

The Rogues Who Went Rogue Chapter 26 - Tips

0 7 minutes read

The other recommendations from around the table were glaringly flimsy: strip him of his dukedom, increase sentencing, banishment, etcetera. Honestly, what would stripping the dukedom do? It won't reverse any damage or bring back any lives that could be lost. Increased sentencing? Greg wouldn't care less if he stayed longer in prison. If he did, he wouldn't have gone in in the first place. And banishment? Really? Before Lucianne showed up in Xandar's life, Greg practically self-banished when he disappeared from the kingdom for sixteen years. These weren't going to work as leverage.

Everyone went back-and-forth with no satisfactory or agreeable idea. When Toby came to terms that there was no other way but the sinister one he had in mind, he cleared his throat and raised his hand. The whole room quieted down as they waited for the defense minister to speak.

Toby chose his words carefully, "I don't think conditional pardon for all ninety-eight of them is the right way forward. Not all crimes are created equal. Murder, for one, has to be...heavily scrutinized. It's fairer to the victims and their families that way. If any one of the ninety-eight has killed another, their case must be brought to court, and punishments may be mitigated depending on how much blame they should take from their crime and how cooperative they'll be in helping us with the current threat."

"Finally!" Christian exclaimed in a hushed tone but everyone in the quiet meeting room heard the duke's relief and enthusiasm.

Phelton then prompted, "And apart from murder?"

Toby continued, "Apart from murder," his eyes locked with Lucianne when he sighed and said, "I'm for granting pardon to every other rogue under Greg Claw, as long as they cooperate in helping us hunt down and eliminate creatures challenging the Queen's Authority."

Christian's brief relief was replaced with an expression of strong objection when he whisper-yelled, "What the f—" Annie gently hit her husband's arm to stop him and get him to be more respectful.

Yarrington prompted, "And what about the other duke? How do we hold him and make sure he understands the repercussions of conspiracy?"

Xandar uttered, "If he has murder on his hands as well, the same rule should apply. If murder isn't in the equation, then we could...perhaps use Greg himself as leverage."

That got Lucianne thinking. It was a fair idea. This line even made Christian's animal listen, really listen. His onyx eyes that held nothing but anger welcomed a shade of contemplation as he waited for his cousin to continue with his proposition.

Xandar elaborated, "Greg has committed more crimes than he has admitted to. Hiding rogues is already one that we didn't know about. If the cooperation with his people goes sideways, we could make his people testify on every wrong that Greg committed, and increase his sentencing with each one."

Lucianne added, "In that situation, his people will be tried, too, but their own sentencing will be mitigated when they testify against Greg. In essence, if Greg turns against us, we turn against him AND the creatures he seeks to protect." Xandar nodded in agreement.

Christian challenged, "And if they run or refuse to testify against him?"

Lucianne locked eyes with Christian and declared in a deadpan voice, "After meeting them and listening to their voices, I'll be able to track down any and every one of them by hacking into their mind-links, and I'll use my Authority to make each of them spit everything out myself."

Christian blinked in surprise, and Lucianne elaborated, "I gave Greg a chance to drop his attitude after he pissed me off during the collaboration, Christian, and he made good of that chance. We should give his people that same chance. If we have a reason to question their loyalty, if there's the slightest reason to be suspicious, if they screw up when we try to find the creatures behind inventing the concoction, I'll personally break them, slowly, until I'm satisfied."

Sure, that sent a shudder of fear down everyone's spines but it was also assuring. Their queen assured them that she wouldn't let her feelings of wanting to help get in the way of doing what was fair for the rest of the kingdom. A smile graced Xandar's features as he gently stroked the back of her hand.

Christian came out of his shock and seemed a little calmer when he said, "Okay. That seems...balanced. I'm in." So was everyone else.

Just when Xandar thought he could dismiss everyone, Tate spoke, "I need to ask..." All eyes fell on him and the deputy defense minister continued, "Can we offer the same pardon to Margaret and her rogues?" His eyes looked pleadingly into Lucianne's contemplative ones.

Lucianne questioned, "Are we talking about only those behind bars or..."

"All of them in her pack, Lucy, even those we haven't caught yet. We both know Margaret, being their leader, would most likely know where they ran to next. She just didn't tell us."

Lucianne gave his words some thought, and couldn't help but conclude that Tate was right. Stella might not know much as a minor and one with a very strained relationship with her mother, but Margaret might have a Plan B that she chose not to disclose.

There was short silence before Lovelace snapped, "And you didn't think of mentioning this earlier, Tate?! If you said something sooner, Lucy could've at least made Margaret spit it out."

Tate argued back, "The Authority isn't the answer to everything, Lovelace. If we can offer the rogues hidden by the other duke conditional pardon, why not these rogues? What's the difference? Both groups are hiding from us anyway."

"I agree," Xandar said firmly. "Instead of wasting more resources and time to hunt them down, maybe it's better to give them a chance to come forward. If these rogues are trouble, it will show during the cooperation, and we would have enough justification to punish them from there."

Lovelace clarified, "The consequences WILL be the same as the rogue lycans, My King?"

Xandar nodded, and when Lovelace's eyes went to Lucianne next. The queen shrugged and said, "I don't see why it shouldn't be."

Lucianne's voice took a worried turn when she reminded Tate, "Tate, if Margaret or any of her people screw up—"

Tate completed her sentence in an ominous tone, "You'll break them, slowly, until you're satisfied."

Lucianne nodded before she decided to add in a gentle voice, "But if it's Margaret herself, I could spee..."

Tate knew she was suggesting showing his mate mercy if Margaret eventually screwed up, so he didn't even let her finish when he b.utted in, "No, Lucy. You can't. It jeopardizes your credibility and reputation as our queen. If my mate remains stubborn and refuses to cooperate and make good of the chance we're granting her, which is essentially a way out, it's better to subject her to the same punishment and...let her go."

Toby blinked so many times at what he just heard and went completely speechless as he slowly sat upright from his laid back position. Lucianne exchanged a worried glance with Toby before looking at Tate as she mind-linked him gently, asking him to reconsider, 'She's your mate, Tate, your future Luna.'

Tate scoffed aloud and had a pained smile when he responded aloud, "I want to help her. I want to get close to her. I want to know her. I'm willing to beg. I've already begged. I've just begged the third time this morning when I went to see her before this meeting. I'm willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. But if she continues to keep me hanging, leaving me...guessing whether she feels the same way or wants the same thing by not saying one f*cking word to me..."

He felt a crack in his heart, and his wolf howled in pain in his head when Tate continued to declare, "I have to let her go. I'm not going to keep knocking on a closed door like an idiot. White Blood deserves a Luna who can contribute in some way, or someone who's at least interested in what happens in and out of the pack. Margaret can be that. But if she refuses to be that, I can't make her. If she refuses to nurture our bond, it's better for the both of us if we just let each other go. I just hope she'll be okay after that."

Toby snapped, "You're giving up already?! It's only been two days!"

Tate swallowed a lump in his throat and told his Gamma, "And in those two days, it seems like she's pushing me further away with each visit, with each word I say. She's not playing hard to get. She's really shutting me out. The hurt just builds up in me and in my wolf with each passing second. Margaret is

showing no interest in giving us a chance, neither is she severing the bond. I have no idea what she wants. She's not talking."

Toby looked at Lucianne and asked, "Is the Queen's Authority off-limits?"

Lucianne gave her friend a disapproving look and threw out a firm, "Yes."

"But this is an emergency!" Toby argued meekly as his hand motioned in Tate's way.

"Not the type of emergency that requires me to choke something out of someone, Toby," Lucianne noted, and went back to Tate, "Talk to her, Tate. Tell her about our offer. Tell her how you feel like how you've just told us, so that she sees your side. She might still be confused about what to do. You lay your cards on the table and let her decide what she wants to do with them. She might have a clearer idea on where to go from there."

Tate held her gaze, taking in what she said for a moment before he obediently nodded in compliance, and asked with a smile, "You're with me, right?"

Lucianne nodded, and promised with firm eyes, "Every step of the way."

"And I've suddenly become invisible," Toby complained as he crossed his arms and slumped back into his seat.

Tate turned to Toby and uttered, "You're my Gamma, minister. You're bound to stand with your Alpha."

Toby smirked as everyone started chuckling and he rebutted, "Unless you stand against the queen, in which case, you're on your own. The most humiliating thing to have written on my tombstone would be 'slaughtered by a five foot creature'."

Christian snorted and started chuckling, so did Weaver. For some reason, Xandar had the urge to correct Toby, "Lucy is actually five-foot three after being marked, Toby." This made Christian laugh even louder.

Toby narrowed his eyes at Xandar and asked in mock anger, "Oh, and that's any better, My King?"

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Xandar dismissed everyone as he got up. After pecking a kiss on Lucianne's hair, he went over to wrap his cousin in a brotherly hug. Christian hugged him back before patting him on the shoulder. Although Xandar didn't say a word, Christian proudly announced, "I know. I know. I'm still your favorite cousin no matter what."

A mischievous smile graced Toby's features as he said, "Yeah, we all know that. He doesn't have much to choose from anyway."

Christian lightly punched Toby in his abdomen, and Toby mocked an anguished reaction before they fist-bumped. After the duke and the queen embraced next, effectively symbolizing that there were no hard feelings despite their disagreement during the meeting, everyone left the meeting room in better spirits.

As Xandar and Lucianne walked out hand-in-hand, Lucianne linked her husband, 'Thank you for what you did in there. I didn't think you'd get onboard with granting the conditional pardon.'

Xandar furrowed his eyebrows in a teasing manner. 'Did you really think I was going in there to stand with my ministers against my wife, sweetheart?'

Lucianne shrugged. 'If your wife is wrong, I don't see why not.'

Xandar scoffed as he let go of her hand before reaching for her waist to pull her body closer to his and continued, 'Would you have done it to me? Ambush me in a meeting room by standing with the majority?'

'Well, I wouldn't ambush you per se. But I will stand against you if I don't think that you're right...and come to think of it, I've already done it several times.'

'And in those times, did I know you were going to stand against me before we entered the meeting room?'

Lucianne narrowed her eyes in mock suspicion. 'I like to think that you did know, otherwise it'll just mean you weren't listening to me when I was talking to you.'

Xandar chuckled and pecked a kiss on her temple before he assured her, 'I was listening, sweetheart, so I did know you were dead set on taking a different approach all those times, and that's my point.'

Their footsteps slowed down when Xandar added, 'I wouldn't just...skip the hard talk with you in private and then go all out against you in public. Baby, that's not how we work, and I'm proud to say that that was never how we worked, even before we were married. We've always talked things through with each other in private first, even when it was hard. If I don't say anything to you beforehand, it's only because I'm on your side. Besides, I need a strong line of reasoning before even attempting to change your mind.'

'Winning an argument against your wife is that hard, huh?' Lucianne teased.

They reached the car, and Xandar pinned her waist to the door before peering into her cheeky eyes as he uttered affectionately, "You don't know the half of it, my love. For comparison purposes, I'll have you know that it's tougher than writing a PhD dissertation."

Lucianne chuckled lightly, and her hands instinctively reached for his chest before sliding up his shoulders as she said, "So, is it safe to say that you weren't able to produce a dissertation to refuse granting pardon, darling?"

He closed their distance and muttered, "I was able to actually, but submitting it was suicidal and potentially embarrassing. If I could come up with counter-arguments against my own reasoning, imagine the ammunition you or Toby would have."

Her eyes softened at how much faith he had in her, and she felt like she was letting him down when she admitted in a whisper, "I wasn't sure if granting pardon was right, though. I really went in on a hunch this time. You heard me in there. There was so little evidence and solidity in what I was suggesting. Maybe I was always sure in the past but today...I wasn't."

"Oh, you were sure, Lucy," Xandar insisted and added with a knowing smile, "You have a different look if you're unsure, which was not what I saw on your face after you spoke to Greg."

He cupped her cheek and looked intensely into her eyes as he continued explaining, "Whenever you weren't speaking to anyone yesterday, your eyes showed that your thoughts were miles away. And those gears in your head looked like they were being pushed to overdrive. There were even a few times when I felt your mental fatigue."

“Sorry,” Lucianne muttered as her facial features squinted in guilt. She didn’t know that, but that explained why Xandar planted extra kisses on her hair and forehead the previous day.

Xandar chuckled and pecked a kiss on her nose. “I don’t mind, baby. I love knowing how you feel, feeling how you feel. The thing is, even during those mental gymnastics, I didn’t feel any uncertainty from you. You were so sure that granting pardon was the best way forward. What you weren’t sure of was probably how you were going to convince an entire room of ministers who hate Greg to get onboard.”

Lucianne was completely lost for words. He read her so well, not just from the mate-bond but also from her face. Her heart melted and her eyes glistened before her thumb traced his cheek and she whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you too, baby.” Xandar kissed her forehead before gently nudging the tip of her nose, like how his animal normally did with her animal on their morning runs, prompting her to respond.

Lucianne chuckled softly and briefly before she pecked a kiss on the corner of his lips, and murmured, “I know.” This made her mate smile broader as his animal cooed in bliss and his human part took a quick whiff of her scent from her hair.

Tate watched their whole exchange from his car. He started the engine and was about to drive off before the sight of the couple from across the parking lot made him pause. Despite not knowing what they were saying, he could see how they looked at each other when they spoke. The Alpha couldn’t help but feel envious at how beautiful Xandar and Lucianne looked together. Why couldn’t he have that? As Tate tore his eyes away, he thought about how he was going to break things down for Margaret when he saw her in the evening.

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The policewoman informed Margaret about Tate’s visit, as usual. She groaned in annoyance before she was escorted from her temporary cell to the interrogation room. She wondered why there wasn’t a limit to the number of times Tate could visit her in a day when her own daughter was only allowed fifteen minutes.

When she stepped into the room, Tate was already there, leaning against the wall behind his chair. Margaret's eyes stuck to the floor, like it did the last few times. But unlike the last few times Tate came to see her, she didn't feel his gaze on her.

She took a peek, and realized that Tate had his hands in his jacket pockets as his eyes fixed on the floor. The creases on his forehead showed that he was pondering deeply. Margaret couldn't deny that Tate was one hell of a looker with his diamond-shaped face and hazelnut hair, and there was something about his eyes that just drew her in. Sharp, bright and determined.

From the first moment they 'met', she noticed how well-built he was, and why wouldn't he be? He was an Alpha. Blessed with the best genes in a pack. Margaret ignored her wolf's protest and brushed off the attraction she felt as the 'typical mate-bond blindness'.

As soon as Tate's face moved an inch, she averted her gaze and chose to stare at the table instead.

"Thank you, Laila," Tate uttered politely.

His deep voice was just so good to hear, and it made her animal wag its tail in happiness. 'Damn it! Damn the mate-bond!' Margaret thought to herself as she reminded her animal about their past, how they were both betrayed. Her wolf growled fiercely and defended their present bond. 'Stubborn, naïve wolf.'

"You're most welcome, minister. I hope it won't be too much trouble to tell the queen that Heather and Hannah said 'hi'."

"Who?" Tate asked in bewilderment.

Officer Laila responded with a smile, "My daughters, minister. Five and four years old respectively. I brought them to work one day and, coincidentally, it was the day when the queen came to see our chief. My kids have been enchanted by her ever since."

Tate chuckled, and it made Margaret's wolf turn defensive when their mate was laughing because another woman made him laugh. It growled ferociously in her head even though no one could hear it.

It was only brought out of its rage when Tate started speaking again in the most melodious voice it had ever heard, "I'll let her know, Laila. Thank you."

Officer Laila nodded gratefully and muttered, "I'll leave you to it. Let me know if you need anything."

"Will do," Tate responded simply, and the red wolf was brought back into bliss seeing that Laila was leaving.

Tate took his seat opposite Margaret, and as soon as the door shut behind them, silence ensued. Her wolf kept prompting her human to look at their mate but Margaret remained stubborn. What was unusual was that Tate had not initiated conversation. He'd normally say something by now. Anything.

When Margaret finally decided that the silence wasn't normal, her eyebrows furrowed as she looked up, and Tate's gorgeous brown eyes held her captive almost immediately. There was hurt, disappointment and even some anger but he wasn't any less attractive.

"So you do know that I'm here," Tate began with a pained and disapproving smirk that looked more taunting than welcoming. Her wolf whimpered, and was prompting its human part to talk to their mate, to ask him what was wrong. He wasn't like this earlier this morning. This morning, he was soft, gentle and assuring.

Now, he just looked defensive and upset. What happened?

"Still have nothing to say, mate?" Tate asked. His slightly harsher tone made his animal regret instantly, and it made Margaret's wolf whimper so hard that it kept pushing for Margaret to talk to Tate. Margaret remained stubborn and pressed her lips tighter to seal it up. She then averted her eyes and chose to look at the wall instead.

"Fine," Tate muttered. His volume turned up a notch when he announced, "You'll be happy to know that this is not entirely about the mate-bond. I came on behalf of the government with an offer."

Although she was still refusing to look at him, Tate noticed her ears perk up. She was listening, so he continued, "We're willing to grant you and your people pardon over any crimes committed in the past with one condition."

Tate remained silent. He was not going to let Margaret get away with getting full information without looking at him like he was one of her mindless goons.

If Tate had learned anything about Lucianne and her rejections, it was that she had enough self-respect to walk away from anyone who didn't see her value, who didn't give her the basic level of respect that any decent creature was entitled to receive.

Margaret wanted to stare at the grey wall but she was more interested in the offer. She had been trying to get Stella to find a way out for all of them for days, and that useless daughter of hers had been more troublesome than helpful. This only confirmed what Margaret already knew when she became a rogue: if you want something done, you have to do it yourself.

Tate's offer seemed too good to be true. But what was the condition?

When she finally admitted defeat in the look-away contest and met Tate's hard gaze that had been patiently waiting for her, Tate spoke in a deadpan voice, "On the condition that you and your people work with us and another rogue group to track down a third group of rogues we're trying to find and eliminate."

Silence.

"I can't read your mind, Margaret. Is that a yes or a no? If you're afraid to speak because I can somehow steal your voice, at least give your head a nod or a shake."

His hostility made Margaret feel like she was being...pushed away, which was the same feeling that she had been having with Stella recently. It was familiar but it still hurt.

She gave a firm nod, and began mentally planning an escape route when they let her and her people out.

Tate and his wolf were beyond relieved that their mate finally gave a response. "Good. After this, I'll send Officer Laila in. You can give us the location of your entire rogue pack and we'll bring them here to cooperate."

Margaret's eyes widened in shock. Tate's eyebrows raised in surprise at her shock. "I still can't read your mind, Margaret. But if this is your way of asking whether I meant the whole pack when I spelled out the offer, then yes. This includes your entire pack, every last rogue under your supervision. You know where they've run. If you continue to hide them, I can't promise you that our allies won't kill them when they hunt them down. You know how this works: all

rogues are the same in our eyes. It's safer to bring your people here, and give them a shot at earning a safe future for themselves."

This got Margaret thinking. She was going to lie about her people's current location but Tate was right. If they were hunted down, there wouldn't be a way out. The past few months had been more hectic than it had ever been before, with her pack having to move more frequently than they usually did because the wolves started tracking them down when they used to only stand guard at their own packs and attack rogues if the rogues choose to enter. The moves were tiring and angering her people and herself.

This offer seemed like a ticket to freedom for all of them. No more constant running, moving and hiding, and finally rid of the anxiety of being found, caught and slaughtered.

Tate was getting more frustrated by the second, and he muttered in impatience, "The offer doesn't get better than this, Margaret. This is already the best one on the table, hence the best one I could ask for."

Her animal's ears perked-up in attention. HE asked for her and her people to be pardoned? It made her animal coo when their mate was being so protective of them and the people under their care.

Again, no response.

Tate heaved a frustrated sigh like he just wanted to get this part over with now when he said, "Anyway, it's not without a...penalty for breach."

His eyes held hers when he declared in a low, warning tone, "If, at any point in time during the cooperation, you or any of your people decide to do anything that goes against our goal, be it betraying us, trying to escape or hurting anyone on the team, the queen will personally end you or anyone else involved. And trust me when I say you don't want to get on the queen's bad side. She will break you, and she will make you feel it until you can't anymore."

The warning made Margaret shudder, and she looked away before Tate's eyes started glistening at what he just told her. If Margaret were being honest, her wolf was intrigued when they first met Lucianne. She was unusual. Lucianne's energy declared her power and status but it also amplified an unusual warmth that felt...trustworthy.

Now, hearing that Lucianne would end her, her wolf whimpered as it scratched the invisible walls in Margaret's head, angered that its human was so reckless and disrespectful in their last encounter with the queen. It was so strange to Margaret that her wolf was not the slightest bit offended after Lucianne used her Authority on them both. Stupid, stupid wolf.

"Do you understand everything I've just said?" Tate's voice held a balance of anger and concern.

Margaret nodded.

"Good. Now, about the mate-bond. Let's just be frank: do you want it?"

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Margaret's eyes widened in shock, but not at her own accord. It was her wolf. It was trying to push itself forward despite the silver bracelet fastened around Margaret's wrist. The red wolf was done persuading its stubborn human part to accept their mate. It just wanted to go over to Tate and bury itself in his chest before begging him to stay. It continued to push even though it was pointless since they weren't immune to silver.

As Margaret continued enduring being pushed forward by her own animal and the bracelet that pushed her wolf back, she couldn't help but get even more frustrated with the naïveté of her animal that was relentlessly trying to fight a losing battle. 'Why can't animals possess some basic human logic?' she complained to herself.

Tate watched her look away and take heavy breaths as her head turned from side to side like she was fighting an internal battle. With furrowed brows, he leaned forward and frantically asked, "Margaret, what is it? What's wrong?"

His worried voice got the red wolf even more berserk. Margaret raised a finger and tried speaking, "Just...give me a minute." And she continued battling with her animal.

"Uh...alright," Tate muttered in uncertainty. He thought when she finally decided to speak to him with less hostility, he would feel like the luckiest wolf alive, but now, he was just worried. Was she alright?

After another few more seconds, Tate and his animal couldn't stand it anymore. He got up and dashed to her side before squatting and taking both her forearms. His gaze held hers as he asked, "Margaret, what is it? Why are you shaking?" When he saw her eyes were alternating between light and dark shades, he understood what was going on.

His hands moved to her wrists and he planted a slow, deep kiss on her clenched fists, sending a stream of sparks throughout Margaret's being. She fidgeted less, but her animal was still pushing, albeit less aggressively now. Tate's thumbs then stroked her fists in slow, soothing motions as he whispered in a calm voice, "Shh...it's alright. You're safe. You're safe. No one is going to hurt you, alright? You're safe. Stay calm. You're good."

The red wolf was whimpering in tears at first but Tate's assurance made it halt its struggle and after a moment, it calmed down. After a few minutes of listening to his voice and feeling his touch, it cooed and tried persuading its human part to hug him, feel him, but Margaret's control over her animal prevailed. She didn't budge. Still, she felt...grateful that Tate cooled down the naïve monster living in her.

When the internal battle was over, Margaret heaved a relieved sigh and gently took back her hands before uttering, "Thank you. She can get really...emotional sometimes."

"That's good to know," Tate responded with a warm smile, which Margaret subconsciously returned. He meant it. It felt good to finally know...something.

Despite his urge to touch her cheek and wipe the sweat off her forehead, he held back, and slowly stood before returning to his seat, much to his animal's dismay. After a few moments of silence, this time it was because Margaret didn't know what to say as opposed to not wanting to say anything, Tate spoke, choosing his words carefully, "Your wolf wants the bond, but you...both aren't on the same page."

As she continued staring at the wall, her lips curled up into a sad smile as she murmured, "You could say that," She was dead certain that she didn't want a second-chance mate, but now that she met Tate, she wasn't sure anymore.

Tate studied her, and had to admit that Lucianne was right: Margaret was confused. "Margaret," he began. Her head inched slightly towards where he sat but her eyes fixed on the table.

Tate decided to make do with this now, at least her body language this time showed that she was listening. "I want the bond, too. I admit that I don't know you but I want to. I want to give us a shot. But I can't if you won't let me. What happened to you in the past wasn't right, and I wish I could go back there and do something about it but..." he sighed in dismay, and muttered, "...but I hope you know that I can't. I can only be here for you now, and help you get through this."

Margaret's eyes watered with each word, and she had to press her lips together to control the tears from spilling out. It had been so long since someone wanted to be there for her and help her get through her past. If anything, she was implicitly taught to never bring it up, to suck it up and put on a strong face and a brave front.

But at the end of the day, she knew that it was all an act. And that the truth was that she was breaking inside, shattering piece by piece every single day since the betrayal. She never healed. There was never time. Survival came first. As a rogue, there was never a luxury of time to heal.

Time was spent on self-teaching through trial-and-error of which territories belonged to other rogues; which rivers were shared and which were not; and most importantly, how to run past packs in large numbers without being detected. It was a cold, dark world. What Tate is giving her now merely through his words and presence was an assurance that she hadn't felt since she was casted out, and that was a very long time ago.

When Margaret managed to compose herself and swallow her snuffle, she pinched her left thigh to cope with her discomfort as she whispered, "I need...time." She felt so ashamed of saying that, so ashamed of not knowing what she wanted. She knew what she wanted! Tate just had to be so different and ruin her well-thought-out plan!

Her words sent a warmth into Tate's heart, and he leaned across the table before he whispered with smiling eyes, "Thank you."

Margaret's self-deprecating thoughts were put to an abrupt stop. "What?" She asked without thinking. Her eyes only amplified confusion.

Tate's smile broadened at the sound of her voice, at her beauty despite her discombobulation. "Thank you for letting me know what you need. I've been trying to guess it for days. It's good to finally know what's on your mind."

He carefully reached for her hand that was on the table, and when she didn't stop him, he lifted it up to peck a sweet kiss on the back and said, "I'll be here if you need anything, okay?"

Margaret was stunned for a moment before she gave a doubtful nod, which was good enough for Tate. But he couldn't deny the heartache when he noticed how tired she looked, probably from fighting with her animal. After giving her hand an assuring squeeze, he said, "I'll let Officer Laila take over from her. Just give her the location and get a good night's sleep. I'll come get you tomorrow."

Another nod, a more certain one this time.

Tate offered a small smile and reluctantly let go of her hand before making his way out of the door, but not before turning back to take another glimpse of his mate first, and he was on cloud nine when he noticed that she, too, was looking at him before averting her eyes when he caught her doing it.

As Tate closed the door behind him after Officer Laila entered, he leaned against the wall as he grinned to himself like he was swimming in a sea of love. It wasn't that she didn't want him. She just wasn't sure. The hopelessness he felt faded away, replaced by a strong determination to win his mate's heart.

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In a separate interrogation room, Lucianne met with Greg, who shook her hand less awkwardly this time. Greg noticed her uneasy demeanor, and prepared for the worst.

They took their seats, and Lucianne began, "Your Grace, the monarchy and the government has agreed to provide the ninety-eight creatures under your care conditional pardon for all crimes, except murder."

Greg was internally grateful that he always preferred torture to death, and he never allowed his people to kill. The long-term goal of keeping these tortured

creatures alive was for them to heal and live on to spread tales about how no one should mess with Greg Claw.

Lucianne registered his silence and pressing gaze before she continued, “The pardon comes with two caveats.”

Neither of them blinked when she went on, “One, we expect you and your people to make room for a few more rogues, who we’ve offered the same opportunity as your people to work on the case in exchange for their own pardon, should they accept the offer, that is.”

Greg had a problem working with other creatures, which was why creatures worked for him, not with him. He averted his eyes for a brief second before meeting her orbs again when he asked, “And the second caveat, My Queen?”

It was Lucianne’s turn to avert her eyes briefly before she cleared her throat and said, “If, at any point in time, you or your people conspire against us, your followers will be...compelled to testify against you, for any and every past crime that they know about. They will be charged for their own crimes as well but sentencing will be mitigated in accordance with the information that they’ll be able to provide to...commit you to the highest forms of punishment. For clarity’s sake, I should mention that any compulsion that...has to be exerted...won’t be done by the King. It’ll be by me.”

Greg waited for her to continue, and when she didn’t, his eyebrows raised in disbelief and he said, “That’s it? My Queen, if you wanted to know about my criminal past, all you had to do was ask. I genuinely thought you knew this. My people won’t know the full extent of what I’ve done anyway. It was a precaution I took. Individually, they’ll know bits here and there but I can tell you that it’ll be quite difficult, tedious and costly to piece any crime together. I’ll happily provide full and frank disclosure right now if—”

“No!” Lucianne exclaimed, and even she was surprised by her own outburst. After composing herself she rephrased, “No, Your Grace. That would not be necessary.”

“Are you sure?” Greg asked, his furrowed brows showed that he was concerned, and completely clueless to the fact that Lucianne was now battling with Xandar’s jealousy through the bond.

Nonetheless, she said, "I'm quite certain, Your Grace. Anyway, that's the offer. Do you accept it?"

Greg didn't even take a second to think before he replied with a wave of the hand, "That goes without saying, My Queen, but do you need time to come up with another leverage?" There was no arrogance or humor in his tone and demeanor. He wasn't taunting her or any authoritative figure. He genuinely wanted to know whether Lucianne needed more time.

Lucianne studied her cousin-in-law seated in front of her. His eyes held no malice, and there wasn't even the faintest hint of manipulation. Those lilac orbs had a different look before he turned over a new leaf. At that time, it was always clear that he was up to something, hiding something. Now, the only thing swimming in those lilac orbs was concern.

Then, Lucianne thought about how coming up with something else was going to waste time that they didn't have. If they didn't speed things up while the experiment to come up with the concoction moved ahead, there'd be more test runs than there would be at present. More test runs meant more new ingredients would be required. More of such requirements would mean more abductions. Lives were at stake. At present, it was only vampires. Who knew if those behind the concoction wouldn't go after werewolves and lycans next? Her people might be used as lab mice to test the concoction to challenge her Authority.

With that in mind, she cleared her throat and uttered as confidently as she could, "That won't be necessary, Your Grace. I'll just...come up with something along the way."

Greg's mouth opened, intending to ask Lucianne to reconsider her decision since he knew that procedure meant the world to governing members. But the duke abruptly stopped himself when he noticed that Lucianne started taking slow, deep breaths as her arm was subconsciously placed across her chest.

Greg put two-and-two together, and concluded that Lucianne was most likely trying to cope with his idiotic cousin's jealousy. Guilt engulfed the duke. He never intended to put her in an uncomfortable situation where she had to fight through things alone.

After aborting his plan to get Lucianne to reconsider, he asked in a low voice in an attempt to change the subject, "I do have one question about the offer, My Queen – these new creatures we have to work with, who are they?"

He was relieved to see her breathing returning to normal as she answered, "Rogue wolves who've been running under the radar. None of them are lycans, so for Goddess sake, Your Grace, play nice."

"I'll try my best. And what could their connection to the Crown be, if I may ask?" Greg was internally worried that Lucianne may have made a deal with some unknown group of rogues that could be more dangerous than useful. He didn't doubt that she was smart but knowing who to trust in the rogue world was not a matter of intelligence. It was a matter of having the right network and connections.

Lucianne bit her bottom lip before admitting, "The leader of those rogue wolves, as it turns out, is bonded to one of our closest allies."

Greg crossed his arms and leaned back into his seat as he took this in. The gears in his head turned like they never got rusty from the more than eight months behind bars before he commented, "Well, that will either simplify or complicate matters."

"Or both," Lucianne muttered to herself, which Greg easily caught, and he let out a brief, light chuckle before he nodded in agreement with a wide smile, "Or both." This was his first authentic laugh in a long time.

Seeing that there was nothing more to discuss, Lucianne offered a small smile and said, "Well, I should get going. Chief Dalloway and his task force will sort out the paperwork, and we should be able to get you out by tomorrow morning."

The word 'paperwork' made his animal roll its eyes, but the thought of being able to get out of the boring sh!thole and work with Lucianne made his lycan wag its tail in enthusiasm.

As usual, Greg stood when Lucianne did, and they shook hands before Lucianne said, "Thank you for your time, Your Grace."

"It's a duty and an honor to serve, my Queen," Greg smiled and responded with a slight bow and an arm across his chest as a sign of loyal service.

Lucianne tried not to look too hasty to leave the room to calm her still-agitated husband. The moment she opened the door, Xandar, who was waiting right outside, pulled her into a tight, possessive embrace as he pecked kisses in

her hair and threw Greg a warning glare before the door closed to block their views of each other.

Greg felt a tightness in his chest at the sight of the sudden embrace but he still managed to mutter, "Mated, marked and married, and he's still looking at me like I have any shot at stealing her. How did this kingdom get a queen who ticked all the boxes and more but is forced to settle with a dumbass for a king? Hopeless idiot." Even his animal was shaking its head at their pathetic cousin.

But if Greg were being honest with himself, he would admit that if it were him in his cousin's shoes, he would've reacted equally defensively, if not worse. Heck, he might not even let Lucianne speak to another male who showed intimate interest with her in the first place, despite already marking her.