

## An Understanding

The sound of the wind whipping the large white sails of their ship joined in with the shouts of the sailors as Boston grew closer.

"All I can say, Princess, is that at least your dress is moderately clean and your hair is presentable," Katherine said, her voice resigned. It was true that the heavy silk of her light blue dress, which was open in the front to reveal the white petticoat underneath, was decently clean, and Isobel's lady's maid had done a good job of braiding and pinning up the Lycan's long dark brown hair, leaving only two curls down to frame her face.

"My father probably won't even be meeting us here," Isobel told her, believing that the Lycan king wouldn't want to sully himself by traveling to the busy and bustling wharf to meet them. "There is no reason to fuss."

"You should let me apply some paint to your face," Katherine insisted as their ship neared the long wharf that protruded from the city and ran for what must have been half a mile into the harbor. She'd learned from the captain only a few minutes ago that the Bostonians had been original and creative enough to name it 'Long Wharf'.

"You know I detest it," Isobel replied to Katherine with a sigh. "It makes my face itch and it makes me look ridiculous." The white paint looked absurd on her sun-kissed skin and the rouge made her look foolish rather than pretty.

"You sound like a child," Katherine told her with a roll of her eyes.

"I don't see paint on your face," Isobel pointed out. Though the young woman had some rouge on her cheeks and lips, no white paint had been applied to the rest of her face.

"My skin is fair enough not to need it," Katherine explained with a smirk. "Unlike you, I wear my bonnet when we go riding."

Isobel groaned but knew her lady's maid was right to scold her. Her skin had once been pale enough not to need that horrid white paint. However, too many riding excursions without the protection of a bonnet had darkened her skin to what society would deem an unattractive color because it implied she worked in the sun and was therefore of a lower class. It was disgusting what people did to make sure they weren't associated with those 'below' them.

"I'll only wear cosmetics if Charles does as well," Isobel said, turning her head to the side to look at her brother. The trend of the '1720s meant that men were expected to whiten their faces as well, something that her brother detested ercely.

"I'm wearing a powdered wig," Charles stated with pursed lips. "I believe that should be sufficient."

Charles and Isobel had grown used to being without cosmetics—and Charles without his white powdered wig— and had only worn them when an important Lycan had visited them in London, which was a rare event in any case. Seeing the bare faces of the hard-working sailors on the ship for the last six weeks hadn't made them any fonder of the white paint and rouge either.

"I'll settle for wearing some rouge on my cheeks and lips," Isobel informed her lady's maid with a sigh. "Maybe my bonnet will shade my face and help to hide my complexion."

Katherine shook her head in exasperation but agreed, which is how Isobel found herself trying not to scratch at her itchy rouged cheeks as men tied the Josephine to the wharf with thick ropes. A ramp was soon lifted onto the side of the gently swaying ship but by the time it had been placed, a group of eight werewolf guards and a scowling Lycan, who Isobel vaguely recognized as her father, had emerged from the bustling crowd and had assembled on the wharf at the foot of the ramp.

"He's here," Isobel noted quietly, moving back from the ship's railing before Edward could see her.

"Indeed he is," Charles replied, sounding no more happy to see King Edward than she was.

"How did he even know we'd be arriving today?" Isobel asked.

"He probably had someone watching the harbor," Charles explained with a shrug.

"You two look as if you're walking to your deaths, not about to greet your father," Alexander noted.

"Is he really so terrible?" Katherine asked, sounding just as nervous as Isobel felt.

"He is," Isobel said honestly, recalling the beatings she and Charles had received from him. It was the servants who got the worst of his foul temper though. "Maybe we shouldn't have brought you with us," she said, realizing how badly she and Charles might have been putting Katherine and Alexander at risk.

"We'll make sure you're protected," Charles promised them. "They'll be alright," he assured his sister.

Isobel nodded but she couldn't help but feel as if she had led Katherine and Alexander to a place they would soon come to hate.

"We wanted to join you, remember," Katherine reminded the princess.

"We chose to be here," Alexander agreed.

"It looks like the King is getting impatient waiting for us," Charles noted with a groan.

Isobel peered over the side of the ship to see their scowling father was moving toward the ramp, his company of guards following behind him with careful blank expressions. She cursed in a very unladylike manner and rushed over to where the captain of the ship was standing.

"Captain. This is to be divided equally between your men," she explained as she handed him the bag of coins.

"Your brother already settled the payment, Princess Isobel," he told her, his eyebrows raised in confusion.

"I know but most of your sailors lost that coin gambling with me," she said, making him chortle.

"I'd say you should keep your winnings but something tells me you won't take this money back," the captain said with a shake of his head. "You're a good woman, Princess. It was a pleasure to have you on my ship."

"It was a pleasure to be on your ship, Captain," she replied with a smile before running over to where her brother was waiting with his back straight and his face a mask of indifference.

Isobel tried to slip on a similar expression but knew she couldn't hide her nerves as well as Charles. Sensing her fear, Charles grabbed her hand and gave it a firm squeeze, releasing it right as their father walked onto the deck, his narrowed eyes finding them immediately. Isobel swallowed as he marched up to them, his group of guards shadowing him.

As they got closer though, the delicious smell of cinnamon and vanilla tickled Isobel's nose. She followed the scent to a handsome guard who was standing behind her father. His light brown hair was cut short, and though he had a short beard, Isobel could see from the rest of his face that he could have only been a few years older than her. His sea-blue eyes were wide and his lips were parted in an expression of surprise, mirroring Isobel's look of shock. Isobel had heard of how it felt when a werewolf or Lycan found the person who they were destined to be with but she'd never thought she'd feel it herself.

There was no questioning it though as she felt the tug towards the brown-haired blue-eyed guard. The werewolf was her mate. Any relationship between the two of them was doomed from the start— Lycan royalty never married outside of their species—but he was her mate nonetheless. As Isobel watched though, his expression quickly turned to one of disgust, and her chest clenched with hurt as his dark blue eyes turned cold and hard. He was her mate but he was clearly not happy about it; instead, he looked revulsed by it, by her.

"I gave you instructions to stay in London," Edward spat venomously, his angry voice stealing Isobel's attention. The sailors' movements stilled in a way that Isobel knew they were listening in as well.

"I am aware," Charles replied coolly. "However, I couldn't allow Isobel to travel alone. It's dangerous for a woman to travel without a male guardian or chaperon. Wouldn't you agree?" he asked, knowing that his father couldn't argue with his logic. Charles had always had a way with words, and with the way Edward's face became pinched and red with anger, Isobel knew that Charles had won the verbal match.

"Who did you leave in charge of the estate?" he asked through gritted teeth.

Knowing Edward's focus was on her brother for the time being, Isobel let her eyes travel back to the guard but immediately looked away again when she noticed his steeled hands and clenched jaw.

"Uncle Fred," Charles explained. "He'll look after it well."

Edward sneered. "You would have been better off selling it."

"Either way, you left me in charge so I made the decision," Charles replied with what looked like a careless shrug.

"Next time, I won't be so careless to leave you in such a position," Edward said, his words attempting to cut Charles down in front of the guards and sailors. "And you," he continued, his grey eyes swiveling to Isobel. "How am I to marry you off when you look like a damned servant?" he asked.

Isobel gulped but had no words to fight him with.

Before she could react, Edward grabbed her chin in a bruising grip, pulling her towards him and yanking her head off viciously. "Is there a reason for your disturbing and improper appearance?" he asked, a drop of his spit landing on her cheek.

"I used the last of my paint two days ago," Isobel replied in a trembling voice. It was a lie of course— Isobel hadn't worn cosmetics on the ship even once— but her father didn't need to know that.

"Father," Charles started to say but Edward cut him off with a sharp look.

"The two of you are as disappointing as I remember you to be," Edward declared, pinching Isobel's chin harder before releasing her and letting her stumble back.

The sailors had given up all pretense of work and were now staring at the scene with looks of anger.

"You on the other hand," the Lycan king said, his eyes having landed on Katherine, who stood between Isobel and Alexander, and looking at her with a lust-lled gaze that made bile rise up in Isobel's throat. "You, my dear, could be of use to me."

His hand reached out to touch her horrified face but before it could touch her pale skin and before Alexander could do something stupid, Isobel's hand had shot out and grabbed her father's wrist.

"Touch her and I will kill you," she said slowly and angrily, allowing her rage to show. "Katherine is my lady's maid and you will treat her with respect."

The guards shifted behind the king, clearly not certain how to react to the situation, and out of the corner of her eye, Isobel could see Alex's hand resting on the hilt of his sword as he stared at Edward's hand furiously.

The king's gaze turned ever so slowly to his daughter. "You dare threaten me?" he asked in a dangerously low voice as he shook his arm from her grip.

"We both do," Charles said coldly. "Katherine and Alexander are under our protection."

Edward laughed as if it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. "You couldn't kill me even if you tried," he said, his eyes still not having left Isobel's. "You have no power here, Isobel," he spat, backhanding her across the face with enough force to send her stumbling to the side and into Charles.

Tears sprung to Isobel's eyes as she lifted her hand and covered her stinging face but she blinked them back and stood up straight to face her father again. He could have threatened her all he wanted, but threatening Katherine had pushed Isobel over the edge— she would do anything, resort to anything, to protect her friend.

"If you touch Katherine or Alexander, I will make it my mission to destroy any matches you might arrange for me," she told him, her voice surprisingly even. "I will destroy my own reputation if I must, and I—and by extension you—will become the laughing stock of Boston if you so much as look at them in the wrong way. So, father," she said coldly, "I would think again if you ever feel the need to look at or touch Katherine again."

The only thing that could be heard on the ship was Edward's heavy breathing and the creak of the mast, and for a second Isobel wondered if she had gone too far. The sailors and guards were staring at the pair of them with eyes as wide as saucers, but while Isobel trusted the sailors to be on her side, she couldn't trust that the guards wouldn't kill her if Edward asked them to.

"Do we have an understanding?" she asked Edward.

Her father's cold grey eyes were filled with so much hate that Isobel was surprised she hadn't burst into flames yet. Isobel's gaze ickered over her father's shoulder, drawn to her mate even when the situation demanded her focus. His jaw was still clenched but Isobel could have sworn she saw something like admiration in his expression. In the span of a second though, it was gone and replaced with the same coldness he'd looked at her with before, making Isobel's gaze return to her father.

"Yes. We have an understanding," Edward replied, his scowl turning into a smirk. "I won't lay a hand on Katherine or Alexander," he said, emphasizing the two names and letting on where Isobel had made her mistake— she hadn't included her or Charles in the deal, and the Lycan king was making it clear that he could hurt her or her brother or anybody else for that matter whenever he wanted to.

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'Hell is empty and all the devils are here'