

## **The Beast And The Blessed by Ashley Breanne**

### **The Beast And The Blessed by Ashley Breanne Chapter 82 - 90**

Eighty-Two: Natalie

Natalie's P.O.V.

The hot water pounded on my back as I stood in Killian's arms beneath the spray of the shower. I didn't want to talk to him about it. The horrors of that world were too

much for any living creature to have to experience.

I could still feel the chill that had settled deep into my bones, and my body trembled

despite the heat I was surrounded by.

Killian had given up talking to me, asking me about it, and I couldn't get my thoughts

together enough to form a cohesive sentence. Every shadow in the room danced,

taunting me as if they were about to come alive and drag me back to that Hell.

My eyes closed as I let my forehead fall against Killian's chest, not bothered by the

water the new position caused to run down my face. It was nice to be able to feel it.

Anything other than cold and pain was welcomed.

"Your mother is impatient to talk to you," Killian mumbled against my head, pressing a

kiss to it before pulling back and trying to look into my eyes as he gently pushed my

face up from under my chin. "I think we should go see what she has to say."

I nodded even though I just wanted to curl up in the protective arms of my mate and

never let him go. He felt like my lifeline, my tether to this realm. I knew it wasn't

reasonable, but a small part of me was saying that if I lost the physical connection to him, I would be sent back to the darkness.

Killian grabbed my hand, seeming to understand my need for contact. No matter how small it was, he always stayed connected to me with a brush of his fingers or arm around me as we dressed.

The private dining room was packed. Including Joselin were the six council members, Charlie and Damien, and my mother filling the table, leaving only the seats for myself and Killian left empty. But there were also twice as many guards standing watch, not only outside the room but inside as well. It was something that had never happened before since I had been here.

Our dinners in this room had always been private. No ears outside the family had been allowed to listen in on our conversations until today. It seemed getting sucked into an alternate universe changed a lot of things.

The council was oddly calm and civil as they stood, waiting for Killian and me to take our seats. No one said anything as Killian pulled me into his lap instead of pulling my chair out for me.

I couldn't look at them as I leaned against Killian's body. He placed his arm over my legs, using his other arm to hold me tightly to him. My gaze was locked on the wall as the shadows of that realm haunted my mind, taunting me. I felt painfully empty, but it was better than embracing the emotions hiding in the box I had shut them in.

I could hear the table strike up small talk, but I couldn't follow anything they were saying. I was listening for another voice. The voice that had burned itself inside my head. I now knew that once I heard him, I wouldn't have much time left before he dragged me back down. I needed to be ready.

"Natalie."

But the crown, it had been on the queen's bed. That had to have been a sign about

her. I knew it was. I just didn't know what it meant.

Had I been right in my assumption that she needed to die? Or had I lost my mind,

corrupted by the darkness?

Bound in the blood...

If something was tied to Lillian, did that mean Killian and Charlie could be tainted too?

Was it my blood since that was now my crown?

I turned my focus to Killian's breathing and his heartbeat.

Focusing on the pure sound

of his life force as his hand ran up and down my arm.

"Natalie."

One of the guards shifted their stance, moving weight from one leg to another, and my

eyes shot up to him. I had seen him around before, standing closer to Killian's office,

but I didn't know who he was. His eyes stayed glued above our heads as he remained

alert and aware.

Could he see me still? The last time I was dragged into that realm, the world around

me didn't fade to grey until I reached Lillian's room. Was I there now and not aware of

it?

"You need to eat something, my love." Killian's voice was low, but

as I pulled back, I could see the worry in his eyes. My hand went up to his chest, where I let it sit for several minutes as I focused on the heat coming from his body. I was still here with him.

“Natalie,” The voice called out again, and I looked up to see my mother sitting next to my empty chair. Her pale green eyes were locked on me, and she looked deep in thought. “Did you see him? What did he look like, the man?” I closed my eyes as I cringed back into Killian’s chest. I just wanted to forget about it for right now, but they seemed determined to focus on it.

“I want to get all of the information before you start to forget it.” She took a bite of her food but watched me like a doctor examining an ill patient. I would love to forget about it. “I did not see him. I only heard him.”

“What did you see?”

The small talk around the table had stopped as all eyes were on me. It was the most civil meal we have had since the council arrived, and I almost wished for the chaos, just so I wouldn’t have to relive that nightmare.

“It was normal at first, but no one could see me as I passed them. Something was leading me to her room, but I couldn’t tell you what it was beyond a feeling. Then everything started turning grey. He kept telling me....” I paused as I watched Charlie’s hand tighten around her glass, her knuckles turning white. “He just kept repeating it. When I refused to enter the room, the shadow men started running at me, attacking me....” i

I looked down at the tablecloth picking at the end of the luxurious fabric. The first one I had been able to fight off. I had even thought I had won as I saw a flash of Killian. But he disappeared, and the shadow men multiplied ... they just kept getting stronger until I was surrounded with their transparent hands pulling at my body. I had tried to shove them back, but nothing happened. It was as if my magic had left me. They just held on tighter before holding me down to the floor. I screamed and cried out for help. But more packed into the hallway, climbing up the walls and perching on the ceiling as they let out bloodcurdling screeches.

They held me down, and their ice-cold grip bit into my flesh. The largest of the group lifted the crown, holding it over my head as it let out a loud demented laugh that terrified me more than anything I had ever experienced before. I could feel the heat coming from it, and sweat started to break out on my forehead in anticipation of the crown melting my flesh. No matter how loud I begged and pleaded, they didn't listen.

Then I felt arms wrapped around me, and the feeling in my body began to return. So, I fought and struggled, determined to break free. Only the warmth from the body reminded me of home, and when I opened my eyes...

"Natalie."

I saw my mother standing up, leaning over as if she wanted to touch me and wake me

from the traumatic memories, but she sat again when I spoke.

"There was a crown. It looked like the crown from my coronation.

It was the only thing that kept its color when everything else turned grey. But all of the gems had been replaced. They were all red.” I narrowed my eyes in suspicion when my mother glanced at my mate with a knowing look.” What?”

“I am familiar with it. It was the late king’s crown.” My mother continued to stare at Killian as she spoke next, and I felt goosebumps rise along my skin. “Your father had demanded to be buried in it.”

“You knew my father well?” Charlie chimed in, but I could see that she was uncomfortable.

“I knew him through Talia, but I was not close with him nor your mother.” I watched as my mother lifted her napkin and dabbed at her mouth. Still, she gave no more away on her relationship with the royal family. We all knew there was more to it since the council recognized her from her looks or power.

“I’m sorry. I want to make sure that I understand. You think the man who had dragged me to that awful place was Killian’s dad?” I wanted to laugh. The absurdity of it was too grand. What had I done to warrant his anger? ” That’s ridiculous, right? How would he even cast magic, and why would he target me from beyond the grave?”

Killian stiffened beneath me, and I snapped my mouth shut, unsure if it was my words or the concept that didn’t sit well with him.

“It is very possible that he did not make it through to the other side yet because his work here was left incomplete.” Agatha, one of the eldest witches

on the council,  
 chimed in. Her long wavy grey hair was wild and beautiful. Her brown eyes examined me curiously as she pondered the new information. “He could be wandering these very halls as we speak, waiting for his time to move on to the afterlife with the Goddess. A few of us can examine his remains and get more information while the others finish the tracking spell on Talia tomorrow morning.” Charlie seethed angrily, throwing her napkin on the table as she stood up. Damien was only a second behind, placing his hand on her lower back, which did nothing to calm her. “That is enough! You are out of line! No one is touching my parents! Do not disturb my father, and no one goes near my mother! That is an order!” She turned to stare at Killian, holding his glare. “I agree with her for now. We need to be focusing on our enemies before anything else. If he is still roaming, he will still be roaming when we come home victorious and our people are safe. He tried to send a message, and we will figure out what that message is, so he should have no further need to communicate with Natalie.” His voice rang out in an indirect Alpha command to which even the witches dipped their heads in acknowledgment, i  
 My eyes settled on Charlie as she glared at me in a direct challenge to speak against her decision. It only made sense as I was the last person to try and kill her mother. But I was not amused. There was something amiss in this family, and

whether it was  
before or after the war, I would find out what it was.  
I would not bring any future children into a place so toxic that  
souls couldn't move on  
to the other side.

The room was silent, and I felt Killian follow Charlie's gaze. His  
burned into the back  
of my head as if he could hear my thoughts after all. I didn't  
respond, but I lowered my  
eyes to the table.

It didn't sit well with me. The timing of it was too suspicious.  
If it had been my father-in-law trying to warn me, he had failed. I  
wasn't sure if he had  
been trying to warn me away from his bloodline, his chosen mate,  
or if he was just  
trying to kill me.

Eighty-Three: Killian  
Killian's P.O.V

She didn't sleep last night, so I didn't sleep. I hated that she was  
scared, and I held  
her to my chest as her heart raced away with fear. Every few  
minutes, despite being in  
my arms, she would move her hands along my skin as if she were  
making sure I was  
still there and alive.

Once she settled, the slightest noise would set her off, and her  
magic would swirl  
around us violently. She was prepared for battle, one that she had  
to fight alone,  
which killed me. I wanted to fight it with her, for her, if I could.  
Aurora had stated that if we touched Natalie while she was in or  
going to the other  
side, we would go with her and be trapped.  
If her theory was correct, I didn't think my father would summon

her to the veil again if he knew I would be trapped there with her. He wanted to send a message or deliver a warning, but he wouldn't risk my life or our family's position on the throne to do it.

I suspected that Charlie would not want to take over if something happened to me.

In the meantime, Natalie was going to be stuck with my neediness. I wanted to touch her as often as possible until we were sure it wouldn't happen again.

Her breathing evened out, and I sighed quietly as she fell asleep. The last time she had gotten any rest was the night before she was taken. She needed this.

Her little hand was shoved between two buttons on my shirt and pressed against the skin of my chest. I looked down at her in my lap. She was curled up in a ball with her head against my shoulder and her legs draped limply over the arm of the chair. It almost hurt to look at her and how perfect she was.

I had always been seen as a monster by most. Having Natalie in my arms only confirmed that for me. I would burn this world for her. Anyone who thought to cross her would have to face me, and I would show them just how vicious and evil I could be. She may have tamed my rage and bloodlust, but that didn't mean it wasn't still there, bubbling beneath my skin.

There was a knock on my office door before it cracked open, and Joselin peaked her head in with a smile. It was a sight to knock anyone off their axis and fill them with

unease. Joselin rarely ever genuinely smiled. She grimaced, glowered, and glared.

But this time, she was smiling, and the evil glint in her white eyes sparkled even more

when she pushed the door open the rest of the way, and the council followed her in.

“If you wake her...” I started to threaten them, but Joselin cut me off.

“We found Talia.”

I sat up straighter in my chair, carefully keeping Natalie as still as possible.

“She’s three miles north of where the patrol was found, but we must move fast. How many witches she has working with her is unclear, but we know she is not alone.

She’s going to know we are coming. We thought we found her last night, but she has only grown stronger since then, and the masking was even harder to break through

this morning. Several power sources surround her, but hers appears to be the

strongest.” Joselin reached forward, sliding my laptop to the side and unfolding the map in her hand.

“What if we siphon from her before the attack?” Rona said as she placed both palms on my desk, focusing on the mountain range that hid our enemies.

“It’s too risky. We would have to tie ourselves to her. If she senses it, she could drain us.” Cora said as she began pacing the room.

Natalie shifted in my arms, and I held her tighter. She let out a sweet sigh as she

nuzzled her face further against my chest.

“Not if you do it the right way. I could easily drain her without her

knowing, but it takes a long time. I found a way to pull from another witch little by little until they didn't have enough left in their body to even get out of bed." Rona was still staring at the map, but the smirk on her face told us all we needed to know. Joselin and I made eye contact momentarily in silent agreement that once Talia was dealt with, Rona would have to go too. Rona didn't have to say it for everyone in the room to know it was how she had killed her own mother. The pride on her face said it for her. "How long would it take?" I asked, pushing down my distrust for her. "Time we don't have, but we may be able to speed up the process if we work together. It doesn't matter how little it is. Anything we can take from her would be helpful." Rona smiled at me, not bothering to lower her voice to prevent waking my sleeping mate like the others had. Her long grey nails tapped the map as she pointed to different sections around the mountains. "We would need to set up points here, here, and here." Natalie shifted, and I saw her eyes open as she looked around the room. "What happened?" I leaned back in my chair, listening to the witches formulate their plan, knowing they would need my final approval before taking action. Cora turned to Natalie, "I don't know how, but I believe your little trip yesterday did something to expose our enemies. This war will be over sooner than we had

expected.”

The premature victorious excitement had me gritting my teeth. To have the war over, we first had to fight in it. We would lose more men and women, and Natalie would have to fight, something I was still unhappy about. If Joselin’s vision was still correct, Natalie would be on the front lines with me.

“Hm,” Natalie hummed, sounding intrigued before pushing herself up to stand, leaving her hand on my shoulder. I could see the wheels turning in her head as she listened to the witches forming their plan.

“I will be calling a meeting of my commanders in an hour. I want all of you in the conference room to participate. It’s time we attack.” I said, and I felt the pressure on my shoulder from Natalie’s hand lift slightly before she completely removed it.

Her body shook subtly as she stood unattached to anything that could ground her. My hand shot out, and I grabbed hers, but she only squeezed mine before letting it go.

“I’ll be right back. I’m okay, I promise.” Her shoulders rolled back, and I could see the determination in her eyes. But her fear was pumping through our mate bond, threatening to drown me.

“Where are you going?”

Natalie swallowed hard before forcing a smile on her face. “I just need to take a walk and get some air.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but she shook her head.

“Alone. I mean, I’ll have my guards still, but I just...I’ll only be gone for a few minutes.”

“Stay close to Tobias,” I ordered as I stood and walked her to the door.

Tobias nodded as I gave him the order through the pack link to stay within touching distance. I wanted him to be able to grab her or her to grab him if anything started to go wrong.

I didn't like the idea of her leaving my sight, and I grabbed her hips, spinning her around until her chest was pressed against mine.

“I can go with you. You won't be alone either way. But I'll know you are safe if I'm with you.” I said, hearing the witches behind us start to bicker and knowing if they would get anything done, someone needed to stay with them to keep them in line.

Natalie laced her fingers through the hair on the back of my head, pulling me down to her. I moved willingly as my hips pressed into hers, capturing her lips in a kiss I hoped she would never forget. Our tongues fought for dominance, and she moaned as the world faded around us.

The clearing of a throat had us breaking apart, and I turned to growl at Joselin.

Natalie ignored her as she ran her fingertips over my jawline, pecking my cheek. “I'll be right back. I'll only be gone for a few minutes.”

I let out a low growl. My beast didn't like it either, and as she pulled away, a bad feeling settled into my gut.

Eighty-Four: Natalie

Natalie's P.O.V.

It was time.

The war was here... or rather, we were going to it. There were a lot of people depending on me not to fail. I couldn't stay in that room. If I did, I would want to touch Killian, to know that I was safe and hadn't been transported back to the darkness. I needed to fight through it, to stand on my own as a powerful descendant and not as someone who couldn't go more than a few minutes without touching someone to ground me to their realm. It was humiliating that our people had to see me that way, and I refused to let them witness me acting so weak. If Killian's father was trying to send me a message, then maybe instead of resisting, I needed to listen. Killian wanted to ignore what happened and tackle one issue at a time, but I knew in my heart that they were connected. My pace increased as I stormed down the hall, and Tobias shot me a worried look when he realized exactly where I was heading. The infirmary doors were still open at the end of the hallway, but there was no movement inside. I paused just outside Lillian's room. I didn't know what I was looking for, but my eyes scanned the hallway anyway. "You have a message for me. I'm listening." I said as firmly as I could. But I still swallowed hard as I waited for a response, terrified that I was making the wrong decision. I could hear the wind whipping through the corridor, and my hair flew up as Tobias

placed his hand on my arm. For only a moment, I allowed the physical contact to calm me before reminding myself what was at stake here and pulling away.

Killian needed a strong mate, and the people needed a strong queen. I wasn't going to hide away, scared of the boogie monster. I was going to tame that bitch and keep it as a pet. 1

"Your Majesty, I don't like this. The king will not be pleased."

George said as he stepped closer to my other side.

I could feel Thomas standing closely at my back, all three acting like a protective barricade. But it was pointless as I knew the biggest threat was in front of me, right behind the door.

"Do not tell him," I ordered, and I felt all three men tense at my command." We both

have our parts to play in this war. This is mine, and I will not let my people down." No matter how terrified I was...

I kept the last thought to myself, not needing to encourage them that this was a bad

idea any more than they already believed. The air wrapped around us violently, and I felt the darkness threatening to take me back down.

"Your eyes..." George whispered in horror, just barely audible over the storm

surrounding us. He shook, and I could see the debate on his face as he tried to decide

whether to shift. We could see no enemies, but that didn't mean danger wasn't nearby.

I ignored him, pulling my arm away when he went to touch me. He dropped his hand

to his side, and I could see Tobias resisting the same urge. He nodded his head once, and I knew without him speaking that he was telling me that no matter what happened, he would stick by my side. He understood that I needed to do this... even if he didn't like it. We were a team, and I nodded back to him. I didn't want to pull them into that realm with me. I didn't want to go at all. But I did need answers.

"I am listening!" I called out again as the faint whisper reached my ears. My guards stiffened, and I knew this time they heard it too.

"Darkness runs free."

I held my breath, waiting for him to speak again. Even during my short nap on Killian's lap, I heard the phrase repeatedly. Bound in the blood, darkness runs free. He was saying nothing new, but I didn't know what he meant by that. I needed more.

"Darkness runs free."

I looked around, spinning to see Thomas's back to me as he stood protectively behind me, but there was nothing else here with us. The shadow men were absent, and the hallway stayed brightly lit in color.

"I don't understand. Bound in the blood, darkness runs free. What does that mean?" I

turned once more, prepared to push open the door to Lillian's room and face my fears.

But the man's voice stopped me again.

"It's too late."

George grabbed my arm, but nothing happened. I could still feel the temperature dropping around us, and goosebumps covered my arms. They

had come with me,  
and now we were all going to face my demons together.  
Somehow that made it easier  
than when I had been alone the day before. “No, it’s not too late. I  
am here! I am  
listening!”

“It’s too late!” The voice said again, and Tobias growled loudly as  
a dark shadow

figure appeared before us, letting out a piercing screech that  
made my hands fly up to  
cover my ears as I flinched.

In the distance, I could hear a stampede of people running toward  
us, but my glare  
stayed on the creature.

“I’m not scared of you. Speak! Why is it too late?” I demanded,  
stepping toward the  
figure and pulling my arm free from George’s hand.

“Darkness runs free!”

The voice didn’t seem to come from the creature. It echoed  
around us from all angles,  
and I gritted my teeth as I pushed down my terror. “You’ve  
already said that! What  
does it mean?”

I waited a minute more before my frustration won. “Fine, have it  
your way!”

A chill stabbed through my body like a million icepicks as I pushed  
through the

shadow and grabbed the door handle. The metal was chilled but  
not cold, and I

wondered which dimension we were in. The colors were bright  
and vibrant, but the

darkness was still in the air, and the shadow man laughed  
manically behind me as I

burst through the door.

There.

We had to be there. Tobias placed his arm in front of me as the three guards growled.

The bed was empty. The former queen's body was gone.

Understanding dawned on me as I shook my head in horror. "He was warning me. I

should have killed her when I had the chance." I muttered as the stampede heading

down the hallway grew louder as the wind died.

The shadow figure flickered in and out before disappearing, and I knew he had left as

his message had been received.

"It was her. She was the key." I whispered as I grabbed Tobias's forearm in front of

me. The white sheets were speckled with dark clumps of soil from outside, but the

room was otherwise empty. All of the machines were turned off, and the blanket that

had been covering her was on the floor.

A furious Killian entered the room, glaring at me before he paused, noticing his

mother's empty bed. I turned to look at him. "It's too late. She was the key."

Joselin appeared next to him, staring emotionless at the empty mattress.

Gasps filled the room as guards piled in through the doorway, ready to fight but

stopping short at the empty space.

"Get out of my way!" Charlie yelled, the crowd parting like the Red Sea for her as she

raced forward with her mate hot on her heels. Her eyes narrowed as she turned her

glare to me. "What did you do? I told you to stay away from her!

Where did you put her?"

Her face was red, and I watched as her eyes turned black and her

hands shifted into claws. She was only a second away from shifting, and I knew she would attack.

“Where did you take my mother?” She roared before shifting into her snarling beast and lunging for me.

Eighty-Five: Natalie  
Natalie’s P.O.V.

The tension in the room was so thick that I felt like we were swimming in it. Charlie’s glare was locked on me, and I matched it with as much anger as I could muster.

Killian was fuming as he sat behind his desk, staring at us like a father about to scold his daughters instead of my mate, who had saved me from his blood-thirsty sister. I wasn’t sure what I had done wrong, but from the curl of disgust on his lips, I had done something.

It might have been because I had thrown his sister through the wall of their mother’s bedroom in front of a dozen people. Perhaps it was because I hadn’t told him I was planning on returning to where his father had tried to talk to me before I did it. I knew he had been worried about me after yesterday, and he would have said no to me going...which is precisely why I didn’t ask for permission.

It was now time to beg for forgiveness.

“Killian,” I started before biting my tongue, knowing that the one who spoke first in any argument or negotiation almost always lost.

He lifted his hand as he closed his eyes. If he hadn’t been so angry, I would assume

he had been in pain from me saying his name. But if he was, he hid it well because hatred was all I could see when he looked at me again. 1

“The fighting stops now. Figure your shit out!” He growled, sitting back in his chair with his hands crossed over his stomach as he looked between Charlie and me. The relaxed stance was a farce, as his knuckles were white from how tightly he held his hands together.

I turned to Charlie, seeing her glare had never left me. “I did not...”

“You may wear my mother’s crown, but you had no right to go near her! I expressly ordered for my mother to be left alone!” She yelled, pushing herself up to stand but stopping when Killian gave a feral growl of warning.

“You...” I tried again, gritting my teeth when she yelled over me again.

“You can be executed for harming a royal family member.” Her claws extended, and her nails made small popping noises as they punctured the fabric over the arms of the chair.

I flinched at her clear separation of me from her family... so much for being sisters. We were bound by our connection to Killian but nothing more.

As I opened my mouth to speak, I narrowed my eyes as she did the same and growled at her, “Stop talking over me!”

Charlie snapped her jaw shut before glaring at Killian like a pouting child. I shook my head in disappointment.

“First of all, you do not get to order me to do anything!” Killian growled at me as I

stood, and I shot him a glare, daring him to do it again before looking down at Charlie.

“I am the queen here, not you! You are nothing but a spoiled princess, and that title has an expiration date. Make peace with that now because I will not continue to put up with your tantrums.” 2

Charlie gaped at me, but I could see the fire burning in her eyes. Once I had children with Killian, our children would become the heirs, and Charlie would no longer get to keep her title as the princess.

“Second, I did nothing to your mother or take her anywhere. If you had used any bit of your brain instead of feeding your actions from your emotions, you could have asked any of the witnesses there with me. You’re protective of your mother, and I respect that, but you have no right to lash out at me for something I didn’t do, especially in front of others!” I wanted to be civil, but the petty voice in the back of my head wanted to make sure that there was no question in Charlie’s mind about where she stood in the hierarchy of this family.

“Lastly,” I snarled as I placed one hand on the end of each armrest and leaned forward until our faces were only a foot apart. My magic was swirling beneath my skin, and I felt victorious as she was forced back against the cushion and was unable to move. “You say you’re the princess, so stop acting like you’re the queen. You also say we are sisters, but you don’t know the meaning of the word. You don’t even see me as

part of your family. Regardless, you were the one who attacked me, Princess.

Attempting to murder the queen is treason. Don't forget your place. If anyone is going to be executed, it will be you. I'll inform you of your fate once I decide your punishment." 2

She glared at me as her eyes watered, but her mouth stayed shut. I wasn't sure if that was my doing or if she didn't have anything to say.

I wasn't going to execute her. We all knew that. She was Killian's little sister. He

needed her, loved her, and would always protect her. But it was an impactful reminder

of the power I now held because of the mark on my neck. I turned to Killian.

A small part of me expected him to be proud of me for holding my own against

Charlie, but the hatred was still on his face as his eyes met mine."

Charlotte, go cool off." 1

Killian's order surprised me, and I let my hold on Charlie drop.

Why hadn't he

reprimanded her for attacking his mate? Perhaps he was satisfied with how I had

done it, but the look on his face said otherwise. Only a moment later, the office door

slammed shut, and we were left alone. His eyes moved from me to the chair I had

been sitting in before in a silent order to take a seat.

I almost felt like a stranger with the desk between us as I sat down. This time I stayed

silent as I waited for him to speak. I had won the first battle, but this would be our war.

"You went to seek out the voice after I asked you to leave it alone

until after the war ended.” His statement was filled with disappointment, and I bit my lip as the very same flooded through our mate bond from him. I tried to push to reach for more, but that was the only card he was showing. Beyond that was a wall, as if he were intentionally holding everything else back from me.

“I knew the two were related, and it felt wrong to ignore it. It came to me for a reason, Killian.” I hoped that he felt my confusion in our bond. The way he was staring at me was not that of a mate nor an equal. It made me feel about two inches tall, and the confidence I had during my conversation with Charlie rapidly vanished.

“You disobeyed a direct order from your superior.” His rewording of the same statement suddenly made more sense to me. 1

“Funny, as your mate and queen, I thought we were equals. Are you mad that I could have put myself in danger or that my new abilities allowed me to go against your command?”

The silence in the room somehow sounded so loud. I could hear my blood pumping through my veins. Would he really be so shallow as to be bothered by having a mate more powerful than he was?

“I am mad that you disobeyed me. What kind of precedent do you think that sets for the rest of the council who were under the same order?” His disapproving tone was irritating me further and making my blood boil.

“You’re going to ask me that as if you dismissing Charlie didn’t undermine me the same way? She is acting like a spoiled brat, and I am sick of it! She hurt you time and time again, and now she attacked me publically. I don’t deserve it. Neither one of us do!” I leaned forward in my chair as I spoke.

“Charlie has always had a special connection with my mother. She is very protective of her, and I agree that she should have some say in what happens to our mother.”

Killian placed his clasped hands on the desk as he leaned forward, his glare unwavering. 1

“That doesn’t excuse her behavior toward either one of us! Why do you let her get away with it all the time?” I stood, throwing one hand up in exasperation as I began to pace in front of his desk.

His negative feelings toward me didn’t seem to be lessening, and the mask over his emotions only seemed to be hardening with each passing word.” She gets a little more leniency, especially regarding my mother.”

“What about with me?!” I snapped, glaring at him. He was clearly choosing sides. I

just hoped he understood that he was doing it. “She tried to kill me, and you did nothing! You just stood there watching!”

I watched as his eyes narrowed, and he laughed cruelly.

“You had everything under control. I wouldn’t let her kill you.” The magical mix of color

in his hazel eyes and the sharp features that made him so handsome suddenly looked sinister.

“Just injure me a little, is that it?”

“No!”

“Well, you wouldn’t have let anyone else close enough to touch me if they were the ones who attacked. Why the hell do you keep Charlie up on a pedestal when she continues to push the limits? What is so special about her that after she abandoned you time and time again that you would still choose her over me?”

Angry and fat tears rolled over my cheeks as I yelled back at him.

“She was the product of rape! She deserves a little understanding.” Killian shouted back, his face red and his vein bulging as it tried to break free from his neck.

My mouth pressed shut as I stared at him, feeling my anger dissipating.

“My mother gave my father a son, an heir, and thought she was done. When my father said he wanted another kid, she didn’t. No one knew what happened until a nasty fight when I was fourteen, and they spilled that dirty secret over a family dinner.

It was hard for her, and she deserves a little understanding.” He closed his eyes and ran his palm over his face as he leaned back against the chair.

“She was a little kid when that news came out then! She is a grown woman now!

There is understanding, and then there is coddling. She may have wanted to have a say in what happened to your mother, and knowing what I do now if that were an

option, I would agree.” I watched as his eyes opened and felt the disappointment

lower in our mate bond. My heart clenches as the lack of emotion

felt like a  
bottomless void.

“But it’s not an option anymore, is it.” Killian’s eyes hardened as he spoke.

“No, it’s not. But I have the feeling you will see her again soon.” I said as I turned toward the doorway. My chest physically hurt as I felt my heart breaking.

I knew there was a difference between the man and the king. But this side of Killian was different. Where had my mate gone?

It seemed there were more sides to Killian than I had thought, and I hated this one.

He didn’t speak as I left the room, and I wondered if that had been our first real fight or our last.

Eighty-Six: Natalie  
Natalie’s P.O.V.

The door had barely shut behind me when my temper got the best of me. He had no right! King or not!

I spun around on my heels and pushed it open, almost hitting Killian in the face. His hand gripped the edge of the door, and he looked down at me just as shocked as I

was. I quickly forced down the feeling and glared at my mate.

“You owe me an apology!” The guards all shifted, and a maid down the hall slowed

with a caddy of cleaning materials in her hands. I didn’t need the pack link to know

they were concerned for my safety. Killian had killed people for far less than my tone.

But he was my mate. But I knew Killian wouldn’t physically hurt me.

I forced myself to stay strong and kept my glare on Killian even though I felt like I was crumbling inside.

“I was coming after you.” He said as a bewildered look crossed his face, sounding as if the idea that he would be chasing after a woman confused him.

The fact that we had an audience didn’t seem to bother him. Still, the water lining my eyes was not

something I wanted them to see, so I refused to look their way.

“You can be mad about your mother. I am too! But you do not get to take your anger

out on me!” My finger shoved into his chest, and he looked down at it. “Forget that I

am your mate! Set that little fact aside for right now. Me, as Natalie, do you love me?”

Killian let out a growl, looking up at me with hurt in his eyes and making my next

breath that much harder to take in. He nodded but answered as I raised an eyebrow

at him, “Yes.”

“Do you trust me?” I felt powerful as he answered me without hesitation. He didn’t

have to answer to anyone if he didn’t want to, and he usually wouldn’t. But he

answered to me.

The corner of his lips twitched as his eyes melted. He was amused, and it only made

me more determined. “Yes.”

“Then don’t talk to me that way, and don’t take your anger out on me! We are

supposed to be a team!” My finger shoved into his chest again as he smiled widely at

me.

“Yes, my love.”

I was fuming as he stared on, amused by the situation, still waiting for my apology.

“Well?”

Killian stepped forward, forcing my hand to fall to my side. He was enjoying this. I

could feel it. The wall he had up had dropped, and while I could still feel his conflicted

emotions, they were lighter than before.

“I never should have let my anger affect how I talk to or treat you.

You are right, my

mate.” He reached forward, his hands pulling my hips toward him as he smiled at me.

“That was not an apology. That was a fact.” I jumped when one of the guards snorted,

and I turned my head to see Thomas and George pressing their lips together to hide

their laughter. It was a pretty full hallway with my three guards and the guards that

usually stood outside Killian’s office.

“I am sorry, my love. I let my anger get the best of me.”

I didn’t get a chance to respond before he pulled me right back into his office and

slammed the door shut behind us.

“I didn’t like you walking away from me upset,” Killian said,

nuzzling his head into my

neck. It was hard to stay mad at him when he was being so

sweet. “The feeling... I

haven’t felt that before. I didn’t like it. I don’t want to ever make you feel like you did

again.” i

The need to crack a joke about the cold king having feelings was on the tip of my

tongue, but we needed to address the more important things first.

“I didn’t like how it felt when you dismissed me. Do you think I had something to do

with your mother's disappearance?" My arms stayed limp at my side, and I didn't need to push the hurt I felt into our mate bond for him to know it was there. The way he had spoken to me had been unacceptable.

"I made the mistake of thinking as a family member, not a mate or leader. It was irrational and is not a mistake I will make again." Killian hovered his lips over my mark, making me shudder before he pulled away without touching it. I was grateful that he did. Otherwise, I would be a withering mess from his touch, and that was something that needed to wait.

"I can understand that. It's why doctors make family members wait in a different room.

It can be difficult for a loved one to see reason in the moment. But, even with that

being said, something still needs to be done about Charlie. That is non-negotiable."

Killian turned and returned to his desk chair before opening his arms to me. "You and I were not a united front, and I resent that you were fine with her attacking me. I also resent that she turned on me so quickly, ready to draw blood when I had never done anything to earn her distrust."

He glared as I leaned against his desk instead of walking into his waiting arms. "I was not fine with Charlie attacking you. But I knew you could handle yourself!"

It excited me that he had enough faith in my abilities to handle his sister. She had trained since she was a kid, fought creatures ten times her size, and came out

unscathed. It was a remarkable feat to have his bet on me in that fight, but I didn't

know if I could trust that it was true or if he was just saying it to get me to forgive him.

His arms dropped heavily as I held his gaze. I needed to cool off before I could forgive him.

"She could have killed me, and you didn't care, Killian! You were so consumed with the idea that she was right. You really thought I had done something to your mother, which I didn't, and even if it was just for a moment, you were going to let her attack

me!" I was shaking because I was so angry, but I wouldn't shift.

My beast was acting

dormant with her mate so close to us. I could practically feel his body heat from where

his leg sat, only a few inches from mine.

Killian jumped to his feet, towering over me as he placed his hand on either side of me

on his desk. "I will say it as many times as you need me to, but I would never let her

hurt you, let alone kill you! I would have intervened if she had gotten close enough to

touch you. Between your magic and your guards flanking you, you were never in any

real danger from her."

I glanced into his eyes. I could see and hear the honesty in his words, but it was hard to believe.

His eyebrows pulled together, and I looked away as he took a deep breath. 'I can see

there is only one way to settle this." He grabbed my face, forcing me to look up at him.

"I would do anything for you. You need to know that."

Killian pulled away suddenly, leaving me feeling cold and empty as he stormed out.

My eyes followed his broad and muscular back as he threw the door open and took off down the hallway.

“Where are you going?” I asked, completely taken aback by the turn in our

conversation. It was a slow jog to keep up with him, and I let myself slow as he went

right out the front door and into the courtyard.

Charlie was sitting out front on the steps, looking lost in thought as Killian approached

her. Tears could be seen on her cheeks as she glanced up at her fuming older brother.

“Stand up, Charlie.” He ordered, and she glowered as she submitted and rose to her feet.

“Please, not now, Killian. I’m trying to think about who could have taken her body, but

the only person that comes to mind is Talia. I need to go see Damien.” Charlie took off

down the large front steps, leaving us standing at the top as she attempted to take her leave.

“Killian,” I whispered quietly, begging him to let it go for now. She needed to be

punished, but it almost felt like kicking her when she was already down. I had thrown her through a wall, for fuck’s sake.

“Charlotte Amery,” Killian called out, and Charlie’s back stiffened as she stopped just

as her feet hit the dirt at the bottom of the steps. “You attacked my mate. I accept your challenge.” 1

I gasped as Killian shifted into his full beast and bounded down

the steps toward his frozen little sister. She held still as he reached the bottom, staring at him with horror and betrayal before removing all emotion from her face and nodding in resignation. "You want to fight me to the death for your mate's honor? So be it.'

Eighty-Seven: Killian  
Killian's P.O.V.

Charlie shifted before me, her wolf significantly smaller than mine but just as eager to draw blood. It seemed that was a family trait.

Craving blood...the kill.

I would have been excited about the challenge if she weren't my sister. But this was

Charlie. My Charlie. I had protected her all her life and cared for her. But she never

grew up. She never listened, and now her insubordination would be her downfall.

I felt my anger start to bubble up. After everything I taught her and everything I had supported her through...

I had always pushed back my feelings on the situation and supported her. Yet, she

couldn't give two shits about anyone other than herself. She was rotten and had been

corrupted. I could see it now. She was bad. She was evil. 4

Natalie had been right, I had let Charlie get away with far too much, and it needed to

stop now.

My vision turned red with rage as the thoughts tumbled through my head quickly. At

first, I was just going to fight her until she submitted. I hadn't wanted her to die.

Now it was all I could think about, like a record player on repeat in my mind telling me to end her. I would kill Charlie, win my mate back, and end this madness.

Charlie deserved to die. i

It was such a sudden shift that it almost made me pause. I had never wanted to kill her before. Out of all the people who needed to die, Charlie had never even crossed my mind. Before Natalie, Charlie was the only one I would be willing to die for. Now the tables had turned, and I had to push down the small feeling in the back of my mind telling me this was wrong.

‘Killian, this is ridiculous! This is not what I wanted! I was going to punish her, not kill her!’ Natalie yelled at me through the pack link, and I glanced over at her adorable face, red with anger. ‘What the hell is wrong with you two today?’ I don’t know, but I can’t stop. 2

Charlie stepped to her right, forcing my attention back to her as I growled lowly. Her body was littered with small silver lines of fur from her scars and battle wounds she had earned over the years that she had been hiding from her responsibilities.

She pranced around the world without a fucking care in the world, going on all these adventures just to come home and shit on everything I had done for our people. Then she had the nerve to attack my mate...

A wave of resentment flooded me, hitting me more deeply than before and fueling me on. It was so strong that my stomach rolled, and my mouth began to water excitedly at

the idea of making Charlie bleed.  
Then she lunged, her anger driving her forward as she growled menacingly.  
I dodged her attack, my muzzle tearing into the flesh on her side. The taste of her blood made my beast purr in happiness as she bucked free and turned with her foaming mouth snapping at me. 3  
The pack was quickly surrounding us, the guards trying to keep the audience at bay as they watched their king and princess fighting to the death. I snarled as Natalie pushed herself into the circle, standing too close to Charlie for my liking.  
'Do not interfere, mate. This ends now.' I snapped jumping between Charlie and Natalie as I tackled my sister to the ground. It was a flurry of snapping jaws and razor-sharp claws as we bit and ripped into each other's flesh, desperate to be the first to make a lethal blow. Charlie whined as I locked my jaw around the back of her neck. "Stop it!" Natalie's voice cried out over the crowd. "You're both acting crazy! IV  
A chunk of fur hit the ground, falling from my mouth as Charlie ripped herself free again before swinging and slicing her claw down my cheek. "Son of a bitch. You're both acting crazy!" Natalie's whisper was faint, but it didn't matter how quietly she spoke. I would always hear her. My claws dug into the dirt, ripping up the perfectly manicured lawn as my body was forcefully pulled back to the crowd's edge. My people moved back, eager to escape me as I fought against the magic, willing to kill anyone in my way.

Charlie was doing the same across the way, and I fought harder to get free, so I could slice her throat and be done with it. Her blood was calling to me, and it was time to end this.

My eyes widened, and my beast calmed at seeing my mate moving to stand between us, looking furious. I scanned her over appreciatively. She was spectacular when she was angry.

My body relaxed before I heard Charlie let out a growl that brought my attention back to her like a magnet, my need for her to die hitting me again full force.

Blood was running down Charlie's side and dripping onto the Earth. She thrashed against Natalie's hold, and I made a feral sound as she moved an inch toward my mate.

"Shows over! Get lost!" Joselin groaned in what sounded like disappointment. She had always loved a good fight. She moved to stand beside Natalie with her back to

Charlie and her palms up, facing me. The crowd stayed for another moment before

Joselin turned her glare to them. "Now!"

My body still resisted my mate's hold, my nails digging into the ground as I fought for freedom. The challenge had been accepted, and my only option was to return to my home victorious.

I would present Charlie's heart to my mate as a trophy, an offering for her forgiveness.

"Settle down!" Natalie yelled at Charlie with her back to me. I snorted mockingly as

Charlie fell flat on her stomach, and she glared at me with her lip pulled back. My hackles rose with unease as my beast gave in as well and immediately sat like a pet waiting for a fucking treat. It was humiliating, and for a brief moment, I wanted Natalie's blood for treating me this way in front of my people. Like a bucket of ice water being thrown on me, I felt all the energy and anger drain from my body. Natalie was right. I knew these feelings were crazy and abnormal, almost as if they weren't my own. But that put it into perspective. In the past few hours, I had felt every emotion possible. I loved Natalie, despised her, hated her, craved her, and now wanted her dead. 1

"Joselin, can you have the council in the throne room in the next fifteen minutes?"

Natalie asked, and pride filled me as I heard the underlying order. I closed my eyes, trying to get my thoughts straight, but they all conflicted. Save Charlie. Kill Charlie. Protect mate. Kill mate. Joselin nodded silently and teleported away. My pride was washed away by a sudden rush of anger, and I gritted my teeth as Natalie's hold grew stronger until I could barely breathe. From the whimper Charlie let out, she was feeling the same. The guards moved in, and the sounds of chains sent a flash of dread through me. Was this what it had come to? Had I grown weak? I would not be overpowered! I would not have my throne taken from me! Natalie's magic faltered as I struggled against it, growling through our pack link for her

and the guards to hear, 'Release me, now!'  
The chains clamped around my limbs, and I glared at her with fury as she refused to look my way.  
"I'm sorry, my mate." She whispered as she finally looked my way. "I can't do that. You're not yourself right now."  
My body shook as she forced my shift, my bones popping and cracking loudly. The restraints pulled at my limbs, and I clenched my jaw to keep from expressing my discomfort and showing weakness.  
'I order you to release me!" Distant laughter filled my head, and my jaw twitched as I tried to rid my mind of the invasive noise.  
"I do not take orders from you, Killian," Natalie said softly, but the power in her voice had me calming once more.  
The different emotions were too confusing, and I hated that my anger was the most prominent. I knew Natalie didn't deserve it, but it was my driving force as I lunged toward her, only to be stopped by the guards holding my chains.  
"Take him inside." Her demand was met with immediate action, and I stood tall as I walked with them into the castle. I would not let them drag me like a worthless prisoner

Eighty-Eight: Natalie  
Natalie's P.O.V.

I didn't trust anyone with Killian or Charlie's blood; everyone in the room seemed to understand that. The healers had also come down but were sitting off to the side after

caring for the king's and princess's battle wounds, waiting in case we needed them further.

My hands were shaking as one of the healers, Flora, talked me through inserting the needle into Killian's arm. She could have done it, but the fewer people handling his blood, the better for my peace of mind, and I knew he would feel the same way.

They had said the vein in the neck would be best, but getting a good stick there was impossible with him moving and snapping at me.

He was enjoying my fear.

The back and forth of warmth toward me had died, and there was nothing but malice on his face. The darkness had taken over, leaving me with a man I didn't recognize.

"So weak. I don't know why the Goddess picked you for me. You are a disgrace to the crown." His voice was deeper, his eyes darker. I had expected to see the pure black orbs that would have mirrored Heath's before his death, but the hazel coloring I loved was still there. My teeth clenched together as his words hit me harder than I had anticipated.

"Hold his arm still," Flora said firmly to the guards assisting in restraining Killian.

He was strapped down to bolts in the floor, but there was only so much the chains could do to keep him from moving while I tried to get the needle in his vein, so we had to ask them for help. I was so distracted by the venom he kept spitting at me with every word that I couldn't focus my magic long enough to restrain

him myself.

I was still working on using it on command and not just as an emotional reaction.

“You’re nothing but a whore. I should have known by the disgusting scars on your back that you weren’t worth my time. You weren’t even pure when you came to me, begging me to fuck you. You were tainted.” His lip was curled in disgust and turned into a snarl as I aggressively shoved the needle into his arm, missing the vein.

My lungs collapsed as the pain in my chest knocked the air right out of my lungs. I

didn’t want to believe that what he was saying was what he actually felt.

I assumed the darkness was controlling him and spouting the insults, but I had to wonder how much of it was true. Were these thoughts already in his head about me and were just being brought to the surface by whatever controlled him?

I closed my eyes as he laughed darkly, enjoying my pain. “You may wear my mark, but you will always be alone. No one wants you. We are all just stuck with you. At least your mother had the good sense to throw you out into the woods.”

“That is enough!” My mother’s voice filled the room from the doorway, and I refused to look up as she entered the room. What he said was true. She did toss me out as a baby, and he didn’t choose me. He was stuck with me. He hadn’t wanted a mate and made that abundantly clear when he found me. “Do not infect my daughter with your

lies!”

The only person that had wanted me here was Joselin, and that was because I would be the person to save her best friend’s life.

Killian growled again, the muffled sound making me feel more relaxed as his lips were literally sealed shut. I was positive he couldn’t part them to speak again if he wanted to, and I kept the pack link tightly shut.

I pulled out the needle, and Flora adjusted the angle of my hand before I inserted it

into his skin, watching as the tube began to fill with blood.

This was the first time I had seen something like it. The dark liquid was filled with

shimmering black lines, like small worms swimming through his bloodstream. It was

almost mesmerizing, but I moved quickly to Charlie to do the same.

Joselin was working over the collected blood, cleansing it of the darkness to return it

to its owner’s body. Still, we had no idea how long this process would take.

When I was done with Charlie, who hadn’t been entirely consumed by the darkness

yet and was sitting stunned and silent, I stood behind them, not ready to face Killian.

She was a more willing participant and allowed me to insert the IV without any struggle.

’Natalie, I swear, I didn’t mean to.’ Charlie looked up at me with wide eyes, begging for

understanding. But I wasn’t there yet. How was I to know if the darkness had been

affecting her or if it had been her choice to attack me?

“Please, don’t. Not right now.” I snapped at her as I turned to my

mother.' There has to be something you can do," I said, standing behind Killian. Aurora shook her head sadly as she continued to observe Joselin's work over her shoulder. Joselin didn't seem happy about it, but she said nothing. The other council members were working on enchanting a few items on the other end of the room to prevent the darkness from being able to retake control of Killian and Charlie. While I had just been learning about that kind of casting, my main focus was guarding my mate. I wanted to ensure no one else got their hands on my mate's blood. It was bad enough they found a workaround by taking his mother. "You are growing stronger every day." She responded, sounding distracted. 'There is nothing I can do that you can't.' I narrowed my eyes at her, waiting for her explanation. Killian rolled his head back, unable to face me fully. But I could see the evil glint in his eyes, and I knew I didn't want to hear what he had to say about me and what I was capable of. "We are not all-powerful, my dear, just stronger than others." She responded as she nodded with satisfaction at whatever Joselin was doing and turned to look at me. I was so sick of the vague answers, but my mate came first, and as soon as he was better, I would sit her down and talk to her. I wanted answers, and I wanted to ask if she could help with my training. The biggest one that had been on my mind was my father. Who was he? Where was he?

I turned to Agatha, who was approaching with two pendants hanging from her hands.

“Is this thing contagious because I am starting to feel a bit violent myself?”

She smiled at me sympathetically. “I don’t think so. That might just be the situation

making you tense.” She handed me the necklaces. “Don’t put these on them until their

blood has been cleansed as much as possible.”

Tense was one way of putting it.

I wanted to scream and cry at the same time. Mostly it was because of what Killian

had said. I knew he would be fine. He was surrounded by powerful witches and

healers. But it would always be in the back of my mind, wondering if he meant what

he said or if it had been the darkness talking.

“Thank you, Agatha.” She nodded before flicking her finger toward one of the

armchairs in the corner of the room. It slid over to me as she patted my arm. “Take a

seat, your majesty. This could take a while.”

I nodded before turning to Tobias. “Can we have someone track down Damien? He

should be here for this.”

He nodded, his eyes turning black, and I narrowed mine at him.

“You could have talked to me through the pack link this whole time?” Joselin snorted

as she looked over her shoulder at a smirking Tobias.

“He could have actually spoken to you this whole time. He just chooses not to. He

doesn’t talk to anyone.” She held his stare momentarily before turning back and

focusing on the blood transfusion before her.

I wanted to help but didn’t want to test my powers on something

that important and  
accidentally kill one of them.

Tobias looked away from me, but a shadow passed over his face  
as he held his stare

above my head. That would be the end of the conversation.

I pulled my knees up, wrapping my arms around them as I  
watched the blood flow

through the tubes to where Joselin was working at the table that  
had been brought in.

The council had joined her, and for once, they were working as a  
team and discussing

the situation quietly and professionally. Medical pumps were set  
up to keep the blood

flowing as Joselin worked quickly. The rhythmic noise of the  
machines was soothing.

We could have gone to the infirmary, but having so many people  
in such a small

space seemed like an unnecessary added stress.

I tightened my hold around the pendants as I reminded myself  
that everything would

be okay. It had to be.

Eighty-Nine: Natalie

Natalie's P.O.V.

My hands were warm as I woke. I had lasted until after Joselin  
had cleaned up all the

equipment and blood. I had only then allowed myself to fall asleep  
in my chair while

waiting for Killian and Charlie to gain consciousness.

It had been hard to hide the tears that silently fell down my  
cheeks as the weight of

the day crushed me. But I would never truly know if the guards or  
any of the council

had seen me crying as I fell asleep.

Sparks erupted along my skin, and I blinked to clear the blurriness

from my vision as I came to. Killian was sitting before me on his knees. The pendant around his neck fell against my shin as he held my hands, pressing his face to them. 'rm so sorry, my love. I am so sorry." His lips pushed against my fingers, and I took a deep breath as I felt a drop of water hit my thigh. I wanted to turn my hand to cup his face, but I felt frozen. He hadn't been himself, but that didn't mean his words hadn't ripped a hole in my heart. He continued to whisper an apology as he kneeled before me, and I glanced up, worried that he may be displeased with others seeing him cry. 1

But there wasn't a single eye on us. Everyone in the room, the guards, the healers, the council, my mother, and even Charlie and Damien, had dropped to their knees with their heads down in submission as my mate, their king, begged for forgiveness. 1

"Killian," I whispered, my hands moving in his hold as I leaned forward and cupped his cheek.

His wide hazel eyes looked up at me with water lining the lid, and I felt my chest tighten at the sight.

"It wasn't me, my love. What I said... it wasn't me. It wasn't true. I am so sorry." He

whispered, and I could feel his torment in our mate bond. His hands were shaking as they tightened their hold on me, and he turned his head to kiss my palm. "I'm so sorry."

The pack link was filled with emotions, and it felt like the entire pack was mourning

with him as he pleaded for forgiveness. I swallowed hard, closed my eyes, and pressed my forehead to his.

"You're back," I whispered joyfully, knowing that no matter how hard things would get between us and how many enemies rose against us, we were still a team.

"Tell me that I haven't lost you." He pleaded, and I knew the man that I loved was, indeed, back.

'You're back!' I cried again as I pressed my lips to his and laced my fingers through his hair. Killian laughed against my lips before kissing me back with as much passion as possible. His hands moved to my hips, and he pulled himself closer to me as he got to his feet and took me with him.

I was so lost in him that the clearing of a throat made me jump. We parted, but I kept my eyes on him as I memorized his face. The cold and cruel lines from the day before were gone, and his eyes had lightened. He was my mate again, and I looked forward to the day I could kill the bitch responsible for tampering with his mind.

"Will all due respect. Your kind may be able to go days without sleep, but mine can't.

Since the meeting of the commanders was canceled yesterday, it would be great if we could do it now so I can go to bed." Joselin's tired voice matched the darkness under her eyes, and I cringed with guilt that I had been sleeping while she had been working and watching over Killian and Charlie.

I felt guilty that I ever had any doubt. While Joselin was socially

awkward and very blunt, she had proven herself time and time again to be a good friend.

“That sounds fair.” Killian agreed, nodding as his eyes turned black momentarily, but he never turned away from me. “We will meet now. It is time to end this.”

The room cleared as everyone made their way to the conference room. I stayed back with Killian, enjoying the feeling of his arms around me as I cuddled my cheek against his chest.

“Natalie, I need to know that you are okay. What I said yesterday, none of it was true.

It wasn't even me. It felt like someone was in my head telling me what to say, and I couldn't stop it.” His hand ran over the back of my head soothingly, and I sniffled as a tear ran free down my cheek.

“I know,” I whispered before opening my eyes when I felt someone approaching.

Charlie looked exhausted but somehow still glamorous. “Natalie.” Her soft voice sounded hesitant as she approached us. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath of Killian's scent again before pulling away and facing my sister-in-law. “I am glad you are okay.”

Damien stood behind her in a protective stance as if waiting for an attack. But he still dipped his head in a respectful greeting toward me when I glanced his way.

“I know we talked about how I treat others and present myself. I promise that I am working on being better. Yesterday I was angry about my mother being missing. It

wasn't at you, but it became consuming as soon as I felt it. If I had been in my right mind, I wouldn't have ever dreamed of attacking you." She chewed on the inside of her lip, sucking only one side in further than the other as she waited for my response.

I knew the chance of it being the darkness was possible, but just like what Killian had said to me, I would always wonder if it was true.

"Apologize." Killian ordered in a low growl, his hand landing on my hips behind me.

"I'm sorry, Natalie," Charlie said, meeting my eyes before glancing over my shoulder to her brother. Whatever she saw must have shaken her because she looked down immediately, and Damien stepped forward to guide her away from us.

"The commanders are here," Killian said softly. "Do you want to attend the meeting or go get some sleep?"

The idea of being away from him right now was not appealing in the least. Between wanting to keep an eye on him and wanting to avoid facing the shadow men three times within forty-eight hours, I would be following him anywhere.

"Let's go," I said, wiping my face and taking a deep breath before standing up straight and doing my best to mentally prepare myself for the stressful conversation we were about to have.

Killian smiled down at me with pride, and I grabbed his hand, lacing our fingers together.

The conference room was packed and loud as all of the commanders, most of whom I

had never had the chance to meet, were discussing the situation. They had broken into groups of two or three, and each one was talking loudly to be heard over the others as they all stood around a large map.

The room fell silent as we entered, and those who were sitting rose to their feet as they all bowed their head in greeting.

“I’ll get right to it,” Killian said as he pulled out the seat to his left and waited for me to sit. The rest of the room followed suit as he took his place at the head of the table.

“The time to attack has come. We have their location and will end this once and for all.”

I admired the way he led his people with a strength that motivated them. Each commander gave their input, and he listened and responded, gathering all of the data before making a decision. The council sat quietly at the end of the table with my mother, all discussing different approaches based on each proposed plan. I leaned back in my chair as I was filled with confidence.

The past two weeks had been a lot of fighting, bickering, and attempted murder. But seeing everyone working together as one team let me know we were far more prepared than I had anticipated.

“So, it’s settled then. Make sure everyone is prepared. We will head out in two days.”

Killian announced as he rose from his seat. I looked around the room at the determination on each face and nodded in agreement.

Two days.

By asking them to be prepared, I knew he was ordering everyone to have their affairs in order... just in case.

A lot could happen in two days, and then the real fun would begin

Ninety: Natalie

Natalie's P.O.V.

The grass was stained red.

Bodies were strewn across the yard as the dark clouds overhead opened up, letting down a sheet of rain that limited visibility.

With each exhale, I could see my breath coming out in a thick fog, but I didn't feel

cold. My body was burning hot as I sprinted down the front steps of the castle. My

breathing was rapid and panicked as my head twisted from side to side, trying to locate Killian.

He was out here. I could feel it, the anger and the pain coming from him.

He was out here, and he was hurt.

A large figure raced forward through the rain, and I squinted as I tried to see if he was

a friend or foe. But he was moving too fast, and the rain was too heavy. His broad

shoulders were smaller than Killian's but were relatively close.

The dark hair made me think it was Tobias or perhaps Damien.

But when he was

finally close enough for me to identify him, my body froze with fear. The pitch-black

eyes were locked on me as he snarled and lunged forward.

I lifted my arms to shield myself as the stranger crashed into my body, but instead of

an impact, I felt a sickly chill, and he passed right through me.

The sound of a struggle

made me turn, and I watched as Heath fought the creature, i  
My stomach turned at the sight of him. His skin was even paler  
than the vampires,  
and dark circles were under his eyes. His cheeks were sunken in,  
and his skin was  
pulled tight to the little muscle he had left.  
But it was the open wound across his neck than made me  
queasy. I knew he was  
dead. Yet, he stood before me as he fought to protect me.  
“Run,” He choked out as he fell to his back, barely holding the  
vampire back as it  
snapped and clawed at him.’ Run!”  
My jaw dropped open as his hand slipped, and the vampire was  
able to sink its teeth  
into Heath’s neck. The scream he let out seemed to follow me as I  
turned and ran  
further from the castle and deeper into the battle.  
I stumbled as I caught my toe on something before regaining my  
footing and looking  
to the side to see a hand. The tanned skin pulled at my heart, and  
my wide eyes  
followed it up with horror to its owner, seeing the first man I had  
ever cared for lying on  
the ground. His eyes were open but lifeless, staring through me.  
Jake.  
“No, no, no,” I gasped. I glanced around as the rain began to  
lighten, seeing the piles  
of bodies surrounding me. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go.  
Another surge of pain ripped through me, and my hand flew to my  
side. I looked up  
and away from the corpses. I would worry about the dead later.  
My mate was still  
alive, and he needed me.  
A lone figure was standing to my right, swaying back and forth. I  
didn’t need to be able

to see his face to know that he was my mate.  
I launched myself over the bodies, sprinting toward him as he  
stumbled to the side,  
falling to his knees.  
“Killian!” I shouted as he clutched one arm across his body and  
against his ribs. His  
other dug into the wet Earth as he held himself up. His uneven  
gasps for air sounded  
rough and painful. My hands hovered over him as I fell to my  
knees, joining him in the  
mud, scared to touch him. “We need a healer!”  
A quick scan of the courtyard only confirmed my worst fears. The  
few people standing  
were moving toward the castle. Their black eyes passed over me  
as they smiled in  
victory when they saw Killian fighting for his life.  
Beyond the city wall, I could hear the terror the black-eyed  
demons unleashed on the  
people. The screaming and growling were quickly cut off, leaving  
only the smell of  
smoke as the rain ceased.  
Killian groaned, and I turned back to him, trying to focus my  
powers so I could help  
him. I wasn’t a healer, but I could at least try to teleport us out of  
here like Joselin  
could. I just needed to get him to safety...to help.  
“Natalie,” He cried between gritted teeth, and my stomach  
dropped when I realized he  
wasn’t looking at me. His eyes were straight ahead, staring  
toward the castle that was  
being flooded by vampires.  
I placed my hand on his back, trying to tell him I was here, but it  
went right through  
him. “Killian, I’m going to get you to safety. I’m going to get you  
out of here!”

How could he not see me when Heath could?

“Natalie!” He shouted as he pulled up one knee, trying to push off it to stand. He tumbled forward a few steps before crashing to the ground with a loud cry of pain.

I rushed to his side, trying to push my magic to him through our bond, my strength.

But as he lay with mud splattered over his face and his cheek against the ground, I knew he didn’t feel it.

A loud scream came from the castle, sending a chill down my spine and goosebumps across my skin. It was familiar, heartbreaking, and full of horror. It was mine.

Killian tried to push himself up once more but crashed back into the mud after rising only a few inches. “No! Natalie!”

His gaze looked right past me as I watched him in horror. His eyes lost focus, and his body fell limp.

Killian’s breathing came out in short pants, and I laid down next to him as each breath seemed shallower than the last.

“Killian, I’m here,” I said, placing my hand over his even though it fell right through.

“I’m here.”

“Natalie.” The broken whisper was paired with blood spilling from his mouth. As much as I wanted to close my eyes, I couldn’t.

I held mine on his even though he couldn’t see or feel me and continued to whisper,

“I’m here. You’re not alone. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Love, wake up.” Killian’s voice became stronger, and I blinked as the world around

me faded, leaving me in our dark bedroom. I was still lying on my

side, with Killian's face only inches away as he rubbed his hand up and down my side. His large form made me feel small as my feet touched the top of his shins. He hadn't shaven in several days, and the dark layer of scruff looked incredible on him. It added to his mysterious and terrifying persona, which only sent a thrill through me.

"What were you dreaming about?" He asked as I continued to scan over his features, my fingers joining in to memorize every part of him. I didn't want to forget it for a moment or miss out on the opportunity to enjoy time with him.

"Horrible things," I murmured quietly, not wanting to disrupt the calmness of the room.

"Your heart is racing." He responded, leaning forward to rub the side of his nose against mine.

It was incredible that the man who had been so opposed to having me here had turned into such a loving and caring mate. I had expected to be locked away in a room to raise the children he forced upon me while he spent his free time with his mistresses.

I had been so wrong about our life together, and I could not have been more grateful for what we had.

The thought of losing him and watching him die, even in my dream, made me feel like my world was ending. I prayed to the Goddess that it was a dream, not a vision. But why would I be in my own dream? I didn't even want to know what had made me

scream like that...that blood-curdling, soul-crushing scream. "It was just a nightmare," I whispered back, pushing myself forward to steal a kiss when his lips parted to say something more. I didn't want to remember how he had called and cried out for me, and I hadn't been there. I had to think it had been a dream because I wouldn't be hiding in the castle if our people were out there fighting for their lives, especially if my mate was. Nothing could keep me from being at Killian's side as we battled our enemies together. Killian pulled back, looking between my eyes as he cupped my cheek. "Do you want me to get you some water? What do you need, my love?" My fingers grabbed his wrist, and I pressed my cheek further into his large, calloused palm. "I just need you. I just need to feel you."