

The Consequences of Carelessness

A week had come and gone since Isobel and Charles had arrived in Boston, and Isobel was dreading the ball that was to take place that night. For that short amount of time, she had been able to pretend that there were no Lycan suitors to meet and no marriage to arrange, but on the morning of the ball, Isobel knew that the time for pretending was coming to an end. Her father was expecting her to make a good impression that evening and she had little choice but to follow his demands.

That night, she would walk down the stairs in the elegant dress that Katherine had selected for her, her face painted with cosmetics until she was deathly pale, and she would become the endearing young lady that Edward wanted her to be. But right then, it was still morning and Isobel could be herself for a few hours longer. Her riding habits were far more comfortable than any dress, and her skin was thankfully free of any cosmetics as she walked down to the stables with Charles. Katherine had gone ahead of them, impatient to see her mate after spending another night apart.

True to his word, Charles had been accompanying Isobel on all of her morning rides, and his presence had become an annoying barrier between her and James. Katherine and Alexander sometimes distracted Charles for long enough that Isobel and her mate could share a few private words, but on the whole, the rides had become a more formal affair since Charles had joined them. Isobel couldn't truly be angry with her brother though because she knew he was only trying to help.

"Do you think this ball is going to be as awful as the one uncle Fred dragged us to last Christmas?" she asked Charles as they neared the stables.

"I expect it will be worse," her brother sighed. "You and I will be paraded about and displayed to every eligible man and woman tonight. We won't have a moment of peace and through all their discussions of the superiority of Lycans, we will have to smile and nod and agree with every ignorant word that comes out of their mouths."

"You seem to have given it a lot of thought," Isobel noted with a small smile.

"I have," he admitted with a swallow. "I can bear having to marry a spoiled and horrid woman, but what I cannot bear is for you to be married off to a cruel and hateful man, Isobel. I won't be able to protect you from your husband and that is what scares me about tonight," he told her, the bare and awful truth of his words hanging in the air between them.

"Who knows? We cannot be the only two decent Lycans in Boston," Isobel said, her words holding no real conviction.

"Perhaps you're right," Charles replied with a strained smile. "Anyway, there's no point dwelling on it. Let's just try to enjoy the morning."

"My thoughts exactly," Isobel told him with a grin, forcing aside all the bad thoughts about what that night might bring as she walked into the stables.

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"You are such a liar!" Isobel shouted in outrage but James only laughed louder.

"It's true," Charles said, still chuckling at her expense. "Why do you think the cooks didn't like having you in the kitchen?"

"I don't know," Isobel spluttered as the stables came into sight. Katherine and Alexander had been riding ahead of them and they were already leading their horses into the building. "I assumed they didn't want me to get in the way of their work."

"Uncle Fred was so angry," Charles told her.

Isobel wasn't sure what had changed, but her brother had been far more talkative and friendly on their ride that morning. She enjoyed the new dynamic, but she only wished that he hadn't brought up her nearly burning down their kitchen when she was a child—an incident that she couldn't even recall.

"You said I was only ve. It wasn't as if I did it on purpose," she said in her defense, her cheeks hot with mortification.

"We can't be sure of that," Charles replied with a wink.

"I'll be sure to warn Lucy and the other cooks about your tendency for causing kitchen fires, Isobel," James told her, the happiness in his sea-blue eyes and the grin on his face worth all of her embarrassment.

"It was one time," Isobel reminded him defensively. "It cannot be a tendency if it only happened once," she insisted as she dismounted Midnight Star.

"Still, I think it's best to warn them," James teased her as he gracefully got down from Willow.

"Don't you dare," she replied, pointing her finger at him warningly.

"Or what?" he asked with a mischievous grin, stepping close enough to her that she could feel his breath on her face.

Isobel's lips parted in surprise and her cheeks flushed with his proximity. That connection that bound them together tugged at her, begging her to take a step forward and close the gap between her and her mate.

"Or what, Isobel?" James repeated in a whisper when she didn't answer, his eyes moving down to land on her lips.

"Isobel," Charles said, causing them both to take a hasty step back as if they'd been caught doing something they shouldn't have. His gaze was piercing and knowing as he looked between the two of them and James was quick to retreat into the stables, taking Willow with him. "You need to be careful," he warned her softly. "What do you think Edward would do to James and to you if he even suspected there was something between the two of you?"

Isobel paled at the mere thought. "You're right," she replied. "I wasn't thinking."

Charles frowned but nodded, telling her he understood. "Let's take the horses in and then we can go on a walk before we go inside for breakfast," he suggested.

"Alright," Isobel said with a grateful smile. "I'd like to brush Star before we leave though."

"Of course," he replied.

Isobel led the mare into her stall and after removing her riding gloves and with some help from George, she removed the saddle and everything else from Midnight Star and got to work on brushing the horse as she drank water from her trough. When she'd finished, Isobel stroked the mare's neck and murmured her goodbyes, though she knew the horse couldn't understand her.

"Thank you for helping me," she said to George as she closed the stall door behind her.

"It's a pleasure," he replied with his adorable gap-toothed grin.

"Bye, George. Be good," she said, placing an arm around his shoulders and kissing his head.

"Bye, Isobel," he said, his cheeks pink and his smile embarrassed as she released him.

Isobel looked up to see James leaning against the stable door, watching them with a small smile.

"Will you be here tomorrow morning with the ball tonight?" he asked her as his brother rushed off to go help Simon with the other horses.

"I might be here later than usual, but I'll be here," Isobel replied.

"Then I'll see you tomorrow, Isobel," he told her, grinning as he turned and left the wooden building.

Despite Charles's warning, Isobel was smiling happily as she joined her brother outside and the two of them strolled aimlessly around the estate's garden. The air soon became stiflingly hot though and with no refuge from the sun, they returned to the mansion, which was when Isobel realized that she had forgotten her riding gloves in the stables. Luckily, Katherine had been waiting for Isobel to return and she was willing to go with her to get them.

"You can stay here. We'll only be a minute," Isobel assured her brother who seemed reluctant to walk all the way back, his face red from the heat.

"Alright," he agreed hesitantly. "But come straight back," he called out as they walked off.

"We will," she promised over her shoulder.

Isobel still had a happy smile on her face as they walked back to the stables but it vanished as soon as they neared the building and she heard the shouting. Isobel was running as soon as she recognized the raised and angry voice as her father's, and Katherine followed after her.

"You're a lying thief!" Isobel heard her father yell as she neared the stable door.

Four guards, the same four that had accompanied her father off of the ship, were standing near the entrance, each holding the reins of a horse, their bodies tense and their expressions stormy.

"I swear I didn't steal them," a young and scared voice— George's voice— cried out.

Isobel ran through the stable door in time to see her father strike George's face, a pair of expensive and embroidered leather gloves clutched tightly in the hand at his side. The young boy fell to the side, his sobs the worst sound that Isobel had ever heard.

"King Edward, the boy is telling the truth. Princess Isobel left them here," Simon explained, his voice pleading as Edward lifted his foot back to kick George.

"Stop," Isobel screamed, surprising her father enough that he didn't kick the boy as he'd intended. She rushed to stand between them, not caring what her father did to her as long as he didn't lay a hand on George again. "George isn't a thief. I left the gloves here after my ride this morning," she told him.

"Then why was he putting them in his pocket? Get out of my way," Edward snapped, shoving her aside roughly before she could say anything in the boy's defense.

Isobel fell to the ground, her limbs moving painfully slowly as she stumbled back to her feet, the sound of Edward's foot meeting George's stomach and the boy's scream echoing in her ears as she lunged at her father, pushing him back and away from her mate's brother. The king's eyes lit up with deadly rage as he looked down at her. One of his hands whipped out to circle her neck, the other one which still held the gloves moving to the back of her head to keep her in place.

"If you ever lay a hand on me like that again, I will kill you," he seethed, his grip on her neck tightening until all Isobel could manage was a choked wheezing sound.

Just when Isobel was sure she would faint from the lack of air, he released her and pushed her backward. She fell to the ground coughing next to George and it was only after Edward had aired in her back the boy once that she managed to cover his stomach with her own. Pain lashed at her back as her father's foot landed where George's stomach would have been had she not intervened.

"You stupid girl," he hissed, reaching down and grabbing a handful of her hair which had fallen loose.

He yanked her to her feet and Isobel whimpered as pain tore through her scalp. "He's not a thief," she repeated, her voice hoarse and rough. "It was my mistake," she said, her eyes meeting James's cold and furious ones over her father's shoulder. Katherine stood next to him and the others who had gathered, looking helpless and horrified as she watched the scene unfold.

"The gloves were in his pocket," Edward yelled.

"Enough," Isobel shouted, her words a near growl as she prepared to shift into her wolf form. She might have been smaller in human guise, but they both knew that her wolf would be just as big as his one— it would be a fair fight.

Edward's nostrils flared with anger but he let go of her and stepped back. He brushed off the sleeves of his coat and then, as if nothing had happened at all, he told her, "I have business in town. I'll be back in an hour." Isobel stared at him in shock as he gestured for Simon to bring him his horse, and once he had the reins in his hands, he calmly left the stables, his face betraying no emotion whatsoever.

"George, are you alright?" she asked softly once the sounds of retreating hooves had faded. She knelt next to the boy and reached down to touch his shoulder but James's voice stopped her.

"Don't touch him," he said, his voice colder than she'd ever heard it. "You've done enough."

"James, I'm so sorry," Isobel said, tears falling from her eyes as her mate picked up his crying brother.

"Just leave," James yelled at her. "I should have known better than to trust a Lycan," he growled as he carried George to the stables, Andrew, Matthew, and William hesitating uncertainly at the door before following after him.

"I'm so sorry," Isobel murmured as Katherine helped her to her feet.

"It wasn't your fault," her lady's maid told her gently, but Isobel knew that it had been.

It was all because she had been careless. It was her fault that George had been hurt.

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"These violent delights have violent ends
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder
Which, as they kiss, consume"

Romeo and Juliet ~ William Shakespeare