

The Beast And The Blessed by Ashley Breanne

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Twenty-One: Natalie

Natalie's P.O.V.

Never once did he let me go that night. He *me in every way possible, making sure to keep my heat at bay. The mixture of soft, loving, and hard, dominating touches had me curious about what he would be like when he wasn't holding himself back.

*had scraped his teeth against my neck countless times during the night, and my breathing would stop as his tense body held very still atop mine. I wanted him to mark me. It would not only solidify my place in the kingdom, but it would confirm my place in *life. I wouldn't have to question what I was to him. I would officially be his mate. I would be his queen.

I had also hoped that it would help trigger my shift.

But he never bit down. He never placed his claim.

I moaned as he pulled out of me, *before laying on top of me. The morning sun had just begun to rise, illuminating the room in a soft glow. I could feel my body returning back to normal. I was exhausted, but the heat was gone.

*rolled off me and onto his back, one hand on his stomach while the other held his forehead.

I didn't like the way that he had *down. What had been the best night of my life seemed to be one that he regretted deeply. His jaw was clenched

*, and the hand
over his abdomen was in a tight fist.
“*,” I called out softly as I rolled onto my side, lifting my arm to
place my hand on top
of his fist. He jerked away from me quickly, dropping his arm to
the bed on the other
side of his body. I looked up at his face to see the cold mask had
been restored. Only
this time, there was a hatred in his eyes that made my ribs close
in on my heart and
lungs. “What did I do?”
“Your heat should be over now.” It came out like a statement, but I
answered anyway
with a nod of my head. He stood from the bed without looking
back at me. “Get some
sleep.”
I pushed myself up into a sitting position, suddenly feeling very
exposed as I sat *on
what he had declared last night as his bed instead of ours. He
was right, of course.
The king is always right. It was his bed, his room, his kingdom. I
was just the toy that
belonged to him for him to play with.
He had claimed that I was brought here as his mate, and as his
chosen mate, I would
be a breeder. Yet, not once did he *in me last night. It told me that
it wasn’t part of his
true intentions. He never meant to make me his breeder or to
mark me as his mate.
He only kept me here so I could sacrifice myself for him when the
time came.
Something that I was leaning further away from even considering
doing.
He had lied when he said that I was to be treated as his mate and
as the queen even

without a mark. I was *to ever dream that I would be more than an omega, let alone a queen.

Without the mark, I was no one. When I died for him, he would be just fine to go about his merry way and find a new mate. A true mate, whether chosen or fated. He would find someone he could mark and start a family with.

I glared at his back as he walked into the bathroom without sparing me a single glance, closing the door behind him and starting the shower. I wanted to break the door down and yell at him. If I had to guess, he was probably feeling good about himself, having helped the poor damsel in distress from a night of agony. He wasn't a hero to me. He was a *.

If he was going to go right back to hating me, he should have just let me suffer or at least kept it strictly

physical. There was no need for the way he kissed me, held me close to him, and looked into my eyes.

For all that I cared, we could have just stuck with doggy style the entire night with no talking and kept any intimacy out of it. Now I was stuck with the false memories of last night and the heartbreak of his rejection this morning. I *it. I felt cheap and *.

No mark. No shifting. No mate. No friends.

I had no idea when this war would happen, but based on the recent murder of one of the guards, it was going to be soon. Without being mated to a wolf or having shifted myself, I wasn't even sure if I were to be returned to the Goddess

when I died, or if I would be sent to the God of the humans. I pulled the top sheet up and over my legs, moving my knees up to hide my chest as I sat on the bed. My stare was locked onto the duvet bundled up at the foot of the bed, where it had gotten stuck, wrapped around the bedpost. I felt numb and didn't bother to look up at *as he exited the bathroom, buttoning up his *dress shirt. It was just another day in the office for him. From my periphery, I saw him stop, but I prayed that he would just keep walking. I knew as soon as he opened his *that he would just make this situation worse. This side of him, the one I had grown to *, only ever did damage. "I." He paused, and I swallowed hard as I felt my anger start to rise. "Natalie." His tone hardened as I refused to look up at him when he addressed me. I knew the truth now. He wouldn't hurt me. While he was doing a *job pretending to be my mate, he still needed me. I could do or say anything I wanted. He could do nothing about it because, at the end of the day, it was me who Joselin saw dying to save him. I was the one who made it so his heart would beat another day and allow him to crush the spirit of others or *them if he was so inclined. I pulled my arms around my knees in a failed attempt to shield myself from him, and the pain I knew his words were about to cause. "I really am sorry, Natalie." The scoff that left me got lodged in my throat, and I felt myself fighting the urge to cry. The bitterness behind my statement seemed to take him by

surprise as I looked to glare up at him, meeting his hazel eyes. "You're a king, *. It's beneath you to apologize when you don't mean it."

Twenty-Two: Natalie

Natalie's P.O.V.

Even after a cold shower, I was fuming. I wanted to give Killian an earful and make sure that he understood just how damaging last night had been to our relationship...

whatever relationship we had.

I knew he wouldn't care, but that didn't stop me. My first stop had been his office, but

when I found that empty, I tried every common room that I knew of, including the gym

and the training field. Yet, he was nowhere to be found.

It was like he knew I was on a warpath, and he vanished.

Although the rational side of my brain told me that he wouldn't be scared of me, a

human. Perhaps he was trying to save me from publically embarrassing myself further

after I had shamelessly thrown myself at him last night. It was bad enough that the

servants would be seeing the blood on the sheets from when his claws had punctured

my hips and the proof that we had not been trying for the heir that the kingdom was

expecting.

When it was discovered that I wasn't pregnant and that I didn't bare their king's mark,

I would be seen as a failure.

I stopped in the middle of the garden, glancing around the grounds and ignoring the

eyes on me. There were hundreds of people that I had seen in the

past hour, but none of them belonged to my alleged mate.

I turned to Tobias, lowering my voice even though there was no one in my immediate vicinity. "He is hiding. Is he not?"

My bodyguard smirked as he stared at me, refusing to give away any information on his beloved king.

"Fine," I grumbled as I thought back to where he might be. I had the feeling it was where I would find him, but I really didn't want to be right. To have him go there after the night we had together felt like it would be the final *to my already beaten confidence. It would destroy me.

But as I turned back into the castle, I found myself making my way toward the infirmary and stopping before the mystery door. I was terrified of what I may find, even more so when Tobias stopped several paces back and took his stance against the wall.

I could feel the hurt in my chest as I worked myself up to open the door. Would he be on the other side, sleeping in someone else's bed? Would she be wrapped in his arms the same as how he held me while we slept?

"Please don't be inside," I whispered to myself as I grabbed the door handle. This was the one place I didn't want to find him. It was the only bedroom I had seen him sneaking out of, but it didn't mean it was the only one in the entire castle that he had been sneaking away to.

The room was brightly lit as I pushed the door open, so I knew he

wouldn't be asleep,
but he wasn't there. It was the woman lying in the bed that took
my breath away. Her
chest rose and fell slowly in time with the machine next to her.
The low beeping of the
monitor showing her steady heartbeat, made me freeze. I had
seen portraits of her
before, but I had never seen her in person.
I never thought I would. She was supposed to be dead.
Her dark brown hair matched Killian's, and I knew if she opened
her eyes that she
would have bright emerald irises staring back at me. There was
no crown on her
head, and she was wrapped up in a hospital gown with a blanket
tucked around her.
But she was just as stunning now as she was at the prime of her
life when she had
been chosen by the king and had produced his heirs.
There was a thickness in the air, a darkness that felt suffocating,
and I knew that she
was closer to death than life.
"Your highness," A voice called out from behind me, and I looked
over my shoulder,
not realizing that I had been moving closer to the comatose
queen. The young healer
who had helped me with my ribs several days before stood in the
doorway with an IV
bag in her hands.
"Why hasn't she been healed? How long has she been like this?"
I didn't want to ask
the question that was at the forefront of my mind, but I was sure it
was as clear as day
on my face. Why were the people of the kingdom told that she
had died?
"We have healed her as much as we can. Her wolf is gone, and

her soul has suffered a great deal with the loss of her mate. Even we cannot treat the soul." She moved to the other side of the queen, Lillian Amery. She hung the bag from the metal post, efficiently switching it out for the almost empty bag that had been there before.

I glanced back to the woman who had led our country for decades. She didn't deserve this. She just wanted to be with her mate, but her body and soul were holding on to this world, forcing her to stay here for reasons unknown to me. The clearing of a throat made me turn to the doorway, and I watched as Tobias raised his eyebrows at me before taking his place back against the wall. It was only seconds later that the familiar sight of the king rounded the entrance and stopped short as he stared at me standing next to his mother. His eyes glanced from her and back to me. "Natalie, what are you doing in here?"

The tone he used was not what I was expecting, and stared at him in surprise. After this morning, I had been ready to yell and fight with him until I got the answers that I deserved. But he sounded defeated as he held my gaze. "I didn't realize this was your mother's room," I said, not answering his question but also not needing to. I still had a book full of questions for him that I knew I would never get answers to.

"This room is off limits. Do not come here again." He demanded with a firm tone, and I looked to the healer from the corner of my eye, grateful when she continued to work

as if she didn't hear the king scolding me.

"Yes, Your Majesty," I replied with a calm and respectful tone, but I hoped he understood my anger toward him by the glare I sent his way when my back was to the healer. His eyes softened as he watched me. I curtseyed before walking past him and out of the room.

While I had been tracking him down to discuss last night and this morning, I had been hoping I could do it in a private setting as there was bound to be yelling involved.

"Did you get seen to?" He asked, and I froze just outside the door. He stood still as I glanced over my shoulder at him. I knew he was discussing my hips. After he realized he had punctured them, he spent several minutes licking and cleaning the wounds. It had been erotic last night, but now I knew he was more than likely doing it instinctively and not because he cared for my well-being.

"That would be a waste of time. I can heal just fine on my own." I responded as I looked away and began walking down the hall again with Tobias falling in line behind me.

"Natalie," Killian called out behind me.

"I am just fine on my own." I snapped back as I spun to fully face him as he stood in the doorway of his mother's room. Tobias stepped to the side, moving back against the wall and clearing the path between Killian and myself. He stared at me blankly before nodding once and regaining his stoic composure. Oh, how I hated that side of him with a deep passion.

“My sister has returned home,” Killian said, and I stared blankly at him. It was the first thing about himself that he had voluntarily provided me. He had a sister. If it wasn’t already public knowledge, I might have been happy that he had given me information about his life. “She will be joining us for dinner.” “Great,” I said, my tone full of sarcasm as I turned and made my way back toward the bedroom, muttering to myself. “Now, I have to deal with two of you

Twenty-Three: Natalie Natalie’s P.O.V.

Their low talking could be heard as I rounded the corner, and I felt my stomach tie into a knot as Killian and Princess Charlotte stood waiting for me. I was late, and it was not welcomed based on Killian’s look of disappointment. My nerves about meeting his sister somehow managed to surpass my anxiety about meeting the king himself. While I was terrified of him for his well-known history of murder and aggression, the stories of her made her all the more fearsome. When her brother took the throne, she took to mercenary work. The stories of her slaying dragons, sirens, and banshees were known across the world. She was a warrior. “Here she is now,” Killian said, but the way his eyes narrowed told me that I would be hearing about my late arrival later. “Natalie, this is my sister, Charlotte.” The young woman turned to face me, and my jaw dropped at the stunning princess.

Her hair was a light brown that fell into perfectly styled ringlets. The bright green of her eyes made what portraits I had seen of her mother seem dull. "Please, call me Charlie." She said as she extended her arm toward me. I moved forward, expecting a dainty shake suitable for a member of the royal family. Instead, I was met with a slightly calloused palm and a firm shake as if we were conducting a business transaction. "I'm really happy Killian found you! He needs someone to knock some sense into him every now and then." Oh, I wanted to knock some sense into him alright. But I would start with the long overdue fight we needed to have. "It's lovely to meet you, Your Highness," I said, curtsying to the princess with respect. When I looked up, she was staring at me with her eyebrows together in confusion, and her eyes locked on my neck. She hummed in response before looking to her brother with a raised eyebrow, but he shook his head and gestured toward the table. "Ladies," He said as he pulled out his sister's seat before moving toward mine. I grabbed the back of my chair and dragged it away from the table before taking a seat, making sure to tuck it back in before he could get a single finger on it. He had never pulled my chair out for me before. Why put on a show for his sister? The look of amusement Charlie sent me made me blush, but I held my head high as the servants came forward and placed the first course in front of us. It was not lost on

me that the guards had been stationed outside the room for our privacy, and Charlie waited until the servants left before speaking.

“So Natalie, I hear you have been impressing the pack with your training. From what I’ve gathered you are a quick study.” Charlie said as she took a large and improper bite of her roll. “I would love to train with you. while I’m here.” I reached for my glass of water and took a sip as I swallowed my bite before responding, placing my hands back in my lap. “Thank you, your highness. I have heard the stories of your adventures and would also love to know more about them.”

Killian continued to stare at me as if I were a side attraction at a circus, but I refused to look his way. He wanted me to act as if I were his mate, but he did not want me to actually fill the position.

“I have plenty to share. From what I understand, my team and I will have new stories before we leave here. Rumor has it that there has been an attack, and we have come to join the guard.” Her declaration of wanting to fight against the vampires made me feel relieved, but Killian’s head snapped over with anger. Charlie raised her palm in his direction and cut him off before he could protest. “No need to argue with me, brother. We are more than capable of fighting off a few measly bloodsuckers”

Killian opened his *to speak but stopped short as his eyes turned black. I knew someone was contacting him through their pack link, and I rolled my eyes as I

returned back to my food. That was one good thing about not shifting. I wouldn't need to worry about people interrupting me constantly.

"I see some things never change," Charlie muttered, and I could see her annoyance as Killian placed his fork back down. "I haven't seen you in months, and you can't even spend a dinner with me to reunite without working."

'Charlie, you know that I missed you, but this is my job. You of all people should understand. Now, if you'll excuse me. I will be right back. Something urgent has come up, but it should only take a minute.'" He said as he rose to his feet. I did the same out of respect for his title, but Charlie leaned back against her chair as she glared up at him. Killian moved toward the door, stopping behind me for a quick moment, but I didn't bother to turn around as he whispered, "Be good."

His quiet warning was easily heard by his sister, and I watched as her interest peaked even further. As soon as the door *behind Killian, I took my seat, aware of the scrutinizing gaze of the princess.

"He said he found you weeks ago. Yet, you bare no mark." She observed, falling silent as the servants entered the room again with the next course. She gestured with her finger for them to place Killian's food down before swiping one of the fingerling potatoes from his plate as the staff made their way toward the door.

"That is correct, your highness," I said as I began to cut into my steak. If Killian wanted me to be good, then I would do my best to abide by his rules.

“Please, just call me Charlie. We’re family now.” She insisted as she took a sip of her wine.

“That doesn’t seem appropriate given my position,” I said, placing another bite of my dinner in my *and chewing slowly. No matter how many meals I had in the castle, the quality of the food managed to astonish me each time.

“You are my brother’s mate, the next queen. Your position is soon to be above mine.”

She said as she dipped her roll in the juice from her steak. “You have no idea how good this is after living off of jerky and berries for the past month.”

“I think there has been a miscommunication,” I said as I set my fork down and looked up at the princess, who was thoroughly enjoying her food.

“Elaborate.” She demanded, but amusement and interest sparkled in her eyes. “Tell me what it is that I’m missing here.”

I took a deep breath through my nose, pressing my lips together as I debated

revealing the truth. But who was I to withhold information from the Princess? She

demanded that I explain, and Killian wanted me to ‘be good’.

Refusing a member of the royal family didn’t seem to be following his orders.

“I am not to be the queen, nor am I your brother’s mate. I was chosen by your brother

and brought here. against my will. He has made it clear that he wants nothing to do

with me, and if his witch’s vision is correct, I will be dead soon, and he will go on to

live another day to choose another to breed with. I would love to get to know you and

hear the stories of your adventures, but it will be as your

underling, not as your brother's mate. So, I believe I am correct when I refer to you by your title, Princess Charlotte." I stated as I looked down at my plate of food, suddenly no longer feeling hungry.

I had thought about it a hundred times, but hearing it out loud when my thoughts weren't being controlled by my heat-induced deliria made the reality of it sink in. For the past few days, I had been going back and forth between denial, false acceptance, and anger. But now that I had said the words, it felt so final. I felt my heart breaking in my chest, and I slouched back in my seat.

Killian pushed the door open at the moment, slowing in his stride as he approached the table to see my defeat and his sister's anger. "What happened here?"

I didn't bother to stand for him this time. My energy was gone. "I would like to retire for the night. It was lovely meeting you, Your Highness."

"Likewise," Charlie said as she stood with me, nodding her head in respect. I was

taken aback by her gesture but felt my heart warm that maybe she wasn't like her brother. "We will catch up tomorrow and get to know each other."

I nodded in agreement, knowing it was more of a demand than an invitation. Killian

didn't bother trying to stop me as I left the room.

Tobias was waiting outside, and I bit back my smile as I heard Charlie start to yell

before the door was fully closed. It seemed I may have an ally here after all.

"What the *is wrong with you, Killian?!"

Twenty-Four: Killian Killian's P.O.V.

Never in my life had I been terrified of a woman. I bowed to no one and demanded the respect I had earned.

But as my little sister's face turned red, and I watched as the vein in her neck started to hammer against her skin, I was positive that it was my last day on Earth. She had always been a delicate-looking little princess until it was time for battle. Then the bloodshed seemed to fuel her soul, and she thrived in any fight. She may have been shorter than me, younger than me, and could not shift into the Lycan state, but by the Goddess, she was terrifying when she wanted to be.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Killian?!" She yelled as she placed both palms on the table and leaned toward me. I had yet to take my seat, and after noticing the steak knife touching her pinky, I had no desire to join her at the dinner table.

"Contain yourself, little sister," I warned as I felt my eyes burn the familiar red of my Lycan in warning of her disrespect.

"Oh, shove it, Killian. Don't you dare pull rank on me!" She shouted with a growl, and I tried not to flinch as she slammed her fist on the table. Oh, if Natalie or Joselin could see me now. They would be having the time of their lives. "I expected more from you!"

My jaw dropped at her statement, and I stepped forward. More from me? I had all but killed myself for this kingdom! "More? I have given everything for our people! What

more could you want from me? For the love of the Goddess, Charlie! You just got home, and you are already jumping down my throat for no reason!”

She blinked silently at me, but it was the utter disappointment and disgust I saw there

that made me pause. “I never thought you would end up like dad.”

“I am nothing like dad! I put my people first! That selfish *was weak!” I shouted. The

growl behind my words made the wine and waters ripple in the glasses on the table.

“Then explain Natalie! Do you not see how much pain she is in? Did you learn nothing

from what happened with our parents?” Her yell was followed by the slamming of her

palm on the table, and I took a deep breath to keep from screaming at her. “How could

you justify taking her as a breeder?”

“I didn’t take her as a breeder! I took her as my mate! She is mine!” My voice echoed

through the room, layered by my beast’s as I declared Natalie as my fated.

Charlie stood wide-eyed, all of the anger visibly melting away at my words. I watched

as she sank down into her chair with her hand over her *before letting out a loud laugh

of shock. “Truly?”

I nodded once before moving back to my seat, subtly taking her steak knife away as I

sat down. She was calm now, but I didn’t know how long that would last. I had learned

my lesson with her as a kid not to underestimate her.

She was still my baby sister, but she was a warrior through and through. If I gave her

the chance to fight she would. The only thing she hadn’t fought for

was the crown
itself. She never wanted it and despised being here surrounded
by fake people in the
court. They loved to kiss her ass and then ask for favors before
they could even stand
back upright.

“Then why does she think she’s a breeder. She has to know after
what happened with
dad and mom, that you would never put her in that position. Does
she even know she
is your fated?” Charlie asked as she
picked up her fork and grabbed a bite from her large pile of
potatoes.

I waited for only a second more before joining her and indulging in
my meal, painfully
aware of Natalie’s food getting cold next to me and her stomach
being empty upstairs.

“She doesn’t know about what happened to our parents. She
didn’t even know mother
was still alive until this afternoon. I have told Natalie several times
that she is my
mate. What she chose to infer from that information is on her.”
Yet, the longer I spent
with her, near her, holding her... the worse I felt about it. She
deserved to be happy,
and while I was failing to do so in our relationship, I had at least
hoped she would be
happy here in my home.

“You can’t push her away forever. If you keep going, at some
point it will be too late,
and you won’t be able to repair the damage done between the
two of you.” Her *was
full as she spoke, and I curled my lip in disgust at her lack of
manners. She had been
out for the past several years playing Robin Hood and had

forgotten all etiquette.

“She will be fine.” It felt as if I had been saying that more often lately, and each time I was starting to believe it less and less.

“I know what happened between dad and mom hurt you. They damaged me too. But you are not dad, and Natalie is not mom. You need to let go of their past and start

looking toward your future.” My hand tightened around my fist as the memories

surfaced, and I swallowed my bite of food harshly.

Their screaming would ruin every moment of family time we had. Meals were the

worst because I couldn't just get up and leave whenever I wanted to. I remembered

how excited I was when my nanny would come to get me for my lessons or a nap. I

hated being in the same room as my parents. They had no shame in airing out their

dirty laundry in front of Charlie and me. But to the rest of the kingdom, they were a

united front, a force to be reckoned with.

My mother had been chosen as my father's mate. She had been the strongest of her

pack and was selected to produce my father's heirs. She was a breeder. I had never

seen a woman resent a man more in my life than my mother did my father. He gave

her everything she could ever want and ever ask for, but it was never enough for her.

She always wanted more, claiming to be a prisoner and demanding her freedom.

He tried so hard to make her happy and loved her with everything he had, but it wasn't

good enough for her.

I had done as much as I could for Natalie. I filled her closet and dresser with the finest clothes and the most luxurious jewelry. She had the freedom to roam the castle and our lands as long as she had her guards with her if she left the walls. I had given her everything I could, but I would not make the same mistake my father did by giving her my heart.

A small part of my beast got angry at my denial. I knew deep down that she had already stolen a little piece of me with the way she would look to me for approval when she did something she thought I would be proud of, how she fiddled with her fingers under the table while maintaining the composure and posture of a queen, the way she pulled my hand up and held it over her heart while she was sleeping in my arms...

The rest of my heart I had to protect with everything I had. Otherwise, what else would be left of me?

"I will be nothing like our father. When the time is right, I will mark Natalie and she will be crowned the queen. But I will not risk my people over a woman." I watched as Charlie rolled her eyes.

"You're pushing away your soulmate because you're scared she will break your heart like mom broke dad's. I think you're forgetting that dad broke mom's heart too. They weren't supposed to be together, and they both knew it. You and Natalie are. You are meant for each other, hand-chosen by the Goddess to love and

worship one another
in this and every life before and after. You are the one hurting
her.” Charlie
had a point, but it was hard to accept it when I had seen for
myself the detrimental
impact a woman could have on a man.
I cut another piece of my steak, staring intently at the meat as the
metal sliced through
it smoothly. Joselin had said roughly the same thing, but hearing it
come from Charlie
seemed to hit differently. She had been there with me through
every low of my
childhood. She had the same damage that I did from our parent’s
failures.
I had the option to be better than my father, but that didn’t make it
any less terrifying to
open myself up to Natalie.
Perhaps I would test the waters first

Twenty-Five: Natalie

Natalie’s P.O.V.

Killian was shocked that night when he got back to the room and
found me curled up
in the armchair by the balcony. His eyebrows were raised as he
examined the throw
blanket I had wrapped around me and the pillow I had taken from
the bed.

“Natalie,” He started after I stared at him in silence for several
minutes, waiting for him
to crack and speak first. I didn’t need to be the king to know that
was the first rule in
negotiation, not to speak first. ” We need to talk.”
My hands clasped together on my lap, and I stared blankly at him.
All my anger from
earlier had melted away, and while I wanted to still yell at him, it

almost felt like I had no ground to stand on anymore. I was nothing to him. Yelling and venting my feelings would do nothing if the recipient had no interest in them. His hands tightened into fists when he realized that I would not respond, but I watch with curiosity as he let out a deep breath and relaxed once more. "Only those that need to know about my mother do. You will need to keep what you saw today to yourself."

My lips pursed out as I dropped my gaze in frustration and nodded as it dawned on me. I was not in the need to know. Whether I was to mate with him, *for him, or rule by his side, I was not one of the people that he trusted to know about his family. If I were to be his mate and queen, he would have told me about it. I would have needed to know. But he didn't because I was nothing to him.

"Is that an order or a request, Your Majesty?" I said, letting my frustration sink into my words and my bitterness into his title. In the privacy of our bedroom or in public, I would no longer call him by his name. Not until he had earned it and proved that he was more than my king and I was more than his underling. Killian almost flinched as I avoided his name, and I watched as his shoulders fell a fraction of an inch. If I had blinked, I would have missed it. "It is a requirement of your position to keep classified information to yourself." His

avoidance of my question answered me. It was an order. "Yes, Your Majesty," I said before glancing at the balcony doors and staring out at the

bright city below. Their world lit up the night and took my breath away from the beauty.

I had to wonder what it would have been like to have made it to the human city. What

would I be doing right now if I were a part of the people and not being stuffed and

prepared like a *on its way to the oven?

Of course, the apple in the * *was not as glamorous as the silver and diamond

pendant they placed around my neck, but the outcome would be the same.

I would be served up to my captures and my remains would be discarded of when

they were done with me. My lips twitched as I acknowledged my own dramatics, and I

tensed when Killian moved up to stand next to me. His gaze was not on the city. I

could feel his eyes burning a *into my head as I refused to look up at him.

“You used to call me Killian.” His statement made me scoff as I curled my lip. His

name. I was very aware. I had moaned it hundreds of times last night, just before he

shattered what was left of me.

“That was when I thought you were more than just a king,” I said, the words slipping

past my lips, and I heard him take in a sharp breath, making me instantly regret

opening my *. The memory of him. ripping out my packmate’s heart in front of me had

me shaking as he stood unmoving next to me. “I shouldn’t have said that. My

apologies, Your Majesty.”

He seemed to pick up on the tremor in my voice but didn’t acknowledge it beyond

taking a small step away from me. "You are scared of me."
"Is that not what you prefer? For your people to be scared of you?" The greater distance between us meant nothing. He could still just as easily rip my throat out before I could take my next breath, but he didn't.
"No. My people do not fear me. They respect me. It is the others who fear me, the ones who live outside of my walls. They remain under my rule, but know nothing of loyalty or the lengths my people go to for them." He sounded so sure, that I wanted to shrink away until I was absorbed by the cushion behind me and disappeared.
I didn't know what to say, needing to discuss last night, but not wanting to start the fight that I knew could either end my life or end my life as I knew it.
"Was I too rough with you last night? Did I hurt you?" His question took me by surprise, and I turned my head to look up at him only to find he had looked away from me and was now staring out at his people. His eyebrows were pinched together, and his hand was flexing at his side.
"No," I whispered, feeling my body still and my fear melt away. It was the pained look on his face as he considered having hurt me that told me that he never would. What he did to my hips had been welcomed and the rawness between my legs today was delicious. "You hurt me the next morning when you treated me like I was a common
*that you had paid for with clothing and jewelry."
"I know I have been distant but I am doing my best. I have given

you everything that

you could possibly want to be happy here.”

A *laugh left me at his words, and I glared at him. “What makes you think you know

what would make me happy? You know nothing about me! This is the most you have ever even spoken to me.”

Killian moved forward as he turned to face me, pressing his back against the wall next

to the double doors that led to the balcony. “So, tell me.”

“Excuse me?” I blinked at him several times in shock as he waited for me to respond.

It was the look on his face that had me the most surprised. I had only seen it a few

times. He rarely let his guard down and acted as a man instead of the king.

Yet, as he kept his intense gaze on me, I was stunned into silence. Did he want to get

to know me now?

“What would make you happy? I can give you anything in the world. What would you

like?” His hand gestured behind him toward the city, and I glanced past him and

toward the town of people.

I pictured all of the people below us. The families tucking their children in for bed. The

couples cuddled up, stealing kisses and discussing their day.

“Civility,” I stated plainly, and I watched as his eyebrows pulled together as he

contemplated my answer before I added to it. “Consistency.”

He didn’t seem to know what to do with my request, and I let out a sigh as I adjusted

the blanket around my body before elaborating. “Since you brought me here you have

been hot and cold with me. You treat me like I am this prized

possession that you are scared to break at night but as soon as the sun comes up, you are cold and *.”

“*? I have never been *to you!” He argued as he pushed off the wall and stood staring at me with incredulity.

“You may not have been violent with me, but that does not mean that your actions

haven’t been *.” I pushed the blanket onto the floor, as I stood with him, not liking that

he was glaring down at me. While I was significantly shorter than him, minimizing the

space between us made me feel more confident.

He pinched the bridge of his nose as he closed his eyes and took in a deep breath.

“You wish for me to be consistent but not cold or *.”

I bit the inside of my cheek as I watched him calm himself. “If I am going to have to

*for you, the least you can do is treat me like I’m not some great burden that you are

stuck with. You don’t have to love me, but you can at least be civil toward me.”

Killian’s eyes widened as they melted into the burning red of his beast, and I stepped

back an inch until my legs hit the chair behind me. “Why the *would you *for me?”

Twenty-Six: Killian

Killian’s P.O.V.

Natalie looks terrified and confused at the same time. I hated that she flinched away

from me, but the way she was standing up for herself was admirable. There were only

a few who had ever stood up to me, and all of them were the women in my family. My

mother, my sister, and my childhood best friend.

She fit right in.

“No one is going to lay a hand on you!” I growled, feeling my beast fight for control, wanting to eliminate the threat that we had yet to be exposed to. Something made our mate worried for her life.

The anger pouring from her doubled as she reached up and grabbed both sides of her head, shaking it back and forth as she moved from the chair and began to pace back

and forth. “Then why did you bring me here?!”

My jaw dropped open to yell back, but watching water pool along her eyelids caused

pain to form in my chest, and I reached up and rubbed at the area.

“Joselin said it herself that I was brought here for the battle, that I was being trained

so I would be strong enough to save you! Why else did you bring me here then?” Her

chest moved rapidly as she stopped. pacing and glared at me with her little hands

clenched into fists in front of her chest as if she was imagining wringing my neck.

“No one said anything about you dying. You save my life, yes, but she never saw you

*.” I explained as I stepped forward slowly. Her face relaxed, and her eyes widened as her hands dropped to her side.

“What?” The disbelief in her tone caused a scoff of amusement to force its way from my chest, and I took another step forward.

“Where did you even get that idea?” I knew Joselin wouldn’t keep something that big

from me. She had never lied to or betrayed me before, and I

doubted she would start now. If she did, I would rip her heart. straight from her chest, and she knew it.

"I..." Her eye flickered back and forth across the ground as if she were reading words that only she could. see as she thought back.

I had known that when women went through heat, they were more easily triggered. I *that knowing about the battle before her heat or finding out during her heat, would have caused her thoughts to spiral out of control. I had seen women be locked up in the dungeons while they suffered because of their *state. Most women are marked right away and don't have to struggle through the heat. Those that do, reacted similarly to Natalie. Their beasts would control their emotions, and they would have a harder time remaining neutral. They would be more possessive, territorial, and sometimes paranoid. But they would also feel positive. emotions more thoroughly. Love, lust...pleasure.

Just thinking about how wet Natalie had been for me last night, how she had rubbed herself against me shamelessly, looking for her release had my body tensing, and I glanced at the bed. She had been impacted by her heat greatly. But this was exactly what she was talking about. She didn't need me trying to *her again when we were finally having a serious conversation. Especially when I couldn't give her what she wanted after we had finished. I still didn't quite know what she wanted. I *she was expecting us to ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after.

That's what mates normally did.

But we were different.

"I guess no one did." She whispered. "Huh. I had thought that... Joselin said there would be a battle, and that I would have to save you, I just figured that as a human in a battle against vampires, I would *."

"She did not see you *. She saw you save me." I shook my head as she turned her back to me and began to walk further away. But this time, it was me who was not

done with this conversation. I pushed forward, grabbing her hips and spinning her around until her chest was pressed against mine. "Do not turn your back to me, little one. We are still talking."

Her eyes dilated as she looked up at me with her lips parted. She was still angry, I knew that. But having her pressed against my body had me growing hard as images of her *flesh sliding mine last night began to *their way to the front of my mind.

"So, we are back to 'little one', then? Convenient that you call me by a term of

endearment when you are hard," She whispered as she placed her hands on my chest, sliding one down until she could cup my *. through my pants. I let out a growl of pleasure at her touch, pushing my hips more firmly against her.

"But then I go back to being an annoyance and a burden when the sun comes back up, and you are through with me, 'Your Majesty.'"

My control snapped as she released me, and my hand reached up to grab the side of

her neck. My fingers laced through her hair as my thumb pushed her jaw up until she had no choice but to look into my eyes. She did not have the power here. I did. I would never let her have control over me. That was why I was distancing myself in the first place.

“Do not tease me, mate. I did not bring you here to *for me, but I did bring you here to be mine. If you want to be mad at me for my actions and treatment during the day, that’s fine. We will fight about it all you want.” I bent down and hovered my *over hers.

The tip of her tongue gently touched my lips as she licked her own to wet them.

I felt my *twitch in pleasure against her stomach, and she let out a soft, breathy moan

that had me ready to throw her on the bed and *her until she couldn’t walk. “I can

agree to be more civil, mate. But don’t you dare turn last night into anything other than

what it actually was. I did not manipulate you with. nicknames and kindness, so I

could *you. Everything we did last night was consensual and honest. You wanted me

just as badly, if not more, and it wasn’t just because of your heat. You were laying in

that tub moaning my name as you touched yourself before I even entered the room.

When I hold you at night, you rub your pert little *against me in your sleep, letting out these soft *moans that drive me crazy.”

Her face turned red, and she tried to pull away from me, but I held on tighter, not

wanting her to move just yet. As she relaxed into my hold, I

dipped my head down to her neck and took in her scent. Her desire was thick and driving me wild, and I knew if I were to slip my hand between her legs, I would find her slick. and ready to take all of me.

“You’ll be nicer? You’ll make an effort to be civil and to treat me better than you have?”

She asked as she cleared her throat and pushed her hands against my chest. I released her this time, admiring the flush. along her chest, neck, and cheeks as she tried to calm herself.

Oh, beautiful. You want me just as badly. Last night was just a taste of what I could give you.

“I can agree to those terms,” I said as I continued to admire the curve of her lips and the way the top of her breasts were rising and falling under her tank top as she continued to breathe faster than normal.

Be patient with me... I wanted to say to her but bit back the words. I had given her enough control for one night. I had given her more tonight than I ever had before. But

Joselin and Charlie had been right. Hearing it from Natalie directly, how much pain I had put her through had me breaking.

I would be kinder toward her but still could not give her the rest of my heart. There was too much at stake. We would take baby steps.

“There is one more question I want an answer to while we are on this subject,” She said as she reached up and brushed her hair behind her right ear. Her entire face was

bright red from blushing, and I was positive that I was going to like her question. "You brought me here to breed with me, but you pulled out last night." "That isn't a question," I smirked as I watched her thighs press together as she continued to stare at me. I strode forward, enjoying the feeling of being in control again. Gone was my angry queen, and in her place was the nervous woman I had carried home for the first time. Natalie gasped as I picked her up. Her hands gripped my shoulders tightly as I set her on the bed. She laid back silently as I pressed myself between her legs. When she didn't speak or push me away, I ground against her once, enjoying the breathy moan she let out against my lips before running my nose across her cheek and to her ear. "Do you want me to fill you, little one?" I nipped at her earlobe as she panted beneath me, her chest brushing against mine. "No." Her reply was like a bucket of ice water being thrown over me. It was curt and direct. I didn't want to force myself on her. While she seemed like she was enjoying our playful argument with her body responding as if she wanted this, her voice cut me like a knife, and I stood instantly. "Understood," I said, leaving her on the bed as I turned and made my way to the sitting room, wanting to calm myself before my guards and staff saw me. I could still hear her breathing heavily on the bed, not bothering to

say another word to her as I accepted her rejection and left the room.

Twenty-Seven: Natalie

Natalie's P.O.V.

The night was awful.

I didn't get a wink of sleep, and I was positive that Killian didn't either. Although with

him sleeping in the sitting room, I moved from the uncomfortable armchair to the

empty bed so I wouldn't have to sit up all night.

It made me smile when he came back into the room. Even if we were mad at each

other, I felt heard. He had listened to me the last time we fought and even if he didn't

want to sleep next to me, he still came back. He didn't go sleep somewhere else, and

he didn't stay up working all night. While his legs hung over the end of the couch, and

he was clearly uncomfortable, the small gesture made me very happy.

The next morning breakfast was brought to our room, and I was stunned when Killian

sat down with me at the small two-person table and began to eat in silence. We had

never shared breakfast before, and I felt self-conscious as he watched me eat.

"What is your favorite color?" His question after a long night and morning of silence

took me by surprise, and I blinked at him from across the table.

Civility. I had asked him for civility, and he had heard me.

I smiled softly as I realized that he was making an effort. He hadn't stormed out of the

room and slammed the door between us. He slept in our room, stayed to have

breakfast together, and now was trying to learn more about me. "Blue," I looked away as I felt my cheeks warm. His piercing, hazel eyes were burning into my soul, and my tongue felt like it was tied in a knot as he continued to stare at me.

After I left him high and dry last night, I had expected him to be angry at me. But if he was, he didn't let it show.

If anything, he seemed more at peace now than normal.

"And you, what is yours?" I glanced over the rim of my cup as I took a sip of my orange juice. His eyes locked onto mine, and I smiled at him as I swallowed my sip and lowered my drink.

"Green." He said, and I forced my eyes away from him to glance around the room.

There wasn't a single green thing in here, nor did I remember seeing anything in his office.

I wasn't daft enough to think that he favored that color because of my eyes.

We had a long way to go before any deeper feelings could come to the surface

between us. The physical attraction was undeniable, but it was the walls he had up around him that made it so difficult to get to know him or develop feelings for him.

"That's good to know," I whispered as I smiled down at my plate.

There had been no hesitation in his answer. He willingly told me something about himself. Even if it was as small as a color, it was a step.

The loud knocking on the door disrupted my thoughts, and my smile fell as I looked

over my shoulder at the heavy wooden barrier. I wished I could send them away, but it wasn't proper nor was it polite. More than likely, it was Joselin telling me that I had to train today, and I would owe her an apology for my actions and words during my heat. She hadn't deserved the way that I had lashed out at her. Now that I knew I had been wrong about her relationship with Killian, I was ashamed to have to face her.

1/3

"Put your clothes back on. I am coming in!" The familiar voice of Killian's sister shouted as she cracked open the bedroom door slowly as if she was scared for what she might find on the other side.

Killian grumbled, his hand tightening around his fork as he looked away from me and to the door.

"Charlie, it's safe," I said trying to hide my disappointment behind a forced smile.

Killian had finally started talking to me this morning. It may have only been one question and a one-word answer, but it was a start.

"Oh, good. I was hoping we could spend the day together before we get ready." She

cheered as she walked forward and grabbed the uneaten English muffin half from

Killian's plate. He let out a growl as she proceeded to help herself to some jam before taking a large bite.

Killian glanced at me briefly, and I could see that he was feeling torn. If I had to guess,

he was enjoying our civil time together as much as I was.

"Thank you for breakfast, Killian," I said, and he seemed to light

up when I used his name again. The brief moment of happiness vanished as soon as his little sister looked at him. He pushed his chair back aggressively as his eyes met mine. "It was very nice."

His shoulders fell a small amount at my words, and as he walked past me toward the door, he stopped by my side.

I held my breath.

It felt like he was a scared animal, and he was trying to approach me on his terms. I

didn't want to make any sudden movements and scare him away.

His hand lifted as he reached for me, hovering over my shoulder.

His fingers flexed

before he curled his hand into a fist and pulled his arm back to his side without touching me.

As he walked away, my eyes followed him. I couldn't help the small feeling of longing

for his touch. He hadn't held me last night and refused to touch me this morning. My

chest almost ached as I watched him leave. My lips parted as I took in a deep breath

wanting to say that I appreciated the effort he had put in this morning, but not wanting

to do so when his sister was currently sliding into his chair and eating the rest of his

food. Instead, I called out, "Have a good day!"

He looked back at me, our eyes meeting for the briefest moment before the door closed between us.

"That was really awkward," Charlie mumbled as she looked up at me with her *full.

I didn't want to discuss my relationship with her but didn't want to

push her away when I had no other friends here. So, I kept my **.

“It was actually a very nice morning,” I said, pushing down my bitterness that it had been interrupted and finishing my eggs.

She let out a short hum, raising her eyebrows in disbelief before taking another bite.

“What are we getting ready for?” I asked, wanting to change the subject, but the way she glanced at the blanket and pillow on the couch told me that she was still distracted by my relationship with her brother.

“My welcome home celebration. It won’t be very big. Just a gathering of the court and my friends. It’s more like a small ball, really.” She lit up when she mentioned her friends, and I smiled at her. It was a happiness that I hadn’t seen from her before, and I knew that it had been the night decision for her to leave the castle and travel.

It was hours of pampering with a team coming in to do our nails, giving us a full body massage, and a facial.

I wasn’t a huge fan of having someone else touching me, but once I was able to relax, I thoroughly enjoyed it. In my old pack, I had never been able to afford a luxury like this. I never even had the free time to do something like this. I had spent all of my time cleaning up after others and waiting on them hand and foot. My entire body seemed to melt and by the time they had us laying with face masks on and cucumbers over our eyes, I felt like an entirely different person. All of my sore muscles from training and my stress were gone.

I also really enjoyed the day with her. She was genuine, friendly, and a little quirky.

The low hum of meditative music had me dozing off, and my fingers twitched as I fought off the sleep that was calling to me.

“Natalie,” Charlie called out, and I hummed in response. “What has my brother told you about our parents?”

Twenty-Eight: Natalie

Natalie’s P.O.V.

All of the work the masseuse had put in was pointless as I felt myself tense back up. I

cleared my throat, resisting the urge to pull the slices of cucumber from my eyes and look over at her.

“Not very much,” I answered, embarrassed to admit that he hadn’t told me anything about them. I had to find out for myself that his mother was even still alive. At this point, I doubted he would willingly offer any information to me if I asked.

We were still at the ‘tell me your favorite color’ stage even though we had already slept together.

“They didn’t have the best relationship,” Charlie started, but the hardness of her voice took me aback. Her bubbly and excited tone was gone, and in its place was a darkness that I hadn’t expected.

I wanted to stop her and tell her that Killian would tell me about it in his own time, but I also really wanted to know. Maybe it would help me to understand Killian better.

“My father had given up on finding his fated. He selected my

mother as a breeder.

She was the strongest female warrior of her pack, and even without the mate bond, he was completely taken by her.” She took a deep breath, and I listened carefully as I heard the slight tremor in her exhale.

It was clearly a difficult story for her to tell, and I didn’t want to interrupt her.

“He tried his best to make her happy. He gave her everything she could ever want.”

The similarity to his son was already at the forefront of my mind, and I had to wonder what happened for the king to be dead and his chosen to be in a coma. Killian had spared no *when it came to me, and I was grateful for it, but knowing that his parents did the same thing and didn’t have a happy ending, I had to wonder what our future held.

“He treated her like a queen, not just because of her title after he marked her, but because he adored her. He loved her with everything he had. She wanted an island, and he gave it to her. She wanted a private jet. She got five.”

Charlie paused, and I heard her moving, but I refused to look at her. When she spoke again, her voice sounded more direct, and I knew that she was now facing me instead of laying on the table. “I’m sure you know that the mark of a chosen mate is weaker than the bond of a

fated mate. When she found her fated mate, she had an affair.”

The cucumber slid off as I opened my eyes wide in surprise. I had never heard about

this before, and it was for good reason. The people would have

had a field day with that kind of gossip, and the royal family. would have lost a lot of respect. Charlie looked away from me as I sat up, mimicking her position on the edge of my table with my legs hanging over the side. I grabbed my robe from the foot of my bed and slid it on quickly. This wasn't the kind of conversation that you laid down for.

I wanted her to know that I was there for her, and I reached over and grabbed her hand on top of her robe. over her thigh. She sent me a grateful smile before she looked away and continued.

"After he found out, they fought a lot. My mother would scream her lungs out at him, telling him how much she hated him for bringing her here against her will. He would yell at her for being so selfish and impossible to please. When other people were around, they acted like the perfect couple. But when it was just the family, they did everything they could to tear each other down. It didn't help that my mother kept seeing her fated behind my father's back." She swallowed hard, and I felt at a loss, not knowing how to comfort her.

"I remember a lot of it, but i was really little. Killian was there for all of it though. He watched as it destroyed them. Then, one day, we were having a family dinner, and my mother was acting the happiest that I had ever seen her. When my father joined us, you could see the way that what remained of his soul left his body when he smelled her

pregnancy.

“He went absolutely mad and shifted into his beast before taking off out of the castle.

My mother chased after him, begging and pleading for him to listen to her, but he was having no part in it. He killed my mother’s fated right in front of her. The pain of losing her mate caused a miscarriage. It was all too much for her, but she pushed through and made it her goal in life to make my father as miserable as possible.”

I shook my head in disbelief. The healer had said that the queen’s mate had died, and

I had just assumed she was talking about the king. I could see why Killian would have a hard time with relationships after growing up with that.

“The only way to break their bond would be to have another mark one of them. My father refused to take another. He was fiercely loyal even after everything she had done. For my mother, without her fated, no one else’s bite would be strong enough to overpower my father’s. The only other option was death.”

Charlie’s eyes began to water, but she blinked them back, regaining her warrior-like composure.

“My father had her locked up for years to keep her from killing herself. She had tried countless times, and it was too big of a risk to let her roam free. Over time, I thought things were getting better. She was acting happier and nicer. When I went to visit her, she had become a completely different person. Once she seemed stable again, she was released. It was all a trick. As soon as she could, she stole a

gun. She walked right up to my father, pulled it out, and pointed it to her own head with a huge smile.

Killian and I were terrified as the guards swarmed around us, trying to pull us from the room. Our father was the closest to her and jumped at her, fighting her for the gun.”

Her hand was shaking in mine violently, and I slid off the portable massage table I was on, standing by her side.

“You don’t need to keep going,” I whispered as I tightened my grip on her hand.

Charlie shook her head, as she stood from the table, “No, you need to know. During the fight, the gun went off, and my mother was shot. Her wolf was already weak from

the death of her fated and the loss of her baby. She fell into a coma, and my father

went *. He felt that it was his fault, that he had shot her during the struggle. He felt the

pain of their bond dying when her wolf left her, and he fought to stay sane just long

enough for Killian to become of age to take the throne. Once he was, our father

followed in our mother’s footsteps and took his life.”

Charlie walked over to the table to grab her water. I watched as she regained the

composure of royalty, hiding back her emotions and trauma and becoming a different

person. It reminded me of when Killian would turn cold before going back into the

public eye as the king.

“Killian will never let himself love freely. He will always be scared that the woman he

gives his heart to will use it to control him or break him as our

parents did to each other. Be patient with him. He will be worth it, but it may take some time to fight through his demons.”

Twenty-Nine: Killian Killian's P.O.V.

What is your favorite color?

That is what I went with. I could have asked her anything, anything at all, and I went with what her favorite color was. I wanted to shift into my beast just so I could chew my own foot off for my *question.

Blue.

The small detail seemed so big to me, and I couldn't help but smile widely to myself as I remembered the way her eyes had lit up when I had asked her. She liked that I had taken an interest and had broken the silence.

I liked the silence normally. I loved it even. It was the only way I could keep the hundreds of thoughts in my head straight as I managed an entire kingdom. But sitting with her in silence, knowing she was mad at me, made me itch with discomfort. I

wanted to hear her voice and feel her touch.

So I broke it, and the bright smile she sent me in response was worth it.

I sent a quick message to Natalie's personal maid, telling her to make sure there were plenty of blue dress options for her tonight. She acknowledged my request, and I sat back in my desk chair, trying to picture Natalie in a blue dress. Every curve of her body was made to be shown off, and I found myself closing my

eyes as I pictured my mate

“Don’t tell me I’m interrupting something.” Joselin’s voice called out from the entrance to my office. I opened my eyes to see her standing by the open door as she smirked at me. “You look happy. I’m assuming you two worked things out?”

I tried to push down my smile, but I couldn’t. I just kept picturing how Natalie had lit up when I spoke to her this morning. “We came to an understanding.”

“How romantic,” She said deadpanned as she entered my office, pausing with her hand on the doorknob as if questioning if she wanted it open or closed, before giving in with a sigh and swinging it *behind her. “And Natalie, how is she?”

Joselin didn’t show very many emotions. It was kind of hard to with her looks and upbringing. The eyes gave away more information than most people knew and not being able to see her irises made it very difficult to read her sometimes. It was her body language that gave her away. The black lines on her ghostly-pale skin moved in different rhythms when she was excited, anxious, or angry. From the way that they moved now, and the palm she rubbed against her thigh, she was nervous.

“She is well,” I said, biting back my amusement at the annoyed look she sent me. I knew she was asking if things would be okay between her and Natalie. She had been excited to bring Natalie home. Not many women in the castle enjoyed talking to

Joselin. She didn't know how to interact with people and came across as a bit dark and evil to most. It was humorous to watch her interact with others.

"Will all do respect, sometimes when we talk, I want to hurt you," Joselin said as she dropped her head back against the chair as she sat down, and I chuckled at the action.

"If you want to know if she still *you for sleeping with me, just go ask her." I looked down, masking my emotions as I began to look through the new stack of papers on my desk.

"I have never slept with you!" She shouted as her hair blew back from her face, and the lines on her skin danced faster than before.

I glanced up at the clock behind her, wondering what Natalie was doing at the moment, but pushed the thought from my head. Baby steps. That was what I had decided and what I needed to stick to. I couldn't spend all of my time thinking about her.

"Then, you shouldn't have anything to worry about, should you?" I snapped back, and she groaned in annoyance.

"You don't understand women at all!" She snapped before turning to walk out of the room.

"You just got here. Where are you going? We have work to do." I ground my teeth as she turned her back to me and kept on toward the door.

"To speak with your mate, what do you think?" She argued as she pulled open the

door.

“She’s spending the day with Charlie,”

Joselin let the door swing *in front of her, locking her back in the room with me as her

head fell forward. Charlie and Joselin loved each other like sisters, but Joselin hated

all the girly *my sister did to prepare for a formal function.

“Fine. What do you need me to do?”

The guests had been rolling in for the past hour, far more than had actually been

invited, but I would never turn my people away. If they wished to welcome their

princess home, they were more than welcome to. Maybe it would make Charlie feel

loved enough to want to come back and forget the nightmare of a childhood we had here.

Normally, at these events, I was calm and collected, but as I waited for Natalie, I was

ready to pull my hair out. Never before had I cared about women’s clothing, but I

couldn’t help but wonder if she had picked out one of the blue dresses.

“Don’t look so grumpy,” Joselin said as she walked by, looking like she was sent by

the grim reaper himself in her black lace, floor-length dress. She didn’t stop, and I

scowled further at the back of her head as she was let into the ball. She didn’t bother

to wait for her introduction, and I knew I would find her going directly to the food table,

the same thing Charlie was bound to do once she got inside.

Natalie’s smell hit me before I could respond, and I turned to see the most beautiful

woman standing before me. Her eyes glanced from me to the

back of Joselin as the doors were closed behind her with uncertainty, and I shook my head as if I could hear her thoughts.

She forced a smile back to me, and I glanced down at the emerald green dress she had selected.

Green. She had chosen green.

My chest felt warm at the discovery, and I resisted lifting my hand up to rub away the odd feeling.

No straps were holding it up, and the back trailed behind her by only a few inches. I

knew she was wearing heels from how tall she was, and I briefly wondered what it would be like to see her in only the heels.

The deep green of the fabric made her eyes pop, and the bright red of her lips had

mine parting with desire. I wanted to taste her, even if it was only one kiss. But I knew

it couldn't happen. Kissing was done by people who had feelings. I knew that Natalie was growing on me, and as much as I resisted, I wanted what I couldn't have.

The small tiara on her head was far too small for someone in her position, and I made

a note to have my mother's old crown improved soon so I could give Natalie

something to wear that she would be proud of.

"You look beautiful," I let out, sounding like a teenager seeing his crush for the first time and *

smacking myself for it. I was a king, and I needed to remember that. It seemed the

more I was around her, the more often I forgot that fact.

I rolled my shoulders back as she approached, and the way her pupils dilated made my chest puff with pride.

“You look very nice as well.” She lifted her hand, and I grabbed her soft fingers. She let out a soft breath at my touch, and I relaxed as I turned until we were shoulder to shoulder, placing her hand in the *of my elbow.

“Are you ready?” I asked, staring ahead toward the doors as I regained my dignity. My voice came out firm and deeper than before. The golden crown on my head held still as I lifted my chin in preparation for our announcement. “Charlie should be here in just a moment. She will go first, and we will be the last ones to enter.” She nodded just as Charlie came rushing forward, “Sorry, sorry! I had to make sure I looked perfect.”

I narrowed my eyes at the way she nervously fidgeted with the end of her necklace before taking a deep breath and calming herself. Never before had I seen her so anxious for a royal function, let alone her own. welcome home celebration.

“I’m ready,” She said softly as she too lifted her chin and stood before the double doors several feet in front of us where people could see only her from below the landing.

“Her Royal Highness, Princess Charlotte Amery!” The Master of Ceremonies called out, his voice carrying through the now silent crowd below as Charlie began to descend the stairs. My eyes narrowed as I noticed her hand shaking slightly before

she grabbed the banister.
Natalie's hand tightened on my arm as she took in a deep breath to calm herself and copied Charlotte's posture with her chin lifted.
"His Majesty, King Killian Amery, and Her Highness, Natalie Matthews."

Thirty: Natalie Natalie's P.O.V.

My head turned up to look at Killian when they announced me with a title. I felt his arm pull my hand in closer to his side in reassurance as they opened the double doors leading to the long stairs case. He pulled me forward until we were standing just before the banister as he looked out over his people. I tore my gaze away from him, glancing around the room at the luxurious setup and the people filling it. I had never seen so much wealth in one room. It made me feel even more out of place and uneasy. As their eyes landed on us, I knew they were thinking it too. An omega, a human on the arm of their Lycant king. It was laughable. I felt my heart hammering in my chest, and I had to wonder how many of them could hear it. Killian sure could as he turned to face me. I held still with my eyes on the crowd as he leaned in and pressed a kiss to my temple. It was simple. Sweet. A silent declaration that I was his. As soon as his lips touched my skin, my heart slowed, and my lungs relaxed, allowing me to take in a subtle but deep and calming breath. The crowd bowed their heads as Killian looked back to them before turning with me to

face the staircase. that curved around the wall of the ballroom. It was extravagant, beautiful...deadly.

I was positive that I would break my neck or, at the very least, humiliate myself by taking a tumble down to the bottom. But Killian held me steady as we descended the staircase slowly. Rather, the king did.

Killian was no more. From the look on his face and his posture, he was back to being the king that I hated, that his people loved, and that the rest of the world feared.

As soon as we reached the floor, people began to swarm us, all wanting to get face time with their king, but very few acknowledged me. I was just the woman on his arm until I bore his mark and the crown of the queen. Neither of which seemed to be happening anytime soon.

From the corner of my eyes, I watched as his people curled their lips at me, but when I turned to face them, they had schooled their features and graced me with a soft smile that must have taken years to perfect.

I made a *note to be cautious around those people. They would not have my trust easily.

It felt like it had been hours of being approached by people for meaningless chatter. It would have been hilarious to watch them babble on to a stone-faced Killian who barely acknowledged them, but we had only made it a few feet from the stairs, and I was parched.

The anxiety of being surrounded by hundreds of Lycans, had all

my blood thickening
until it felt like I had also turned to stone. As soon as the man
before us finished
speaking, I looked up at Killian, enjoying the way he turned and
gave me his complete
and undivided attention.
“I am going to grab a drink. Would you like anything?” Killian
shook his head in
response, squeezing my hand on his elbow as if he didn’t want to
let me step away
from his side. He opened his *the respond but closed it again as
Joselin approached
us, looking rather serious for the occasion.
“Your Majesty, I have urgent news. May I take a moment of your
time?” Her eyes
flickered over to me before holding steady on Killian.
I hated it. The more she took him away from me and dismissed
me, the more I hated
her.
He may have told me that he was faithful, but even without my
heat, I was doubtful
that there weren’t deeper feelings there. He was always with her,
talking to her, and
watching her. Even as I had approached. him tonight, he was
staring after her.
More than anything, I wanted to tell her no, that she may not have
him. Not only was it
rude to take him away from his alleged mate during a social
function, but beyond the
pack dinners, this was our first real outing together. There had
been several little
changes in his treatment of me today, but even I knew it was too
much and too soon
to ask him to put me above his work for a few hours.
He glanced down at me, and I knew he saw the defeat and hurt in

my eyes as his face softened, but I held my chin up and nodded in acceptance. I knew before he even opened his *that he was going to choose her. cheek.

“I will rejoin you shortly, my mate.” He whispered, and I flinched as he leaned in again to kiss my He stopped immediately and pulled back with his jaw tight. He didn’t get to touch me when he was leaving with her, the witch who had tried to force herself into

my mind and held a monopoly over his time.

It was insulting that he was playing the kind and loving mate toward me when he was only moments away from having his witch all to himself, to do any number of things.

“I’ll be here,” The nerves and excitement were gone from my tone as I took my hand

from his arm. He glanced down at his sleeve with his eyebrows pinched together

before straightening his neck and nodding once in confirmation.

I couldn’t help but watch his back as he turned to walk away with Joselin closely in

tow. She glanced over her shoulder at me, but her face was unreadable, and she

turned back with her head tilted down.

I didn’t need to look behind me to know Tobias had moved up to stand near, keeping

only a few feet between us in the crowd. No one dared to approach me. No one

wanted to. Without the crown on my head or the king by my side, I was nothing but a human to them.

It was fascinating to watch them dip their heads at me in feigned respect as I walked

by when it was obvious that they looked down on me. They wanted to be in my good grace for when I was marked by Killian. Charlie stood by the food table, snacking with a forced smile on her face as she continued to glance around the room, clearly not interested in what the woman circling her had to say. Her face lit up as she glanced toward the entrance of the ballroom, and I followed her gaze to the monstrous group of men entering.

They appeared to be even more uncomfortable than I was. The guests parted for them, murmuring to each other as the scraggly men moved through the crowd, their heads on a swivel as they scanned the area. Each step they took looked as if their suits made them itch with how stiffly they were moving. I imagined it was how one would walk when wearing a burlap sack instead of the expensive fabric they had on.

The largest of the group donned a suit made for a member of the royal family, but the large sword strapped to his back caught my eye, and from the growl that Tobias let out, it also caught his. The faded leather strap holding his sheath on clashed sharply with the fine black material of his suit jacket.