

Chapter 40

ABBIE

Now back at the castle I don't know what to do with myself. Do I just return to my old tasks now that I'm here? Should I seek out Gannon or perhaps Clarice? Gannon gave me some of his blood so the worst of my injuries are healed, I don't want to burden him by harassing him. Uncertain of what to do next, I wander aimlessly until I inadvertently reach my previous quarters. Tentatively, I rap on the door in case Beta Damian has enlisted a new personal servant. Met with silence, I cautiously push the door ajar and glance inside only to find the entire guard quarter downstairs also empty; I wonder if I should clean here first since the guard quarters were also tasked to me. The hour grows late, and I decide to see Clarice in the morning about where she plans to assign me and decide I should just stay out of everyone's way and go to bed.

Stepping into the room that used to be mine, I find the bed bare, so I mosey down the hall to the closet and retrieve some blankets and pillows. The task is made more difficult by my wounds. The stitches are pulled so tight that some are cutting through my skin like cheese wire.

Blood covers almost every inch of me. It has congealed in my hair and under my fingernails. I swiftly make the bed but realize I can't sleep in this condition. I head to the laundry room, scanning for clean clothes. I spot some servant uniforms, pajamas, and a pair of socks on the shelf. I snatch them up before grabbing a towel and searching through the first aid kit for antibacterial soap. As I limp toward the servants' bathrooms, my bones ache, every step a painful reminder of the ordeal I've been through.

Stepping inside, I find it empty. One side of the bathroom holds stalls for showering while a half wall is divided up the middle to the toilets and basins; long mirrors run the entire length of the center wall on both sides.

As I pass it to head into one of the shower stalls, I glance at the state I'm in. My normal auburn hair is matted, twigs and leaves are tangled in the knots. My clothes are torn, and I can still smell his scent all over me. Gannon's, too, but Kade's is still there. My heart pangs at the thought of him.

The way he lay dead in the dirt. My mate, though cruel, was mine or supposed to be. Staring at what is left of me as I peel off my clothes, I'm disgusted.

My skin marred from years in the orphanage is already horrifying to look at, though my scars were never deep or as jagged as Azaleas. I have always felt terrible for how she hates her appearance and the lashes that mar her.

She had taken so many whippings reserved for me, and I had done the same for her. Gazing at them, I used to think it was a reminder of what we endured and survived. Though these marks were left at the hands of Kade, I noticed something so much worse.

I never survived at all. Instead, I moved from one hell to another. Staring at my ravaged flesh, I am not so sure anyone can look at me again and be anything but disgusted by the sight of me. There are multiple marks on my neck from him that have turned my flesh black like it is rotting away my skin, the skin raised jagged, same as the scars etched into my heart. The hollow void feels like it will never be filled again, bottomless. I press my lips together to stop crying out when I peel my shirt off, dumping it on the floor.

I hiss as I force my pants down my legs. The blood saturates my pants, sticking to my skin and making me feel like I'm being skinned alive. Tears blur my vision, and I bite back the sob as my stitches open and blood cascades down my leg in a stream. I try to step out of my pants when hands fall on my hips, making me jump and hiss as the stitches along my arms and ribs tug from the movement.

“I was looking for you,” Gannon murmurs. He kneels, peeling them off, and I grip his shoulder, stepping out of them. He kisses my hip bone, which protrudes beneath my skin. The blood rushes to my cheeks, knowing I am now standing naked in front of the man.

“Why are you in the servant bathroom?” he asks, standing back up. Keeping my back to him, I cover my breasts. Not that there is much

point with the giant mirrors. I know he can see every vile inch of me if he glances at them.

“I didn’t know where else to go. You disappeared, and I didn’t want to bother Clarice to find out where I would be stationed. So I went back to my old station,” I tell him.

“You should have just gone to our room,” Gannon whispers.

“I am Beta Damian’s servant. I don’t think he has another. No one was in the room when I went in there,” I tell him.

I grab my soap, placing it on the niche before hissing as I start the shower. Gannon growls behind me while I examine my arm, which is black and blue, where Kade mauled me, the stitches pinching my skin, holding it together. The water sprays out, bursting from the shower head in a wide spray, making my injuries burn and sting.

“Can you shut the door?” I ask him, not wanting to turn around. I hear the door close and sigh, stepping under the water, only to cringe away. My head throbs as I wet my hair before turning around. I rub my eyes to rid them of the water. When I open them, Gannon is standing in front of me.

The door is closed behind him, but he is inside the stall. I quickly try to cover my breasts, though I have no idea why. When I asked him to close the door, I didn’t mean for him to come into the shower with me.

Gannon's eyes run the length of me, then quickly dart away. My stomach sinks. This is why I didn't want to turn around. I know what he sees; my mutilated skin is anything but pretty. I look disgusting, my skin carved up and the pieces forced back together like broken puzzle pieces. Turning to face the back wall, a lump forms in my throat.

"Can you get out, please?" I whisper, though I know he will hear me with his heightened hearing.

Embarrassment washes over every inch of me, and I suddenly want to scrub myself raw, as if I can clean away the vile marks lacing my skin. As if I can scrub away the memory that comes with them.

"Am I scaring you? I won't hurt you, Abbie," Gannon murmurs next to my ear before his chest presses against my back. He reaches past me, grabbing the soap out of the niche in the wall.

"I saw the way you looked at me, Gannon. Just go; I don't want your pity," I tell him. He growls, the sound vibrating against my back.

"The way I looked at you?" he asks, sweeping my hair over my shoulder. He dips his face into my neck. His nose runs up the side of my jaw.

"You don't have to pretend like it's all okay, Abbie. I know how much this must hurt," he whispers, and I can feel his warm breath tickling my skin. "But please let me take care of you."

I try to pull away from him, but his arms wrap tightly around me, trapping me against his body.

“I don’t need anyone’s pity or sympathy,” I snap at him, anger flaring up inside of me. “Especially not yours.”

Gannon’s grip loosens slightly, and he takes a step back so that we can face each other.

“Abbie, look at me,” he says softly, placing a hand on each side of my face and forcing me to meet his gaze. “I don’t feel pity for you. What happened to you is terrible and unfair, and it breaks my heart to see what that animal did to you.”

I swallow before answering, my voice coming out shakier than intended.

“I know I look disgusting, so please, leave.”

Gannon growls and I become startingly aware that he is indeed naked.

“I only looked away because I could tell you were uncomfortable with me staring, Abbie, not because I didn’t like what I could see,” he purrs, his voice laced with an undeniable warmth and sincerity.

“But he ruined me. I’m broken,” I tell him, my voice cracking as I summon the courage to speak those words aloud without crying. The weight of the realization settles heavily on my shoulders, and I can’t help but feel like a shattered doll, its porcelain form broken and cracked, held together by fragile glue, marred and made ugly, never to be whole again.

Gannon’s gaze softens, his eyes filled with empathy. “We are all a little broken, Abbie,” he says gently, reaching for my arm that shields my chest and the stitching that traces across my skin. His lips brush against my shoulder, and a shiver courses through me at his tender touch.

“Don’t hide from me. You never have to hide from me, Abbie,” Gannon whispers, his voice a soothing balm against the scars that mark my body. His grip tightens around my wrist, his thumb caressing the back of my hand in a comforting rhythm. With a sigh, I release my arm, allowing his hand holding the soap to glide over my torn-up flesh. The scent of Gannon envelops me, mingling with the steam that fills the small space, creating a bubble around us.

As Gannon’s hands move across my body, washing away the physical remnants of my past, a sense of relaxation washes over me. My shoulders drop, and I lean back against him, surrendering to his care, unable to stay strong any longer. The sheer size of his presence could easily overwhelm me, his strength capable of breaking me in half. Yet, at this moment, he is gentle—a tender giant whose fingers massage my scalp, removing the congealed blood and gunk with a tenderness that belies his size.

“I wish I could heal you,” he murmurs, turning me around to rinse the soap from my hair. My eyes roam over him, taking in a sight I’ve never witnessed before. Gannon, usually adorned in at least a tank top, now stands before me shirtless. The scars that stretch across his skin catch my attention, tracing a story of battles fought and wounds endured. They litter his body all the way to his hips. Mesmerized, my gaze fixates on the thick scars that brand his chest—it is as if someone had tried to rip his heart from his chest. The lines are harsh and pronounced, the texture of his skin rough beneath my fingertips as I trace them gently.

Gannon’s hand moves, fingers slipping beneath my chin to tilt my face up, ensuring our eyes meet. “Don’t hide yours, and I won’t hide mine,” he whispers, his thumb brushing over my bottom lip.

“These from the wars?” I ask, a little shocked. I always thought Lycans healed quickly.

“No, self-inflicted,” Gannon says, peering down at his torso.

“You did that to yourself?” I ask, horrified. He tilts his head to the side, examining my face.

“Why?” I blurt.

“The same reason you gave yourself that scar on your neck, I tried to end it,” Gannon says, his hand moving to the side of my face. His fingertips trail down the scar behind my ear. My hand moves over his,

and I touch the scar and swallow. The memory of how I got it and Azalea hers will forever haunt me. That day, I wish I could remove it from my memory entirely. If only the rope held and didn't snap.

"You tried to...end your life?" I ask, barely able to get the words out. The thought of gentle, caring Gannon wanting to die is too much for me to grasp.

Gannon nods, his expression pained as he stares down at our intertwined hands. "I was in a dark place," he admits softly. "I know what it's like to look in the mirror and not like the person staring back at you," He leans down, pressing his head against mine. "Just as I know the feeling of not wanting to wake up anymore. Looking for anything to erase the agony you are in."

For a moment, we stand there in silence, lost in our own thoughts and memories. Then, Gannon's hand moves from my face to cup my cheek gently, his thumb brushing over the scar again behind my ear.

"I'm glad you're still here," he says, gazing into my eyes with such intensity that it takes my breath away.

"I'm glad you are, too," I reply honestly.

With a small smile, Gannon leans down and presses his lips to mine in a tender kiss. It's not passionate or heated; instead, it's filled with a sense of comfort and understanding. Gannon knows what it's like to

carry heavy burdens and pain; he knows what it's like to feel broken inside.

"More than my life," Gannon murmurs. "That is what you and Azalea say?" he whispers. I swallow and nod.

"More than my life, Abbie, you are worth so much more than mine. You hold on, and I will for you, I have for you."

"Azalea told you?" I ask him, suddenly feeling dirty.

"No, the king did. Azalea wouldn't betray you. She explained how you both shared similar scars and the meaning behind the words you speak with each other. Not what the butcher did, but I got the picture. Doyle confessed when I found him."

"You met him?" I ask, feeling bile rise in the back of my throat at the mention.

"Yes, and we killed him for what he did. Mrs. Daley, too. He will never come after you again. I will never let anyone hurt you again."

"You killed him?" I ask. I am surprised at how little I feel about that information. He had confessed to murdering someone, but I feel nothing.

“He hurt you, so I made him hurt, too,” Gannon tells me, and I nod, biting my lip. What do you say to someone who confesses to killing for you? I should be worried he would, yet I felt nothing. Not sadness, not relief, just nothing.

“I wish I could heal you,” he repeats, and my eyes dart to him, his eyes roaming over my torn flesh before moving to the marks on my neck.

“Kade never deserved you. I hate that his marks lay on your beautiful neck.” I touch them, and they feel bruised. The movement makes me wince.

“You will let me remove his mark from you one day; I can be patient, Abbie,” Gannon says, and my brows furrow at his words.

“You can remove them?”

Gannon chuckles darkly. “Yes, when I mark you and when you agree to let me be yours,” he says, and I step back. I wasn’t sure I wanted anyone to have that sort of control over me again, not after what Kade did.

“Shh, not now. When you’re ready. I will wait. For now, having you back is enough for me,” he says, stepping closer. His arm goes behind me, and the water cuts off.

“What if I am never ready?” I ask, wondering if he would walk away.

I'm not sure if I can be with anyone, though I used to want to be with Gannon. I still do; I'm just not sure how that will be possible now. So much has changed. I have changed, and I know it isn't for the better.

"I'm immortal, Abbie. I have all the time in the world to wait for you," he says before turning and grabbing the towel hanging on the hook. He wraps it around me, pulling me closer. His lips press to my forehead.