

## The Rogues Who Went Rogue

### Chapter 18

Outside the interrogation room with Reida in her arms, Lucianne dictated an email to Pellethia, and Xandar typed out whatever she was saying on his phone. After he, Christian and Lucianne were satisfied with the message, the king then sent the email. The empress's reply came in a matter of minutes. Xandar, Christian and Lucianne took a few policemen with them, and they got on Xandar's jet to head to the vampire village, Falling Vines.

Lucianne linked Toby and Phelton to meet them there. Xandar persuaded Lucianne to stay on the jet with Reida, and after giving thought to the fact that they would be in a territory where the Queen's Authority would have no effect on its species, she agreed to stay on the jet with their daughter.

When they landed, Pellethia, Octavia and a few others from the previous night were there to greet them with warm smiles. Only high-born vampires who had evolved to not feel the burn from sunlight were there. Octavia wasn't high-born, but mating and marking Pellethia gave her this evolved trait. Every vampire still hated the sun, but the light rays couldn't scar or kill them like it would the less-evolved population. Those susceptible to burns remained indoors, thus were absent.

Pellethia was a little upset that Lucianne wasn't joining them, but with Xandar's permission and Octavia's green light, the empress alighted Xandar's jet to meet Lucianne, and left her consort to lead the lycans and werewolf to Falling Vines.

Xandar noticed Toby looked a little pissed as he watched Pellethia dashing to the jet in excitement, so the king asked, "Toby, you're not jealous, are you?"

The defense minister narrowed his eyes at the king and spoke with no shame, "I'm proud to say that I am, Xandar."

Christian burst out laughing. Phelton and the policemen they brought with them were pressing back amused smiles.

As Xandar tried his best to ignore his cousin, he patted Toby on the shoulder and assured, "Don't worry, Toby. Lucy's relationship with Pellethia is like the one with her nephews and nieces. You're on a different level with her as her best friend."

"And I WILL stay there," Toby said a little too seriously before he continued complaining, "And why is Lucy the one who has to stay on the jet, Xandar? If you stayed there with little Reida, then I would at least get to keep an eye on my best friend so my position isn't compromised."

Christian's stream of chuckles continued to flow even louder than before, and it was making some of the vampires loosen up. Many have started

eavesdropping on their conversation, even Octavia, who spoke to Toby with a smile, "I really wouldn't worry about Pelly being Lucy's best friend, minister. Rafael over there is my wife's best friend. I doubt she'd replace him."

Their heads turned to where Octavia was gesturing towards, and a male vampire with blonde hair gave a brief wave with a wide smile and a knowing glint in his eye. As they continued walking forward, Toby waved back meekly as he muttered in embarrassment, "That's good to know."

Even some of the vampires were subtly chuckling at Toby's reaction, further easing the atmosphere between their species. The tension and awkwardness reduced considerably. Xandar felt it, as did Octavia. They exchanged a brief glance, and both rulers knew that it would be in the foreseeable future when their respective species no longer had to live within the territorial limits drawn by their ancestors.

Within a few minutes, they reached the village that was so quiet that it was eerie. Most homes had doors or windows left wide open but there wasn't a soul in sight. Xandar told the vampires about Greg's suspicions, that the abductors had used scent sprays of which effects would have faded by now. They split into groups of three and started sniffing around the village again.

Lycans and werewolves had a better nose for scents

due to their more animalistic nature compared to vampires. Even so, it didn't take long for the vampires to come to the conclusion that the previously-strong odor of lycans was now very, very faint. And the lycans and Toby concluded that they smelled no wolves. At all. So, lycans were involved but there were only about three. They couldn't have taken everyone in the village all on their own.

When the sniffing was done, Toby delved further into his Gamma mode. He started studying the prints like how he, Lucianne and many of their allies did when they found such prints in wiped-out wolf packs in the past. What they never had to do was tell apart a real print from a fake one. After silently scrutinizing a few prints here and there, the minister muttered, "Greg Claw was right."

"How can you tell?" Xandar asked. Those looked quite real to him.

Toby got Phelton to take off his shoe and make a footprint right next to one of the fake ones before he lowered himself into a squatting position and began explaining, "If you looked here, Xandar, you'd see that the fake one went too deep at the second and third toe while leaving the first, fourth and fifth toe print in unequal depth. It isn't possible to assert one's weight only on two toes when one is walking, much less when one is running. That's the problem with this print. That one,"

Toby walked a few steps to another print and continued, "Okay, the one who made this print wasn't even trying. I mean, look at it."

Christian had no idea what he was looking at, neither did most of the others who were furrowing their eyebrows in bewilderment. Xandar looked hard and finally muttered, "The heel...it went too deep compared to the toe prints."

"Exactly. When one is sprinting, force is exerted on the front part of the foot, not the back. In other words, not the heel. Whoever did this was probably a newbie in this trade. Looks like the other duke was right. These prints are faked to throw us off. These weren't made by our animals."

"Are you suggesting that one of our own did this?!" One of the vampires exclaimed in insult.

"Well..." Toby wanted to offer an alternative explanation but he was immediately cut-off by the same offended vampire, "From the way this is going, it looks as if your species simply seek to wash your hands off this entire affair and..."

The man stopped when Octavia hissed a cold warning that sent a shiver down his spine, "Watch your tone and your attitude, Maddock."

Xandar then spoke on behalf of his species, "We're not dismissing this issue at our end until it's fully resolved at your species's end as well."

"Hmph. So you say," Maddock muttered.

Octavia sneered, "Should I have your tongue cut or your title stripped, viscount?"

Upon hearing that, Maddock glued his lips together. After Octavia conveyed an embarrassed apology to Xandar, who shrugged the matter off with a smile, Toby decided to get the ball rolling again to ease the increasingly-tense atmosphere, "Wokay. Anyway, I was going to say that these prints weren't made by our animals but it doesn't mean that there weren't any of our kind here. We smelled three lycans, so they had to be here."

Rafael spoke for the first time, "So, now what?"

Toby said, "Now, we have to find out whether the three lycans came alone or with another set of vampires."

Maddock rolled his eyes and questioned, "And how on earth do you propose we do that? Need I remind you that unlike your species, we and the proditors don't smell any different."

Vampires termed their version of a rogue as a 'proditor'. Proditors have no separate, distinct odor. They still share the same general scent as those loyal to the empire. That was the downside of their species. You just wouldn't be able to tell them apart that easily.

Xandar amiably suggested, "If you and Octavia would

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allow it, Maddock, we could enter these houses to get a whiff of their belongings to get a sense of those who lived here. If we detect a scent in the house that's not found in a wardrobe or on the shelves, we'd know there was an intruder."

That logic sent a wave of realization among the vampires. Why didn't they think of it?

Octavia couldn't mask her smile when she said, "Xandar, if and when you choose to retire, I hope you'll consider joining the defense department in our empire since it is clear that..." her berating eyes went to Maddock, and she said, "...help is in dire need here."

Xandar tried to not increase the tension when he responded lightly, "Lucy would kill me if I dumped the kingdom on her and left, Octavia. My tenure in your empire would probably be the shortest one in history once my wife orders for my assassination. But thank you for the offer. It's nice to know I have a safety net to fall back on should I need it." Christian patted his cousin's back and laughed as Octavia and a few other vampires grinned and chuckled.

The mere mention of Lucianne got Xandar thinking about her. As they made their way to one of the houses, his animal asked his human to link their mate, already missing her. Xandar didn't need anymore persuading since he felt the same, so he linked her.

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