

Chapter 3

Abbie

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 hadn't told us what happened, only that we could go 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.

"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 hope we'd find 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 wouldn’t be the same thing without her, it was made for her.

“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. I stare at the flickering flame. 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 knew precisely what Ivy meant 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 might as well have been trying 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 could 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 would 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.