

Untouchable (The Moonlight Avatar Series Collection)

Chapter 1 – The Slave

“And what if—what are you if the people who are supposed to love you can leave you like you’re nothing?” – Elizabeth Scott

Halima

Cheering and words of encouragement erupted from the yard, echoing through the woodsy air like sirens.

My eyes peeked at the commotion through the kitchen window, squinting from the sun’s glare. It had a full view of the lush-green front yard, allowing me to witness the spectacle with a front-row seat. Pack members of all ages gathered around a blond-haired pubescent boy going through his first shift. His mother comforted him with his head on her lap, while his father coached him through the pain. Little Jordan did nothing to dampen the cheery mood but fueled the outpouring of support for him. The love and care radiating from the pack members were palpable, overwhelming my senses to where I could feel the strange sensation around me.

Their love for Jordan choked me, invoking the painful reminder that I would never have what he had.

First shifts were a celebratory event for Zircon Moon. It marked the sacred passage from wolf pup to a full wolf, functioning similarly to when one goes through puberty for the first time. During this time, the pack members gather around the shifting child with love and compassion, passing on their good wishes as they too remembered how dramatic and painful their first shift is. It sheltered the child and strengthened their bond with the pack. Their parents

served as guides and the pack members serve as their unyielding support. It was, honestly, the moment each wolf pup looked forward to—knowing that they're cherished by their community.

The snapping of the young bones filled my ears. I almost flinched at its shrill volume. I watched the boy sprout black fur from his pale flesh and his face morph into that of a wolf's snout. Just as the shift had started, it ended. Each member came to congratulate the boy on his official entry into Wolfhood with a pat on his head or a caress of his inky black fur. Jordan released a howl in pure delight, and the rest of the members howled along with him, the volume shaking the foundation of the pack house.

Could that have been me? If I hadn't been damned into a life of pain and servitude, could I have gotten a celebration like that? Could I have felt the love and admiration from the pack and my parents? I shifted alone in my dingy, foul stench prison alone at twelve years old. I had no guide, no comfort, and no support. I had no one to cheer me on through the pain. I didn't dare to howl, for the guards would've beaten me to silence.

"You forget, they don't consider us a part of this pack." My wolf spoke through our mind-link. She must have felt my sorrow, as she always did. **"But it doesn't erase us from not getting the support and celebration we deserved. It hurts."**

"It's whatever," I replied with sadness, putting away the last dishes. I bore the mark of Zircon Moon on my right shoulder blade, a wolf howling at a crescent moon, but it would be a bitter day in purgatory before I was considered a member. *"No use in moping in something that would never happen, Artemis."*

I grabbed my bucket and filled it up with soap and warm water, getting to work on scrubbing the kitchen floor with my nylon brush. My bony knees were red and blistered from the constant work, and my fingers were pruned like raisins. However, I found that the sooner they lose sensation, the easier it was to work, and I was counting on it.

Artemis, my beautiful white wolf, was my only friend and confidant. Friendships were impossible to come by, let alone anyone to have an idle chatter with. Five years ago, I was horrified to see that I had shifted into a white wolf. Werewolf history considers white wolves to be the rarest form of a wolf. There was a one-in-a-million chance anyone would shift white. And yet, I was the one. The lowest scum of the earth was special. I thought I was special.

But Alpha Jonathan made sure I remember there was nothing special about me. I was worthless and disgusting. According to him, being a white wolf did not and would not erase my past sins. He beat both Artemis and me, solidifying my dark thoughts that I was better off dead. I couldn't walk or kneel for days. His brutality was what I would always fear, for he was the mighty Alpha. I trembled violently at the thought of him towering over me with his fists raised.

By the time the pack members entered the pack house, I had long since finished the kitchen floors. Slipping by unseen, I got to work in the plethora of bathrooms. My body was aching, but the only motivation I had was, the sooner I get this done, the sooner I could be left alone. I was not in the mood to run into any pack members today. But trouble always reared its ugly head to someone like me.

I was mopping the hallways, deep in my thoughts, when I was shoved forward. With nothing to grab onto, I collided into the pristine floor, knees first. Old blisters popped and oozed as I hissed silently in pain.

"I thought I smelled something rancid." The vile voice rang through the air. I turned around to see Raina, my older sister, with Odessa flanking on her left. Raina, older by two years, towered over me at five feet nine. Her chestnut-brown skin could absorb the sun's rays for days. Her long black curls bounced with her every movement, and the blue tank top she wore revealed her muscular arms. Her upturned deep brown eyes revealed the dark intentions she had, involuntarily sending shivers down my spine.

Odessa was another beauty, her brunette hair rivaling that of silk. She was the lover of our future Alpha and destined to be the next Luna. Her complexion gave way to her Grecian beauty: olive-toned skin, mesmerizing almond-shaped hazel eyes, and cupid-bow lips bound to make any man fall to their knees. She never hid her hatred for me, always punishing me any chance she got.

'You belong on your knees' she would say to me.

Raina and Odessa were childhood best friends, just as Nuria and I were. Their mocking smiles and head nods to each other told me what was coming next. I wanted to run, but I couldn't. How could I? Those two would chase me down and drag me back, kicking and screaming. They were, by far, stronger than me and could tear me apart if they wanted to. My eyes pleaded with Raina to leave me alone.

In one swift motion, Raina grabbed the mop water, circled me, and dumped it over my head. I closed my eyes and allowed the soapy water to splash all over me, drenching my raggedy dress. As usual, I didn't make a sound. I didn't cry. I didn't whimper. I just cast my eyes to the ground and waited for the next part of the torture.

What was that quote... the humans would say? The most beautiful could hide the most-evil?

"Water didn't help at all to curb the smell." Raina sneered behind me, her voice dripping with disgust. "She smells like a wet dog. At this rate, the entire pack house would lose their lunch. I know I'm about to."

"I have an idea." I heard Odessa reply, the evil in her voice clear. A hand reached out and grabbed hold of my curly hair, crunchy and lifeless from many days without a decent wash. She dragged me along the ground, unable to escape the clutches of the brunette who made it her life's mission to cause me the most hell. My weak struggles did nothing to deter their mission or their laughter.

They pulled me to an empty bathroom I had just cleaned and threw me against the floor. I heard the squeak of a faucet turn on in front of me as rapid sprays of water began to fill the bathtub. Steam quickly filled the room. Raina placed her foot on my spine, ordering me to stay still.

I was trembling with fear at what was to come. How could I not be terrified? My arms were too sore from all the work to even push her foot off me.

“Is it full yet? The stench is making my eyes water.” Raina sneered.

“Almost, Rain! Hand me the soaps.” I heard the squirting of bottles and the sloshing of water. “Damn, this shit is hot!”

“Perfect! Time for your bath, bitch!” They forced me to my bare feet and then, without warning, tossed me into the scorching hot bathtub. My screams reverberated off the bathroom walls, drowning out demonic laughter. Both girls held me down as long as they could in the scalding water, throwing insults at how filthy I was and how I should be grateful that I was being cleaned. I fought back, desperate to escape the scalding prison. The hot water slowly, but surely, entered my lungs, searing me from the inside out.

Is this the day I finally die?

“What are you girls doing?” A third, gruffer voice entered the bathroom, and just like that, Raina and Odessa’s fun sizzled away. Their hands released me for me to crawl out from the bathtub coughing the hot water out of my lungs. I recognize the voice as my father, Beta Steven Lane.

“Steven, hi! You look good today!” Odessa complimented with a smile on her face.

“Don’t you girls have anything better to do than to bother the slave?” My father asked.

I couldn't remember the last time he referred to me as his daughter. My heart felt like a rock in my chest. It shouldn't still bother me after all this time, but it did.

"We were just cleaning it, Dad." Raina's voice was void of the earlier disgust, now filled with repulsive sweetness. 'It'. I was just a thing to them. "It was stinking up the hallway!"

I heard Dad sigh. "Rain. It could clean up itself and the mess in the hallway. Odessa, Neron asked for you."

"Oh! Well, that's my cue to leave." Odessa gave my sister a side hug. "We have plans for his passage to the alpha ceremony that we need to discuss. Meet me by the garage later so we could go shopping!"

"We aren't using my car this time! Val still hasn't forgiven us for backing into his!" Raina bellowed out as she followed behind her friend in a fit of laughter. I felt my father's presence linger for a moment longer, unable to look me in the eye. I slipped onto the wet floor. I hoped—no, prayed my dad would provide some words of comfort. I was not asking for much! I just wanted to know if a small part of him still cared for me...still *loved* me...

But, 'disgusting' and a door slam were all I got.

Pain skyrocketed through my weakened body as my eyes burned with unshed tears. I didn't need to look at my flesh to know that brown became red upon the burning. If I was a human, I surely would have died. But I only have Artemis to thank for helping me heal. It wasn't much considering we're both weak, but she helped subside the pain so I could get up on my feet.

"**Halima...**" Artemis whimpered in our head.

"*Artemis, please. Don't say anything.*" I respond, defeated, "*Maybe things would be better if I were dead. Death is better than this.*"

“You can’t give up yet, Hal. We must live, for our mate is out there. They’re our only chance of happiness.” She yipped back.

Artemis was right. There had to be someone out there who wanted a broken and bruised werewolf as their own, right? I looked at the mirror above the soapstone for the first time in a long time and the floodgates opened. A heavy sob escaped me as I slowly covered my face with my quaking hands. My curly hair, lopsided from the forced chops and weakened curls stuck to my skin, now marred with red with colorful bruises littering my b*dy from head to toe. My cheeks were sunken, the bags under my eyes were heavy, and my l*ps were crusty. My only piece of clothing, an ugly, sleeveless gray dress, clung to my skin like a second skin. Someone must want me, or else what was the point of all this? I must keep holding on for them. The longer I looked into the mirror, the more disgusted I felt.

The girl in the reflection was disgusting. I was disgusting.

Who was I kidding? Who would want this ugly thing in the mirror? I dropped to my knees, choking on my gut-wrenching sobs for a good minute. The pain and abandonment of my family flooded through my body, making me cry harder. I was alone, in a house full of strangers who desired my torment. Why couldn’t I just die?

Moon Goddess, why subject me to this horrible fate? Did you think I deserve such treatment? Answer me!

Please...

“Don’t go near it, sweetheart! It’s an abomination and I don’t want you getting hurt!”

“It’s like a monster, Mommy?”

“Yes, it is. It killed our Luna and the Angel. Do you want to be anywhere near it?”

“No, Mommy...”

I never understood how parents could instill hatred in their children. I wouldn't hurt the little girl. Outside, under the harsh rays of the sun, I was scrubbing the pack members' clothes with a lone washing board. Functioning washing machines were in the basement, but why use that when the pack could make the slave wash their clothes the old-fashioned way? I hated washing clothes, but it was also the only time I could sit outside in the sun.

I could feel Artemis itching to go for a run, but I pushed it down. The last time I went for a run was when I was fourteen, attempting my first and only escape. I was not only dragged back by the border patrols, but the Alpha made an example of me by beating me in front of the entire pack. I would have died back then, but my father stopped him.

It wasn't out of love, however. It was out of the desire to continue to use me as a pack slave. Today, I was seventeen. As much as I wanted to escape, I couldn't bear another beating like that. Artemis was unresponsive for a week, and I almost lost my mind.

Pinning the wet clothes on the clothesline, I made sure all stains came out of every article. Even a minor stain could land me in a world of trouble. My ears suddenly perked up at the sounds of laughter and muffled conversation. I turned to my side and notice Raina, Odessa, and two other pack members piling into a car to go shopping for the alpha ceremony tomorrow evening. Squinting my eyes, I glimpsed at Neron, the future Alpha.

Goddess, he was *gorgeous*, more now than when we were kids.

Compared to my five feet five stature, he towered over me by at least another foot. His long black hair was tied back in a low ponytail, giving me the perfect view of his chiseled chin, working a smile. He wore a tight black shirt that outlined every curvature and groove of his chest and arms, exemplifying his honeyed skin. I dared to glance down at the designer blue jeans he was wearing, outlining his muscular legs. His blue eyes were

parallel to the deep depths of the oceans. Never would I dare to look him in the eye. I shouldn't even be looking now.

His brawny arm wrapped around Odessa's small waist, molding perfectly in his hand. What was I doing? They shared a k*ss and it pulled me back into the reality that he would never look at me like that. He hated me as much as his father does. Artemis whimpered within me, growing restless at the affectionate sight. I knew she was eager to find our mate so we could be loved like that too, but I feared that day may never come. After a few seconds, I got back to work, ignoring the car engine roaring in the distance.

“SLAVE!”

Alpha Jonathan's mighty roar echoed throughout the field, making me leap with absolute fear. My mind races to find the errors I could've made through the day and came up empty.

Trepidation encompassed my senses, preparing me for an incoming beating. Dropping my washing board, I sprinted into the pack house. A pack member tripped me with his foot and laughed at me along the way, but I remained focused and followed Jonathan's cardamon and cinnamon scent. If the Alpha demanded something, I must respond promptly. If he called for me twice...I didn't want to think about the ramifications.

Neron was a spitting image of his father, but Alpha Jonathan had auburn hair compared to his son's black. The black came from Luna Celeste. As fast as my legs could carry me, I found him near the doors of the enormous assembly hall, impatiently tapping his foot.

“Never make me wait for you again. When I call, you are to get here within seconds! Understood?”

“Y-yes, Alpha.” I croaked, bowing my head in submission. Artemis whimpered again, this time in fear. She was just as afraid of our alpha as I was.

“You are to clean this entire assembly hall. I want every tile, chair, and stair spotless. You are aware of the Passage of the Alpha ceremony tomorrow evening, are you?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Good. I want nothing less for my son. You are to work the event to ensure the utensils and plates are clean. Lead Omega Cassandra would give your orders, and I expect you to follow them to the letter. As for the assembly hall, I’ll punish you if any corner is left unclean, understood?”

I nodded, keeping my eyes focused on the ground, hoping to escape from his vengeful glares. He sighed in frustration, turned on his heels, and strode out of the assembly hall. I sighed, letting out a breath out that I didn’t know I was holding as I took in the enormous hall. Its white and gold interior was large enough to fit all 300 pack members plus more. Standing up on my feet, I knew for a fact it would take me the entire night to clean this mini-palace.

“At least we would be left alone.” Artemis purred in our head.

“Don’t jinx it, Art,” I replied.

After I finished with the laundry, I spent the last of my energy sweeping, scrubbing, and polishing the mess hall from head to toe for the rest of the afternoon and deep into the evening. The cleaning chemicals burned my nostrils and stung my eyes, but I pushed through. My stomach rumbled in the agony of subsistence, but I couldn’t do anything to provide what it needed. I was lucky if I got something other than scraps and unwanted left-over food. I hadn’t had a decent meal in eight years. Werewolves could go for prolonged periods without food and water, and I was edging up on day four without food. Some days, I’d be so desperate for food that I rummage through the trash for something to eat. One Omega caught a whiff of my behavior and made a habit to take out the trash every evening so I wouldn’t be tempted. I got the lovely nickname of Raccoon because of it.

The pack house quieted down, signaling that the members were retreating to bed. I smiled to myself, knowing that peace was on its way to me. Nighttime was when I was free from the abuse. I could think and speak to Artemis without interruption. Like tonight, there were some days I didn't sleep. Even if I could, having a full night's sleep was a rare commodity. Once the sun rises, I was working, and everyone made sure of it.

As I scrub the farthest corner of the stage, I heard the assembly doors open. Sucking in a breath, I continued to work, ignoring the newcomer. I knew who it was by their frankincense scent. There was a clank of a glass plate against the floor. I instinctively flinched as it slid in my direction. The visitor turned and left, closing the doors behind them. I turn around to see a plate full of scraps of meat and pasta.

My stomach roared at the sight of the food. I grabbed the plate and scarfed down the food. It had long since lost its temperature, but something was better than nothing. I looked back at the door and reminisced on the one member of the pack who had some amount of decency to be polite to me.

Future Gamma Kwame Dubois. Out of everyone, he made sure I was fed something rather than let me go hungry. Who needed a feral slave on the loose? But years of abuse have made me cautious. As much as I wanted to believe that Kwame was kind to me out of the goodness of his heart, I refused to believe it. He gave me food now and then, but it would not fool me. It was all an act to keep me as a working slave. I was sure he could see 'guilty' written all over my face whenever he looked at me. Just like everyone else.

How could I expect him to be any different?