

## Chapter 22 A Shocking Admission

Almara

A week had already gone by as Noah's assistant. Even though the first day had brought such a thick tension that I could have cut it with a knife, both men had been behaving rather nicely when they saw each other in the morning.

Arthur always made a show of kissing me goodbye though. Noah took it all in stride, never once acting jealous which meant Lily had been wrong about him. I wondered if maybe he just liked riling people up for fun.

While I was with Noah in the mornings, the afternoons were reserved for the gallery. There was much work to be done there to prepare for Noah's exhibit. Sometimes he would accompany me to oversee the work, other times he trusted me enough with his vision to do it by myself.

With Noah's vote of confidence, my own confidence grew. He made me feel safe and secure enough to ask questions when I was unsure of things. Whenever I got his seal of approval on something, my heart fluttered in my chest. I didn't know if it was because he was my hero or other reasons that I didn't...couldn't think about. Maybe both.

Even now my heart rate picked up speed as he placed his hand over mine, guiding the brushstroke so it would make the proper effect. He often did this, ever since I told him I learned better by being shown rather than just watching. And every time my body had the same reaction, even though I didn't want it to.

"What made you interested in painting?" I asked, trying to distract myself from the uncomfortable feelings he was stirring inside me.

"I'm surprised it's taken this long for you to ask me," he said teasingly, his breath caressing my face as he spoke.

I could feel my face grow hot. "I didn't want to pry. Some artists keep their inspirations close to their chest."

"Feel free to pry away. I have nothing to hide. As for your questions, it was the colors that I saw around me. I wanted to own them, do what I wanted with them. There are so many images that I see in my mind that don't exist in real life. But I can make them real and that is why I paint."

My breath hitched. It was so close to my own reason for wanting to become a painter. Noah and I had far more in common than I realized. So much more than Arthur and me.

I bit my lip. Those kinds of thoughts were borderline cheating. If it would even be considered cheating since Arthur and I weren't really together. But Arthur was giving me his loyalty. I should at least give him mine.

"Since we're asking each other personal questions, may I ask one of you?" Noah asked politely, breaking me out of my thoughts.

"Of course! Ask away," I answered, smiling at him as he came around from behind to sit on the stool beside me.

"Your relationship with the alpha is fairly new, am I correct?" he asked, gazing at me with such intensity that I ducked my head.

"Yes, it is," I said truthfully. That was common knowledge. Sofia had just been on TV mere weeks ago saying that she and Arthur were in love. And now here I was, claiming to be his fiance. The math was simple.

"And you're already engaged to be married," he said thoughtfully, rubbing his thumb and index finger under his chin.

"Yes. It's been quite a whirlwind." Now that was an understatement. Arthur, much like his pack name, had brought a hurricane with him.

"Forgive me, Almara, but it all seems rather strange. Are you quite sure that you want to marry him? You aren't being forced into a relationship with him?" If possible, he watched me with even more intensity as if my answer were everything to him.

I blinked at him, not sure how to answer. How was he so close to the truth? Had I been giving off some kind of signal? Or was he just genuinely concerned?

I'm telling you it's because he likes you. He's looking for any excuse to swoop in and steal you away, Lily muttered, but she didn't sound entirely displeased by the idea. Of course she didn't. Lily lived for drama.

No, he doesn't, I argued. There was no way. I mean, he was Noah Cunningham. Men like Noah Cunningham did not pine after girls like me.

"Almara, do you need help?" Noah asked when I stayed silent. I shook my head emphatically. Maybe I did need help, but I didn't want Noah to become a white knight for my sake. My poor choices (namely Robert) had led me to this. It was up to me to help myself.

"No, I'm fine, Noah. Really. It's not like that with me and Arthur. We're together because we want to be. I love him." The taste of truth on my tongue startled me. I had meant for it to be a lie, but second it was past my lips, I knew that it wasn't.

Finally, Lily crowed, but I could barely acknowledge it. My heart was pounding in my chest with the admission and I was suddenly a bit dizzy.

A muscle in Noah's jaw clenched and for a second I thought I saw his eyes take on a red hue, but before I could look too closely, he abruptly stood and stalked out of the room without another word.

For a second, I just sat there. I didn't know what to do. Why had Noah just walked out like that? Like he was upset by my answer?

For the last time, he likes you. Open your eyes, Lily said and I could hear the aggravation in her voice. She was getting annoyed with me.

But...However, I didn't really have an argument anymore. From his line of questions to his reaction, it seemed like Lily was right. Noah had feelings for me. Feelings that weren't entirely unreciprocated.

Arthur and I were doomed. It didn't make sense for me to love him. And I was sure he didn't feel the same way. If I were free from my obligations, I could easily see myself with Noah. But I couldn't tell him the truth, couldn't ask him to wait for me. That wouldn't be fair to him.

Honestly, I don't know how you've lived this long with you being as blind as you are, Lily muttered darkly, but I didn't really understand what she was getting at.

I sighed as I put down the paintbrush. We probably weren't going to be working anymore this morning. I made sure all the paints were capped and dunked the used paint brushes in water. I knew Noah had help to clean up, but I didn't like feeling completely useless.

"Noah, I'm leaving," I called out, but I was only met with silence. "Thank you for today. And... I'm sorry."

I cast a glance in the direction Noah had gone before walking out his front door. It shut with a finality that I hoped was just my nerves and not some foreshadowing of things to come.