

Not What They Expected

James had known something was wrong as soon as he'd stepped onto the ship. He'd come to a stop beside Matthew but a tugging sensation had him wanting to keep moving forward. The familiar smell of caramel had surrounded him, making his frown deeper.

While he'd been used to smelling the pleasing scent in the estate's kitchens, he couldn't understand how the smell of cooking sugar had wound up on a ship.

With dawning confusion and horror, James had followed the pull in his chest until his eyes landed on a young woman who could have only been Princess Isobel. The power rolling off of the reasonably tall woman was similar to that of a werewolf of significant power, but the rich silk of her dress proved her to be something that James hated— a Lycan. Disgust twisted James's face at fate's cruel jest of giving him a Lycan for a mate. He was surprised to see the hurt that entered the princess's hazel eyes instead of the reciprocated hatred or revulsion he had expected to see in her expression.

In fact, the princess was nothing like James had expected her to be. It was true that she was beautiful, but it was an unusual sort of beauty that couldn't be found at a Lycan ball or in upper society. Though she wore a blue silk dress and a bonnet adorned with expensive lace, Princess Isobel's skin had been darkened by the sun as if she'd spent hours every day outside— something Lycan royalty would never do. And though she wore a subtle amount of rouge on her cheeks and lips, her face was free of the white paint that ladies and men were expected to wear in polite society.

Still, she was beautiful in a way that those painted ladies could never be because the loveliness she possessed was natural and unaltered by cosmetics or patches. James had always found those pieces of black material cut into circles or other shapes, which had moved beyond the function of hiding blemishes or scars to become a trend, a bit ridiculous, and he somehow knew that Isobel's face would be ruined by such an accessory. Even the shape of the princess's face, being soft rather than possessing angular features, set her apart, giving her a look of innocence or gentleness— things that James knew could not be associated with a Lycan.

Despite whatever prejudices he was holding against the princess though, James's hand had still instinctively reached for the hilt of his sword as King Edward grabbed Isobel by the chin and roughly pulled the bonnet from her head, criticizing the far-from-pale color of her skin. It was only Matthew's sharp assessing look that had James releasing the grip on his sword and resisting the intuitive urge to slice the Lycan king's hand off for touching his mate in that way.

She's the same as all the others, James reminded himself. He knew Princess Isobel would be just as cruel and heartless as her kin, so he had to ignore the protective instincts the bond was trying to instill in him— the woman would probably reject him as soon as she could, disgusted that her mate was someone so unworthy and beneath her. Except that Isobel's behavior ended up being just as confusing as her appearance.

When the King's attention had shifted to the female werewolf standing beside Isobel, the princess's body stiffened and James could see a kind of steely determination enter her eyes.

"You, my dear, could be of use to me," Edward said to the pale woman, and James could almost sense the hatred spreading through his fellow guards.

They'd seen similar behavior from him before but they were all as disgusted by it as they'd been the first time they had witnessed Edward's appetite for young female werewolves. James shifted, wishing he could do something, anything, but knowing that as always he could do nothing. There were three Lycans on that ship all of whom could shift during the day and kill every guard and sailor on that ship as easily as a man could crush an ant under his boot. A hush fell over the ship though as a hand— Isobel's hand— did what the guards could not and shot out to grab the king's wrist before it could touch the werewolf's face.

"Touch her and I will kill you," Princess Isobel said, her voice strong and sure. "Katherine is my lady's maid and you will treat her with respect."

James hadn't known what to think as he'd watched a woman younger than himself stand up to a man that everyone feared. Based on the shifting of the seven other guards around him, James knew they weren't certain what to make of her either, or what to do for that matter: Edward was their King and Isobel had just threatened him after all. But none of them lifted a hand to intervene or pull the princess away from her father, they just watched the scene unfold before their eyes.

James took a step forward when Edward's hand shot out to strike Isobel's face though, his body screaming for him to protect her. Again, it was Matthew that stopped him from making a foolish mistake by grabbing James's shoulder and pulling him backward. James's hands clenched into useless fists and his teeth ground together viciously as he watched his mate cradle her red cheek. The bitter taste of shame coated his tongue as he stood by while Isobel pushed her shoulders back and faced her father with that same determination as before.

"If you touch Katherine or Alexander, I will make it my mission to destroy any matches you might arrange for me," she told the king. "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, I would think again if you ever feel the need to look at or touch Katherine again."

The ship was completely silent as the two Lycans faced each other in a battle of wills, neither of them looking like they were willing to bend.

"Do we have an understanding?" Isobel asked her father, and in the absence of his answer, her eyes drifted over his shoulder to rest on James again.

He quickly hid whatever emotions that had been showing on his face, returning to the blank expressions that he'd learned to wear as a servant in a Lycan estate. Isobel looked back at her father, but not before James had noted a flicker of disappointment briefly enter her expression.

"Yes. We have an understanding," Edward replied. "I won't lay a hand on Katherine or Alexander."

James knew by the way that Isobel's face paled slightly, she had noted the way the king had put emphasis on the two names, making it clear that their understanding only extended as far as the two werewolves. James's jaw clenched in anger at the thought of Edward hurting Isobel but he knew that he could do nothing about his rage. No werewolf could.

"I need four of you to come back to the estate with me. The rest of you can escort my imbecile children and help them with their belongings," the king snapped at James and the other guards before storming back towards the ramp, looking like a child about to throw a tantrum.

"We'll stay here," James said to the guards on the other side of Matthew, gesturing to himself, Matthew, Andrew, and William. He didn't necessarily want to spend time with the princess but he knew that he'd prefer if he and his friends were the ones guarding his... mate. It felt wrong to apply the word to a Lycan but James couldn't deny what she was to him, or rather what she would be until they rejected each other, ending the bond between them.

One of the other guards grunted in displeasure but he and the other three left the ship with Edward without putting up a fight. James turned back to Isobel and Charles to find his mate's attention focused on him again.

"These are all our belongings," Charles explained, gesturing to a relatively small pile of wooden chests on the deck before walking over to them and picking up one of the larger ones himself, Alexander, the guard he and his sister had brought along following in his footsteps.

James shared a surprised and slightly amused look with his friends before they also walked over to the pile of chests. Even after the manner in which Isobel had stood up against her father, it was a shock to see a Lycan doing work that they could get a servant to do instead.

"Are you sure you want to stay here, lass?" James heard one of the sailors ask Isobel.

"I don't have much of a choice, Lachlan," she replied sadly. "You needn't worry about me though." Her words were hollow and meaningless. Everyone who had witnessed her interaction with her father would know better than to think she would be safe in Boston.

James straightened up with the chest he was holding in time to see the sailor smiling down at her sadly. "Even though you gambled me out of the last of my coin, I'll miss you, princess," he said, making James's eyebrows rise in surprise and confusion.

"I'll miss you too. All of you," Isobel said, looking over the group of sailors that had assembled around her and her lady's maid. "Take care of yourselves."

"Take care of our princess. If you're as good at being a lady's maid as you are at singing, then I know she'll be in good hands," the Captain said to Katherine with a chuckle.

"I will, Captain," Katherine replied, an embarrassed blush staining her cheeks.

"Alright, help them carry the rest of these down," the Captain ordered, and four sailors stepped forward to pick up the last of the chests.

Matthew and the others had already started down the ramp after Charles and Alexander and the sailors moved to follow them.

"After you, Princess," James said with a nod of his head, letting Isobel and Katherine know that they should walk ahead of him. The wharf was busy and he didn't want to risk losing sight of them.

Isobel's eyes met his, and she hesitated as their gazes remained locked for a few tense seconds before nodding and walking to the ramp with her lady's maid. When Isobel stepped onto the unmoving pier of the wharf, she stumbled slightly, as if unused to the stillness of the land.

"It appears my legs must grow accustomed to land again," she said to Katherine with a light laugh, glancing over her shoulder and giving James an embarrassed smile when she caught him watching her.

James quickly averted his gaze but made sure to keep the princess in his sights as he followed them, even if it was only out of the corner of his eye. His friends led the two Lycans, the sailors, and Alexander and Katherine through the crowd of the wharf while James stayed at the back of the group, keeping close to the princess and more observant than usual for any potential threats.

"Can I ask for your names?" Isobel asked over the noise of the street and the harbor as Matthew and William worked on securing their belongings to the roof of the carriage that had been waiting for them.

"I'm Andrew," the kindest of their group said, shaking off his surprise first. No Lycan had ever asked for their names.

William and Matthew each grunted out their names as they lifted a particularly heavy chest to the roof, and then the princess's eyes were on James again.

"I'm James," he said.

Isobel's mouth moved without making a sound, and he was almost certain she was silently shaping the word 'James' as if she were testing the name on her lips. The thought made him swallow.

"Alright, we're ready to go," William said as he jumped down from the back of the carriage.

The driver who'd been watching Isobel and Charles with a skeptical and slightly awed expression helped to open the carriage door for them. Charles got in first and then offered his hand to help his sister in.

Isobel looked to the driver with raised eyebrows before she took her brother's hand, and the man paled as if expecting her to transform into a wolf right there in the street and rip his throat out.

"You haven't told me your name," Isobel reminded him gently.

"My name is John, Princess Isobel," he replied, his shoulder's slumping in relief.

"It's nice to meet you, John," she said kindly before stepping up into the carriage.

Katherine and Alexander followed her into the carriage and the driver closed the door behind them. John, a slightly greying werewolf, turned to James with wide eyes.

"They're not at all what I expected," the man said under his breath before moving to his seat behind the horses.

James and the others moved to their own horses who had been tied behind the carriage and who John had been watching for them.

"Do you know what this means?" William asked with a grin as they mounted their horses and prepared to follow the carriage.

"What?" Matthew asked, still looking a bit dazed, not that James could blame him.

"George was right about the princess," William replied with a boisterous laugh. "She actually is kind."

Although James still had his doubts, he couldn't argue, and despite his initial reaction to the princess being his mate, whatever he was feeling now, it wasn't disgust. Still, James knew that they needed to break the bond between them as soon as possible. He would need to find a way to speak to Isobel without so many people around though— a mate bond between a Lycan and a werewolf was not something Isobel would likely want to announce in fear of being judged for fate's choice for her mate.

There was a reason that Lycans only ever married other Lycans— a female Lycan and male werewolf would only ever produce Lycan daughters and werewolf sons and a male Lycan and female werewolf could only ever produce Lycan sons and werewolf daughters. Lycan royalty didn't want that dilution in their bloodlines, so unions between Lycans and werewolves were something that never occurred. James and Isobel would be no different.

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'I defy you, stars.'

Romeo and Juliet ~ William Shakespeare