

Chapter 25

AZALEA

My body groans in protest as I shift onto my back, the dull ache spreading through my limbs. My memory, like a grainy photograph, leaves me slightly confused. Wasn't I in the throes of heat just moments ago? Yet now, inexplicably, I feel perfectly fine and well-rested, devoid of any telltale signs of a feverish temperature. I had been in pain and discomfort so long that relief feels strange.

However, rolling over, I find the bed empty, making me get up.

Casting a quick glance around the room, I search for any trace of Kyson's presence. Spotting the closet, I shuffle toward it, my footsteps muffled by the plush carpet beneath my feet. Inside, a limited selection of clothes awaits me, remnants of my tendency to shred them during my restless episodes. Most of them are Kyson's, but I remember he started keeping a stash in his office, away from the destructive reach of my claws. A bemused chuckle escapes my lips at the thought of him safeguarding his clothes against my unpredictable nesting habits. Such a bizarre thing to do, making me realize how little I know about being a Lycan.

I meander around the room, trying to wake up before hunting down Kyson when I notice my tablet. I pick it up to check the time before noticing Kyson's phone nearby. I furrow my brows. I recall Abbie's promise to call back last night. Or was it still the same day? The boundaries of time have blurred for me lately, days blending into nights and vice versa with disorienting regularity.

I unlock his phone but notice he has no notifications on it or messages, not that I could read those anyway without typing them into my tablet. I toss the phone on the bed and head for the bathroom with a shake of my head. Eager to see Kyson, I shower quickly, so I can try to convince him to take me to visit Abbie.

When I get out of the shower, I towel dry my hair, not wanting to use the hairdryer because my hearing is super sensitive right now.

Even now, every sound seems amplified, from the flickering of lights to the gentle rustle of curtains caressed by a passing breeze. My senses, already acute, seem to have reached an unprecedented level of intensity.

Slipping on a pair of comfortable flats, I turn the doorknob and step into the dimly lit corridor. There, leaning against the wall, yawning and rubbing his tired eyes, is Dustin. A small chuckle escapes my lips as I take in his disheveled appearance.

"You look exhausted," I remark, causing Dustin's eyes to snap open and his posture to straighten.

“Good morning, My Que—” he begins, but I raise an eyebrow, cutting him off before he can finish.

“Azalea,” he corrects himself. It was stupid.

It’s rather silly how he tries to maintain formality when he follows me around like a faithful shadow. I’d like to think of him as more than just a duty-bound friend. He’s seen me at my worst.

“Do you know where the king is?” I ask him, and he yawns again.

“I will take her,” Trey says, appearing seemingly out of nowhere, and Dustin glances at him. I hadn’t even noticed him standing there.

“Why are you here?” Dustin questions, a touch of confusion lacing his words. “It’s not your shift today.”

“Damian instructed me to relieve you. I don’t mind taking over your duties,” Trey responds, shrugging his shoulders. My gaze shifts between the two men, realizing Dustin has covered Trey’s shift multiple times. Has Dustin been working tirelessly for the past three shifts? That’s nearly forty hours without rest.

Dustin shakes his head and waves him off. “I am fine. You can go.” Dustin tells him, waving him off.

“No, Dustin, you really should get some sleep,” I interject, concern lacing my voice as I take in his exhausted appearance. His well-being matters to me; after all, he’s more than just a guard, he’s my friend.

“I’m fine, Azalea. The king is in his office, but I wouldn’t advise going down there. He’s in one of his moods,” Dustin informs me with a hint of exasperation. But when isn’t he in a mood? I can’t help but wonder if it’s just his personality rather than a temporary state of mind.

“You said Damian is back?” I ask Trey, and he nods.

“Go and rest, Dustin. Trey will accompany me to see the king,” I insist, squeezing his arm gently as I pass by him. However, just as I’m about to join Trey, Dustin grips my arm, causing me to give him a puzzled look. With a sigh, he speaks up.

“It’s fine. I’ll take you myself. You’re dismissed, Trey. Your presence isn’t required here,” Dustin asserts firmly, his voice tinged with authority. Trey growls, shaking his head in disagreement.

“But...”

“I am her personal guard, and I dismissed you. Now go!” Dustin’s voice snaps with authority, his eyes filled with a steely determination. Trey growls in response, a low rumble that echoes through the tense air. He shakes his head in frustration, his lips curling into a snarl.

“Trying to help, gee,” he mutters under his breath before stomping off, the sound of his retreating footsteps fading into the distance.

Turning my attention to Dustin, I see a mixture of anger and concern etched on his face as he watches Trey leave. His gaze follows the disgruntled figure until he disappears.

“Hey, what’s got into you?” I inquire, with curiosity and worry. Dustin shakes his head slightly, his fingers absentmindedly tracing circles on my shoulder as he drapes his arm over it, pulling me closer to him.

“Something’s off about him,” Dustin responds. “I haven’t liked him since he came here eight years ago; he rubs me the wrong way.” He lets out a sigh, his grip tightening ever so slightly. “However, he took a bullet for the king about six years back, earning a spot on the Royal Guard. Damian put him on personal guard duties alongside me; he is trusted.” Dustin’s words hang in the air, leaving an unsettled feeling in their wake. “I don’t trust him, though; a few things don’t add up for me.”

I furrow my brows in confusion. Trey seems harmless enough; perhaps a bit brusque at times, but nothing that would warrant such skepticism. Then again, I remind myself, I trust Dustin implicitly. If he senses something amiss, it can’t be ignored.

“What do you mean?” I ask softly, with genuine curiosity.

Dustin's gaze meets mine, his eyes searching for understanding. "Just, I don't know. How he came to be here doesn't seem right to me," he explains.

"So, where was he before?" I press on, my desire for answers growing stronger.

"The Landeena Kingdom," Dustin replies, his tone tinged with sadness. "About twenty percent of the pack here are originally your family guard or those from your kingdom, survivors of the massacre. After your parents were killed, King Kyson's pack was the only remaining Lycan pack. For safety, Lycans stick together. We are a dying species, so the king took them in." Dustin nudges me gently with his elbow before stifling a yawn. "My Queen, those people are your people."

"And Trey was one of these people?"

"Yes, he came here eight years ago. He was here briefly, but he spent two years with the Landeena Guard searching for you. I know he was high up in the Landeena Kingdom, yet he never speaks of his time there. None of the Landeena guards do. I know Kyson knows everything about Landeena and the guard, but I also know Landeena, even to this day, has kept your family's secrets whatever they are. I am not sure why, but Trey, for some reason, has alarm bells ringing for me. He always appeared obsessed with finding you."

The revelation hits me like a bolt of lightning. People survived? I had assumed in the aftermath of the horrific events that had unfolded, everyone had been lost. But now it makes sense that there would be

survivors, scattered remnants of a once proud and noble lineage. This knowledge makes me feel more connected to a past I don't recall than ever before. There's walking, talking evidence of my birthright, of my parents in this castle right now.

"How about we stay in the room for a bit?" I suggest softly, my concern for Dustin's well-being evident in my voice. "You can sleep. Since you don't want anyone else as my guard."

"I am fine; I can take you," Dustin assures me, but I grip his arm and pull him back toward the room.

"Sleep on the bed if you'd like. I promise I will remain here; I won't sneak off on you," I tell him, my voice soft and reassuring. Dustin shakes his head, a slight frown creasing his forehead. Instead, he follows me toward the couch, his eyes lingering on me with a mix of curiosity and uncertainty.

I retrieve my tablet and open it up and a book, deciding to do something educational.

Dustin stands there, watching me intently, as I raise an eyebrow at him, silently questioning his disobedience.

"You are supposed to be sleeping," I remind him gently, patting the cushioned surface of the couch as an invitation. He purses his lips, a hint of defiance flickering in his eyes.

“Don’t make me try to order you. It will just embarrass me when I can’t,” I snort quietly, and his lips tug in the corners, but he reluctantly sits, and I put the throw blanket over him.

“Now, sleep,” I tell him.

“Yes, boss,” he laughs, closing his eyes. It doesn’t take him long before he falls asleep, and after an hour, he falls sideways into me, his head resting in my lap while I’m trying to work out how to do the strange letter in the book. It had a dash above it, but I can’t figure it out on the tablet. Giving up, I move to the following sentence when Damian comes in, and I hold a finger to my lips, pointing to Dustin, who is sleeping soundly.

“He should be on guard,” Damian growls, and I growl back at him, shooting him a glare.

“Thirty-six hours he has been rostered on for,” I snap at him, and he seems taken aback.

“No, Trey is his relief,” Damian says, his eyes narrowing as he observes Dustin’s slumbering form.

“Trey was here earlier. Dustin didn’t trust him and sent him off,” I explain.

Damian's confusion is evident, his brow furrowing. Eventually, he sighs, a resignation settling over him. "Fine, I will speak with Dustin when he wakes; I brought your lunch up," Damian says, passing me a plate. I sit my plate on the arm of the armchair.

"The king?"

"In a foul mood," Damian replies with a hint of weariness in his voice. He straightens his black shirt, brushing away breadcrumbs from the sandwich he had hastily made for me.

"Can you take me to see..." I begin to ask, but Damian raises a hand, cutting me off.

"I know what you are going to ask. The answer is no, I have to go with the king to check out something. We will be gone for a few hours," he explains, and I huff, annoyed.

"The king said he will take you on the weekend. He will, Azalea, just be patient."

"I can't be patient when I know she is in trouble."

"The king said she is fine."

“It was an act!” I growl, becoming angry that no one will listen to me. Why won’t they believe me?

“My Queen, I don’t know what else to say, the king...”

“Yeah, the king said,” I mock, glaring at the plate.

“He has his reasons,” Damian defends him with a growl. If he has reasons, why not tell me those damn reasons? I just want to see her, that’s it. If she is fine, I will apologize for wasting his time, but until I do, I will keep pestering him because I know I am right!

I place my plate on the coffee table before carefully slipping out from under Dustin’s head.

“Azalea?”

“No, he won’t take me, then that is fine! There are plenty of others here who can,” I tell him before stomping off out of the room. Excuses, always an excuse.

Damian chases after me as I stalk down to the office, telling me I should leave him be. That he is in a mood! I roll my eyes and pull my arm from his grip when he tries to stop me from going into the office.

Pushing the door open, I step inside to find Kyson by the window, whiskey in hand. He looks at me and smiles, his eyes going over my shoulder as Damian steps in behind me, looking somewhat flustered.

“Everything okay?” Kyson asks.

“Yes, I was trying to take Azalea back to her room,” Damian says, grabbing my arm, and Kyson snarls ferociously, making him let go. He shakes his head, and his eyes flicker. Damian backs away from me with his hands up. What is wrong with him?

“Can I speak to you, please?” I ask Kyson, who is now glaring at Damian. Kyson turns his attention to me before waving me over and dismissing Damian. He glares at the door as it closes, and I slowly approach him.

Kyson sits in the armchair, flopping heavily into it, his whiskey sloshing over the sides of his glass. I take it from him, placing it on the lamp table beside him, just as Kyson grabs me, hauling me onto his lap. He buries his face in my neck and starts purring, tugging my shirt up.

“Stop. I need to talk to you,” I tell him while pushing off his chest. He growls, ignoring me, fondling my breast, and nipping my shoulder through my shirt. His skin is scorching hot.

“Are you alright?” I ask him, but he growls again, tugging at my clothes, trying to undress me. With a sigh and I speak.

“Damian said you were leaving for a few hours, so can you get one of your other guards to take me to see Abbie, or even Dustin could take me?” I ask him, pushing his face away that is currently buried in my neck.

“I will take you on the weekend,” he mumbles, licking my neck, his hands pawing at me. His grip feels rough as he tugs and pulls me.

“Kyson, stop. We will be quick straight there and back.”

“No, it is too far to go on your own, on the weekend. End of discussion,” he snaps at me. I growl at him before shoving him off and standing.

“Then Trey can come, too?” I tell him.

“I said no!” he snarls, his eyes flickering dangerously.

“Abbie never called last night,” I tell him.

“She was probably busy,” he says, earning me an eye roll. I storm off toward the door. Fine, I will go by myself.

“Azalea?”

“If you don’t take me, I will go myself,” I tell him while stalking toward the door. I barely have a hand gripping the door handle when the sound of snapping bones reaches my ears, and his hand falls on the door beside my head. The growl that rips out of him makes me spin around to face him.

It reverberates through the air, its deep and menacing timbre resonating with a haunting intensity. Goosebumps ripple across my flesh, each hair on my head standing at attention as an icy shiver slithers up my spine, sending a chill that pierces to the core. It is a feeling that engulfs me instantly, as if I have taken a leap off a towering building, my stomach plummeting with a sickening lurch. A sense of terror grips every fiber of my being as I come face to face with him, his face twisted in rage, his eyes pitch black.

Kyson, the man I once knew, has vanished, replaced by a savage creature. His voice emerges as a harsh growl, causing me to instinctively step back until my body collides with the door. The raw power coursing through him is palpable, his entire frame quivering with unrestrained anger. At this moment, I comprehend why everyone held such fear for him; even when he dismissed me with callous disregard, his rage had never been this consuming. It is something far beyond human emotion, a manifestation of a monstrous and primal nature that surpasses any semblance of humanity.

“Mine! You will submit...” His words hang in the air, abruptly ceasing as he blinks and shakes his head. His claws scrape against the door behind me, their grating sound akin to nails on a chalkboard. I grit my teeth, refusing to succumb to the overwhelming fear that threatens to overpower me. And then, a sudden transformation overtakes him. He

stumbles backward, his expression one of bewilderment and vulnerability, as if he has lost control over his own ferocity.

The mood changes slightly. “Where is your guard?” he says, turning away from me and putting some distance between us.

“Outside,” I lie, not wanting to get anyone in trouble, especially Dustin. Damian is angry enough at him earlier.

“You should go back to the room, Azalea.”

“But Abbie—” I protest.

“I said room, now go. I have to leave, anyway.”

“Dustin and Trey—”

“I said no! Now get out!” he screams at me, and I shake my head, turning on my heel and rushing out. Damian stands by the door and jumps when I come rushing out.

“I told you he was in a bad mood,” Damian says, and I growl at him before stalking off down the corridor toward my room. Just as I reach the doors leading toward the stairs, they burst open, and Dustin crashes through them, looking frantic. The look of relief on his face when he spots me is evident as he clutches his knees, trying to catch his breath.

“You said you wouldn’t leave!” he says, coming over to me and gripping my arms.

“Sorry, I had Damian with me. I didn’t want to wake you,” I tell him, taking the arm that he offers me when Damian calls after him.

“Dustin, a word.”

I chew my lip, hoping I didn’t get him into trouble. Dustin sighs loudly but stops, heading back down the hall when Clarice comes up with the king’s lunch. She stops, peering at Damian and Dustin, who are talking.

“Azalea, how are you feeling?” she asks, cupping my face with her hand. Before I can answer, I hear Dustin growl before yelling at Damian.

“Fucking bullshit!”

“It’s an order. You need sleep,” Damian snaps back at him.

“I will lock the door and sleep on the couch.”

“Trey is her other assigned guard. The king trusts him, and so do I,” Damian says.

“Get anyone else; I am telling you something is off with him!”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, if this is over the assignment last year, are you still pissed about that? He proved he had nothing to do with sabotaging you.”

“No, it’s about her safety. I couldn’t give a fuck about that. But...”
Dustin argues back.

“What happened?” Clarice whispers to me, and I turn my attention back to her.

“I’m not sure. Dustin keeps taking Trey’s shifts, Dustin said he doesn’t trust him,” I tell her when I hear a growl.

Dustin curses under his breath, stomping back over to me. “Come on,” he says, looking furious. My brows pinch as he grips my elbow, leading me away from Clarice, who glances at us confused.

“Are you alright?” I ask him.

“Damian pulled me from shift for the next eight hours.”

“It’s fine. You need sleep,” I tell him as he pulls me up the stairs.

We make it back to the room in record time, with his long strides as he tugs me after him. “Slow down!” I tell him, stumbling on the top step. His hand gripping my arm is the only thing stopping me from falling.

“Sorry,” he says, leading me to the room. He pushes the door open.

“Just sleep; I will be fine.”

“Damian ordered me back to my room to ensure I sleep. Just be careful around him. I am setting the alarm and will speak to some other guards to keep an extra eye up here.” Dustin almost looks frantic. “Don’t trust him, Azalea. Just stay in your room the moment I can come back; I will be here, just...” he curses, shaking his head. “Make sure you keep the door locked. Promise me you won’t let him in here!” Dustin says, gripping my arms.

“Okay, I promise, I won’t let him in the room with me.” Not that I would; I barely know Trey. So I doubt he would try to come in here, anyway.

“It’s fine. I will see if Clarice will stay with you while the king is gone; Gannon can’t be too much longer, surely. I’ll mindlink and ask Liam,” Dustin mutters, rubbing his chin.

“I’ll be fine,” I tell him.

“You know where my room is, right? Wake me if you need me. You also have my number on the phone; just press number three, speed dials straight to my phone.”

I nod, wondering if the lack of sleep is making him paranoid. He sighs, kissing my forehead and hugging me, something he has never done. “Don’t let yourself be alone with him,” he whispers before leaving after I nod. I watch him leave, still wondering why he feels so strongly about Trey.