

Only a Dream

"Alright, now that it's only us, I have to ask you, James," Matthew said once the four of them were following the carriage at a slow trot down King Street. "Why were you acting so strangely on the ship?"

James winced. He'd hoped Matthew would have forgotten how he'd reached for his sword when Edward grabbed Isobel and how he'd taken a step forward after he'd struck her. "Would you let it be if I told you it's something you're better off not knowing about?" he asked with a sigh, though he already knew the answer.

"No," Matthew replied with a scowl.

"I noticed you seemed a bit more tense than usual," Andrew added. "Although I don't blame you. I didn't like the way the king was treating Isobel either."

"I keep thinking I won't be able to hate him any more than I already do, yet he always manages to surpass my expectations," William muttered.

"Tell us what's wrong," Matthew pressed James. "I know there's more to it."

Matthew had a knack for knowing when one of them had something on their mind and a frustrating knack for getting them to talk as well. James used to admire Matthew's keen observation but right then he resented it.

"Isobel is my mate," James mumbled under his breath, the words becoming lost within the noise of their horses' hooves clomping down on the street and the sound of the carriage wheels turning over stones. People walking on the street turned to stare at the carriage, knowing it must carry someone of considerable wealth.

"Would you mind saying that again," William asked. "This time loud enough that we can actually hear you."

Matthew and Andrew chuckled but their smiles and laughter died as soon as James repeated the words— this time loud enough for them to hear. William was so shocked he accidentally jerked his reins back and his horse came to a standstill in the middle of the street. James might have laughed if the subject at hand weren't so serious.

"Did you just say..." Andrew started, his words trailing off as he absorbed James's words. "Is this some kind of jest?" he asked uncertainly.

"I wouldn't joke about something like this," James sighed.

"Are you sure?" Matthew asked, his forehead creased with a frown.

"Unless you all smelled caramel as well when we walked onto the ship and felt a pull towards the princess, I'd say I'm sure," James replied with an annoyed huff. It was hard to mistake what he'd felt for anything else.

"What are you going to do?" William asked after they'd ridden in heavy silence for a few minutes.

"I need to find a way to speak with her," James said with a shrug of his shoulders. "We have to reject the bond."

"The first one of us to find a mate and fate gives you a Lycan princess," Matthew scoffed. "God must have a twisted sense of humor to do something like that."

"Whatever you do, just don't let Edward find out you're his daughter's mate," Andrew warned. "He'll have you whipped or hanged."

"I'm not daft," James replied with a roll of his eyes. "I'm not about to tell anyone else about this and you all know better than to open your mouths about it." They'd known each other since they were boys and he quite literally trusted them with his life.

"I'd be more concerned about what the princess might say to her father," Matthew said, his frown deepening. He might have been a gossip who was quick to smile but Matthew could also be the most cynical of them all. "If she breathes a word to the king about this, she'll be signing your death warrant."

"She doesn't seem the kind for that," Andrew disagreed. "And she seems to hate her father as much as we do— perhaps even more."

"Either way, you'd best speak to her and warn her from telling anyone about your bond," William, the most sensible of them all, said. "If word travels, the king is likely to find out."

"I'll have to find a way to speak with her alone before I can do that," James reminded them all. "I can't trust the other servants not to talk if they overhear us."

"You, a werewolf guard, wish to speak to a Lycan princess alone," Matthew scoffed drily. "I wish you luck, James."

"Perhaps she will be the one to arrange a meeting," Andrew pointed out.

"Andrew's right," William agreed. "She's likely too embarrassed to tell another soul about this and will want to reject the bond as soon as possible."

"Maybe you're right," James murmured as they passed the two-story red brick Town House and turned onto Cornhill Street which would soon become Marlborough Street, the street on which the Governor's House and Edward's mansion could be found. He could only hope that the princess would be discreet until then.

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"Isobel?" Charles asked, drawing her from her thoughts as the carriage slowly turned around a corner. "You're being very quiet."

"Sorry. I was lost in thought," she explained with a false smile.

Charles's eyes grew sad. "I'm sorry I didn't protect you from him," he said. "I should have done more."

"I barely felt the hit," Isobel told him, though she realized the lie was useless. They'd all heard the sound of his hand connecting with her face, had all witnessed the way she'd stumbled to the side.

"It's my fault," Katherine said softly. "I'm so sorry, Isobel."

"Yes, how dare you be so pretty," Isobel replied with a pointed look. "It is no more your fault than it was Charles's," she told her friend.

"Isobel is right," Alexander said, reaching forward to take his mate's hand and squeezing it gently. "You did nothing wrong, Kat."

"Besides, I wasn't even thinking about our father just now," Isobel admitted to them all. "Something else happened on the ship," she said with a swallow.

"What?" Charles asked with a concerned frown.

"I... well, I found my mate," Isobel explained in a whisper, though her words were not at risk of being overheard.

Charles, Alexander, and Katherine blinked at her. Katherine's mouth opened only to close again when she found nothing to say.

"There weren't any other Lycans on the ship," Charles said slowly.

"Yes, I'm away," Isobel replied impatiently. "He was one of the guards. James."

"The handsome one with the beard and the brown hair?" Katherine asked, apparently finding her voice again.

Isobel nodded.

"Handsome?" Alexander spluttered.

"What does this mean?" Katherine asked, either not having heard her mate or simply ignoring him.

"It means nothing," Charles replied for his sister. "Isobel will reject him and nobody will ever find out about this."

"Charles—" Isobel started to say but he cut her off with a sharp look.

"If our father were to discover that your mate is a werewolf, today's performance will have been nothing in comparison to what he will do. You cannot tell another soul about this." Charles's voice was firmer and more commanding than Isobel had ever heard it. "Do you understand?" he asked.

"I understand," Isobel replied in a weak voice.

"You need to reject the bond as soon as possible," Charles insisted. "That guard's life, and perhaps even your own, depends on it."

Isobel swallowed the lump in her throat and nodded. "I understand," she repeated.

"It doesn't seem fair," Katherine whispered. "A mate bond is special. Why shouldn't Isobel and James have a chance at the happiness Alex and I have?"

"For the same reason that Edward thought he could lay his hands on you," Charles said, his voice not cruel but holding a bitterness directed toward their father. "Our uncle taught us to respect your kind, but had we grown up under our father's or most other Lycans' tutelage, they would have taught us much differently. Perhaps if that were the case, Isobel and I would treat you no better than dogs."

"You're too kind for that," Katherine argued quietly. "Not even your father could have turned you into something so cruel."

"Perhaps," Charles replied with a sad smile.

Isobel looked down at her hands, wishing she could agree with Katherine, but the truth was that she had no idea what would have become of them. Had she and her brother not been left in their uncle's care after their mother had died giving birth to Isobel, they could have become the very kind of people they resented. They could have become images of their father. Perhaps that was why James had looked at her with such disgust— after working for Isobel's father, he must have come to hate Lycans. He was probably more than impatient to break their bond and Isobel didn't think she could fault him for it. The thought weighed heavily on her as she lifted her head to look out the small window of the carriage to get a brief glimpse of an impressive mansion as they passed it.

"Handsome?" Alexander asked again after several seconds of silence had passed, and despite herself, Isobel laughed, caught off guard by his question.

Katherine rolled her eyes but soothed him by saying, "He's not nearly as handsome as you are. You know I love you, Alex."

He narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously but couldn't contain his adoring smile for long. "And I love you, Kat," he replied in a whisper as the carriage slowed to a halt.

Isobel was happy for them, but she couldn't help the bitter sting of jealousy at hearing them share those words with one another. It was ironic that not even an hour after she'd met her mate, she was thinking about how she would likely never find love. She looked out the window again to see a two-story mansion similar to the one they'd passed only moments before.

The red-bricked and white-trimmed house looked grand and imposing, and Isobel already hated it. It would be the place she would likely reject her mate and it would be the place she would likely be introduced to the man who would become her husband. Isobel knew he would be as cruel and wicked as her father, and so she hated him already too. For a second, Isobel allowed herself to imagine a life in which she was just a normal werewolf, a life in which she and James could let their bond grow and get the chance to fall in love.

When John opened the carriage door though, she let the dream slip away— it was foolish to imagine such things when they could never and would never happen. This was her life and she would just have to accept it.

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'My only love sprung from my only hate.'

Romeo and Juliet ~ William Shakespeare