



48 SECRET LAKE

After overhearing their entire conversation, I decided I would never have my bath in the women's bath again. 1

I walked down the castle grounds and took myself on a stroll.

Everyone stared at me with every turn I made. The chains around my ankles only made it worse.

You could hear the clank against the metal as I walked, and people would turn to see me.

Flustered, I went ahead and found myself going down a lonely path.

I wasn't in the castle anymore.

There were ground floors away from the castle, beautiful trees, and a lovely forest.

Back home in our pack, I had hardly had the chance to survey the pack because I was always busy.

But today, I was done with my work, and I could stroll around without anyone asking if I had worked.

I kept on walking down the path and past trees. In the distance, I saw a little deer hopping and some squirrels chatting.

How I wish I could be like them. Free.

I took a few steps forward, minding my path so that I would not forget the way I had come, and came across a beautiful lake.

It looked untouched, as if no one had come around.

There were lilies above the lake and swans swimming about.

Birds sang, and a group of beavers were working.

I hadn't had the opportunity to swim in a very long time.

There used to be a little lake back home in the pack where I frequented, but when Jessica found out I had somewhere safe to visit, she reported to Luna Maria, who destroyed the entire forest.

I had been only nine years old, and I could remember it as clearly as day.

Once I had finished all my chores, I went to swim as usual, and I had no idea that Jessica had

followed me.

Her mother came and caught me swimming naked.

"You little prostitute!" She had hissed at me!

I had jumped in fear and found her at the bank of the lake.

She had been standing with about seven wolves.

I dove into the river to hide my nudity.

"Look at you swimming naked! Your mother was always a slut, and I knew you would be one too, but you're barely even nine years old!" She had raged. "And yet, look at you! Swimming naked so that a man can come and find you, ain't it?! My little Jessica would never be like you!"

I had been alarmed by her words and accusations. "No, Luna Maria, I just came to swim here alone."

"Are you even a virgin?!" She spat at me.

Her words surprised me, and behind her, Jessica's face had a smirk.

"Get out of the water!" Luna Maria had ordered.

I had hoped they would leave for me to do that,

but the men remained put, and I was forced to hurry out naked and wear my clothes.

Eventually, she completely burned it down to the ground, even though I had begged her not to.

I promised her that I would never visit again.

She ignored me, and I watched my beautiful secret burn down before my eyes.

I shook the memory away, stripped off my clothes, and entered the lake.

The water was so soothing, and the swans came towards me.

I saw about five flamingos together by the other end of the lake.

I smiled as I watched the little animals play around, and nature was tranquil.

Then, I saw a massive crocodile coming towards me.

I jumped in fright, but to my surprise, it only swam right beside me. ⁶

I dared myself to touch its skin, and I slowly did.

The crocodile didn't resist, and I smiled as I gently rubbed its patterned skin before it swam

away.

I was at peace just swimming here. I wanted to stay here forever.

I would always visit here.

This would be my secret haven, away from the pack.

In some ways, it was as if life was better here than even back home.

And from how things were between Xaden and me, it didn't seem he would touch me anymore.

I sighed as I swam in the lake, and after a few hours, I had to come out.

I couldn't risk staying here so long before they missed me.

As I reached the bank of the river, I saw that my ankles had healed. 1

It was supposed to be bright red and partly bruised because of the chains, but here it was clear.

Was it the lake?

I quickly looked into the lake to see my reflection, and I found out that my injuries from

last night's beating had all gone.

Well, except for the scar on my face that I was born with.

I quickly turned to my back to see the marks on my back.

It was gone, too!

I looked back at the lake, astonished!

What had just happened? Had I discovered a magical lake? ?

I wanted to take another dive when I heard loud bells ringing.

I became alert.

Back in our pack, it was usually good or bad when the bells were rung.

The last time I heard the bell ring was when Xaden invaded our pack.

I quickly put on my clothes and hurried out of the forest.

I walked back to the ground floor and then into the castle itself.

There was a buzz of people rushing around.



I was confused.

What was happening?

I turned to someone. "Please, what's happening?"

The person ignored me, and I asked someone else. They did the same thing.

I saw Lady Belinda giving instructions.

"There you are!" She was pointing at me. "You need to set your schedule aside. I'll give you new duties. You will be servicing one of the packs when they arrive."

I was confused.

When did one of the packs arrive?

I was more lost.

"Please, what is happening?" I asked her.

"It's the festival." She said to me, "Ahead of the coming hallo moon."

I had heard of the Hallo Moon.

It was a rare event. The last one supposedly took place seventy years ago, but the other was much longer.

A lot of wolves went their entire lives without



ever seeing it.

The moon formed the shape of an exact halo and was visible for three nights.

No one knew when it would happen, just that it did, and a few days before it took place, the group of wolves who dealt with the study of the moon would find it and inform other packs.

It was the second-biggest festival, and I also knew that it was usually held at the location where the halo reflected.

If the other packs were coming here, then that meant that the halo was reflecting here.

I didn't know much about it, but there were myths about it being a dark festival, and I had a sickening feeling in my chest.

