

Chapter 14

Kyson

As I storm away from the confrontation with Damian over Ivy, my anger is a storm brewing inside me. Damian is right on my heels, frustration evident in his voice as he adds his opinion to the mix, fueling my anger more.

“Everything alright?” Clarice’s voice cuts through the tension as she steps out of the back doors of the laundry.

“He had her near the castle,” I snap, my words laced with venom.

Clarice sighs heavily, her disappointment palpable.

Why the heck is everyone taking her side? She isn’t even the queen! I haven’t marked her. Have they forgotten Claire already?

“She is picking oranges, Kyson,” Clarice tries to reason, but my glare turns to fix on Ivy. However, when I turn to confront her, I find she’s already gone. Damian curses under his breath and moves to chase after her, but my growl halts him in his tracks.

“No, Gannon can watch her. We need to go over the rogue murders and the information Kade gave us,” I command, my voice leaving no room for argument.

Damian freezes, his frustration with me reaching a boiling point. “Was it necessary to be such a prick? She’s having a hard enough time as it is, and you just keep hurting her. You’re digging yourself a grave, Kyson. You’re risking everything!” he yells.

“No, her mother ruined everything,” I counter coldly.

“Exactly, her mother, not her. But still, you punish her for it, punish yourself,” Damian retorts.

“I am not punishing myself,” I snarl, but the words ring hollow even to my ears because I’ve felt nothing but agony without her. Yet she does not deserve my love.

“Really? Then how do you explain getting so fucking drunk that you lost control last night?” Damian challenges.

I growl, ignoring him and storming inside the castle, trying to escape Damian’s accusations. The kitchen staff scatter as I enter, sensing my foul mood, and I keep moving toward the foyer.

“Are you seriously going to continue ignoring the bond? This is your only chance at having a mate, but you can’t see past your hate,” Damian continues.

“Damian, enough. I have a headache,” I snap, heading toward my office.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of Ivy walking across the lawns. Through the windows, Peter chases after her before stopping her. I watch her for a second as she talks to Peter. She looks longingly at the castle, making a pang of guilt wash over me. Peter wanders off, leaving her alone, her figure deflated in defeat, while Peter looks at her with worry. She has everyone convinced she is not a monster, but I know otherwise.

“Can you at least fucking try to talk to her? She frets without you,” Damian’s voice rings in my ears and he grabs my arm. I

snarl, but he doesn't back off when Gannon opens the foyer doors and steps inside.

"You can still fix things, it's not too late, Kyson," Damian pleads but I shake my head.

Ignoring him, I brush past Gannon, who steps into my path with a glare. "What's happened now? What did you do?" he instantly accuses me.

I'm at the end of my tether. Do they have any idea how it feels knowing you're housing a monster's daughter? They all witnessed what Marissa did, yet they expect me to accept her daughter with open arms.

"Everyone, patrol now!" I scream, my patience worn out. My command erupts violently and Gannon gasps clutching the wall as he fights to remain where he is.

Damian resists, straining against my command. "Remove the command," he grits out. I hate commanding them, they know it, and guilt hits me for it, but I won't back down. They need to let me get my head straight and come to terms with this; she is not the only one grieving the bond.

“No, I’m sick and tired of hearing about her, sick of you telling me how to handle my mate when YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND,” I snarl back, watching as Gannon, unable to resist any longer, rushes out the door.

“You’d leave her defenseless,” Damian accuses.

“She has Dustin,” I snap before storming off.

“Dustin, you ordered him to go into town for you with Liam earlier. It’s nearly dark, Kyson!” Damian shouts at me, but I ignore him, and keep walking, only to hear his body smash against the door, unable to resist my command any longer.

In my office, I reach for my bottle of liquor, immediately chugging half of it in an attempt to drown out the bond that’s gnawing at me. Time slips away as I sit there, consumed by thoughts of Ivy, of Claire, and the state I found her in. It all rushes back, the guilt of leaving that day, her last words replay in my mind on a loop that morning, I didn’t want to go. Why did she make me leave? She would probably still be here if I’d stayed.

Some time later, Clarice enters, her disappointment evident. “If you’re here to scold me, don’t,” I warn her.

“Just collecting your tray,” she responds, her tone tired. But I can tell she is holding her tongue. She wants to speak but also knows her place. Little does she know, it’s not her words I fear. It’s breaking her heart. Clarice knows me better than anyone here, she helped raise me, raise Claire, more than my parents ever did.

I glance at the clock, realizing hours have passed. Clarice sighs and picks up the tray. “You, too. Why do I bother cooking for you if you don’t bother eating it,” she mutters with a shake of her head.

“Did you remember to send food down for—” I stop mid-sentence, the guilt unbearable.

“For your queen?” Clarice finishes for me, her eyes holding a mixture of pity and reproach. “I left it for her, but she never touched it. Abbie tried to get her to eat, but she refused, said she wasn’t hungry,” she informs me.

“She refused?” I growl, anger flaring again. “She should be grateful I let her live, yet she refuses what we provide.” I snarl, seeing that her refusal has upset Clarice, too. I get up from my chair.

But Clarice blocks the door, her eyes hard. “I used to think you were a good man, but now I am not so sure anymore. You hurt her...” her words trail off unfinished, but I hear the threat loud and clear.

“You’ll what, Ma? Quit?” I ask her, and her bottom lip quivers, and she glances away. I instantly feel bad for the words and wish I could take them back.

“Do you not remember? Have you forgotten already?” I ask her, and her gaze hardens as it turns to me.

“No one has forgotten, though I wish I could... I wish I could, Kyson, I’ve lived through hell and back, but nothing broke me more than losing her. I won’t live through losing you, too. This kingdom won’t survive losing their queen. We’ve lost too many,” she snaps.

“She is not queen!” I yell.

“But your kingdom won’t accept anyone other than her. She is your true mate, our true queen. You need to realize that because if you lose her, you lose all of us!” she says before walking away.

I stare at her. They barely know her! I punch the wall in frustration, feeling more furious than ever. Snatching my bottle, I drink every drop, yet it still doesn't help, doesn't numb the bond.

Stumbling down to the stables, a fresh liquor bottle in hand, I find Ivy curled in a ball, surrounded by shredded clothes, and the scent of her tears fills the air. It's freezing inside, and my guilt intensifies as the draft rushes over me. Leaving her, I step outside to gather wood, hearing a noise in the forest, but I dismiss it as one of the guards when they don't come closer.

Returning with the wood, I find Ivy awake, struggling to light a fire with one hand. "Finally, Damian, can you please light—"

She stops mid-sentence when she notices me. "Sorry, sir," she murmurs, fear evident in her voice as she quickly stands.

I notice the tremble in her words; she is scared of me. No, that is not an accurate word. She is petrified of me. I take a step toward her, and she takes one back and the way her heart rate picks up doesn't go unnoticed by me; it bothers me for some reason. Perhaps because I spent so long trying to get her out of

her shell, only to see her reverting back to the way she was when she first came here, maybe that bothers me.

I study her, seeing her straighten her spine, and stare past me. Despite the pain it causes her, she clutches her hands behind her back, just like Mrs. Daley taught her. I know because I feel it. Pain shoots up my hand, and I drop the wood.

Ivy gasps and moves to pick it up. “It’s fine, My King; I can wait for Gannon,” she tells me, then freezes.

“I mean,” she pauses. “Do you need me to send someone up with wood?” she asks yet won’t meet my gaze. Now she is questioning whether I got the wood for her or for myself.

“Leave it,” I tell her, not trusting myself with more than those words. She rises, and I snatch the piece of wood out of her hand. She bows her head, moving back to her makeshift den of torn blankets, when I notice a few of my shirts. I shake my head, and she tries to cover them, realizing what I am staring at.

Ivy’s face turns pink with her embarrassment while I load the wood in the furnace. I can feel her eyes watching me, smell her fear. I start the fire, and once I am satisfied, it will remain going,

I close the little hatch and get to my feet, leaving out but not before glancing back to see her rush toward the warmth.

As I walk back to the castle, the weight of my actions, my guilt, and my loneliness press down on me, heavier with each step. My own bitterness and anger are turning everyone against me, and I can't seem to stop the spiral. The night air does nothing to ease the turmoil inside me. When I hear a noise, I pause for a second, staring out at the tree line across the small lake. When I notice nothing, I keep walking.