around before realizing the king was no longer in the car with me.

"You wanna get inside? The king went on a warpath and had Ivy escorted out of the castle,"

"What?" I asked, scrambling to undo my seatbelt. When I fail, my claws slip out, and I slice it, shoving past Liam and moving toward the door.

"What happened?" Liam asks, but I don't have time to explain. "Is she safe? Did he hurt her?" I ask Liam, marching inside the castle.

"Her hand was busted up pretty badly,"

"He hurt her?" I snarl.

"Dustin said he didn't intentionally. He is with her," Liam tells me as I turn for the stairs to find Abbie screaming at the guard and Clarice trying to calm her down.

"Abbie, wait. Dustin won't hurt her. They can't hurt her,"

"She already is fucking hurt! I want to go with her. Let me fucking pass," she growls, and I watch her eyes glow.

What in the fucking madness is going on?



I have never seen her raise her voice at anyone, but right now, she looks like a cornered animal about to attack.

Clarice grips her arm, yanking her back when she tries to shove past the guard, who looks like he doesn't know what to do.

But I know if she gets too loud, he will be forced to remove her from the castle.

"Liam!" I growl. This isn't something I have time for. It will be up to him to deal with her. Yet the moment I speak the word, and she hears my voice, she turns to me. Relief floods her features, and she rushes over.

"Tell him to let me pass, the king... he had them take her, Gannon," she says, glaring back at the guard. She turns around to face me, and I press my lips in a line. Her eyes scrutinize my face for a second, and she takes a step back from me.

"You already know," she says.

"Liam just told me; I will handle it,"

"Tell the guard to let me pass,"

"I can't do that," I tell her, knowing doing that could cause more drama for Ivy.

"Yes, you fucking can. You're third in command, are you not? Tell him to take me to her."

"I will handle it. I will bring her back into the castle. I need to speak to the king first."

"Fuck the king, that bastard—" Liam clamps his hand over her mouth as my heart sputters in my chest at her words. She threatens the king and she will have every

guard on her in seconds.

“Shh, Abs,” Liam whispers to her. I grip her shoulders, trying to calm her down. It’s one thing trying to get Ivy back in the castle. The king has no ties to Abbie besides Ivy, and if she steps out of line, I know he will have no problem kicking her off castle grounds.

“She’ll be fine. I will stay wherever he sent her if I have to,” I tell her with a sigh. The strange bond they share, I don’t think I will ever understand.

Both girls are almost mute, obedient, and terrified of their shadows half the time, yet will risk their own lives for each other without hesitation. I hate seeing Abbie like this. It’s almost as if she needs Ivy like she needs air to breathe and vice versa.

Her entire body shakes with her rage and fear for the girl. Her nostrils flare as she glares at me, her eyes flicking between hers and her wolf side.

“I will take you to her, but for now, I need to help calm the king,” I tell her, stepping away from her. I head for the stairs, fucking livid.

“What do you want me to do with her ?” Liam mindlinks

“Make sure she doesn’t threaten the king and get herself killed,” I tell Liam.

I make my way to the king’s quarters and shove the door open. The moment I do, anger courses through me. He gave me his word he would speak with Damian first. If he had, this never would have happened. He turns to face me the moment I walk in, and he snarls, which only angers me more. How could he?

Does he not realize how lucky he is to have a mate that fucking wants him?

To have his mate at all. Mine was dead and buried in the fucking woods, and every day I have lived with that.

Every day for nearly twenty years, I wished I could take that back; the pain she caused me was better than the hollow, empty feeling her death left behind.

I wished I could take back what I did back then, and he was making the same damn fucking mistake.

Only his reasoning was fucking ridiculous.

She didn't hurt him; she did nothing to him.

For twenty years, I lived in torture until Abbie came along. He kills her or breaks their bond, there is no coming back from that. He just couldn't control his damn temper and seeing that made me lose mine.

"Where is Ivy?" I demand while looking around the room, his hand's fist by his sides, and I growl at him when he sneers at the mention of her name.

## Page 28

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

My temper got the better of me as my fingers grip his shirt, and I slam him against the wall.

“Where is my fucking queen?” I scream in his face just as the door flings open, distracting me, only for him to punch me.

I grunt before he kicks me, sending me flying backward into the bookshelf.

The books rattle, and some fall off the shelves as I lunge at him.

Only Damian gets between us and shoves me back.

I growl, pointing at him, feral with rage.

“You have made a fucking mistake, king or not; I won’t stand by this. Now, where is our queen?” I snarl at him, my voice raising. Damian, caught between us, looks at us both, trying to figure out what was going on.

“Will someone tell me what happened and why you just made me put her in the fucking stables?” Damian demands.

“You fucking bastard, you fucking promised. She isn’t her mother,” I spit at him. He said he would speak with Damian, but he didn’t.

“Who, what in the world happened when you were gone, and who are you talking about?” Damian demands.

Kyson can explain it to him as he should have when he got back.

For now, I need to verify that Marissa was her mother because he very well may have done this for no reason, not that his motivation is good enough in my eyes.

“Fix it, I swear, Kyson. I have stuck by you for fucking decades, never opposed anything you have asked, but if you don’t fix this, I am walking. King or not, I am fucking done,” I warn him before heading to the door.

“Where are you going?” Damian demands as I move toward the door. I stop, my hand on the door handle.

“To see my queen,” I snap. The king growls at me.

He may be too stubborn to see the error of his ways, but I’m not going to continue watching him kill himself because he can’t leave the past in the past. I refuse to watch him toss her aside, and expect us to go back to living on eggshells around him.

“Wait, just fucking wait until I know what’s going on,” Damian snarls at us both. I snap but close the door and fold my arms across my chest, worried I may just attack him again if I don’t.

“Now, explain,” Damian says.

“Marissa Talbot is Ivy’s mother,” Kyson tells him while shaking his head and muttering too low for me to hear.

“What?” Damian asks, clearly shocked by this information.

“The werewolf hunter, the one who killed my sister and the other Lycan bloodlines. Her mother was the insider. She was the one who killed them,” Kyson growls as if we

aren't aware of her crimes.

"That's what Alpha Dean had to tell you?" Damian gasps, glancing between us. I snarl when I watch the king walk to his bar to drown his sorrows so he won't have to deal with them.

"Wait, that is why you sent her to the fucking stables, Kyson? For something her mother did?" Damian asks, outraged.

"She is innocent. She didn't fucking kill your sister, Kyson," I snap at him.

"You think I don't know that?" Kyson roars. Yet with the expression on his face, I can tell he is conflicted. His heart was here with her, but his mind was trapped in the past with how he found his sister.

"What about her father?" Damian asks,

"They are trying to figure out his link, but we believe it was her partner. We also think he wasn't aware of the crimes bestowed on his wife. We found nothing on him. That's why we're late," I explain.

"And you're sure it's her parents?" Damian asks, sitting down and rubbing both hands down his face.

"He was supposed to show a picture to Ivy to make sure, but instead, I come up here and find out she has been taken to the fucking stables," I growl.

"Gannon enough, it may not be right what he did, but stop. Just let me think," Damian says. I press my lips in a line, waiting for his orders.

"Go, take a photo to Ivy, verify it's her mother," Damian says, and I nod, leaving out.

Abbie was waiting for me with Clarice at the bottom of the stairs. Liam had taken the guard's position by the doors, and relief flooded me when I saw she hadn't been removed from the castle.

"What did he say?" Abbie said, rushing up the last couple of steps as I walked toward her. "Nothing, I am going to see her now,"

"I will come with you," she says, and I sigh. I'm not sure what state she is in, and I glance at Clarice. She nods to my silent message. That woman can read me like a damn book.

"How about first we go clean up, then we can take her a cupcake for her birthday," Clarice says and I almost groan hearing that. That's right. The queen will shift any day now, and Damian told me Kyson promised to be there. It's also why he was so hesitant to leave her, not wanting to miss it.

"No, I want to see her. She will be petrified, please," Abbie pleads, and I grip her face in my hands.

"You will see her, I promise. Just stay with Clarice. I need to speak to Ivy, then you can come down."

"Speak with her? You say that as if she did something wrong, I have been with her all day. She has done nothing that—" she sighs, and I glance at Liam, who nods, and I know he must have told her to watch what she says because she doesn't finish.

I tug her closer, and she pushes off my chest with her hands, but I hold her tighter. Not caring that we have witnesses, yet her body pressed against mine calms me as her scent invades my senses. It seems to have the same effect on her because she stops struggling to get out of my grip.

“I promised Damian, and I will handle the king, but for now, you just need to be patient.”

“I want to see her,” she says, and I kiss her forehead.

“Let me speak with her first,” I tell her before letting her go. She chews her lip before realizing we have witnesses, and her cheeks turn red. Liam and Clarice say nothing about it, then Clarice waves her over.

“Come, you can help pick out which cupcake she wants, and we should find her something warm to wear,” Clarice tells her, and tears fill Abbie’s eyes, but she nods, storming off toward the kitchen. I sigh and leave for the door when Liam grabs my arm.

“You should know Trey is down there with Dustin.” I furrow my brows at his words.

“So?”

“He wasn’t here when the pact was made,” Liam says, and I realize that means if the king orders him to kill her, he will. “I’ll handle it,” I tell him.

“Be sure you do, because Dustin is already having issues with him, apparently. Everything was fine until the king kicked her out; I spoke to the driver, who apparently let it slip to Trey what happened. His reaction to the news is somewhat worrisome,” Liam tells me.

“How so?” I ask.

“He was quick to escort her out,” Liam tells me and nods, heading toward the stables. The air is cold, and I will have to send someone to get firewood. I won’t allow my queen to freeze down here. Approaching the stables, I hear Dustin snap at Trey.



“Fuck the king,” Dustin snaps, and I walk in just as Trey moves to challenge him. Dustin sets the bandages down that he was using to try to wrap Ivy’s bloody hand . He moves to stand in front of her, clearly not liking Trey’s presence near her.

“Yes, fuck the king. Remember where your loyalties lie, Trey.” I snarl, and he pauses as Dustin straightens. He was a stupid man challenging Dustin.

I don’t care if he was once part of the Landeena’s Guard when the kingdom existed, Dustin is part of my men, and if push comes to shove, I will back the men of my kingdom before I back another.

I hold no loyalty to him, and if he thinks he can fuck with Dustin and Liam, and not kill him in his sleep, he will be in for a rude shock. We all know Liam and Dustin are close.

“They are with my king,” Trey stupidly says.

“And she is your queen,” I snarl at him, and the man whimpers before his eyes glare at Ivy with hatred I don’t understand. I just know I can’t allow him around her if he has issues with her.

“You haven’t been here as long as the rest of us, but the king swore us all to choose his queen over him,” I tell him.

“If so, why is she down here, then?” Trey demands.

“Because the king is an idiot. Move Dustin. I will wrap her hand. Go fix up the king’s old quarters for me,” I tell Dustin, crouching down in front of her.

“Yes, sir,” Dustin says while Trey growls.

I glance over my shoulder at him to see the fury on his face.

What has gotten into him? Once this is over, I will have to have a word with the king.

I don't like how he is looking at her. Trey is usually quiet, did his job, which he is good at, and is observant, so it throws me a little that he is acting like this and openly.

"You're off guard. Get out of my face," I growl the order at him, and my aura rushes out. Trey doubles over before rushing out when I drop it.

I set to work cleaning her hand and wrapping it with the supplies Dustin had. "It will heal once you shift. Do you think you can hold on for a couple of hours?"

"Can't you heal it?" she asked.

"I would if I could, but only the king can heal you. My saliva or blood won't work on you since you aren't mine," I tell her, cupping her face with my hand. I wish I could, but even if I could, I wouldn't. The king would kill me for letting my DNA mingle with his mate's.

I pull my phone from my pocket, checking the time. "Once the moon is at its highest peak, I will take you outside, so you can shift, My Queen," I tell her.

"Please don't call me that," Ivy murmurs, looking away from me.

"I need to ask you something," I tell her while unlocking my phone and scrolling through the pictures. I stop before turning my phone in hand to show her the screen.

"Do you know this woman?" I ask, praying she says no. She takes the phone from me. A sob escapes from her lips, and her bottom lip quivers. I know the answer before she says it. She nod, tears trekking down her face.

“She’s my mom,” Ivy smiles sadly while brushing her thumb over the picture of Marrissa. I curse too low for her to hear and hang my head before shaking it and looking up at her.

“He will come around, Ivy. You just need to give him space,” I tell her, but she looks at me, confused. So no one has told her anything at all.

“What do you mean? I don’t get it. What did I do?” she asks. Knowing she did nothing, I frown when Kyson’s voice flits through my head.

“What did she say?”

I bite back a growl.

“Marrissa is her mother,” I answer, wishing I had a different answer for him.

“You did nothing. It’s what your mother did. She killed the former king and queen and the king’s sister.” I tell her as I come out of the mindlink. She blinks, astonished, unable to believe it.

“Just try to get some rest. After your shift, I will take you to Kyson’s old quarters.” I tell her.

“But my birthday isn’t for another couple of weeks,” she tells me as I’m about to get up.

“The fact you recognized the king as your mate, Ivy, shows your birthday is today,” I tell her, just as I hear someone curse.

The stable doors open, and Clarice and Abbie come inside.

They stop by the door and glance at me. I nod to them before standing and leaving, giving them space as Abbie rushes to her side. I stop by Clarice at the door.

“Don’t be long; I don’t want to be dragging you to the cells for disobeying the king,” I tell her. Clarice nods, and I stride out.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

The stable door groans open, and our steps are hesitant, our shadows flitting against the wooden walls of the stables when I find Ivy sitting on top of an old wine barrel that has been turned upside down.

The room, dense with the smell of hay and horses, suddenly feels tighter, more constricted when I see the saddened look on her face. They haven't told us what has happened, only that we can spend a few minutes with her and wish her happy birthday. I'm so confused... I thought we were safe here.

Gannon, whose gaze remains hardened, acknowledges our presence with a brief nod.

He stands, his tall figure casting a long shadow, and murmurs a warning, "Don't be long; I don't want to be dragging you to the cells for disobeying the king.

" His voice is cold and filled with anger. I have never seen him look angry.

Clarice, her fingers trembling slightly, is the first to approach Ivy.

She holds a frosted cupcake as if it's a lifeline.

Yet, it's Ivy's gutted expression that draws me in.

Her ebony hair, usually vibrant and full of life, lies limp against her pale skin.

Her cerulean, blue eyes, usually shimmering with excitement at seeing me, are shadowed with despair and confusion.

“We can’t stay long; Gannon is right; the king is on the warpath, but I couldn’t let you go without wishing you happy birthday,” Clarice tells Ivy, placing the blue cupcake in her hand. Clarice lights it with a match, and I stare at the flickering flame.

“You’ve been baking,” Ivy asks me, and I glance down at my uniform.

Shaking my head, the weight of our predicament hits me anew. “No, I just spilled the bag on the counter before I came down here. Clarice made a cake for you,” I admit, my voice shaking. A cake, such a simple pleasure, feels out of place amidst the palpable tension.

It’s not just the cake or the stable, it’s the unspoken reality that binds us.

The chains of servitude, of being mere pawns in a kingdom that’s never truly been ours.

But for a split second, we both had hoped we’d found a home here.

Ivy, despite being the king’s mate, is now condemned to these stables, away from the luxury of status she barely had a chance to grasp.

Now if a queen has been placed here, what chance do I have—we have?

We might have been better off with our fate decided by our old Alpha.

“Well, I had a cake made, but I couldn’t carry it down,” Clarice tells her sadly.

“You should have seen it, Ivy. Clarice did a good job. She spent all day making it. It’s so pretty, better than the ones we used to make at the orphanage, it...” I trail off before frowning.

“You enjoy it then,” Ivy smiles encouragingly, but that won’t be the same thing without her; it was made for her. Ivy’s longing gaze drifts toward the blue cupcake as Clarice places a candle on it before lighting it, its tiny flame flickering brightly.

“Blow it out and make a wish,” Clarice tells her.

Ivy blows the candle out without excitement or light in her eyes.

I know she only does to please Clarice. I was so excited to help Clarice, and it was all for nothing.

I smile sadly and kiss her knee, giving her hand a squeeze from where I sit beside her.

“What did you wish for?” Clarice asks, a teary smile on her face.

“I wished to be free,” Ivy tells her, and a choking whimper leaves my lips.

Such a simple wish, laden with so many complex emotions. The pain of our shared history as slaves, the injustice of it all, wells up. “Don’t,” I choke out, tears threatening hearing her speak those words.

“Don’t say that,” I whisper. Anything but that, she can’t wish for that. This was supposed to be a fresh start.

“I think it’s a good wish,” Clarice says, glancing at me, startled.

“Not where we come from. The only freedom rogues get is in death,” I tell her. I know precisely what Ivy means by those words. Clarice stares at her, shocked before grabbing her face in her hands.

“You wish for anything but that. Do you hear me? I will not watch my queen die. I

have buried enough of them,” Clarice says before stalking out. I watch her go before turning back to Ivy.

“I wish I could stay to see you shift,” I tell her, and she nods.

Glancing around, I see that this place is cold and lonely.

Ivy stayed with me—not that she had a choice about being locked in the room with me, but I at least still had her by my side.

I wonder if maybe I can convince Gannon to let me come down when her shift starts, so she won’t be alone.

“It’s not too bad. We have slept in worse places,” I tell her, glancing around, trying to uplift her mood, but I may as well try to grasp air with how useless my attempts to cheer her up are.

Maybe if I ask the king, he will allow it, or I can deliberately get myself in trouble and hope he kicks me out here with her.

“I will speak to Beta Damian. Perhaps he can convince the king to let me stay here with you,” I tell her, although my chances of even getting close to the king’s quarters to ask Beta Damian are slim. Ivy shakes her head.

“No, stay in the castle; you don’t need to be punished, too,” she tells me.

“Abbie, love, you need to go,” Gannon calls out softly, and embarrassment courses through me at his endearment, and I know my cheeks turn a little pink when Ivy looks at me questionably.

Leaning forward, I kiss her forehead and cheek. I don’t want to go. She doesn’t



deserve to be out here with farm animals, but I would rather not ruin my chances at being allowed back.

“I will try to come back. If I don’t, I will tomorrow,” I tell her, rushing back to the door. I look up at Gannon as I pass him.

“I won’t leave her alone. Once she shifts, I will sneak her back into the castle,” Gannon tells me before reaching for a lock of my auburn hair. He twirls it around his finger and then clears his throat before nodding, and I rush out before he does anything else that I will have to explain to Ivy.

Liam is waiting for me when I return to the castle, and I head for the guards’ quarters, hoping to find Damian to see if he will grant me permission to stay with Ivy for the night. The thought of her shifting with no one but Gannon upsets me.

Climbing the stairs, it’s not long before I hear Liam’s footsteps rushing to keep up with me.

Reaching the second-floor landing, I see Damian in the hall talking to one of the guards before he turns and goes toward the king’s chambers.

Turning on my heel, I go to head down there, only for an arm to wrap around my waist and turn me in the opposite direction.

“Uh ah, can’t let you do that?” Liam tells me, and I grit my teeth as he walks me toward the guards’ quarters.

I peer up over my shoulder at him as he keeps forcing me in the opposite direction. “Then can you ask Damian if I can stay with Ivy?” I ask him, and he sighs, steering me down the next corridor.

“Gannon is with her. She will be fine,” he says, and I stop.

“Abbie?” he says, and I shake my head, but he rolls his eyes, grips my wrist, and drags me along with him. I try to pull out of his grip, only for it to tighten.

“Abbie, if you go barging in there, you will only make things worse. Leave it be and trust that Gannon will look after her,” Liam scolds me as if I am some disobedient child.

Truth be told, I don’t mind him. He seems okay, a little eccentric, but I know he cares deeply for Gannon and, unfortunately, the king, who currently is on my hate list.

“What if she gets cold down there?” I wonder aloud.

“Gannon sent guards to get firewood. Dustin will take her blankets. For now, you need to go to bed,” he says, stopping at my door. He opens it and motions for me to go inside. “In ya go, don’t make me tuck you in,” he warns me. Tears prick my eyes as I step toward my door.

“And don’t think of trying to sneak out. Gannon asked me to watch you. I will be right outside this door, Abbie. Trust me, you won’t get far,” he tells me, and I glare at him.

“But by all means try; I love me a game of cat and mouse, and I could use the entertainment,” he chuckles, shutting the door, and I sigh, moving toward my bed.

## Page 30

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

I am up early before the sun has even risen fully.

I am anxious and want to sneak down and see Ivy, so I can bring her something to eat.

I wonder how her first shift went. Getting dressed quickly in my maid's uniform, I open the door to find Liam standing next to my door, playing a game on his phone.

His fingers jab hard at the screen while he curses at it.

He must be losing, I think, rolling my eyes.

Shaking my head, I step past him, and he follows with his head down, focused on his game.

"Stupid game," he growls as he follows me downstairs to the kitchens.

"What are you playing?" I ask, not really caring, but if I have to listen to him curse his phone out, it would be nice to know what he is cursing about. I wait for him to answer as he starts stabbing his phone viciously with his finger.

"A cake-building game," he tells me, and I pull a face. With the crazy finger poking and cursing, I assumed he was playing some killing or shooting game.

"A cake-building game, cake like you eat?" I ask, wondering if it is code for something else.

“Yep, making this stupid pink unicorn thing, but the sprinkles are going too fast, and the placement is wrong. It deducted more bloody points,” he snaps before looking at me, and he grabs my arm, making me stop.

He looks me over from head to toe, and I step back from him, not liking how he is eyeing me.

“Have you got a phone?” he asks, and I roll my eyes as I continue walking into the kitchens. “Of course you don’t,” he mutters as I shake my head and step into the kitchen. “Ah, she has one,” he states as he turns to Clarice.

“Momsy, oh dear, Momsy?” he calls in a sugary sweet voice as he moves toward Clarice’s station with a practiced, boyish energy. She lifts her gaze and raises an eyebrow at him as he skips over to her.

“Yes, Liam?” Clarice yawns tiredly, looking like she had no sleep at all.

He stops next to her bench, drops an elbow onto it, and places his chin on his hand, batting his lashes at her.

“Can I borrow your phone?” he asks, and she sighs, giving him a pointed look.

“What’s wrong with yours?” she asks, pointing to it in his hand.

“Nothing, but I need to download a game on yours so that you can send me your coins.”

“You want my phone for a game?” she repeats, pulling it from her apron pocket. She eyes him suspiciously while he giggles like a schoolgirl. She hands it to him, and he lights up as if all his Christmases have come at once.

“You better not be using it for porn like last time. Damn near gave me a heart attack when I opened my browser to see what you’re into,” she scolds.

“I promise.” He offers her his pinky. She smiles and chuckles before grabbing his face and squeezing his cheeks, making him have fish lips.

“I’m serious, I want my phone back.”

He wiggles his squashed lips at her, and she laughs, letting him go. “I am just downloading a game so that I can send myself some sprinkles,” Liam tells her, unlocking her phone as if he has done it a million times before. Clarice raises an eyebrow at him.

“Sprinkles?” she asks him, and he nods, focused on her phone. Clarice looks at me, and I shrug. It is so weird seeing how carefree she is with Liam like he is her ray of sunshine. She messes his hair lovingly, returning to her duties.

Liam sits on a stool by the counter, and I set to work making Ivy and Gannon some breakfast so I can take it down to them. It is the perfect excuse to go there. The king surely doesn’t intend for her to starve.

When I am done, Clarice finds me a picnic basket, and I leave Liam with Clarice, rushing out the doors toward the main foyer area to see a commotion.

A loud roar rings out from down the corridor, and I see Ester running stark naked from the king’s office.

My stomach sinks as she rushes toward me, clutching her clothes in her hands, just as Damian steps out from the stairwell further up.

He grabs Ester by the arm and shakes the woman with a sneer on his face.

His eyes run up the length of her, making him growl loudly at her state of undress.

He shoves her away before both his hands hit the door of the king's office.

He then slams the door shut with a loud bang.

I gasp as Ester runs out the castle doors.

And I turn to find Dustin glaring toward the doors she ran through, along with half the kitchen staff who have rushed out to see what the commotion is.

“He wouldn't have, would he? Ivy, she's...

” I stutter, tears burning my eyes on behalf of my best friend.

Surely, the king didn't kick his mate out to be with the likes of her.

If he has done so, then boy have I misjudged the king.

Dustin growls before storming off, and I turn to find Clarice with a murderous glare on her face.

She presses her lips in a line before her eyes go to mine. They soften a little before she gasps. “Come on, you go down there like that, and Ivy will know something is wrong,” she tells me. I peer down at the picnic basket in my hands, and nod.

Ivy is hurting enough, and she can read me like a book. It will only hurt her more if I go down there crying about what I saw. Plus, I'm sure she'll find a way to make me tell her. So reluctantly, I follow Clarice, knowing she is right.

Liam is waiting by the kitchen doors when she stalks toward them, and Clarice stops

beside him.

“Find out what happened for me; I swear if the king...” she doesn’t finish. “He did, and I will whip him myself,” she growls, striding past him. Liam watches her go before gripping my shoulder when I go to pass him.

“Chin up, love. I know the king. He is being a dickhead, but he isn’t unfaithful. It is nearly impossible for one to cheat on their mate. At least for us Lycans, anyway,” he tells me before strolling off toward the guards at the end of the hall.

Stepping into the kitchen, I find the staff are all murmuring about the king. I listen, trying to calm my racing heart.

“She is always all over him, though I thought he learned after the last time,” a cook named Sheri tells Amanda, who sighs heavily.

“Enough, ladies, we will find out. You know the king is on edge after the news he received last night,” Clarice says, cutting the ladies off.

“What news?” I ask Clarice curiously, but it is Sheri who answers.

“Another family was found, and more children by the river,” she explains with a grim expression on her face.

“How old were they?” I ask, horrified that more rogues were killed.

“A few around our queen’s age, and some young ones, about five or six years old, and an elderly woman,” Clarice answers before she sniffles.

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

“What a waste of life,” Clarice states.

Silence falls over the room, and I am shocked to see so much heartache on the woman’s face.

They are Lycans, yet they mourn for those killed by the hunters, despite them only being lowly rogues and werewolves.

Growing up, Ivy and I were constantly reminded of what scum we were for being rogue.

Werewolves hate rogues. Yet here, everyone considers us as people, not the dirt beneath their toes.

It is odd and hard to get used to, and I wasn’t sure if I ever would.

But Lycans don’t seem to be prejudice against our kind.

Everyone turns back to their tasks and Liam returns moments later. Clarice peers up at him. Everyone stops what they are doing, waiting for him to answer the unspoken question from Clarice.

“The king woke up to Ester touching him. He tossed her out and had Damian order her off the castle grounds,” he says, and Clarice lets out a breath.

The tension in the room dissipates significantly at his answer.



Clarice nods while Liam climbs up on the bench beside me, helping himself to some fruit salad Clarice is making.

She slaps his digging fingers only for him to pout at her, and she clicks her tongue before relenting and giving him the bowl of fruit.

“I didn’t think he would, but with how drunk he was, you can never be certain,” she says, looking relieved as she eyes Liam devouring the freshly cut fruit salad.

He watches eagerly as she retrieves another bowl and starts making more, and I turn my attention back to Clarice. He stole one of her puddings earlier, yet she didn’t seem bothered by Liam. They actually seem quite close, and Clarice obviously adores the psycho.

“He’d have copped a beat down if he had, by not only me, but I think the entire guard,” Liam chuckles.

“You’d really fight the king?” I ask, shocked. Liam raises an eyebrow at me.

“We’d lay our lives down for our queen. And that is what Ivy is, even if dumbass doesn’t see that at the moment,” he explains.

“You all really care for Ivy, don’t you?” I blurt, shocked at their disgust of their king’s hypothetical infidelity. I certainly didn’t think they would care since he is a king and can technically do as he pleases.

“This castle has been the prison of the king’s depression for far too long. Since he found Ivy, we can all suddenly breathe. No one wants to go back to the way things were,” Clarice tells me.

“Plus, none of us want to hurt him. He is a good king; despite current behavior, he is

a good man, just troubled by the demons that lurk in him,” Clarice adds before telling the servants to tend to their chores. They all rush off.

“What do you mean none of you want to hurt him?” I ask. Could they really hurt the king?

“Some of us have a blood pact with our future queen. If he were to physically hurt her or try to kill her, we would have no choice,” Liam says behind me, and I peer over my shoulder at him. He shrugs, yet still, I am confused. It is Clarice who answers, causing me to turn around and face her.

“The King’s Guard was originally made of twelve men. After his sister died, we lost a few guards, but those who remained and some of the staff were tied by a pact. The king asked us to swear to protect his future queen no matter the cost, even her life over his,” Clarice explains.

“That was the worst week of my life,” Liam growls, and whatever happened back then, I can see haunts him just as much.

“But I would do it again,” Clarice shrugs.

“You’re part of the guard’s pact?” I asked her.

She nods. “I am one of the few servants here who is.”

“Yeah, a week full of the king forcing his blood down our throats and us breaking his command,” Liam explains.

“Huh?”

“For the pact to work, the king can’t be able to command us to harm his queen. It’s a

safety thing. When it comes to the king, she is the only one who can override his command. He could tell us to kill her, but we would do the opposite. We would kill the king for her,” Clarice answers.

“But I have seen him command his guard before,” I answer.

“It only works if he asks us to threaten her life. We can’t. The king can still command us, though it is more painful when he does. We can resist it to a degree, but if he pushes us too hard, we would relent.”

“Unless it comes to the queen,” Liam says. “That bond can’t be broken.”

“I still don’t understand,” I admit. Though I didn’t know much about Lycans so maybe that is why.

“The king’s blood is infused by witch magic,” Liam shrugs.

“Witches still exist?” I ask, a little shocked.

“Yes, of course, just not in plain sight,” Liam answers.

“So no matter what, you will keep Ivy safe even from the king?”

“Yes, assuming he doesn’t kill us to get to her,” Clarice answers.

“So you and twelve guards?”

“It was twelve; some have lost their lives since the pact,” Clarice states.

“Who’s left?”

“Myself, Liam, Dustin, Damian, and of course, Gannon. A couple of others, but we are the main ones you will find guarding the queen,” Clarice answers.

Clarice picks up a tray and turns to me. “Now Ivy must be starving, so we better get you on your way to her,” she says, repacking and checking the picnic basket. “Also, Abbie, I need to send you to town a little later, we have guests coming this afternoon.”

“Who?” I ask.

“Alpha Kade, one of the packs with allegiance to the king. He is helping with the rogue childrens’ deaths.”

I nod, wondering If Gannon can come since I still can’t read. Chewing my lip, I am about to tell her that is why Gannon came with me.

Seeming to understand my pause, she adds, “I have already called ahead. You just need to pick up the order. Though I am a little upset, you didn’t tell me you can’t read,” Clarice says, and I stare at the floor.

“Had to find out from Damian when he told me the queen couldn’t,” she says with a shake of her head. “Now come on, let’s get a wriggle on,” Clarice says moving toward the door.

## Page 32

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

I sit with Ivy on the pier that overlooks the man-made lake by the stables.

Ivy eats very little despite my trying to encourage her to eat.

We enjoy the morning sun, enjoying the rays heating my cold skin.

I tell her everything that happened in the castle last night.

Though I don't think she is really listening; she seems stuck in her head no matter how hard I try to pull her back to the present moment. I hate seeing her like this.

Ivy leans against one of the logs on the pier, watching me, yet I draw closer to the water.

I wish I was swimming with Gannon or even just going for a run; it is strange to me to have the freedoms we have here.

Another thing I haven't told her about. I want to tell her, yet I can't bring myself to because I don't want to risk upsetting her more.

"Abbie!" Ivy hisses as I sat on the edge and tossed my legs over the side and into the water.

"Gannon is right there," I tell her, pointing him out, and she lets out a sigh.

I wade my feet through the water, loving the feel of the water between my toes.

Peering up, Gannon is smiling at me, and I can't help the blush at the knowing look on his face.

However, what impresses me most is that he kept his word and didn't leave Ivy's side all night, as he said.

She was supposed to shift, but now doubt has crept in.

I believe, along with Ivy, that the king is wrong about her birthday.

But still the question remains: if that were true, how could she recognize him as her mate?

More shocking was learning of Della's crimes. Della was Ivy's mother before Alpha Dean's pack killed her. Though now we have learned that wasn't even her real name. And that Della Hunley was, in fact, Marrissa Talbot.

A notorious hunter and the woman responsible for not only killing the king's sister but also an entire kingdom that used to reside in the mountains.

The Landeena Kingdom. Knowing this information and realizing her childhood was a lie—that her mother was a monster—I could see weighed heavily on Ivy.

It broke her, a woman she loved. Her mother was a monster and serial killer.

Accused of unspeakable crimes, and now Ivy was paying the price for them.

I hope there was some mistake. The Della I remember was kind, loving, and doted on both Ivy and me. She was strict, but protective of us growing up. She was my mother's best friend. We had stumbled upon their little camp after my mother fled the pack we were part of.

I have no memory of being in a pack, though I do remember having a bigger family once. My mother was a twin, and we were forced to go into hiding after her twin and my grandmother died.

Hiding from the man who killed them, my mother never spoke of it, but I had heard whispers when a child who will forever remain with me.

“I have to head back soon. I have to go into town with Clarice to grab some supplies,” I tell Ivy, not wanting to go. Tears fill my eyes, not knowing when I will get to see her next, but I have chores to do, so I know I need to leave her.

Lifting my legs from the water, I wander over to her, lean down, and clutch her fingers gently.

“Maybe I could ask if you could come?” I tell her hopefully, but I know it will never be allowed.

Ivy doesn’t get the chance to answer when we hear screaming from the castle’s direction.

My head whips toward the direction of the woman’s screams, and I see Ester thrashing and screaming her head off while two guards drag her across the manicured lawns.

I try not to smile. Well, they finally found her!

I stand, and Gannon turns to stare up the hill in the direction of the castle, a glare on his face.

“Ha, it serves her right,” I huff, and I curse at myself when I turn back to see Ivy watching me.

“What did she do?” Ivy asks curiously. I can’t believe how stupid I was to say that! I peer down at Ivy before her head turns to Ester, still thrashing as they lead her toward the front of the castle, toward the enormous iron gates.

“I worry it may upset you, but nothing happened. The king woke up before she could do anything,” I tell her while staring down at my hands, picking at my nails. Nervously I steal a peek at her, hoping she doesn’t ask more.

“Before she did what?” Ivy asks. I chew my lip, not wanting to answer, but I won’t lie to her, and she will eventually find out. I just wished it wasn’t me giving her the news.

“The king woke early this morning in his office to Ester fondling him,” I tell her. Ivy pales, almost turning green at my words, and my eyes widen when she sucks in a breath, a look of pure panic on her face. She gasps as if she can’t catch her breath, and her eyes prick with tears.

“Hey, hey. Nothing happened, I promise. I heard the guard talking this morning. When he woke, he was livid and tossed her out. He then banished her from the castle, so I guess they finally found her. He didn’t do anything with her, Ivy.

I promise you,” I tell Ivy, moving quickly to grab her face in my hands.

She sucks in a breath, and I breathe with her, trying to calm her.

“That’s it. Breathe, Ivy. He didn’t betray you,” I whisper to her repeatedly as I try to stop her panic attack. When she calms, I brush my hands over her face to clear her tears. Why did I stupidly say something? I mentally scold myself.

“So he didn’t sleep with her?” Ivy asks, letting out a breath finally.



“No, she ran naked from his office crying like her bum was on fire,” I tell her remembering the sight making her snicker. She really took a walk of shame, and she should feel shame because not a single person was happy with her little act.

Yet the look on her face tells me she doesn’t see any funny side. I’m about to say something else when a whistle catches our attention. We look to the hill, and saw Clarice wave to us.

“I gotta go, but I will try to visit you later,” I tell Ivy as I lean down, briefly hugging her before rushing off back down the pier and up to Clarice, who is waiting for me.

After my heartbreaking visit with Ivy, I leave to grab the few groceries Clarice has ordered from the grocer.

It’s a beautiful day as I go over the mental list of chores I still need to complete before the guest Alpha arrives.

As I walk toward the main gates, I notice the king talking to a man whose back is to me.

But as the breeze shifts, every muscle in my body tenses, and I find myself unable to move. My body goes into some sort of shock.

“Abbie, are you okay?” Liam’s voice reaches my ears, yet I still can’t bring myself to move. My heart leaps in my chest when his hands gripping my arms jolt me out of the odd state I am in. Liam turns me so I face him.

But my eyes automatically go to the stranger standing with the king. His suit is a light gray, his jacket open, and he has his hands in his pants pockets. My eyes roam over his body. The white shirt he wears fits his body in a way that I can see the outline of his abs pressing tight beneath it.

When his eyes meet mine, he appears curious.

“Abbie?” Liam’s voice says, and I notice the man’s eyes go to Liam’s hands gripping my arms. His lips move in a way that tells me he doesn’t like Liam touching me.

I shake my head, coming out of my daze and staring at Liam, who stares back worriedly at me.

He glances over his shoulder at the man the king is with.

“Sorry, I forgot what I was doing,” I tell Liam before quickly rushing out the gates while every part of me screams I should be running toward that mysterious man...

toward... I gulp... my mate ... not away from him.

He makes no move to stop me, and once I am trudging down the road, I shake my head, thinking I must have imagined the feeling I had heard about for so long.

I make my way into town, but that nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach never dwindles.

If anything, it only gets worse. I’ve always heard when you lay eyes on your mate, you just know.

And in that crazy moment, it felt like I just knew.

As the time passes, it feels harder and harder to conjure up the initial feeling. All I know is something is off.

The entire walk is a daze. Even after I retrieve the goods I’m sent for, I step out of the shop, having no memory of even entering. I’m on autopilot—my mind consumed

with the man back at the castle. So consumed, I don't even notice he has followed me to the small town until I walk right into him.

"You didn't stick around to introduce yourself, a little rude, don't you think, little mate?" before the deep voice comes as his hands slide up my bare arms, leaving tingles from his touch.

I take a startled step back, and he puts up his hands in what I assume is supposed to be an apologetic gesture. "Your name is Abbie, isn't it?" he asks.

I say nothing. Despite him clearly being my mate, he's still a stranger, though every fiber of my being calls for me to go to him, submit to him.

He glances around, and I follow suit. No one is around, which only makes me more nervous in his presence.

"Liam told me your name. No need to be scared. I won't hurt you, love," he tells me.

But my brain doesn't seem to be able to function, and he sighs loudly.

"I'm Alpha Kade, but you can call me Kade. "

"Nice to meet you," I tell him, trying to step around him, knowing no Alpha would want a rogue for a mate.

His aura isn't as strong as Gannon's or anyone else I've met here, so I know he is a werewolf, yet there's power behind it that tells me I'm right in thinking that. He sidesteps, blocking my path again.

"Trying to escape me, are you? I don't mind a good chase, though I would rather not cause a scene here," he tells me, making me stare up at him. He catches my chin

between his fingers, forcing me to meet his gaze. His eyes flicker, and I watch his tongue dart out between his lips as he looks at me.

“You realize who I am to you?” he asks, his tone is curious, as if probing to see how much I know.

“You’re my mate,” I whisper, bracing for his rejection so I can go about my day. He chuckles softly, leaning down, so close his lips are almost brushing mine.

“Hm, if you know, then why are you trying to run from me?” he asks.

I blink at him, and I furrow my brows at his words. “I’m not; I am...” I stop myself, realizing that’s exactly what I am trying to do. He raises an eyebrow at me, his thumb brushing over my bottom lip.

“Good, I am a busy man and don’t have time for silly games of hide and seek. So, shall we?” he asks, letting me go and motioning toward his car. I glance down at my bags in my hands, knowing Clarice needs them for dinner tonight.

“I’ll return you to the castle after lunch. The king has already okayed it,” he tells me.

“You told the king who I am to you?” I ask. He nods, reaching for the bags I grip, so tightly my knuckles are straining against my skin.

“Of course. Now come on, there’s a café down the road,” he tells me, and a giddy feeling rises in my stomach. My mate wants me? He wants to keep me? He’s not rejecting me! I thought for sure when he said nothing, that meant he was going to reject me.

Chewing my lip nervously, I glance at his car.

It's sleek and modern. He opens the door and motions for me to climb in.

My mother would have scolded me for getting in a car with a stranger, but mom always said mates were our biggest blessing.

They would love us unconditionally and never leave us.

When I was younger, I craved a relationship like my mother and father had.

Though, over the years, I never thought it would be a possibility for me.

No one would want a broken rogue for a mate.

Mom's words flit through my head, a vague memory I hold.

"If you find your mate, and I hope you do one day, it will be the most magical experience of your life. You'll know instantly they are yours, and you are theirs.

It's a love that compares to nothing else," she told me, and as I stare at him, I wonder if I will have that with this man.

Mrs. Daley always told us we would never have a mate, that we were unlovable and vile.

Hearing that enough over the years, I started to believe her.

Yet as Kade waits patiently for me to climb into his car, I wonder if Mrs. Daley had it all wrong.

"I mean you no harm. Don't you feel the pull?" he asks, and I nod.

“You’re not thinking of rejecting me, are you, Abbie? You wouldn’t shun the Moon Goddess in such a way, would you?” Kade asks.

“No, of course not. I just didn’t expect you to want me back,” I answer honestly.

“Of course I want you. You’re my mate. Now, who doesn’t want their mate?” he asks, and my cheeks heat at his words.

“So, shall we?” he asks again, motioning toward his car. A giddy feeling bubbles up within me, and I nod, climbing into the car. He leans over me, plugging in my seatbelt before pausing as he steps away. His hand cups my cheek, his thumb brushing below my eye gently.

“You are a pretty one,” he murmurs, and tingles rush across my face, his scent inviting. I can’t help myself as I inhale deeply, his scent strong, like peppermint and white chocolate. Kade chuckles softly.

“Good to see the feeling reciprocated,” he whispers, his eyes sparkling as they go to my lips. He then clears his throat, letting me go and shaking his head as he shuts my door.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

As we drive, Kade turns on some music, and his relaxed demeanor starts to soothe my nerves.

I can't help but steal glances at him, taking in his strong features and the way his muscles subtly shift under his shirt as he drives.

We arrive at the café, and Kade guides me inside, his arm casually draped over my shoulders, leading me to a table.

We sit across from each other, and Kade orders us both coffee and sandwiches. He maintains eye contact with me, creating an intense atmosphere that makes the air between us heavy. It feels like he's studying me.

"Tell me about yourself," Kade says, breaking the silence.

"I'm just a rogue," I reply softly, feeling a bit out of my depth.

"Come on now, Abbie. There must be more to you than that," he presses, his gaze piercing. I shift uncomfortably in my chair, not used to talking about myself. Sensing my reluctance, Kade decides to talk about himself instead, which relieves me.

"You know, my pack is lovely," Kade begins, a hint of pride in his voice. "They are going to be so excited when I bring you home. You'll love the pack house, it's beautiful."

"You want me to leave with you?" I ask, surprised.

“Of course, you’re my mate. We are supposed to be together. You wouldn’t turn your back on what the Moon Goddess wants, would you?”

I shake my head, but my thoughts instantly turn to Ivy. I have never been without her. Although he is my mate, he’ll look after me, and I won’t have to be a maid, but what will become of Ivy?

“Once I have you home, and we complete the mating ceremony, and I mark you, then I’ll introduce you to the pack,” Kade adds.

“Mating ceremony?” I ask nervously.

“Of course, why is that an issue?” he inquires, his eyes narrowing slightly.

I say nothing, the idea giving me a mix of emotions—none of them are good.

“So once you’re back, you should pack what things you need because once I am done helping the king, we’ll be leaving.”

“I don’t know if I can go, that is up to the king,” I tell him.

“Nonsense, don’t worry, I will handle the king. Besides, it’s the law; he can’t stop you. Mate bonds are protected,” Kade assures me, his tone confident, dismissive of my concerns.

But the thought of leaving Ivy behind weighs heavily on me. I’ve never been without her, and the idea of leaving her feels like abandoning a part of myself.

It’s just about dark by the time I return to the castle.

Kade drops me at the front gate, and I can’t wipe the smile off my face.



My mate wants me, and he seems nice. He tells me all about his pack and the packhouse, about duties I am expected to perform as his Luna.

It's nice, though I am still a little wary.

I wait for the other shoe to drop, keeping an eye out for the rejection, but it never comes.

Easing through the gates, I nearly jump out of my skin when Liam moves off the wall beside the iron gates.

"Gannon has been looking for you," he states, and I swallow nervously. While with Kade, I completely forgot about Gannon for those few hours. Guilt swamps me and my heart beats faster.

"You need to tell him, Abbie," Liam tells me. I say nothing because I don't know what to say. I never thought I would be put in a position where I have to choose.

"Are you going to reject Kade or turn Gannon away?" he asks, stepping closer, and for the first time since meeting Liam, I take a step back from him. He doesn't look happy with me, and his entire demeanor is off. He looks like the callous killer I have heard rumors of.

"He's my mate, Liam," I answer softly.

"Yes, but you're a werewolf, you can reject your mates," he says. I furrow my brows in confusion.

"You want me to reject my mate?" I ask him, knowing doing that would be shunning the Moon Goddess for the gift she gave me.

“Kade is not a good man, Abbie.” He doesn’t elaborate further. Instead, he turns on his heel and walks off before calling over his shoulder.

“You need to tell Gannon; if you don’t, I will,” Liam states, not bothering to stop.

“Wait,” I call out to him while chasing after him. He slows but doesn’t stop as he walks through the double doors.

“You can’t tell him. I barely know the man. You’re acting like I am about to run off with him,” I snap, annoyed at the accusation in his tone. Liam turns on me instantly, and I back up at the murderous look he gives me. My back hits the stone wall, and I gasp at his closeness.

“That is exactly what you will do. You will run off with your piece of shit mate and forget him. Just like she did. Then I will be left to pick up the pieces,” Liam snarls.

“He’s my mate,” I whisper, suddenly feeling tiny next to this man with the way he has me trapped and cornered.

Everything he’s saying goes against everything I’ve ever learned about mates.

We are supposed to be with our mates, not reject them.

He reaches a hand up and I flinch, but he only twirls a lock of my hair around his finger.

“Gannon loves you. Kade doesn’t. That man isn’t capable of love. I guess you’ll find that out the hard way,” he whispers before letting go and stepping back.

“What’s that supposed to mean, Liam!” I growl. He glares at my tone. I didn’t mean for it to come out the way it did, but it’s too late to take it back.

I like Liam... but I don't exactly trust his character analysis of other people given his own rather sociopathic tendencies. Maybe he's just saying all of this to mess with me.

"Do the right thing, Abbie. You need to tell him. If you don't and I have to, I will skin your mate alive and make you watch.

If you want to be with your mate, fine. But don't lead Gannon along.

You hurt him like she did. Not even Gannon will be able to save you from me," he says, his tone of voice turning darker along with his eyes. Tears prick the corners of my eyes.

What is he talking about? Who is 'she'? I don't want to hurt Gannon. I'm overwhelmed by my own thoughts.

"I don't want to hurt Gannon," I tell him.

"Then you'll tell him or reject your mate.

If you want to be with that twat, Gannon will understand.

But if he finds out because he caught you or I had to tell him, it will destroy him.

But know this, Abbie. Just like you and Ivy are forever bound together, so are Gannon and me.

Nothing will come between us," he says while stepping toward me again.

His canines slip out, and his claws extend from his fingertips as he grabs my face. His thumb brushes over my cheek, and I swallow, feeling more like prey than I ever have in my life.

“You hurt him, and he may forgive you,” he tells me while his hand moves to my throat, his fingers wrapping around it. His claws graze the back of my neck and make my skin prickle with goosebumps as he leans in so close his stubble brushes my cheek.

“But I won’t. And I am not the sort of man you want to make an enemy of,” he whispers next to my ear.

A tear rolls down my cheek, and I nod before feeling his tongue move across my cheek, licking up the tear that brimmed and spilled over.

“So just keep that in mind. Like you and Ivy come together, so do Gannon and me. He is a good man, but I’ll let you in on a little secret. I’m not ,” he growls before pecking my cheek and stalking off, leaving me feeling sick with fear.

I stand there petrified, watching him leave when the door across from where I stand opens. The king walks out of his office and stops, stunned to see me standing there crying.

“Abbie?” the king asks, and I look at him. His eyes go to the end of the hall where Liam is before he turns toward the stairs and disappears. The king sighs and pushes his door open wider, nodding toward it.

“Are you okay?” he asks, and I nod.

“I need to get back to my room,” I tell him, wandering off.

“Abbie, is this over Kade being your mate?” The king calls out, and I stop suddenly angered that he would dare mention mates when he has locked his own mate away and rejected her over who her mother was.

“Even if it is, you would be the last person I would ask advice from, especially when your mate is rotting in a stable like a damn farm animal,” I snarl before stomping off.

I hear his growl behind me, and I half expect him to order me out of the castle, too, but as I reach the stairs and look back at him, he stands by the window staring out at the stables. Good, I hope the bastard feels guilty.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

DAYS LATER

Every morning, I woke to candy placed on the end of my bed from Gannon.

Ivy was staying in the king's old quarters and no one had been able to get close to her.

Not even me. Clarice explains she is fretting for the king, and it turns she-wolves savage.

However, because things have been so chaotic around here, I have hardly had a chance to see Gannon.

Though he has been leaving candy and craft supplies in my room or his for me to find when I clean it.

Which only makes me feel more guilty when I find them each day.

This morning is no different when I find a bunch of roses on the end of my bed, with chocolate.

I pick them up, putting them in a vase on the windowsill before getting ready for work.

Today, we are holding funerals for the rogues who were found dead, and I have to help Clarice in the kitchens to cater for it.

Grabbing my uniform, I slip it on and move toward the door.

Although, the moment I step out the door, I find Liam is waiting in the hall, leaning against Dustin's doorframe.

"Gannon spent all afternoon looking for you, Abbie, while you were off with Kade. You still haven't told him," Liam states as I close my door.

"I haven't had a chance because he has been busy," I tell him, walking past him.

"Have you decided?" he asks, and I sigh. How can I decide when I barely know either of them really? I'm not sure I can reject Kade. The mate bond is stronger than I was ever told about. It make me crave my mate, and fills me with loneliness when he is away.

"Kade is my mate, Liam. It is a blessing from the Moon Goddess," I tell him, walking down the stairs.

"Not all mates are blessings. Kade doesn't want you. He just knows by keeping you, it makes him stronger," he snaps, keeping up with me. I scoff because it sounded ridiculous. Liam grabs my arm stopping me.

"He is using you. How can you not see that?" he snaps.

"Using me?" I laugh. "I have nothing to offer him. He isn't using me, Liam. You know nothing of our relationship." Now Liam scoffs and folds his arms across his chest.

"So he told you he has kids and a wife?" Liam asks and I blink at him before getting angry. He would say that just because I want to try to make this work with my mate?

“You’re lying,” I growl.

“Ask him. To Kade, you are just another side piece with the added benefit that his wolf side will get stronger having his fated mate,” Liam growls at me and my hand moves before I even registered what I did.

My hand connects with his face that he would say such outrageous things about Kade when he has been nothing but nice to me.

The slap is loud, and I gulp when his head whips to the side before turning back to glare at me. “I will let that one slide since I know you are blinded by your bond, but I would not recommend hitting me again.” Liam snarls, stepping closer to me when I hear Gannon’s voice.

“What’s going on here?” he asks, and I lift my head, peering to the top of the stairs to see Gannon coming down them.

Liam arches an eyebrow at me before clicking his tongue.

“I warned you,” Liam hisses at me, turning to speak to Gannon.

Yet my hand reaches out and I grip his wrist. He looks down at my hand before looking back at me.

“Tell him because I won’t lie if he asks me,” Liam says before stalking off. My gaze darts to Gannon, who is watching us as he comes closer. He watches Liam leave, stopping next to me.

“Are you going to explain why you just slapped my friend?” he asked, gripping my hand that is trembling. He lifts it to his mouth, kissing my knuckles, and I pull my hand from his grip.



“Gannon don’t. You won’t want to touch me after I tell you,” I tell him, feeling guilty and know I’m holding off. I don’t want to tell him because I want him, too, but Kade is my mate.

My destined mate. Someone the Moon Goddess chose for me and I can’t throw that away.

If I did for Gannon, and Gannon left me, I would have no one but Ivy.

Kade told me he couldn’t leave me, that he doesn’t want to, that he loves me and he will always love me.

So I have no choice but to go with the safer option.

“Tell me what?” he asks, glancing back at Liam as he leaves. Yet how did I tell him? How can I tell him that Kade asked me to leave with him? Gannon turns back to me and my heart is torn. I want Gannon, I also wanted my mate.

He cups my face in hands, and I shake my head, tears spilling down my cheeks. “Tell me, whatever it is. I can try to fix it. Did Liam do something?” he asks, and I shake my head.

“You can’t fix it, Gannon,” I tell him, knowing this isn’t something that needs fixing or something he can control.

“Tell me, whatever is wrong, we can work it out,” he says, pressing his forehead against mine. I try to push him away, but he doesn’t budge, refusing to let me go. When I try to pull away again, he lifts my face, staring at me with worry.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, wiping my tears away with his thumbs. “I.. I found my mate,” I whisper, and he shakes his head.

“What?” he asks and I swallow, looking away, unable to meet his gaze. “I found my mate,” I repeat, though this time my voice sounds dead even to my own ears. Gannon lets me go, stepping away from me.

“Who?” he asks clearly stunned by this information. However, I don’t get a chance to answer when he asks another question.

“Is this why I haven’t been able to find you over the last few days?” he snaps at me. “Why Clarice has been avoiding me?”

I say nothing, knowing Clarice knew where I was, although I never asked her to lie for me.

“Who is your mate, Abbie?” Gannon asks.

“Why! So you can threaten him like Liam did?” I snap, becoming frustrated with everyone telling me to choose damn sides, forcing my hand. Gannon growls.

“I would never hurt you like that?” he says, and I feel instant regret at his words as he looks away.

“It’s Alpha Kade,” I tell him and his head whips back to face me, his eyes turn black, and his canines protrude.

“No. You are not his mate,” he snarls.

“Yes, I am,” I tell him.

“No, Abbie, you can’t be with him. I won’t allow it!” he snarls.

“It’s not up to you, Gannon; he’s my mate, not yours.” He growls at me, and the

angered look on his face frightens me.

“No, you don’t understand. He is not a good man, he?—”

“I don’t want to hear your lies. First Liam tells me he is married and has a family and now you want to try get between us, too. Mates don’t cheat on mates! Liam said it himself regarding the king. He would tell me if he had a family before me.”

Gannon steps closer but I step back. “You’re wrong. But you need to listen to me. Kade isn’t who you think he is. I have known him for years?—”

I hold up my hand having heard enough and he stops, and I open my mouth to say something but then close it not wanting to say something I will regret. Instead, I head down the stairs toward the kitchens.

“Abbie!”

“No, Gannon. I don’t want to hear it.”

“He is married!” Gannon yells at me and I stop spotting Liam waiting by the doors, I growl storming off to find Clarice.

## Page 35

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

Liam wanders up the stairs toward me after she disappears, and I stare at him before snarling. “What did you do?” I snap at him.

“Same as you. I told her the truth. She is just blinded by the mate bond,” he says, shaking his head.

“I can’t let her leave with him,” I mutter, and Liam climbs the rest of the stairs and stops beside me.

“Sometimes you need to let them see for themselves. Everything comes to light eventually,” he states.

“I don’t want what’s left over after he breaks her,” I tell him. No way can I handle seeing that sort of heartache. The same heartache Liam and I endured.

“I know, brother, but the king already granted him permission to take her when he leaves,” Liam tells me.

“He what?” I asked. Liam nods and frowns.

“I saw kade stop by last night, so I decided to listen in. Kyson told him if she wants to go she can.”

My stomach drops and a cold feeling settles over me. “No! I won’t allow it!” I snarl. How could he agree to such a thing?

“You stop her, and she will question if she made the right choice,” Liam says behind

me, and I stop on the bottom step.

“She’ll come back, Gannon,” Liam calls out to me.

“I know she will. That isn’t what I’m worried about.

I am worried about the state she’ll be in when she does!

” I growl before storming off to find Kyson.

Liam sighs and I peer over my shoulder to see him slip into the kitchens while I head to the king’s office.

The moment I walk into the room, he sighs as if the weight of the world is resting on his shoulders and crushing him.

“You heard the news, I take it?” he says and I fall into one of the chairs by his desk. He doesn’t bother looking up from his paperwork.

“You can’t let her go,” I tell him.

“It’s already decided. She leaves in a few days,” he says simply.

“Kyson!” He looks up before leaning back in his chair and folding his arms across his chest.

“You know the law, Gannon. I can’t stop her unless she directly asks me to force him to reject her.”

“She would never ask. He has her convinced he is some gift from the Goddess!” I snap at him.

“Mates are gifts from the Goddess,” he says, and his brows furrow.

I know he is thinking of his mate who has been rotting away because of his neglect of her.

However, my experience with mates and Sia, I would hardly call them a gift.

That woman was a fucking curse! A curse I broke. And it nearly killed me doing it.

“I won’t try to stop you from convincing her otherwise, Gannon. But once he leaves and if she wants to leave with him, I have no choice but to allow it,” he says.

“And if it were Ivy?” I ask as he stands.

“It’s not,” he states.

“But if it were?”

“I’m not doing this with you today, Gannon.

We need to head to the cemetery. Argue with me over this later.

Preferably after I have had a few drinks so I can turn a blind eye to whatever it is you’re doing,” he says, walking toward the door.

He walks out and I shake my head before pushing out of my chair.

I follow him toward the back of the castle.

When I reach the hill, I see Abbie standing with Clarice while the king makes his way to the bottom of the hill, checking the graves he dug last night.

Abbie glances over at me, but I turn away from her.

I know what that man was capable of, so why can't she see what sort of monster he is?

## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

I 'm waiting with Clarice for the burial to start.

We're holding a luncheon in the ballroom for the staff, but I won't be attending.

I've agreed to meet Kade this afternoon, but still, I help set it up after my altercation with Gannon.

I notice Gannon coming down with the king.

It saddens me when he looks my way, only to look away.

Guilt courses through me, and I turn my attention straight ahead, holding back the emotion that threatens to choke me.

In an ideal world, Gannon would have been my mate, but I have a mate and can't throw him away, either.

I've never had anything, and Kade is mine, and I will fight for that, even if I don't know what I'm fighting for exactly.

The ceremony is just beginning as everyone waits on the hill. It's only moments later when I notice movement at my side and glance in that direction to find Ivy.

My shock must be apparent because she smiles sadly before staring ahead, and I don't miss how her eyes instantly seek out the king. I grip her fingers, giving them a squeeze. She's missed so much, and I have so much to tell her, but for now, it'll have to wait.



The king is standing at the front where I see thirteen fresh graves dug. He's staring off vacantly toward the path leading to the surrounding forest. I feel Ivy's arm brush up against mine, and I can tell she's trying to figure out what's going on.

Time seems to stop, and the only noise is the soft breeze and the birds in the trees. I swallow when I see the open graves that have been freshly dug. Glancing around, we see movement in the far corner before a succession of coffins is carried to the grave sites where the king is standing.

Most of the coffins belong to children, making me think of Tyson.

What if he's one of the children? What if Mrs. Daley killed him?

It makes my heart clench in my chest. Most of them aren't large enough to be adults.

Four of them, I can tell, are adult-sized coffins, but the other nine belong to children.

The guards carrying them stop by a grave, and they set them down before music starts playing from the violinist who stands by the river. We stand silent as we all wait for the coffins to be lowered into each grave. We merely watch.

When it finishes and the coffins are laid to rest, a horn blares again.

After a few minutes, everyone starts climbing the hill and leaving to go back to work.

The place is packed with people, but I only pay attention to the most important person to me here, Ivy.

I grab Ivy's arm and tug her up the hill, back toward the castle.

Excitement bubbles within me as I try to contain my enthusiasm about having her

back in a semi-normal state.

This place is lonely being the only werewolf in the castle besides her.

Not that she's shifted yet, but now she's returned to me; I feel like I can finally breathe again.

Finally, I can let go of the pressure building on my shoulders because with her it's a little bit lighter, and I'll endure it for her, knowing she's by my side.

We go back in through the laundry, following behind Clarice.

The moment Ivy steps inside, I wrap my arms around her and so does Clarice.

"You're back?" I murmur while squeezing her tighter.

Clarice cups her face in her hands, her eyes teary, and she lets out a breath that cannot be mistaken for anything other than relief.

Ivy grips her hands and opens her mouth to say something when the king suddenly enters the room.

She stops, staring over her shoulder at him, and I notice Gannon step in behind him.

"Get back to work!" the king snaps at us before stalking past without so much as a backward glance. I press my lips in a line when I see the heartbreak on her face. Is the mate bond not the same for Lycans? How can he treat her so badly?

I swallow and look away as Gannon and Damian follow after him. Gannon doesn't even look in my direction, just clenches his jaw as if he can't bear to be near me. I bite the inside of my lip before returning my attention to Ivy.

“He will come around,” Clarice tells her, gripping her shoulders.

Ivy shakes her head and looks at me. I smile at her sadly, and I hate how she put on her old maid’s uniform.

She’s supposed to be happy! Happy because the king is her mate, but here she is, forced back into a position I wish I had never needed to see her in again.

She ignores Clarice’s protests that she isn’t a servant and shouldn’t help me when Ivy insists.

“I want to help Abbie. I am not his mate anymore. He has made that perfectly clear,” Ivy tells her.

“You’ll always be my queen,” Clarice whispers, and I see Ivy swallow.

Seeing her sadness just makes the decision to leave with Kade all the more torturous.

I can’t leave her with the king while I run off with my mate.

Ivy follows me to help me do my chores, which I am excited about.

It’s the most time we’ve really spent together since being here.

I tell her about how the king returned yesterday morning and spent the day hand digging the graves himself and half the night, refusing any help when the guards tried to step in and take over.

I also tell her about the castle gossip.

However, I’m too scared to tell her I found my mate and may be leaving her.

Yet as the day goes on and the time to meet Kade draws closer, I'm becoming more excited.

That giddy, excited feeling bubbles in me at knowing I'm seeing my mate soon.

Only for it to dampen when the guilt returns.

It's like waves of pure happiness, then guilt over Ivy and Gannon, then fear of the unknown and excitement that I've found my mate, blissfully painful, a torturous combination.

But when the time comes, I can't help the spring I have in my step as we come into the kitchen.

Clarice sighs and looks over at me, where we stand on the other side of the kitchen counter.

She then rolls her eyes before speaking.

"Go on then," she says with a dismissive wave.

A little excited squeal escapes me before I grab Ivy, quickly pecking her cheek, before rushing off out of the kitchen.

"Wait, where are you going?" Ivy calls after me.

However, I don't stop. All day I've been trying to figure out a solution to my problems, one being that I can't leave Ivy, the other Tyson.

I have to ask if there's any chance Kade will help me get him from Mrs. Daley.

The other thing I have to ask is if he will allow Ivy to come with me, because if she can't come, I'm not leaving her behind by herself.

Kade is waiting for me out front by the gates.

He smiles when I slip out the doors, and I return the smile and as I meet him.

He holds my door open, and I don't hesitate to climb in, loving his scent that I know saturates his car.

Kade takes me to a different place today.

Instead of a cafe or restaurant, he takes me for a picnic by the bridge.

"Are you excited about leaving in a few days?" he asks as we set out the blanket and sit on it. I frown and look at the river running under the bridge.

"I have to leave, Abbie. I can't stay here. I have a pack to run back home," he tells me when I say nothing. He passes me a sandwich and pulls some grapes out of a container. He pops one in his mouth.

"What's wrong?" he asks, watching me. "Is it that Gannon you always talk about?" he demands, and I'm shocked to hear the anger in his tone.

I say nothing, scared to anger him further.

"Sorry. I hate how close you are. And I hate the way he stares at you," Kade says.

"I've hardly seen him," I tell him.

"He was watching you when you ran out to the car," he tells me while taking a bite of

his sandwich. I swallow, tearing apart my sandwich and popping a piece into my mouth.

“Do you know Ivy? My friend?” I ask him, and he glances at me.

“The king’s mate?” he asks.

I nod.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of her. Why?”

“The king hasn’t been nice to her recently. I wanted to know if she can come with us,” I ask, and Kade scoffs.

“And how would that be possible?” he laughs, and my face falls. I sigh, leaning up against the tree.

“I can’t steal the king’s mate, he will kill me, Abbie.”

“And I won’t go without her,” I tell him, and his eyebrows raise.

“You would choose your friend over me?” he asks.

“She’s more than just my friend. We grew up together,” I tell him, but he shakes his head.

“You’re asking the impossible of me.”

“We could sneak her out. The king doesn’t even need to know. He will think she ran away,” I try to reason.

“I can’t believe you are serious about this. I knew you were simple, but damn it, Abbie, the king is a Lycan. Do you have any idea what they are capable of?” he says, a sharp edge in his tone.

He’s right. I’m being foolish. It’s a stupid idea. I look away, embarrassed, and blink back tears.

“I didn’t mean to call you simple. Sometimes I forget it’s not your fault,” Kade says, reaching over and gripping my hand.

“I can’t read, but that doesn’t mean I am simple,” I respond to Kade, feeling the sting of his words more than he probably realizes. He’s the last person I expect to use such names against me.

“I don’t mean it the way it came out. I’ll think about your friend. Maybe we can figure something out. Now, what’s this other thing you mention in the car you want to ask me?” Kade squeezes my fingers, trying to smooth over his earlier comment.

I explain to him about Tyson, watching as he listens intently, nodding. “I know Alpha Brock. I can request the boy for you, if you want. See what he says,” he offers.

“Really?” I ask, excitement bubbling up. He’s willing to help me get Tyson back?

“Only if you behave. And show me that you can look after him when we get back home,” he conditions. The way he says ‘behave’ strikes me as odd, as though I am a child, too. I’m not quite sure what he means by it.

But he’s willing to help me with Tyson. I could keep him and raise him, give him the safe refuge I have found. Now, all I need to do is convince Kade to let me sneak Ivy out. I can’t wait to tell her we might have a way to be free from this place.

## Page 37

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

I look for Ivy when I return to the castle before finally finding her in her room.

Excitement bubbles inside me at the thought of getting her out of here.

I know I can convince Kade; I have to; I'm not leaving her behind.

I can't abandon her, not when she is already so alone; she wouldn't abandon me, either, that much I'm certain of.

When I push the door open and spot her, I rush into the room excitedly and over to her, where she sits in front of the fireplace.

Ivy looks relieved to see me and sits up on her knees. "Where have you been? I have been looking for you," she says before grabbing my arms. She hugs me before I hold her at arm's length, making sure she is okay.

She looks rather tired, and I know it is her mate bond affecting her this way and causing it. She looks so sad all the time. Despite her best efforts to hide it from me, I know. She can't hide it from me, so I'm excited to share this news with her. I know it will give her hope.

"I didn't want to upset you, but I have some news. I found my mate!" I tell her while almost bouncing on the spot as I clutch her fingers.

"Oh, that's wonderful, Abbie. What's he like?"

I blush and then start telling her all about Kade. And what we have been up to, the



places he has taken me before glancing at my hands, praying she agrees to come with me.

“He’s great, but he asked me to leave with him.

“You’re leaving?” she asks and I notice her eyes turn instantly glassy, but I know Ivy. She won’t dare say anything to stop me. She wants me to be happy and I wish the same for her.

“Yes, in a few days, but I have a plan. Come with me?” I ask, clutching her hands. Ivy looks at the floor, and she smiles sadly. I can’t imagine the heartbreak she is going through. “I will convince him. I will convince him to help get you out. We can come up with a meeting spot,” I tell her.

“Abbie, he won’t go against the king,” she tells me. I shake my head. “I will convince him. You’ll see. He will let me bring you.” I tell her.

“If he says yes, will you come?” I ask her.

“But he won’t. No one would dare go against the Lycan King. Kyson would kill him if he took me, you have to see that,” she says.

“He won’t know you’re with us. I’ll figure it out, you’ll see. I will get you out,” I tell her, and she sighs.

“I don’t want to get you in trouble,” she says.

I shake my head. “I’ll convince him, you’ll see,” I tell her quickly, getting up and pecking her cheek.

After dinner, I head to my room, and when I step inside, I find Gannon sitting on the

end of my bed. I stop at the door and peer over at him, wondering if he is here to argue more over Kade.

“Please, Gannon, I don’t want to argue with you,” I whisper.

“I’m not here to argue, just come here,” he says, patting the spot beside him on the bed. I glance at the spot before being nudged into the room from behind, and I jump, looking over my shoulder to see it is Liam.

“She can use my old phone,” he says, tossing it to Gannon.

“I factory reset it,” Liam says, and I look at Gannon, wondering what they are talking about and why both of them are suddenly in my room.

I move closer to Gannon, slightly nervous next to Liam. When I am close enough to him, he reaches out and grabs my hand before moving further back on the bed and pulling me to sit between his legs.

Liam shuts the door, and Gannon wraps his arm around my waist, resting his chin on my shoulder. I try to get up, but his hold is too strong.

“Watch,” he says, holding the phone out in front of me.

“Gannon?” I murmur, knowing Kade wouldn’t like me sitting on the man’s lap, though it is hard not to lean into his warm embrace, his scent soothing and familiar.

“Abbie, stop. I am not stopping you from going, but this? You need to learn, or I will risk the king’s wrath and order you to reject him,” Gannon says.

“What?”

“In case you need me, please. Just this once, listen to what I am saying. I understand you made up your mind. But I need to show you how to use this.”

I sigh, but decide to go along with it.

He shows me some features on the phone, opening and closing messages and the phone book.

“Gannon I can’t send texts, I can’t read,” I tell him.

“This button here, you just speak into it, and it will convert your speech to text, then hit send. Liam also set it up so it will read messages back to you,” he tells me while showing me how to work the device.

“You want me to text you?” I ask him, and he nods against my shoulder.

“Mine and Liam’s number are in here, so is the king’s. If you want to come home, call me or Liam. We will answer, no matter how late it is. Anything Abbie, you ring us, and we will come get you,” Gannon tells me.

“Gannon, Kade isn’t ...”

“I know you don’t want to believe anything bad about him, but just take the phone, Abbie,” he says, placing it in my hands. I take it and he switches the screen off.

“Now unlock it,” he says, and I do.

“Show me how to use it, like I just showed you. I am not leaving until I know you can work this phone,” he says, and I focus back on the screen.

It takes a few tries and Gannon corrects me, but I eventually get the hang of it. When

he is satisfied I have it figured out, he sighs before leaning down and passing me a bag he has by his feet. “I got you a few things and Clarice went into town and bought you a few different sets of clothes.”

“Gannon, you shouldn’t...”

“I can’t come with you, so stop. Let me do this and just accept it,” he says, tapping my leg for me to get up. I let him up, and he stares at me for a few seconds before wrapping his arms around me and pressing his lips to my forehead.

“Keep practicing with the phone, Liam put credit on it for you, already,” he tells me, and I nod. He then leaves me, wandering out of the room, and I sit back down on the bed.

The next morning, I am woken early by someone knocking on my door. Before I can even get up, it opens and Liam strolls in. I sit up, worried. He holds his hand out with a placating gesture.

“Gannon is on patrol. I am just checking if you can use the phone properly; Gannon asked me to double check again. He said Kade is picking you up this afternoon.” I nod and he unplugs the phone from the charger sitting next to me and hands it to me.

“Now show me how to use it. You take this phone with you no matter where you go. Make sure you answer it if he calls, because if you don’t, I know he will go to hunt you down. The king can be brutal when punishing us and you don’t want Gannon punished, Abbie,” he tells me.

I nod and show him. “I will take you to see Kade this morning,” Liam tells me, and I gulp, staring up at him with worry.

“I won’t hurt him, but I will be waiting with you while he picks you up.”

I sigh, knowing not to argue with him. Liam would do as he pleases.

He waits outside my door as I get changed before escorting me downstairs. We wait out the front, and when the car pulls up, Kade gets out, and I can tell he is a little frightened of Liam as he ushers me into the car.

“Liam,” Kade acknowledges. Liam tilts his head to the side, watching Kade but remains silent. Kade quickly gets in the car and pulls away.

“That man is strange. I don’t like you hanging around him,” Kade says as we drive into town.

“Where are we going?” I ask him, ignoring his statement.

“To the cafe, we leave today,” he tells me.

“And Ivy?” I ask him.

“I am still thinking about it. I have yet to decide,” he says as we pull up out the front. We head inside and sit at the back table. Kade hands me a menu, but I set it down on the table.

“Right, I forgot you can’t read,” he exhales before clicking his tongue.

“That is going to be an issue. I hope you’re a fast learner.

You will have to earn your keep. I can’t have a useless Luna,” he says, staring at the menu.

I shrink in my seat a little, not wanting him to know how much him saying that affects me.

The waitress comes over, and Kade orders for us. I remain quiet, picking at my food.

“Why are you quiet? You aren’t second-guessing about coming, I hope. I can’t remain here, I have a pack back home to run,” he tells me.

I shake my head. “I am just worried about Ivy.”

He presses his lips in a line, seemingly annoyed.

“She is the king’s mate, she will be fine. Time to cut ties with her,” he says, and I look over at him in shock and disbelief. Setting my fork down, I get up.

“Abbie?” he says as I grab my phone off the counter, about to text Liam or Gannon to come get me.

“Abbie, where are you going?” he asks, but if that is how he feels about Ivy, then my mind is made up. I am not going.

I walk outside and unlock the phone when it is plucked from my fingers. I glance over at Kade, who has come up behind me.

“You don’t just walk out during a conversation,” Kade scolds me, looking livid.

“I am not going. If Ivy can’t come, I am staying here,” I tell him.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

“Y ou are asking the impossible. How am I supposed to sneak her out?” he demands.

“She can meet us somewhere, and we can grab her on the way. Either that or I stay, Kade. I won’t leave her behind,” I tell him, snatching my phone back off him. He growls and I turn away from him, stalking up the street only for him to grip my arms.

“Fine, fine. What is this plan you have?” he purrs. And I turn in his arms to peer up at him. He smiles back at me. “I’m sorry, love. I didn’t mean to upset you,” he tells me, cupping my face in his hand.

“Now tell me what you want me to do,” he says, and I smile. He is going to help me.

The breeze is cool as the day slows down, and all the servants prepare for dinner and end-of-day tasks.

Tugging the white sheets from the clothesline with Ivy, we fold them, bringing the corners together and placing them in the basket.

Our interactions have been flat most of the day, and she has been quiet for most of it.

I’m itching to tell her that Kade agreed and I try a few times, but then have to stop because someone is always around.

A guard, another servant, so amongst the blowing winds and the flapping sheets, I move closer to Ivy before reaching over and dropping the pocket watch into the front pocket of Ivy’s apron. She glances down before putting her hand in the pocket and feeling around for what it was.

“When the big hand is on the twelve and the little is on the seven, I am leaving,” I whisper as she examines it.

She chews her lip before glancing around nervously, as do I, making sure no one else is around or within earshot. Then I reach into my shirt and produced a small key from my bra that I had to take off Gannon’s key chain when he wasn’t looking, which was a real bitch.

I had to wait for him to shower when he came off shift and I quickly used my key he gave me to sneak into his room before quietly sneaking around and finding the keys.

He had caught me, and I told him I was grabbing his laundry, which seemed to get me off the hook.

I drop it into her pocket before quickly retrieving another sheet from the line to fold.

“I stole the key from Gannon. It’s for the laundry door,” I whisper, nodding to the one we just came out of.

“Run along the river and head west. Keep going, and you will find a bridge. Meet us at the bridge. He said he will help me get you out. You have to be there at 7 PM sharp,” I quickly tell her while glancing around, and she nods.

And for the first time in ages, I see the sparkle back in her eyes as she tries to hide her smile while pulling another sheet down from the clothesline.

“You convinced him,” she smiles, and I smile back at her and nod once.

“Yes, but he said if you’re late, we can’t wait. He said he doesn’t want to be caught waiting outside the town limits,” I tell her. Looking at the sky, the clouds are moving in dark and heavy; it was going to be one hell of a storm when it hit. I just hope she



won't get caught in the middle of it.

"And you're sure he won't tell on me?" Ivy asks.

"He promised me," I whisper before reaching over and gripping her arm. "We will be free. Just not the freedom we used to long for, but actual freedom. Freedom to live," I tell her, and tears prick my eyes. "Always and forever," I tell her.

"More than my life," Ivy says in return. Those words mean more to us than a simple I love you. It means I am still fighting, fighting to remain by her side and her mine.

"More than my life. Always more," I tell her because the Goddess knows the only reason I am here is because of her; the only reason I still suck air into my lungs each day, and if it weren't for her I would have been dead the moment I tied that noose around my neck.

If she hadn't climbed up there with me placing it around hers, too, the rope never would have broke; I would be dead.

Because the Goddess knows I wanted it to end back then.

Sometimes I still do until I remember I would be leaving Ivy behind.

We finish dragging the clothes off the line and stroll back through the laundry doors when something hit me and I shriek.

I rub the spot on my lower back and growl.

Laughter reaches my ears. I spin, spotting Peter, the stable hand boy, then I notice a rotten apple splattered at my feet that he threw at me. That rotten little sod.

“Peter, you little shit!” I hiss, dropping my basket and chasing after him, picking up rotten apples that have fallen beneath the trees.

I start lobbing them at him. Peter is one of the stable boys.

He is fifteen and has a mop of blonde curly hair and is always up to mischief or making a mess any way he can.

I shriek when he pelts another my way before I throw my next trying to hit him while screeching as he tosses one back and I duck.

I gather more apples, filling my apron pockets, when Ivy picks up an apple and tosses it.

Peter darts behind the castle wall just as Dustin walks around.

The mushy apple smacks him in the face, and he freezes on the spot, stunned for a second before wiping the mush off.

I chuckle, unable to contain it while trying to muffle my laughter.

Peter hides behind him before popping his head out and sticking his tongue out at me.

I pin him with a glare. Dustin wipes the mushy apple off his clothes, growling.

Bits of apples stick to his crisp, clean uniform and a chunk is stuck in his stubble.

Dustin’s eyes go to me, and I gasp, pointing at Ivy who shakes her head. He raises an eyebrow at her, a devious smiling splitting onto his face.

“You think this is funny, My Queen?” he asks her, a smile on his lips. I snicker

before stopping when he walks over to the apple tree, making me squeal. I rush toward Ivy before using her as a shield. Dustin picks up a gross-looking apple that was nearly liquified in his hand.

Dustin tosses the apple in the air a couple of times, letting it break up more before he laughs and throws it.

Ivy shrieks and ducks, falling on top of me only to hear him gasp, and Peter burst out laughing, holding his tummy, and pointing behind us.

Turning my head, I look behind us to see Clarice covered in the rotted mush.

We both tense, waiting for the scolding as she steps closer, examining her soiled apron.

She looks back up, and her eyes go to us on the ground where we are and both of us point to Dustin standing by the apple tree with Peter. We look in their direction to find Dustin pointing the blame at Peter.

Clarice glares, and we all froze in place as the old woman stalks toward us before ripping her apron off. “Apple war it is, then,” she huffs, a look of wild excitement on her face. Then she runs over and scoops up some apples. I giggle before jumping up and joining the fray.

### AN HOUR EARLIER

The time finally comes for me to leave, and I am waiting out front of the castle, sitting on the steps.

A small bag sits between my feet that Clarice has made up for me, so I have a few things to take with me until Kade organizes for more clothes.

As the car pulls in, I jump to my feet and rush over to him.

The bond tugs me to my mate, and I am ecstatic that Ivy can come with us.

That I will eventually get Tyson back. Today is a good day; everything's coming together, though I will miss this place.

Miss Gannon and Clarice, but Kade promises I can visit whenever I want.

I smack into his chest the moment he gets out of the car, and he wraps his arms around me, burying his face in my hair before pecking my lips softly.

"Get in the car, my love. We need to head home," Kade whispers, cupping my face in his hands.

Peering around, I try to find Gannon but can't see him.

So instead, I turn to the king and give a quick bow to him.

Surprisingly, Damian gives me a brief hug before I look again.

He was just here seconds ago. Where did he go?

“Where did Gannon go?” I ask, a little disappointed. Alpha Kade grips my shoulder, turning me toward the car.

“You said goodbye to your friend?” he asks me, and I look up at him, nodding.

He inclines his head toward the car, and I slowly walk back to it before climbing into the passenger seat and clipping in my belt.

Kade shuts my door, and I watch as he talks to the king, my hands sweat, and I wipe them on my pants.

After a few minutes, he climbs into the car, starting it. I wave to the king and those waiting. The king stiffly waves back, and I peer up at Kade. “The king looks angry,” I tell him.

“Probably busy,” is all Kade offers. We drive to the bridge where we are supposed to meet Ivy, yet as time slips on, and the closer it nears to 7 PM, the more nervous I get. I pace along the walkway, looking to the path below. Once 7 PM comes and goes, I hear howls fill the sky, and Kade gasps.

Nervously I look at Kade. “I don’t think she is coming, love, she must have changed her mind.”

I shake my head, knowing she wouldn’t have.

“No. She’ll be here,” I tell him, pacing again.

“Abbie!”

“No, she will be here,” I tell him, and he growls behind me. I peer over my shoulder at Kade, and he presses his lips in a line.

“The king knows of her plans. The gardener told him when he heard you speaking,” Kade tells me. But the gardener wasn’t there to listen.

“Abbie, don’t make me do this; I don’t want to hurt you, but we need to leave. Kyson will come for me when he finds out I was in on it.”

“How do you know about the gardener?” I question.

“One of the guards sent me a message just now,” he says, coming over playing with his phone. He shows me the screen.

“You know I can’t read, do the voice to text thingy,” I tell him.

“My phone doesn’t have that feature,” he tells me.

“No, we need to wait. She will come. I know she will,” I tell him.

“Abbie, get in the car,” he repeats, and I shake my head.

“Just go,” I tell him, waving him off and turning toward the steep incline to go look for her when I feel his aura slip out and wash over me.

“Stop this nonsense and get in the fucking car! You are testing my patience. Now!” he bellows the order, and I whimper as I try to fight his command, but my feet carry me to the car with frighteningly quick steps.

Kade growls, slamming my door before I barely get my legs in. I sit there, shaking at his command. He climbs into the car and starts it before he sighs heavily.

“The king is mad at me. You don’t want me hurt, do you? What would the Moon Goddess think if you got your mate killed, all because you foolishly wanted to wait?” he asks.

“What if she tripped or something? What if she’s hurt?” I ask, worriedly.

He puts the car in drive, and it starts moving. I reach for the door handle, but Kade’s hand drops on my thigh, his nails digging in.

“Do you not love me? Did you not hear what I said about the king looking for me?” he growls before once again his aura slips out. “Sit there and be quiet! Think about the consequences if the king finds me. Imagine all the ways he could hurt me,” he orders, and I blink.

My mind is overpowered and does everything he asks. For hours, I imagine possible torture scenarios, my bond aching and cringing when finally he squeezes my fingers.

“I dropped my command. I’m sorry, love. I shouldn’t have commanded you,” he tells me, and I peer out the window, feeling sick.

If only he knew how tortured my mind already was and then he does that.

Forces me to envision his death while my bond tugs painfully in my chest. The guilt forms an endless pit in my stomach.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“That’s okay. You are forgiven. I bet you’re hungry. There is a truck stop ahead.” At

the mention of food, my belly rumbles. He pulls in and there is a small diner. Stepping inside, we take our seats and Kade orders for us. But when the food comes out, I stare at the measly plate.

“You need to watch your figure. Can’t have a fat Luna,” he says as I stare down at the bowl of lettuce.

“Lucky, I am here to look out for you. I’ll make a Luna of you,” he says.

I look at his eggs and bacon, but not wanting to sound ungrateful, I tuck in.

My belly rumbles after we finish eating and climb in the car.

I am still very hungry, and I pinch my shirt that is far too loose, wondering if I am overweight.

Surely, someone would have told me? Maybe not, but I don’t think I am.

I’ve never had enough to eat, and I’ve always thought I looked sickeningly skinny, with the way my hip bones jut out and my ribs show.

The drive takes hours, and I reach into the backseat to retrieve my bag, pulling my phone out.

I have multiple text messages from Gannon.

Yet something tells me not to listen to them in the car.

Kade makes it very clear about his dislike for Gannon and Liam, and I don’t feel like arguing with him over any message he sent.



So I tuck the phone back in the bag when my fingers touch a wrapper. Excitement bubbles in me and I pull the bag of candy clouds out. I open it and pop three in my mouth while reaching for the dial on the radio. Only Kade slaps my hand.

He had never done that before. He always let me choose the station when in his car. “I’m listening to that! What has gotten into you? You’re acting out of sorts!” he snaps, glancing at me.

Am I acting out of sorts? Is it me? Why do I suddenly feel so uncomfortable in his presence?

It’s like all the warmth and safety have melted away.

Guilt smashes me for even thinking I was uncomfortable.

The Moon Goddess would strike me down for my terrible thoughts about my mate. A gift she bestowed me.

“What have you got?” Kade asks when I pop another candy in my mouth. I show him the bag, offering him some.

“Strawberry clouds, do you want one? They are...”

He rips the bag out of my hand.

“I knew you were acting up! For fuck’s sake, you shouldn’t eat candy. The sugar goes to your head.” He winds the window down, tossing the bag before I can try to grab it. “You’re so talkative and loud whenever you eat that shit he gives you!” he snaps and I shrink in my chair.

“Seriously, Abbie, think of your health. And my sanity. It drives me up the wall when

you're blubbering and bouncing on your feet!" he scolds.

He never complained before, and Gannon never said I talk too much. That sinking feeling returns, and I turn my gaze out the window.

Wiping a stray tear with my fingers. "You're not seriously crying over candy?

" he huffs, and I feel myself slip into a mask I had learned at a young age.

A mask Mrs. Daley earned from us. One of emptiness.

Tears won't help you, no, they would get us beat back at the orphanage.

Kade mutters something under his breath.

I turn my thoughts inward, blocking out the world and everyone in it. Going to a place no one can touch me. Going to a place I only visit in my dreams. Grandma's house. Where my childhood was good before it all got taken away from me when we had to go on the run.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

My sense of time slips away, and it is only when Kade shakes my shoulder that I snap back to reality, startled by his touch. “We have arrived, my love,” he murmurs, and I blink, disoriented.

Already? I cast my gaze about, taking in the late hour and the unfamiliar surroundings.

This is not the grand packhouse Kade described to me; there are no sprawling gardens, no elegant fountains, no tall hedges.

Instead, my eyes land on a dilapidated cabin, nestled in isolation, surrounded by an imposing forest. I thought he was supposed to be Alpha of some great pack.

Confusion fills me as I inquire, “Where are we?” The desolation of this place is palpable.

“It’s a safe house,” Kade explains, his voice tinged with concern.

“We have been experiencing troubles with neighboring packs. We cannot risk alerting them to your presence. It would put you in grave danger.” I furrow my brows, about to voice my worries when he steps out of the car without another word.

The wind bites at his figure as he circles around to open my door.

I step out, rubbing my arms for warmth before retrieving my bag.

“How long will we be staying here?” I inquire, my eyes tracing the tiny porch with its

uneven slope and the door that bears the signs of weathered neglect—a gaping crack and a missing chunk from the bottom corner.

“You will remain here until we can resolve the conflict with the other pack,” he replies, fumbling with his keys.

“But...you won’t be staying with me?” I question, glancing apprehensively into the shadows cast by the looming trees.

“No,” he responds gently, his eyes filled with regret. “I must return home to maintain appearances. If I do not, they may grow suspicious and come searching for me. It would not be safe for you.” The weight of his words settles upon me as a deep pit grows in my stomach.

“But is this place truly safe?” I ask, seeking reassurances. It sure doesn’t look safe.

He nods, his expression solemn. “For the time being, it is. I will stay for a while longer to ensure your comfort. My men have stocked everything you may need. Come, let me show you inside.” Urging me to follow him, he unlocks the stubborn door with a few firm kicks, its swollen frame revealing the damage inflicted by water.

As I step inside, the disarray of the cabin assaults my senses, litter strewn about like remnants of forgotten lives, reminiscent of abandoned buildings I encountered near the orphanage.

Within the confines of this forsaken dwelling, a double bed—or perhaps a worn futon—occupies the space, its mattress heavily stained.

Kade flicks on the lights, their feeble glow flickering as he moves toward the minuscule kitchen, so cramped I can easily stretch my leg from the bed to touch the counter.

He returns with a box of matches, placing them in my hands.

“I must depart now, but I shall return tomorrow,” he informs me. “Firewood can be found at the back; you may need to chop some for yourself. Fresh bed linens are over there, and there is food in the pantry and fridge.”

“Wait,” I plead desperately. “Can you help me start the fire? I’ve always been dreadful at it. Either Gannon, Liam, Dustin, or sometimes Damian would always take care of it back in my little room at home.”

“Don’t be silly,” Kade dismisses kindly. “It is dreadfully late, and I must hurry home to shower for work. You will manage just fine for one night. I will return around lunchtime tomorrow.”

“Please, let me come with you. You can sneak me into the pack house. No one will see me; it’s late night, no one will be up at this hour,” I tell him, not wanting to stay here by myself.

“Abbie, love, I need to go. I haven’t got time for theatrics. Behave, and I’ll be back tomorrow.”

With those words, he kisses my forehead before turning to leave me here. I survey my surroundings, settling onto the creaking mattress that digs into my backside. The chill in the air seeps into my bones, causing them to ache.

I glance around, sitting on the creaky old mattress, the springs digging into my backside. It’s freezing here, so cold my breath makes clouds in the air.

I will myself to get up and start the fire.

After mere moments of sitting, the cold seeps deep into my bones, making them ache

from the inside out.

Too cold to even start a fire, I reach for the sheets and blankets huddling beneath them and pull my phone from my bag.

Switching on the screen, I sigh wearily, realizing it is far too late to call Gannon and disturb his slumber.

Instead, I replay his messages, his voice filled with longing and telling me to call him.

As I lie there in the frigid cabin, I can't help but wish for the comfort of Gannon's presence and the warming fires of the castle. The weight of solitude settles upon me, amplified by the biting cold that lingers in the air.

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

The following morning, I decided to take a look around. I try calling Kade a couple of times before I decide to venture out and see what was nearby; I doubted it very much. Besides the road at the end of the long driveway, I saw nothing but trees.

I had just finished eating the last of the crackers which I had for breakfast; the cereal was stale and rock hard.

He told me someone stocked the place, but everything was already opened, and half gone.

Even the milk went bad overnight. But hunger pains are something I know I will get used to.

Hunger was the least of our problems in the orphanage, and we would have to scavenge for food, or sometimes the kids would sneak us stuff.

That didn't last long, though, not after one of them got caught and smacked.

We told them not to worry about us and that we would earn our keep.

So I knew I could last a while without eating, but since Kade has been ignoring me since I interrupted his meeting, I know I have to look around to see what I can find in case he doesn't return.

First, I investigate the back of the cabin, which is putting it nicely.

It look more like a cubby house some kids built.

I find an old barrel which I figure will come in handy to do some washing, so I spend a good chunk of the morning soaking the bed-lined and torn curtains before rewiring the clothes line as best I can.

It leans to one side and has barely enough line to hang the linen and curtains on.

Once I finish that, the sun is high in the sky, and the heat make me exhausted, but still, I power through the need to lay down and rest. I make my way through the forest at the back, wanting to shift, but instead wandering around searching for berries or anything remotely edible.

I find a few birds' nests but am too tired to even attempt to climb the trees to retrieve them.

I also find a small dam. It is shallow; the water looks slimy and murky.

With a sigh, I turn back around and head back toward the cabin.

Quickly checking the clothesline, I'm walking back to the front door when I notice the car parked along the road. I stare at it, wondering if it is Kade, yet as I stroll across the vast dead lawn along the dirt driveway, it screeches as its tires tear off down the road.

Wiping my forehead, I turn back to the cabin, thinking they must have had the wrong address.

Stepping inside the cabin, the tin roof has heated inside to the point that it is hotter inside than outside.

It's like an oven, so hot that after twenty minutes, it is becoming difficult to breathe.



I must have passed out because the next thing I know, I'm waking up to Kade shaking my arm.

Startled, I lurch upright and glanced around. I had fallen asleep on the futon.

"Some of my patrols saw you in the forest. What were you doing?" he asked. I blinked at him.

"Pardon?" I ask, rubbing my eyes and peering at the windows. It was dark outside. Did I really sleep the rest of the day away? I shake my head, trying to regather my thoughts.

"I said my patrol saw you sneaking through the forest. Now, what were you doing out there?" he demanded. I furrow my brows in confusion. It was only a forest.

"I was just looking around. I was also trying to see if there were any berries," I tell him. Kade clicks his tongue, and I reach out for him, needing some contact to know he is really here and not just in my dazed thoughts.

"I can't have you running through the forest, Abbie. It is dangerous out there," he tells me, yet I saw nobody, not a single person or strange scent. He growls angrily.

"And to think I was going to reward you, but after such behavior, I don't know if I should!" he growls.

"I can come home with you?" I ask, excited.

"What? No! It's unsafe; I have told you this," he says, shaking his head at me. He gets up, moving toward the small kitchen.

"I see you cleaned up," he states, glancing around at the small area. Yet I scoot to the

edge of the bed when I see he has some plastic bags on the small counter. My mouth waters when I catch a whiff of something hot to eat.

My stomach growls embarrassingly loudly at the smell of food. Kade smiles, digging through the bag before coming over to me. He sets a plastic container in my lap full of pasta and meatballs. "I had my housekeeper cook you some dinner," he says, passing me a fork.

I look up at him, waiting for him to sit with me. "You're not eating with me?" I ask.

"No, I already ate before heading over here.

" Instead, he watches me while I eat, which I have never ever been so self-conscious of before. His eyes make my skin prickle with goosebumps as if he is judging the way I ate. Or maybe I'm reading too much into it.

When I finish, I wash the container and turned it upside down on the counter.

"See what being good gets you?" Kade says, and I peer up at him. "Good?" I ask him.

"Yes, of course. You behave, and I reward you.

Today I let you off easily with you wandering around.

You understand why I can't have that, right?

" he asks. I swallow because I don't see an issue with what I did, yet the look on his face when I don't immediately reply tells me I have done something terrible.

"I was only looking for berries. I was hungry," I tell him.

"I told you I would bring you back food," he says, rustling the bag at me.

"How do you expect to be my Luna when you can't follow simple conditions?"

"But you never said I couldn't look around,"

"Well, now you know. Don't forget your place, Abbie! You are my Luna. I am your Alpha. What I say goes. What would happen if I presented a disobedient Luna to my pack? I would be the laughing stock. You need to think hard about your actions," he scolds.

"Now, put these away before I change my mind. I will think of something suitable for punishment for your actions," he says, sauntering off to sit on the couch. I stare after him before looking at the bag of groceries.

"That should last you a couple of days," he says, and I nod. Pulling the stuff out, I find a fresh loaf of bread, coffee, and three liters of milk. Packing half the bag away, I turn to glance at Kade, who is texting on his phone.

"Did you get sugar for the coffee?" I asked, chewing my lip. I knew that brand of coffee. It was nasty and cheap. Extremely bitter tasting, Mrs. Daley called it visitors coffee when she bought it, and it was the only coffee we were allowed.

"I will drop you some sugar cubes tomorrow. Try not to use too many. You always chatter too much when you're hyped on sugar," he says, not even bothering to look up from his phone.

I swallow, a strange hollow feeling that sinks into my stomach. Shaking the feeling off, I retrieve the rest of the groceries, finding some dried meats and a bag of carrots. Not wanting to sound ungrateful, I put it away quickly. With the limited supplies, I don't want him taking any away.

"Come here, my love," he says, waving me forward.

I hesitantly move toward him. I stop just out of reach, and he looks up at me.

When he reaches for me, I step back, wondering why he is being like this.

Didn't he miss me as I did him? My bond cries out for him, but all he has done is scold me since being here. Is the bond not the same for men?

"Why are you being like this? Have I hurt you? No! I haven't, have I?" He answers his own question. "I would never hurt you, Abbie! So why are you so fearful?" he snaps.

"I was going to punish you, but I changed my mind. I would rather give you something else. Something I know you will love," he says, motioning me toward him. I shuffle my feet, but he grows impatient, reaching over and pulling me down between his legs.

He sweeps my hair over one shoulder, and I peer up at him over my shoulder.

"Let me make you my official Luna," he purrs at me.

My bond flares excitedly. He was officially claiming me.

That meant he wanted me, that he loved me.

I nod, and he kisses my cheek before gripping my chin and tilting my head back further and kissing me deeply.

His tongue tastes every part of my mouth before he pulls away, leaving me breathless.

He brushes my cheek gently with the back of his hand, then turns my face away before sinking his teeth into my neck.

Pain slices through me, but only briefly when I feel the bond come alive with full force.

Sparks rush over my entire body as I feel the bond snap into place.

Kade pulls me onto his lap, cradling me against his chest. He kisses my nose and I feel my canines slip out.

My soul is screaming out for his, and I lean forward, eager to mark him in return.

Yet, at the last second, he pulls away from me. "I said I was being lenient, Abbie. I didn't say you could mark me! Not after you disobeyed me earlier!" he snaps at me. It is as if he punched me in the stomach.

"But..." he places a finger to my lips.

"When you prove you can be trusted and do as you're told, I will allow it. Maybe once you go into heat," he tells me. My face heats at his rejection, and I turn in his lap, tears pricking my eyes, but I hold them back.

"Now, now, don't be upset. I can still mindlink you, so at least I can keep you company when I am not here. You just can't talk to me back. But you can hear me," he tells me.

"Now get some rest. I will be back tomorrow," he tells me, getting up while I touch my fingers to my neck. Pulling my hand back, my fingertips are covered in blood. I stare at the door after he leaves, trying to figure out what it means.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

The following day, all I can think about is what he said last night about going into heat. I don't want to go into heat. I don't want to do what is expected. Yet I want to mark my mate so that way the bond will form, and maybe he will let me come live with him in the Packhouse.

It is lonely out here, and I feel trapped. Kade has dropped off some sugar cubes. There were ten in a sandwich bag. I crushed them and put them in the sugar jar, hoping they will last.

For the most part, I spend the day sleeping, having nothing better to do, my mind wandering to Tyson, Ivy, and Gannon.

How much my life has changed in a week, and I'm not sure it's for the best anymore.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad here if I had Ivy with me. When I wake up, I retrieved my phone to see multiple missed calls from Gannon. I'm about to call him back when I hear tires on the dirt road.

We had texted, or I voice texted him, but I haven't spoken to him.

And my messages are always brief because the voice text thing jumbles the words, and he keeps asking me to repeat myself, so I gave up.

As the tires got louder, I glance out the window to see Kade pull up. He smiles and seems to be in a cheerful mood. My bond flares and I set the phone down before rushing out the door.

"I have a surprise for you," he says as he leans down to kiss me before stepping back to look at me.

"I spoke with Alpha Brock today. He said Tyson is doing well. And once you're settled into the Packhouse, I can send someone to retrieve him," Kade tells me.

"Really?" I ask.

"Of course. Come on. Come on," he says, ushering me into the cabin. He takes his jacket off sitting on the bed.

"When can I come to the packhouse?" I ask, excited that I can finally get my boy back. That he will be with me and kept safe. I can get my bubbly Tyson back with me where he belongs.

Kade picks up my phone when he notices the screen on.

He glances at it and unlocks it, scrolling through it.

"Make me a coffee, love," he says, and I turn to the kitchen.

When I make his coffee and hand it to him, he has a stormy look on his face.

He quickly sets my phone down. Taking the chipped mug, he sets it on the floor beside him before pulling me on his lap.

"I missed you," he says, nipping at my jaw.

I can smell liquor on his breath, on his clothes, and a heap of different scents that have me sniffing him.

It bother me for some unknown reason. Yet I snap out of my strange fascination with his scent when he squeezes my bum, his hands groping me, and I try to pull out of his grip, but he rolls on the side, pulling me with him.

Panic writhes through me when he starts tugging at my dress. His hands on my body make me cringe, and I push on his shoulders before panicking completely and accidentally kneeling him in the crotch. He growls, clutching himself and rears back.

"Damn it, Abbie! What is wrong with you?" he demands.

"I didn't mean it. You just startled me," I tell him. I shake violently as I move away from him. He reaches for me, but I bring my knees closer to myself.

"I can't believe you! After everything, I have done for you! I was getting Tyson back for you! The least you could do is help me out. I have needs, too, Abbie. Bloody useless at everything you do!" he snaps while I stare at him with wide eyes at how angry he is getting.

"You better not carry on like this when you go into heat. We will complete the bond then. Until then, think about what you just did!" he growls, shaking his head. He retrieves his jacket before leaving, slamming the door so hard a piece crumples and falls off.

I'm no longer here. No, I'm stuck back in the basement as that vile man breathed on the back of my neck as he pinned me down.

As unimaginable pain tore through me, my thighs were stained red with his brutality.

Gone is the cabin, as I am transported right back there, right back where nightmares are my reality.



Where monsters are real, and where I try to end it once he is done with me.

I thought my life was traumatic before that day. But it opened up an entirely new world. I suddenly notice the shadows in the house more. I now take a second glance at everything I would usually only glance at, wondering if he is lurking here waiting. Constantly fearing it will happen again.

I fear seeing my own body because it bears its marks of it. I fear people because I know how much one person can destroy you. It opens you up to realize how truly evil our world is. Now everything has you second guessing the ulterior motive behind one's actions.

Some logical part of me knows I'm not there anymore, yet the flashbacks are so real I might as well have been enduring it all over again. Everything felt real; I could still feel his calloused fingers and the way my tunic tore.

The stinging of my flesh as he ripped my underwear down and felt the warmth of my blood as it cascaded down my legs. His scent was putrid, like rotting meat and steel. His voice in my ear and the taste of his fingers as he muffled my screams of agony.

Even the voices above us, the TV show Mrs. Daley turned up when she sold me to him so the kids wouldn't hear me. The tune that played at the start of it I will never forget. And I swear she used to turn that show up every time it came on, to remind me of what he did.

It was one of the worst triggers because that show was on daily, and the moment it came on, my surroundings faded away, and I was right back there. Right now, that jingle played on a loop, keeping me trapped in the memories of my innocence stolen.

Surviving trauma is one thing. Learning to live with what happened, however, is another entirely. It lingers, waiting in the background to be triggered. Only to remind

you of how helpless you once were, showing you how easily destroyed you can be again.

And right now, I'm plagued with memories I wish weren't mine—wished weren't imprinted on my brain and all because of the way my mate's hands felt when he grabbed me. No way can I survive mating with him if just his touch repulsed me so much it sent me back here to this place.

## Page 43

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

The next week is horrendous. The day after Kade left in a rage, I tried to call Gannon only to find out my credit had run out from texting Kade and calling him. Plus, I called the castle and got their answering machine, not realizing it didn't automatically disconnect when no one answered.

But that wasn't the strangest thing, though. I checked all through the phone, and I couldn't find his messages or his phone number anymore. My phone book is completely empty, and my messages are empty. The only number that remains is Kades.

I ran out of food on the second day. Kade always has some excuse not to visit, or when he does, it is only briefly, and he quickly kills any excitement I have about seeing him.

I never seem to do anything right, yet today I was completely depleted.

My energy reserves died along with any motivation.

I miss home terribly. I never thought I would feel at home at the castle, but coming here makes me miss it.

I miss Gannon; I miss Clarice, even Peter, even though he drove me up the wall. Most of all, I miss Ivy. She is my safe place. The one person who only wants the best for me. She is more than my friend. She is my strength, my armor, and my reason for living.

All morning I lazed around but knowing Kade is supposed to come over today, I

decide I need to do my washing. So I hand scrubbed my dress, knowing it will take all day to dry, when Kade's voice booms in my head.

"Why aren't you answering your phone?" he asks. I blink and answer back only to remember I can't. Cursing, I listen only to hear my phone ringing. I race back inside and managed to scoop it up to see Kade's number pop up on the screen. Answering it, he instantly starts talking.

"Love, the king and Ivy are trying to call you. Answer your phone when they call back."

I glance at the screen and notice the writing on the front with the phone emblem. "Okay. When will you stop by?" I ask him.

"Today. I have good news for you. Alpha Brock said I can come to pick Tyson up next week. Would you like to come with me?" I chew my lip. I never want to go back there again, but for Tyson, I will suck it up.

"He really said that?" I ask. "Wait, does that mean I am coming to the packhouse?" I ask. Finally, everything is turning out the way it is supposed to be.

"Yes, of course. I will message the king and let him know to call you back, okay? I love you," he says, and I murmur it back before he hangs up. But he is getting Tyson, and I'm moving to the Packhouse. I can't wait to speak to Ivy. It feels like forever since I spoke to her.

Not even a few minutes later, my phone rings as I step out to peg up the last of the laundry.

"Finally, you called!" I squeal, unable to contain my excitement.

Even better is that I can see her face if I want, yet trying to figure out how to turn my camera on without help was extremely difficult, yet the king is patient as he talks me through it.

I cry excitedly, waving to her and gushing about how much I miss her when I finally see her face peering back at me.

"Where are you? You look like you're outside?" Ivy asks while squinting into the camera at the background.

"At the cabin. I was hanging out washing and didn't hear my phone. Plus, I ran out of credit. I have been trying to reach you for days. I have been so worried about you. Kade said the king caught you before you could get to the bridge?" I ask her, and she chews her lip, glancing away briefly.

"And someone could have told me how to hang up, too. I rang the castle phone, but it went to some message machine and ate all my credit," I laugh. It's as if for the first time in days, I can breathe, and all it took is hearing her voice.

"Your mate hasn't put credit on it for you?"

"Kyson asks over Ivy's shoulder. I squint at the screen, and my eyes went wide.

"Sorry, My King. I didn't see you in the background," I say.

I thought he left after he explained the camera to me.

His presence make me a little nervous now.

I realize he was behind her all this time.

"It's fine, Abbie. I'm not angry with you," The King tells me, and I chew my fingernail and nod but don't say much, knowing he is right there listening in. I sigh.

"So, do you like it there?" Ivy asks, and I shrug, I can't say much with Kyson there. What if he told Kade if I said I wasn't happy here? Besides, everything would be okay after next week when I finally move into the Packhouse and bring Tyson home.

"Yeah, it's not bad. He comes during the day, but it has been two days since I saw him last. He says he is always busy with work and sleeps there sometimes." I tell her.

Kyson growls behind her, and Ivy peeks over her shoulder at him, and I wonder if I said anything bad that will get me in trouble with Kade. I can't risk angering him, knowing Tyson is so close to coming back home with me.

"What about the people in his pack? Do you like them? Did you make any friends?" Ivy asks.

"I haven't met any of them yet. He said soon, but I need to stay at home first. He thinks I will go into heat soon because I keep getting the worst stomach cramps.

I asked him to take me to see a pack doctor because I don't think it is that.

My chest feels really tight, and it hurts.

I actually thought I was having a heart attack last night.

It's not just my stomach, and I feel fine on days when he does come here," I admit before realizing I'm saying more than I should.

The king growls behind her again, and she peers over at him.

"I like it other than that, but I'm hoping he will take me to visit you soon. He promised I could," I tell her, trying to do damage control. Ivy smiles, also liking that idea.

"If he can't, Abbie, I will send Gannon to come and pick you up to bring you here," Kyson tells me.

"Really? I never got to say goodbye to Gannon. He walked off before I could," I tell him, remembering the day I left. I turned away for a few seconds, turned back, and he was nowhere to be seen.

"Yes, if he can't bring you here, I will send Gannon.

I will put your phone on my plan so you don't run out of credit, too.

That way, you can call Ivy whenever you like," Kyson tells me.

When I hear tires on the driveway, excitement bubbles within me, and I can't wait to tell Kade that the king said he will send someone to pick me up so I can visit Ivy.

Or maybe we will stop on our way back from picking up Tyson. I know Ivy will love to see him.

"Oh, oh, I hear a car. I think he is here," I babble excitedly. "I love you, but I have to go."

"Love you, too," Ivy replies.

"More than my life," I smile.

"More than my life," Ivy says before I hang up. I rushe out to the driveway, only to

stop in my tracks, realizing it isn't Kade. It is that car again, parked along the road. I furrow my brows. Maybe it is a similar car.



## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

The aging door creaks open, its old hinges emitting a loud groan that reverberates through the room.

As the light streams in, filtered and subdued by the curtains, I see the space is enveloped in a dim, ethereal glow.

Liam, a tall and imposing figure with broad shoulders and a chiseled jawline, strides into my sanctuary.

His dirty blond hair tumbles messily into his eyes, adding an air of ruggedness to his already formidable presence.

Despite his commanding demeanor, there is a certain enigma that shrouds his face, concealing the savage nature that lies within.

Frustration etches his stance as he saunters toward me, dressed only in a tank top and jeans.

The sinewy muscles of his bulging arms are on full display, adorned with thick, corded veins that seem to pulsate with every step.

“Get up!” he demands, his voice laced with an undeniable authority. I groan in protest, reluctant to be torn from the peaceful embrace of slumber, but Liam’s relentless determination leaves me no choice.

Standing at the foot of my bed, Liam begins clapping with a resounding intensity.

“Up! Get out of bed,” he insists, his words punctuated by the forceful removal of my blanket.

A mischievous glint dances in his eyes as he exclaims, “Oh la la, what have we here? Sleeping in the buff, I see. Me likey.”

Before I can react, his hand connects with my exposed skin in a swift slap that leaves a searing imprint on my ass. The sting radiates through my body as if every finger has been branded onto my backside.

I snarl in defiance, rolling over onto my back and fixing him with a glare that could ignite the room. “Liam, you fucking twat!” I hiss through gritted teeth, my hand instinctively rubbing the welted flesh. “Get out of my room.”

But Liam remains undeterred, his resolve unyielding.

“No, can do. I have a job to do, and you are coming with me,” he declares with unwavering determination.

I groan in resignation, reaching for my blanket and attempting to reclaim the warmth that has been so abruptly snatched away.

However, Liam’s grip is firm as he snatches it again, tearing it completely off the bed.

“Up, or I will make use of that ass by turning it into my personal cum dumpster,” Liam snaps, his words laced with a dangerous edge.

Anger courses through my veins as I begrudgingly sit up, tossing my legs over the side of the bed.

As I do so, Liam nonchalantly strolls toward my drawers, rummaging through them and flinging clothes in my direction.

With a mixture of annoyance and resignation, I snatch the garments and begin dressing myself. “And where are we going?” I inquire, a tinge of curiosity seeping into my voice.

“Anywhere but this room. I am sick of watching you sulk,” Liam retorts, his exasperation palpable.

Great , the psycho woke me for no damn reason . Pulling my shirt over my head, I fix him with my meanest glare.

“Has Abbie called you?” I ask him as I slip on my sneakers, stealing a glance in his direction. He shakes his head in response.

“When was the last time you spoke to her?” he queries, tilting his head slightly to the side.

“Days ago, a week maybe more,” I shrug nonchalantly, uncertainty clouding my mind. The days have blurred together since she left, merging into a haze of indistinguishable moments.

“She’ll come around, Gannon. She will realize what sort of man he is,” Liam assures me, his voice carrying a hint of optimism. Grabbing my belt from the bedside table, I deftly thread it through the loops before securing the buckle and following him out of the room.

“Maybe ask Kyson for permission to visit her,” Liam suggests as we make our way through the corridors.

Unsure of our destination, I continue to trail behind him, my mind preoccupied with thoughts of Abbie.

We eventually find ourselves in the labyrinthine depths of the castle's basement, specifically the kitchens.

Descending deeper into the bowels of the building, we finally come to a halt in a dimly lit chamber.

“Kyson wants me to find all the archives on Azalea Landeena,” Liam informs me, his voice carrying a note of urgency.

We had long suspected Ivy may be the missing Landeena princess, the rightful heir to the Landeena Kingdom.

The implications of this revelation are staggering, as it means Kyson's treatment of her has been misplaced.

He had believed her to be the daughter of the infamous serial killer Marissa Talbot, but now doubts have begun to creep in.

Too many pieces of the puzzle fail to align.

Having voiced my concerns to Damian on numerous occasions, I had become increasingly convinced something was awry with Ivy's behavior. Her instincts seem more akin to those of a Lycan rather than a werewolf. However, Kyson remained steadfast in his refusal to listen to our doubts. Until now.

Navigating through the cluttered expanse of the storage area, we drag boxes out and sift through them in search of any information pertaining to the Landeena family and their missing daughter, who would be roughly Ivy's age.

Our efforts yield a few scattered files, which we quickly scan before deciding to consult Damian for further insight.

Unfortunately, it becomes apparent we have barely scratched the surface of this vast labyrinth.

The cell is almost inaccessible, with towering stacks of boxes reaching all the way to the ceiling.

And there are six more cells just like it.

When our search finally draws to a close, Liam leads me to a training session with the castle's men and what remains of the Landeena guards.

The day stretches on, filled with physical exertion and the relentless pursuit of honing our skills.

Amidst it all, I attempt to call Abbie, my longing for her presence gnawing at my heart.

Liam, ever vigilant, seems determined to keep me distracted. I wish he would stop babysitting me.

As the shift comes to a close, we make our way back to my room within the castle's confines. Stepping through the threshold, I groan in frustration as Liam follows closely behind.

"Come on, Liam, leave me be," I growl, my frustration seeping into my voice as I stalk toward the bathroom in need of a quick shower.

The hot water cascades over me, washing away the grime and tension of the day.

However, when I step out, I find Liam still lingering in my room, his eyes fixated on my personal belongings.

Snatching the photos of Sia and Abbie from his hands, I confront him with a mixture of annoyance and anger.

“Liam!” I snarl through gritted teeth, my voice laced with frustration. He exhales heavily before moving toward my bed and taking a seat.

“By the way, Kyson granted you leave to visit Abbie,” Liam states matter-of-factly, his words hanging in the air. I sigh in acknowledgment, realizing he must have convinced Kyson or perhaps enlisted Damian’s help in persuading the king.

“You didn’t have to get involved,” I mutter, placing the photos back in their folder with a sense of careful reverence.

“When you get her back, are you going to tell her about killing her aunt?” Liam’s question hangs heavy in the air, causing me to swallow hard as my gaze averts to his penetrating stare.

“More importantly, are you going to tell the king about who Sia truly was?” he presses further, his voice filled with a mix of concern and curiosity.

“It changes nothing. We dealt with Sia in the end, and she never had the chance to carry out her nefarious plans. What good would come from dredging up the past? Nothing but turmoil,” I respond, my voice tinged with resignation.

“The king wouldn’t be angered by your actions against Sia and her mother,” Liam asserts, his gaze unwavering as he locks eyes with me.

“Are you speaking solely about my involvement or considering everything?” I

counter, my tone laced with a hint of skepticism.

“If Kyson were to discover the truth, he might hold Abbie accountable. Assuming guilt by association. Look at what he has done to Ivy. I won’t risk it with Abbie,” I explain, my words laden with a sense of protectiveness toward the woman I love.

Liam takes a seat at the edge of the bed, his posture reflective of deep thought.

“And what about Abbie?” he probes further. “You have to tell her about us. She will find out, Gannon. Secrets like this don’t remain hidden forever.”

“Tell her what exactly? That my mate chose you over me? Or how I felt the bond breaking every time she fucked my best friend? Or perhaps I should inform her about how we tore her beloved aunt apart when we discovered the truth about each other?” The bitterness in my voice is palpable as I unleash my pent-up frustration.

Liam sighs, his expression filled with a mixture of sympathy and understanding. “Abbie would understand. I just don’t want this one secret to tear you apart again once you have her back. If she were to uncover it on her own, the consequences could be dire.”

“The only person who knows about this, Liam, is you. Unless you plan on revealing it to her, there is no way for her to find out,” I retort sharply. Liam shakes his head, his expression a mix of resignation and concern.

“Just think about it, Gannon. I will support you, no matter what you decide. But I believe Abbie deserves to know the truth about her parents and the circumstances they were running from.”

“We can’t say for certain. We only recently discovered Sia had a twin sister. There could be numerous reasons why Abbie’s parents went rogue,” I argue, desperately

clinging to the shreds of doubt that remain.

“But it does make sense, doesn’t it? Why would Abbie’s parents willingly become rogues?

They were fleeing from someone. We might not have known about it until Abbie entered the picture, and you stumbled upon those files, but now it’s clear who they were running from.

Abbie has a right to know, at the very least, that her aunt was your true mate,” Liam concludes before turning toward the door.

“Get some sleep, brother. I’ll make sure your car is ready for your departure first thing in the morning to see Abbie.

Hopefully, you can bring her home,” he says, his voice filled with a sense of hope and determination.

With that, he shuts the door, leaving me with a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions.

I exhale deeply, retrieving my clothes and slipping into bed.

Tomorrow holds the promise of reuniting with Abbie, and I can only hope my words and presence will be enough to convince her to return with me.

If not, I am left uncertain of what other avenues remain open to me.

However, I know if I were to ask Liam for assistance, he would willingly aid me in exacting vengeance upon Kade and sweeping the consequences under the rug.

Unfortunately, such an act would require the annihilation of his entire pack.



As sleep begins to claim me, I am left with lingering questions and a sense of trepidation. The truth weighs heavily on my heart, threatening to unravel everything we have fought so hard to build. But in the depths of my soul, I know secrets can only remain buried for so long.

## Page 45

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

Last night, the king granted me special leave while Ivy was transitioning. I have been in the car ever since.

Desperate to reach Abbie, I repeatedly dial her number, hoping to persuade her to see reason. My calls go unanswered, just as they have in our previous attempts. Abbie has been purposely avoiding me, shutting me out of her life.

My mission is to report any issues. It angers me that Kyson won't allow me to forcefully remove her from her mate.

Such an act would certainly create tensions as well as be deemed unlawful, especially if she wished to remain by his side.

As his mate, she belongs to him. However, the temptation to break that law gnaws at me relentlessly.

Love makes you do weird things. I am prepared to face any consequences, be it imprisonment or lashings.

I just don't want Kyson's already fragile political situation as collateral damage.

If it means freeing Abbie from her undeserving mate, I will do it

I know Kyson would hesitate to pass such a sentence, especially under pressure from the packs he governs.

It wouldn't bode well for a king to defy the very laws he helped establish – laws put

in place to halt Alphas from forcibly marking multiple women and tearing them away from their true mates.

That was precisely why Kade refrained from marking any of his wives; technically, they were free if they found their destined mates.

However, Abbie was an exception. He had marked her, fully aware that having a mate made him stronger.

Despite the futility of my efforts thus far, I have no choice but to persist. Going against a mate bond is nearly impossible for she-wolves, and my attempts to expose Kade's infidelity has fallen flat.

So, for now, my only option is to convince Abbie to willingly leave him. He didn't deserve her. Neither did I, but I would spend the rest of my life trying to prove my worth to her if she would have me. As stupid as it might be to try, I have to.

We rarely come this far out into the pack.

Even when invited to stay, as we passed through it sometimes, we always sought accommodation elsewhere.

We feel uncomfortable within packs, never fully certain of their allegiance or potential ties to the hunters.

Caution dictated our actions. Nonetheless, Alpha Kade has shown us kindness, always extending his help unquestionably whenever we need him to send his men to scout for hunters in his area.

He is still a disgusting werewolf, treating women as if they are nothing more than trophies or possessions.

My phone jolts me from my thoughts, and I pull over to answer it, knowing I will soon need to input the address.

Damian's name illuminates the screen, and I swiftly connect the call, placing the phone against my ear.

When travelling we try not to use the mindlink, it can be distracting while driving.

"Have you obtained the address?" I inquire, rummaging through the glove compartment, searching for a pen and paper.

"Yes, I have it right here. Remember, Gannon, remain unseen. If you are caught lurking without formal notice, suspicions will be raised," Damian advises, caution evident in his voice.

"What did you tell him?" I query sharply.

"I informed him Ivy wanted to send a care package," he responds.

"Very well. I'll stop along the way and purchase some items; I can play the role of a delivery boy," I retort with a hint of annoyance.

"Good idea. But please, Gannon, refrain from causing harm. We cannot afford any bloodshed," Damian pleads.

"I am solely here to retrieve Abbie," I state.

"You mustn't force her; you know the consequences if you do," Damian reminds me.

"Perhaps I am willing to accept those consequences," I confess.

“And what becomes of Abbie if she chooses to return to him? You would be banned from entering his pack, leaving her trapped there. The king would have no choice but to administer one thousand lashings and imprison you, as per the law. Don’t make him do that.

You witnessed what happened last time; it nearly destroyed one of our own,” Damian counters.

“But that imbecile forcefully claimed the girl. I am not seeking to claim her; I only wish to take her away,” I argue.

“Semantics matter little, Gannon. Don’t force my hand in ordering you to retreat,” Damian warns firmly.

“This is Abbie we’re discussing, Damian,” I breathe, desperation tinging my voice.

“I am well aware, but our hands are tied. Kade is the only Alpha with whom we have a genuine alliance,” Damian reminds, his tone laced with resignation. I glare out at the forest beyond the windshield, frustration coursing through my veins.

“So, what’s your decision? Shall I command you to return, or can you restrain yourself?”

I snarl. “Fine, I won’t force her. But if he has harmed her in any way, I swear I will kill him,” I vow vehemently.

“The king mentioned that he saw Abbie, and she appeared to be in good health, aside from Kade’s infidelity,” Damian interjects.

“And that is still hurting her,” I counter sharply. “There’s no way it can’t.”

“Gannon!” Damian’s voice rises, reprimanding me.

“Fine, I will keep my hands to myself. Just give me the address,” I concede, fearing he will order me back home after driving all this way.

As a mere Gamma, alongside Dustin and Liam, I hold little power compared to Damian, who holds the rank of Beta.

If he commands my return, I will be powerless to resist. With haste, I jot down the address before ending the call and inputting it into the GPS.

The destination is indeed located outside of town, miles away.

I had expected Abbie to be at the packhouse, for that was where an Alpha’s mate should reside – not hidden away in some secluded cabin.

Kade has isolated her from everyone and everything, including the town itself.

A growl escapes as I realize she is out there alone, especially with Hunters on the prowl.

Starting the car, I drive to the nearest town before stopping at a general store to fill a basket with items. I carefully select all her favorite fruits and candies, products I have persistently encouraged her to try since she was initially hesitant to accept anything from me back at the castle.

Toward the end, however, she had let her guard down, and I had managed to convince her to be with me, only for that wretched Kade to intervene and shatter our fragile connection.

Surveying the store for additional gifts, I find that even flowers are absent from this

meager establishment.

Perhaps Abbie will appreciate a book, I muse momentarily before remembering her inability to read.

A comic book might suffice; maybe she could interpret the story through the illustrations.

If she were to return with me and reject her mate, I could take it upon myself to teach her how to read.

Thirty minutes later, I arrive at the outskirts of Kade's territory.

Abbie's dwelling is barely on the border, and I navigate down a long, winding dirt driveway.

The place before me hardly deserves the title of a house; it resembles more of a shack – a structure that seems poised to crumble with a mere gust of wind.

I catch sight of Abbie at the clothesline, her gaze shifting toward my approaching car.

Shielding her eyes from the sun's glare, she squints to discern my identity.

Swiftly parking the car, I send a text message to Damian as per his request. Abbie gazes apprehensively at the vehicle, her worry evident.

I wonder why a random car would cause her concern.

Nevertheless, she appears unchanged – save for a slight tan, as if she has spent ample time outdoors.

Her cheeks bear hollow contours, more pronounced than when she departed, and her skin wears a wearied pallor.

Despite these signs of fatigue, she seems to be holding up well, or so I hope.

“Oh, it’s you,” Abbie states, her tone laced with nervousness as she approaches. “Why are you here?” she asks, her lips caught between her teeth.

“What? Is that all you have to say?” I inquire, raising an eyebrow in surprise. A small smile tugs at the corner of her lips before she rushes toward me, and I swiftly enclose her in my embrace.

“God, how I’ve missed you,” I confess with sincerity. Abbie nods, her thin arms wrapping around my neck. She lets out a relieved breath, and I can’t help but wonder why she was anxious about an unfamiliar vehicle. But for now, she is safe, and that is all that matters.

“Why are you here?” she murmurs.



## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

My face nestles in the curve of her neck, seeking solace in the delicate intermingling of scents. The familiar fragrance of her skin, a sweet blend of vanilla and lavender, wraps around me like a comforting embrace. Her question hangs in the air, dripping with skepticism and a hint of longing.

“Why are you here?” she repeats, her voice wavering with a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

“To see you,” I reply, my words laced with an undercurrent of urgency, trying to hide my disappointment that she isn’t more excited to see me.

“Why else? You haven’t been answering my calls.

” Gently, I guide her back onto her feet, my gaze fixed upon her.

It’s impossible not to notice the weight she has lost, a feat that defies logic given her already slender frame.

Her pants, rolled at the hips to keep them from slipping off, appear several sizes too big.

Even her white shirt, a piece borrowed from Kade’s wardrobe, hangs loosely on her fragile form.

And as I observe her, I can’t help but notice the nervous glances she steals down the driveway.

Instinctively, I turn my head to follow her gaze.

“Expecting someone?” I inquire, a note of caution creeping into my voice.

“Kade hasn’t been by for a couple of days,” she confesses, her voice tinged with uncertainty. “He said he was out of town, but...” She leaves the unspoken words to hang between us.

“But what?” I press, my curiosity piqued.

“Nothing,” she dismisses with a forced laugh. “Probably just me being paranoid.” She gestures toward the kitchen. “Coffee?”

I nod in response and make my way back to my car, retrieving the bags before joining her inside.

The worn porch creaks beneath my weight as I step gingerly across its aging planks.

As she opens the door, it swings with a slight tilt, its hinges worn and weary.

Stepping into the dwelling, I can’t help but be struck by its tiny size.

The kitchen, bedroom, and living room mold together as one in this cramped space.

“Where is the bathroom?” I ask, my curiosity leading me to seek out the necessities.

“There’s an outhouse out back,” she nonchalantly replies, her attention focused on turning on the stove and filling a camping kettle.

I scan the surroundings in disbelief, my mind struggling to reconcile this meager existence with the knowledge Kade, the leader of one of the wealthiest packs, is her

mate.

There is no bed, only a fold-out couch neatly made and calling to mind images of discomfort.

I perch on its edge, feeling the groan of weary springs and the bar at the center of the bed digs into my backside.

“You should come back with me,” I implore her, my voice tinged with a mix of concern and frustration.

“Not this again, Gannon, please,” Abbie whines, her plea echoing with weariness. A growl forms deep within me before I remember the bags clutched tightly in my hands. I extend them toward her, watching as her brows furrow in confusion.

“Take it,” I insist, a hint of urgency lacing my words.

She sighs heavily, her steps carrying her toward me as she accepts the bags.

Placing them on the table, she peers inside, her eyes lighting up with delight as she pulls out a bag of sugar clouds.

It’s a small pleasure I’ve noticed she treasures; whenever we ventured into town together to gather supplies for Clarice, I couldn’t help but notice her longing gaze fixed on these sugary treats.

And so, I made sure to keep a constant supply on hand whenever our paths crossed.

She pops another sugar cloud into her mouth, which stains her lips crimson and coats them with a fine dusting of sugar.

A chuckle escapes me as I watch her struggle to pull her loose pants up, the candy acting as both a delightful distraction and an inconvenience.

Her pants continue their descent down her hips, and she absentmindedly rolls them up once more.

Observing her movements, I can't help but notice the emptiness of the tiny fridge, save for half a bottle of milk and a solitary block of cheese.

Rising from the couch, I swing open the cupboards to find them nearly bare.

"Why is there no food here?" I growl, my frustration simmering beneath the surface. What is going on here? Something isn't right.

"Kade said he would come out soon to bring more," she shrugs, her voice carrying a hint of resignation as she retrieves coffee and tea bags.

"What have you been eating then?" My words escape with a sharp edge, directed more out of concern than anger.

She nervously chews on her lower lip, her gaze drifting toward the forest visible through the window.

"Have you been hunting for your own food?" I inquire, my tone softening as I try to understand her circumstances.

"No, I promise. I didn't kill anything," she stammers, her words stumbling over each other in a rush to explain. "I just took some bird eggs." Her gasp betrays her fear that my anger is directed toward her for resorting to hunting.

"Bird eggs?" I scoff, my disbelief evident.

“I tried to catch a rabbit once, but I couldn’t do it. I swear,” she stutters, her voice tinged with guilt.

“I don’t care about you hunting, Abbie,” I assure her, wanting to alleviate any sense of blame she may feel. “My point is that you shouldn’t have to. You are an Alpha’s mate, not some slave or a hidden secret.” My voice bristles with indignation.

“I’m not... He’s introducing me to the pack soon. It’s just not safe right now. He’s having issues with a neighboring pack,” she stammers, her eyes darting back to the kettle that now whistles.

“Do you realize how absurd that sounds? You’re his Luna, and yet he has you living out here in these conditions,” I argue, exasperation tingeing my words.

“It’s not safe,” she defends him, her voice laced with a mix of loyalty and fear.

“The safest place for you would be by his side, don’t you think? Not out here along the border where anyone could get to you,” I reason, my frustration mounting as she continues to offer excuses, lies he has fed her.

It’s like arguing with a brick wall. I despise this mate bond nonsense with every fiber of my being.

It blinds she-wolves to their mate’s faults, making them gullible and vulnerable.

And all it takes is the smallest flicker of what they perceive as kindness—something she has been deprived of for so long—to make her believe she should trust him blindly simply because he is her mate.

“No, you’re coming back with me,” I declare, my grip tightening on her arm.

“What? No! I have a mate. I can’t just leave. He’ll worry,” she protests, her voice trembling with a mixture of fear and uncertainty.

“Worry? Then where the hell is he, Abbie?” My frustration boils over as I try to drag her toward the door.

“No!” she screams, thrashing against my grip. “Gannon, stop!” Her voice cracks under the weight of her emotions, tears streaming down her face. “He loves me. He said he loves me. He’ll be back,” she sobs.

“I fucking love you. He doesn’t,” I scream at her, my words dripping with desperation.

Abbie whimpers, and I suddenly become aware my claws have slipped out, grazing her delicate skin. Thankfully, the wounds are shallow, and I release my hold on her, watching as they swiftly heal.

“You have a mate out there somewhere. How can you say that?” she demands, her tear-filled eyes searching mine for answers.

“No, I don’t. I want you. Can’t you see that?” My voice cracks with a mixture of longing and frustration.

“But I am not yours. I am Kade’s mate. He loves me, and I love him,” she insists, her voice wavering with a mix of conviction and doubt.

“If you think this is love, you are mistaken. Love doesn’t hide someone away.

Love doesn’t force them to live like this,” I snap, my words tinged with both sadness and anger.

Her brows furrow, tears pooling in her mesmerizing hazel eyes.

She shakes her head before sniffing and wiping her hands on the front of her shirt.

“You should go,” she whispers, unable to meet my gaze.

I swallow hard, my heart heavy with unspoken words. She wraps her arms around herself, seeking solace in the comforting pressure of her own embrace as she turns back toward the kitchen.

“Abbie?” I call out to her softly, my voice filled with a mix of longing and resignation.

“Gannon, please... just don’t,” she breathes, her words barely audible.

“Tell me... Tell me you’re happy here,” I implore her, my voice a mere whisper in the air. “Tell me something because this... this isn’t right. I would take care of you.”

“I’m not yours,” she says slowly, emphasizing each word with a quiet determination.

“But you could be,” I murmur earnestly. “You just need to see beyond the bond, Abbie. See through his lies.” My voice trails off, uncertain if there is another way to convince her, to break through the walls that surround her heart.

“You were willing to be mine before, Abbie,” I tell her.

“That was before I discovered my mate, and you’re a Lycan it would never work.”

“I would change you, make you a Lycan, but you need to reject Kade and come home with me.”

“I can’t, he...he... He loves me,” she says, staring at the ground.

“But do you love him? Think about it, Abbie. If he wasn’t your mate, and you are locked up here, would you stay or come back with me?”

“That’s not fair,” she says.

“Answer me,” I demand.

“That would be different,” she says, gazing around at the place.

“You live in a castle. Who would choose this place over that?” she finally says.

“Fine, then if he wasn’t your mate, who would you choose, him or me?”

“But he is my mate!”

“Exactly, the mate bond tells you to love him, to stay with him, it is not a damn choice! But if you had one?”

She bites her lip. “I don’t know! I... please you must leave, you’re confusing me, stop. It all needs to stop.”



## Page 47

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

“Come back with me, even for a little while, just come back, come see Ivy, you wanted to see Ivy, right?” I beg.

“It’s unsafe; I have to stay here; Kade will take me to see her. He promised he would.”

“I’m fucking Lycan. What safer place is there to be than by my side?” I curse while shaking my head and pinching the bridge of my nose in frustration.

“He’s my mate,” she says, even though she looks confused about what she wants. And that stupid marking on her neck I wish I could remove so she could think clearly.

I move toward her, and she backs up, her bum hitting the kitchen sink. “Come back with me.”

“I can’t, Gannon.”

“But you want to, don’t you?” I ask her, and she looks away.

“I can’t leave my mate. It would hurt him if I did.”

“What about the pain he causes you?”

“Ah, not this again, he wouldn’t do that; I’m his mate,” she says, trying to push past me.

“He has multiple wives, Abbie. Why do you think he keeps you out here?”

“You’re lying, I already asked him, and he said you are just jealous.”

“Of course, I am jealous, but I wouldn’t fucking lie to you,” I tell her.

“You need to leave,” she says, but I grab her, pushing myself against her and gripping her neck. My lips crash against her plump ones, and she tries to shove me away when my tongue forces its way between her lips.

Abbie moans as my tongue invades her mouth. Her attempts to shove me off stop and her hands run up my chest, and she kisses me back hungrily. I grip her thighs, placing her on the edge of the sink and pressing between her legs when she gasps, pulling away from me.

“Why would you do that?” she growls.

“Still think a mate can’t cheat on a mate?” I ask her.

She shakes her head. “No, it’s because you’re Lycan, you did something!”

“I didn’t make you kiss me back, Abbie.”

“She-wolves are attracted to men of dominance, it’s... it’s.. it’s in our DNA! You need to leave,” she says, shoving me away feebly. But she is much too weak to move me.

“Abbie, he is no good for you.”

“He is my mate; I am destined to be with him,” she sobs before pointing at me. “You made me. I wouldn’t have if you...” she shakes her head.

“It’s okay to love someone else, Abbie.”

“I don’t; I love my mate, I...” she says and looks around frantically, her body trembling.

“Really, because back home, you seemed to like me, too.”

“Yes, before I found my mate.”

“You still do!” I tell her.

“Of course, I do, Gannon; you’re Lycan, I’m a werewolf. It makes me submissive to your kind.”

“Doesn’t make you love someone,” I tell her.

Seek us out, yes, but I can’t make her love me.

It is in their DNA that she-wolves seek out dominant males for safety, but that doesn’t mean they love them.

I know she loves me, too, or she wouldn’t have always sought me out or let me follow her around like a damn lost puppy.

Damian even offered to tell me to back off.

Still, she refused, saying she liked me being around her, and she never reacted to Damian like this, and he is of higher rank than me; she even asked to be put in my quarters, and we all agreed before Kade came into the picture.

“You need to leave; I want you to leave, please.”

“Come back with me.”

“No! Just go. You can’t force me. It’s against the law. I may be stupid, but I know that much,” she says, looking away.

“You are not stupid; misguided, yes, but not stupid, Abbie, don’t say that,” I tell her.

“Leave; I have asked you to, so please, Gannon, don’t make this harder than it has to be,” she says, and I sigh. I pull my phone from my pocket and glance at the time. I was only granted an hour here, and I am already fifteen minutes over.

“When you change your mind, you call me. I don’t care what time it is; I will come for you. Do you still know my number?” She nods. “My number, Abbie.” She sighs and rattles it off, knowing it by heart. I kiss her forehead before nodding. “Answer my calls.”

“I will okay, just leave,” she says, and I chew my lip before turning and sulking out the door.

When I get in the car, I start the engine and glance up to find her standing on the porch watching me.

She waves before looking away, and I turn the car around.

When I drive over the boundary, Damian rings.

“What?”

“Are you on your way back with her?”

“She wouldn’t come. There is no food in that place. It’s a shithole.”

“She has to come willingly. You can’t take her.”

“It’s fucking bullshit. I should command her,” I tell him, and I should and take whatever punishment Kyson delivers. She would have no choice, I am Lycan, she would do as I commanded.

“You do, and she will always question whether she made the right choice,” Damian tries to reason.

I growl, and eventually, he hangs up when I come to the town.

I nearly drive through before I curse and pull into the grocery store.

I fill a trolley with different foods before driving back, unable to get the thought of her eating bird eggs and whatever she could find in the forest out of my head.

Returning to her place, I swiftly unload the groceries, careful not to make any noise that might disturb her slumber.

Through the cracked window, I catch a glimpse of her sleeping on the fold-out bed.

I knock gently on the door before hurrying away, unable to trust myself not to break the rules and forcibly drag her away.

As I drive off, my mind consumed with thoughts of her, I catch a fleeting glance of her through the rearview mirror.

Her gaze lingers on the groceries before shifting back to my retreating vehicle.

I know I’ll face severe consequences for going back and being late, but I can’t bear the thought of her going hungry.

Damian will lose his mind when he finds out, but perhaps Kyson will understand the

importance of ensuring Ivy's safety?

If she knew about Abbie's living conditions and Kade's deceit, she would surely be outraged.

I'll find a way to tell her, even if it means facing the king's wrath.

## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

My mind reels with the fact Gannon drove all the way here. I've missed him, but I know it's wrong to have feelings for someone else when you have a mate. It feels like a betrayal to the Moon Goddess to refuse the gift she has bestowed on me.

Honestly, I've never considered myself worthy of a mate—someone to love me unconditionally—until I met Kade.

I miss him and wonder if being apart hurts him as much as it does me.

Nevertheless, as I unpack the groceries Gannon has brought and left on my doorstep, I am unable to refrain from thinking about him.

I can't wipe the goofy smile off my face as I chew on a strawberry cloud; he always gave me candy at the castle.

Him remembering these are my favorite, has me smiling like an idiot, but then guilt sets in.

I shouldn't be thinking about Gannon, I have a mate, and I scold myself for my reckless thoughts.

However, it feels strange seeing the cupboards with food in them.

Kade brings a couple of bags every few days, but nothing like this.

I'm always rationing everything, and even then, it still isn't enough to last before he returns.

Days have passed since I last saw him, and I haven't eaten anything since the bird eggs two days ago.

It upsets me that Kade never stays long, only a few minutes before saying he has to get back to work.

This place is quiet— too quiet for my troubled mind.

It makes me miss Ivy and Clarice more. The walls feel like they are closing in more each day.

The nights feel colder and the longing to go home back to the castle grows worse every day.

After packing away the last of the groceries, I decide to go bring the washing in.

I only have these pants and the shirt, plus the clothes I came here wearing.

Handwashing them every day in the sink is becoming tiresome.

I have asked Kade for clothes, even fresh linens. He promises but never delivers.

Stepping outside, I shield my eyes from the sun that is slowly going down behind the trees.

I've split some sticks to make my pegs, since none have been providing, and only half the clothesline still has wires.

I can't wait to finally go to the packhouse.

Kade has told me all about it and how beautiful it is.



I just need to be patient, and soon I will be free to be with my mate and not be at threat of the pack war he is currently stuck in.

Checking the clothes, I see the hems are still wet, so I flip them on the clothesline and hang them up the other way.

Another half an hour and they will surely be dry, and I can iron them for tomorrow.

Going back inside, I stop when I hear tires on gravel.

My heart leaps with excitement, hoping it's Kade.

But when I turn around, I see the mysterious black Mustang parked at the end of the driveway again.

I stare at it, wondering why they come here every day but never introduce themselves or get out.

However, today is different when I see the car door swing open and a woman gets out of the car.

She's gorgeous, with long curly blonde hair half pulled up.

She wears sunglasses covering her eyes and everything about her screams luxury and money.

The woman strides around to the front of the car, her knee-high black boots crunching on the gravel as she leans on the hood.

She's wearing a white cami and blue jeans, her lips stained bright red from her lipstick.

The mystery woman sits on the hood of the car, and I wave to her, wondering if she's a pack member and if I should say hello. But Kade told me not to talk to anyone out here, so I stay where I am. She doesn't wave back, but instead only stares at me.

With one last glance over my shoulder, I rush inside, closing and locking the door. Not that it would do much; the door's hinges are loose, and the bottom of the door is waterlogged, making it challenging to shut and leaving a gap that the mosquitoes like to come in from at night.

I peer out the window at her, staying far enough back, hoping she can't see me.

She sits there for a while, then eventually flicks her cigarette and leaves, making me wonder why she stops here.

Once she finally leaves, I let out a breath of relief and return to what I'm doing.

My afternoon is like clockwork so it's not hard to get back on track.

I nap before bringing the clothes in, then hang them up along the window curtain on a coat hanger.

I make my bed before grabbing the comic book Gannon got me.

The pictures tell a story about a cat with stripes.

If only I could read, the images might make more sense to me, but I am thankful nonetheless.

Feeling a bit hungry, I wander into the kitchen.

The sun is down now, and the day has turned to night.

The nights are the longest, so cold and empty, and that's usually when the most pain comes.

That horrible, heart-breaking pain that restricts my chest. My anxiety always peaks around this time, waiting for it to arrive.

Next time I speak with Kade, I will ask him to take me to the pack doctor.

Something must be wrong, or it wouldn't be so frequent.

## Page 49

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:04 pm*

Entering the kitchen, I grab a cup and fill it with milk, deciding on milk and cookies. I am too tired to cook, and the stove is temperamental, only working when it wants to. Dipping my cookie in my milk, I bite into it. The sugary sweetness makes me giddy.

Sugar always has that effect on me. Kade says it's because I'm not used to having it.

After I irritated him with my constant talking on the way here from the bag of clouds Gannon gave me before I left, he tossed them out the window and snapped at me to keep quiet because he had a headache.

I haven't had anything sweet since, except for artificial sugar in my coffee that Kade brought the last time he came here.

He said it was a treat for being good, but it didn't even taste like sugar and had a funny aftertaste.

Just the reminder of him getting upset makes me tense.

What if he comes and sees me with them? Maybe I shouldn't have anymore?

I don't want to annoy my mate and make him leave when he rarely visits me as it is.

I place the half-eaten cookie back, planning to eat the other half tomorrow, just in case he comes to see me.

Which I hope he will; the bond always relaxes the nights he does.

I put the open packet in the fridge and decide to quickly spring-clean to burn off some energy.

Quickly rushing around, I fill the sink with water and start cleaning the kitchen.

Nothing I do improves its state. The place is falling apart.

After washing my cup, I place it on the sink upside down when I hear car tires again.

My eyes widen with excitement, and I can't help the stupid smile that spreads across my face.

Pulling my hands out of the water, I quickly dry them and race to the front door, tossing it wide open, unable to contain my excitement.

I squeal when I see Kade's car parked out front, and he hops out along with two of his pack enforcers whom I met back at the castle. Kade looks gorgeous in his suit, and I rush down the steps, bouncing with joy. I run over and am about to throw my arms around him. Gosh, I missed him.

But I am greeted with his fist instead. My head snaps back, and I clutch my face, blood spurting from my nose and lip where his fist connected.

Blood stains my shirt and my hands as I look at them.

Shocked, unable to process what just happened, I land on my back on the gravel.

Lifting my head, I see his hand reach for me before seeing Kade's face contort with anger and his once handsome features are now twisted in a cruel sneer.

His fist is covered in blood and his expensive suit is stained with it.

He looms over me, his expression full of rage.

My mate grabs my hair, making me cry out as my neck arches back painfully.

Kade says nothing, just rips me back toward the house; I clutch his hands, my feet slipping on the loose gravel as I try to stand.

I feel the rough gravel scrape against my bare arms and legs as he drags me across it, and my scalp burns violently as he rips on my hair.

I clutch the top step as he hauls me up it, only to earn a kick to the stomach when he is halted.

“Kade?” I cry out as he drags me across the ground and up the steps by my hair.

What did I do? I don’t understand. My hair tears painfully from my scalp when he tosses me inside.

I scream in pain when I land on the hard floor on my hip.

My hands jar as I throw them out, trying to break my fall.

The metallic scent of blood fills the air as it drips from my nose and lips.

Kade kicks the door shut, and my eyes widen when he turns on me again.

“You fucking whore, who were you with?” Kade bellows at me. I scramble back on my hands and feet when he grabs my hair again, hauling me upright.

“What do you mean?” I shriek as he yanks me into the kitchen.

“Whose car was here? Do you think I wouldn’t notice, wouldn’t feel your infidelity?” he screams.

“He stopped in to visit me and bring food; it was just Gannon,” I sob, trying to get him to let go.

He finally does let go, and I stumble back into the sink when he growls, grabbing the back of my neck and plunging my face into the water.

I choke and sputter on the dirty water. My hands grip the sides as I try desperately to pull my face out, only for him to shove my face in harder.

I scream choking on water only for him to rip my face.

“Kade, please!” I beg, gasping, trying to twist out of his grasp.

“You think you can just fuck around behind my back? You belong to me!” Kade snarls, his fingers digging into my skin.

“I’m sorry,” I whimper, feeling like I can’t breathe when he suddenly holds me under the water. I thrash, my lungs screaming for air.

“Sorry doesn’t cut it,” he spits, finally pulling me up from the sink. I gasp for air, coughing, and wheezing as he grips my shoulders, shaking me violently.

“Please,” I cry out, tears streaming down my face.

My throat burns and aches furiously from inhaling the water, making my nose burn, but before I can drown, he rips my head out, and I suck in harsh ragged breaths.

“Did you fuck him, you whore?” Kade screams in my face. I breathe harder, gasping

for air. My hair and face are drenched, my shirt soaked, and the water in the sink is stained red.

“No! I swear,” I sob, knowing that even if Gannon had made a move on me, I would never cheat on Kade.

“You’re lying!” he roars before delivering a hard slap across my face. The force makes me stumble backward and fall onto the floor.

I curl up in a ball as Kade towers over me, his fists clenched at his sides.

“Lying slut!” he screams, grabbing my hair again. I scream and beg, my arms shaking as he pushes me toward the sink.

“No, no, please. I’m not lying,” I beg.

He shoves my face back in the sink, and I claw and scratch at the bench, trying to get air. Water sloshes onto the floor at my feet as I struggle against him, only for him to rip me out at the last second again.

“He brought me food, that’s all,” I choke out desperately, wondering what he is talking about. Kade yanks my head back, ripping open the pantry and fridge.

He snarls, storming over to me and slamming my head into the bench again. Pain explodes through my skull, and I see black as my head pounds to its own beat. I collapse onto the floor, gasping for air as I try to shake off the dizziness.

Blood pools in my mouth from where he has split my lip open with his violent grip. I struggle to peer around through my blurry vision, as panic rises in me, him looming above me.



“What did you just say?” Kade growls, his hand still gripping tightly onto my hair.

“I-I said he brought me food,” I stammer out weakly, trying to catch my breath.

“A man brings you food and you don’t tell me? You hide it from me like some kind of secret?” Kade’s voice is filled with rage and betrayal.

“I didn’t think it was important,” I whimper, tears streaming down my face as I try to defend myself.

“Nothing is more important than what happens in this house,” Kade seethes, his grip on my hair tightening even more. “You’re mine, and everything that concerns you concerns me.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” I cry out, completely helpless under his wrath.

“You’ll be sorry when I’m done with you,” he sneers before slamming my head back into the bench again. The pain is worse this time, and I feel hot tears streaking down my cheeks as darkness starts to close in on me.

But before everything goes black, Kade lets go of my hair and turns away from me. Gasping for air and clutching at the bench for support, I watch as he storms across the kitchen and punches a hole into the wall.

I shrink back against the cabinets, fear coursing through me as he continues to vent his anger on anything in sight.

He starts ripping the canned food off the shelves, tossing them at me, and I shield my head, my body becoming bruised and battered, the bond screaming for him to stop, and my heart twisting painfully in my chest. He snarls, picking up a bag of candy.

“Did you fuck him?” Kade snarls, and I shake my head, sobbing.

My hands shake as he reaches for me, and I put them up to shield my face.

Blood trickles down the side of my head, from my nose and eyebrow, my lip, my arms are bleeding from his claws and my blood stains the floor, my hands, and my clothes.

“Please, Please, I didn’t do anything wrong,” I shriek when he grabs my hair again, ripping my head back before stuffing the candy in my mouth. I try to spit it out, choking on it.

“Filthy fucking pig, you fucked him, didn’t you? Thought you could get away with sneaking around behind my back,” he roars in my face, spittle hits my face with his words.

“You want to act like a whore, I will treat you like one,” he growls.

## Page 50

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:05 pm*

Kade rips me to my feet by my hair, and he shoves me toward the door.

I see my phone and desperately try to snatch it off the counter when he punches me in the stomach, knocking the air from my lungs and I double over.

He smashes it on the floor, my phone breaking into pieces while I try to catch my breath.

He kicks me in the stomach, and I retch.

The little food I had eaten bubbles up my throat and spills onto the floor along with my blood.

Black dots dance before my vision, and flecks of gold as a wave of dizziness washes through me, the room spinning around me violently.

My blood drips from the gash on my head.

Kade's feet stop beside my face when hands grab me, and I am tossed over his shoulder.

He kicks the door, sending it flying into the front of the yard before stomping down the steps.

"Open the trunk," he snaps at one of his men, who rushes to do his bidding.

I thrash, trying to get him to put me down, begging and pleading with him, though it

falls on deaf ears when I find myself tossed into the trunk, and he slams the lid shut.

The sound of the trunk closing echoes in my ears, followed by the sound of the car engine roaring to life.

The inside of the trunk smells musty and stale, with a hint of gasoline from the car's fumes.

The scent of my own blood and vomit lingers in the air, making it difficult to breathe, and I taste bile in my mouth as I continue to retch, my stomach empty and churning with pain.

My tongue tingles from the metallic taste of blood.

I can hear faint, muffled voices and the thud of the trunk hitting the pavement as the car drives away.

My fingers scrape against the rough carpet lining the trunk, seeking any sense of stability as I am thrown around with each swerve and turn.

My body bruises against the unforgiving metal walls, the pain radiating through my limbs.

I have no idea how long he drives, but I am sent hurtling into the rear seat when he slams on the brakes.

My heart beats erratically, filling my ears with the pounding sound of it when I hear the car doors slam.

I can't breathe, panic consuming me, and I try to suck in a hiccupped breath as the trunk opens.

One of his enforcers reaches in to grab me.

I thrash, slapping his hands away and kicking when he punches me.

My head whips to the side, and I feel my eyes swell shut instantly. I groan, dazed from the blow.

“Hurry up,” Kade snarls when I feel a needle jammed in my arm.

It is like someone set my veins on fire as the poison rages an inferno through my bloodstream.

“Don’t worry, love, it won’t kill you, but you won’t be able to shift or heal, just a mild sedative,” Kade mocks as I peer up at him through my swelled eye that feels like it is ballooning out.

The other man grabs me, tossing me over his shoulder, and I groan, feeling sick at just the motion of him walking up steps.

Then, I am dumped onto the red carpet. I can’t even sit up, wholly paralyzed yet wide awake.

My mind races as I try to peer around, yet all I can see is a bed with red blankets in the distance.

Attached to it are different chains and ropes, and the room smells funny.

The pungent aroma of incense burns my nose.

“Sit her up, and make sure she watches,” Kade sneers when the man from before grips my shirt, leaning me against the wall. He grabs my head, which is now lolled forward;. I am dribbling blood, it drooling down my chin. A woman walks in with

barely any clothes on.

She is dressed in intricate black lace lingerie, with a matching garter belt and thigh-high stockings. Her hair is cropped into a short, edgy pixie cut, and she towers over me in her stiletto heels. “Yes, Alpha,” she asks, yet I notice the tremble of her fingers and the shake of her voice.

“This is my mate, Abbie. She is being punished, so we are going to put on a show for her, get on the bed, Blaire.” The woman gasps and spins when he motions toward me with his hand, and she stumbles back, her face paling.

“Your mate?” she gasps, and she goes to kneel, her hands outstretched like she wants to help me when Kade snaps at her. “Don’t touch the slut. Now get on the bed,” Kade snarls at her.

The woman looks horrified at Kade. “But she is your mate,” the woman says, and Kade growls.

“Are you questioning your Alpha? You remember what happened last time you questioned me?” he asks, tilting his head to the side, and she whimpers, offering her neck to him and nods. “Get your clothes off, and get on the fucking bed,” he snaps at her, she looks over her shoulder at me.

My eyes well up with tears when Kade starts removing his own clothes.

“If she closes her eyes, hit her,” he orders the man holding my head up.

The woman, Blaire, quickly strips off her lingerie and gets on the bed, lying on her back with her legs spread open.

Kade climbs onto the bed and positions himself between Blaire’s legs, his eyes never leaving mine.

The man holding my head up grabs a handful of my hair and pulls my head back so I can't look away.

“Watch,” Kade orders me as he leans down and starts kissing Blaire's neck. She moans softly, but I can see the fear in her eyes. I feel sick to my stomach as I watch Kade touch another woman like that. Tears stream down my face as I am forced to watch every intimate moment between them.

I try to look away, but the man holding me slaps me hard across the face, making me cry out in pain. “No closing your eyes,” he growls at me.

Kade continues to fuck Blaire while occasionally glancing over at me with a smirk on his face. I feel so violated and helpless, unable to move or protect myself from this humiliating display.

Pain ripples through every part of my body, my heart crushed to smithereens.

Gannon was right; there is nothing wrong with me.

The pain I feel now is worsened because I not only endured it for so long, but I am also now forced to watch it as he fucks this girl right in front of me for hours, the pain is excruciating, and I pray for it to end.

Kade finally finishes, climbs off the bed, and walks over to me when he is done.

Tears trek down my face when he stops in front of me.

“Open her mouth,” Kade says, and my eyes widen.

I try to move but can't; I can't even speak.

My tongue feels numb; I can only drool on myself.

The sting of tears pricked at the corners of my eyes as rough fingertips grab my chin, forcing my mouth open wider.

My panicked gaze flicks to the woman named Blaire, her sobs muffled by her hands as she lay on the bed.

But my attention is quickly drawn back to Kade as he stuffs his cock into my mouth.

Each movement feels like a violation, his touch alone making me feel dirty and used.

Kade's grip on my hair tightens as he begins thrusting into my mouth with an almost violent force.

My tongue recoils at the taste of her, slick and bitter on my taste buds.

He had already used her for pleasure, and now I am little more than a vessel for his release as he empties himself inside me. I can't help but gag and choke on it.

Finally, he lets go of my hair and I crash to the ground, gasping for air and feeling utterly violated. The taste of her lingers in my mouth, a constant reminder of what just happened. My entire body goes numb, even my mind as I stare blankly at the dust underneath the bed.

I can only stare there, no longer listening, going deaf to my surroundings.

Closing my eyes, I pretend to be back in mine and Ivy's room at the orphanage, remembering the times we would lay on the hard floor gazing out the window at night making pictures of the stars, dreaming of what it would be like to be free.

I never thought I would see the day when I would rather be back there than where I currently am.



Kade leaves me on the floor and stalks out.

It takes hours before I can move my hand.

Eventually, I brush my hair behind my ear.

It had been annoying me, obscuring my vision for hours and tickling my nose.

I try and blow it away to no avail, so I eventually use my hand, having regained some feeling back.

My fingertips brush the scar behind my ear, and I suck in a shaky breath.

“More than my life, more than my life,” I repeatedly whisper to myself as I cry because she is the only person I’m holding on for.

“More than my life.”