

## The Rogues Who Went Rogue Chapter 31 - Tips

0 4 minutes read

Outside the interrogation room, Lucianne stayed in her mate's hard chest as her thumb stroked his nape in slow, soothing motions. Xandar continued taking in her scent from her hair as he focused on her comforting voice cooing to him through their mind-link.

When his heart rate returned to normal and his temperament was under better control, he pressed a kiss on her forehead before he asked in dissatisfaction, "So, what should we do if Greg does stray, my love?"

Seeing that their private moment was over, Christian came over to join the discussion. Lucianne's brows furrowed as she took another hard look at Greg who was now being escorted out through the second door that opened up on the other side of the room as she muttered, "If prison walls can't hold him... I don't think we're left with any other option."

Christian bluntly asked, "So, death?"

In a reluctant whisper, Lucianne muttered, "Yes."

Sensing the heaviness in her heart, Xandar held her closer and his thumb stroked her shoulder as he said, "Lucy, if this isn't a game he's playing, we won't have to resort to that. Okay?"

She forced a smile and nodded dotingly before pecking a kiss on Xandar's cheek, grateful for the assurance he gave her. Now that that was out of the way, Xandar brought up the second thing that bothered him, "You and Greg mentioned that Tate and Margaret's bond would either simplify or complicate matters, or do both, sweetheart. What did you mean by that?"

Lucianne registered his sudden impatience in getting the answer to the question he just asked, so she started her explanation, "Well, if Margaret respects the bond and wouldn't let anything come between her and Tate, it would simplify matters for us because she'll be a cooperative team player, and her followers will, hopefully, follow suit. But, if she sees the bond as..."

Lucianne groped for the right word, and finally settled on, "A mistake." She sighed in despair and proceeded to say in a small, troubled voice, "Then, things can get complicated. We don't know if we can trust her or any of the rogues she leads. If one of them turns against us, disclosing our plans to the

creatures coming up with the concoction, our efforts to stop them will be in vain. Punishment and sentencing will be another complex element if such a betrayal does occur, because the big question would be whether Margaret knew or should have known what her people were up to.”

Christian’s eyes wandered to the ceiling as he processed this before he prompted, “And the third possibility, my Queen, where it can become both a simplification AND a complication?”

Lucianne nodded and elaborated, “Say, hypothetically speaking, Margaret cooperates in the initial stages of our venture and she and Tate fall in love, simplifying things. But in the course of executing the plan, she changes her mind and chooses to...stray, after they both are already in love—”

“Oh, Goddess,” Christian muttered in dismay.

Xandar thought aloud, “Tate might change his mind. Even if his mate conspires against us, he might ask for mercy.”

Christian continued in a whisper, “Or even fight for it. I just hope he won’t blackmail anyone to do it.”

Xandar furrowed his brows and said, “Christian, come on. It’s Tate. He wouldn’t do that to us. Right, baby?”

Lucianne met Christian’s worried gaze as she assured the duke, “For as long as I know Tate, he has always been able to separate temporary urges from long-held principles, choosing the latter without fail. It’s the reason that White Blood has thrived in such a short span of time. I’m confident that he’ll do the right thing if such a time comes. I’m just not sure whether the right thing for us would also be the right thing for him, because his urge to give into the bond may not be temporary.”

Xandar asked in a whisper of disbelief, “Lucy, you can’t be suggesting that he blackmailed one of us.”

Without hesitation, she said, “He wouldn’t. He, Juan and the rest of us have been friends for a very long time. I wouldn’t go so far as saying that he’ll blackmail us, but he might resort to finding some sort of...middle ground?”

Meaning to say he might help Margaret escape and disappear, and he'd stay back and suffer the consequences on her behalf."

Christian questioned, "But doesn't that seem a little extreme, My Queen? Trading one's life and liberty for someone who just leaves him here and runs away?"

Lucianne uttered sadly, "Not if love is part of the equation, Christian. Deep, intimate interest can make creatures do...unexpected things, even if it's one-sided."

Xandar pinned her to the side of his body before he muttered, "That, I have to agree." Christian then caught his cousin glancing at the one-way mirror where they watched Greg and Lucianne speak earlier before the king planted a deep kiss on the queen's temple.

Christian heaved an exhausted sigh before he asked with pleading eyes, "But this is hypothetical, My Queen? We don't know if that's what Alpha Tate would really do?"

Lucianne confirmed, "Yes, it's completely hypothetical, Christian. It's just about considering all possibilities. We are not saying that it will happen but that it could happen." Xandar stiffened at the word 'we' since it meant her and Greg, instead of her and him.

It bothered Xandar how his wife and crooked-minded cousin could come to the same hypotheses without saying more than a few words to each other regarding the matter. Greg only took a few seconds to catch up to Lucianne's thoughts, whereas Xandar himself needed her to spell the whole thing out for him.

"Darling, are you okay? What is it?" Lucianne's angelic voice of concern rang through his ears, bringing him out of his thoughts. Christian knew exactly what it was, and decided to step away to join Tate instead, who had just come out of the interrogation room after speaking to Margaret.

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Xandar loosened his tightening grip on Lucianne's waist, and he peered into her eyes as he said, "I do try to be better everyday, baby. I love you, and I'll do anything for you. You know that, don't you?"

“I do. What is this about?” Lucianne asked with furrowed brows as she closed the distance between them.

He held her close and squeezed her tight for a moment before he muttered, “I just...wished I knew how you think...like how Greg knew.”

Lucianne’s body tensed-up at the mention of the other duke, and she parted their bodies only slightly before she said, “Xandar, Greg didn’t...know how I thought per se. We just came to the same conclusions with the available facts. It’s just analysis and strategic thinking. He could do it because he has practice in committing illegal activities without ever getting caught. I have practice as a Gamma when I needed to keep Blue Crescent and our allies safe. It’s not about knowing one’s thought process, darling. It’s just...individual...yet similar strategic thinking.”

Xandar wasn’t satisfied. His fingers ran through her dark, luscious curls when he murmured, “I wish I could do that.”

Lucianne’s heart broke when Xandar wished he was different. He was already so much, and was still trying to be so much more than he already was. She couldn’t have dreamt of a better mate, neither could the kingdom ask for a better king. Her hands went to both sides of his neck, and she stroked it lovingly as she assured him, “Strategy a sk!ll, darling. And all sk!lls can be learned, acquired and improved. You’ll get there in no time once we work on this case.”

She pulled herself up and pecked a k!ss on his cheek before she said, “You’re more than what you think of yourself, Alexandar. Don’t ever wish that you were different. I love you for just being...you.”

As the familiar warmth wrapped around his heart, he smiled blissfully at his beautiful wife before pecking a k!ss on her nose and said, “Thank you, baby. I love you, too.”

A cheeky glint entered Lucianne’s eyes when she teased, “Honestly, My King. If there was anyone who knew how I think, it would be you. You knew what I wanted to do with Greg’s conditional pardon request even before I said anything. And did you really think I’d favor anyone else over my history geek?”

Her thumbs started drawing circles on her mate's shoulders as she continued, "Nerds are very hard to come by, and to this day, I've only met one who can make my heart flutter and has the ability to make me feel safe and loved with his presence."

"And I'm determined to keep it that way, My Queen." Xandar answered in his deep voice and kissed her cheek as she chuckled. They then went over to join Christian and Tate, who were both speaking to Chief Dalloway about extracting Margaret's pack.

Christian suggested, "Maybe the queen should go."

Tate immediately said, "No. Using the Authority at this stage won't do any good, Your Grace. It'll just drive the rogues away. The compulsion might even make them consider turning against us. Besides, Lucy might be needed here when the other duke's people are rounded-up. I can go with you, chief."

Chief Dalloway replied, "As much as I appreciate that, minister, I'm afraid it won't alleviate the problem."

"What problem?" Lucianne asked.

The chief offered her a slight bow before explaining, "It's about extracting the rogues without bloodshed, My Queen. I was telling the duke and the minister about how rogues are inclined to turn defensive in the presence of authoritative figures, as you would know from your own experience, Your Highness. It's worse now because they know we're holding their leader in custody."

Lucianne nodded in comprehension before she asked, "So, you're asking for permission to bring Margaret along to reduce the likelihood of any possible attack?"

The men around her turned wide-eyed before the chief muttered to himself, "That might actually work." He then proceeded to ask, "Do we have the Crown's permission to do this, Your Highnesses?"

Lucianne looked up at her mate with her signature doe eyes, and linked, 'Margaret won't escape. Stella is still with us. She wouldn't leave her daughter here and flee with her people. Let the chief bring her there?'

Xandar's heart always melted whenever Lucianne looked at him like that, and that voice she used when she asked for something was very difficult to say no to. After running his fingers through her hair in a way that made her animal purr, he pecked a kiss on her temple and linked in response, 'It's definitely better to bring her along. We should let Tate go, too. It might give them time to bond. Margaret might even learn to open up and trust him and us.'

Lucianne's eyes twinkled in excitement as she exclaimed, "That's great!" The queen's hand flew to cover her mouth when she realized that her excitement made her respond to the king's link out loud.

Christian, Tate and Dalloway jerked a little with her sudden outburst but Xandar found her demeanor to be so adorable that he couldn't resist pecking a sweet kiss on her nose.

It was decided that Tate would accompany Margaret, Dalloway and his task force to collect the rogues under her supervision. All that was left to do was hope that Margaret's followers and Greg's followers would get along.

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On Tate's private jet, he sat next to Margaret. The twenty policemen and thirty lycan warriors around them chatted casually with one another like they weren't about to face a pack of rogues. Then again, the months of training under the queen's and the defense minister's direct supervision had built not only their strength and skill set, but also confidence in their abilities.

Only Phelton was wary. When he heard that the king and queen had authorized extracting the rogue pack, he didn't think twice before volunteering to come to keep his eye on Margaret. After what she and her wolves almost did to Lucianne last time, Phelton kept his guard up. No one knew if they were walking into a trap.

The queen may be forgiving and open to the fact that creatures could change for the better but Phelton wasn't. He had a solemn duty to protect her and the rest of the royal family as a warrior and minister. It really bothered him that Tate didn't seem the least bit suspicious or skeptical about Margaret. She was the leader of a rogue pack. There was every reason to be suspicious. Then again, that was his bonded mate.

Margaret had cuffs on as a precaution, and Tate's animal whimpered at the sight of their mate being bound. There wasn't anything that he could do since the authorities wanted to make sure that Margaret wouldn't try to escape or attempt to mind-link her people to trap the authorities upon their arrival.

Margaret was at a window seat but the view didn't interest her. Her eyes were fixed on the armrest but her mind was miles away. She wondered who she was asked to work with, and whether it was a group that her pack had already met.

"Hey," Tate's voice brought her out of her thoughts when he asked, "You okay?"

"Yes, thank you," Margaret's polite reply came in a mere whisper, without her meeting his gaze. Tate took comfort in the fact that she responded this time without being forced. At least she wasn't shutting him out anymore.

He wanted to get to know her. But her reluctance to look at him made Tate feel that it may still be too early for that. The Alpha cracked his head for a topic that she would be more open to talk about, and he casually asked, "About Stella...apart from photography, what does she like?"

That question worked like a charm. Margaret's eyes snapped to him and she asked, "She likes what?"

Tate's eyebrows raised before he explained, "Photography. You know, taking pho—"

"No, I know what photography is. I mean," the creases on her forehead got more visible when she asked, "Since when did she enjoy that?"

"Uh...I...don't know?" Tate didn't have a better answer, and when Margaret's eyes dimmed, he added, "But I could ask her the next time I see her. Or you could. Or we could ask her together."

Margaret smirked lightly as she started staring into space again, and Tate was gr0aning internally. How could they be mates when he didn't even know what to say to her?! Tate was convinced that this was karma getting back at him for sleeping around with random she-wolves in his earlier years as Alpha.

He watched her, and couldn't help but admire her stunning side profile. Despite her eyebags and the few strands of grey hairs, her feminine features would make heads turn in any pack. He wanted to talk to her. He didn't care if they had an empty conversation. He just wanted to talk to her.

As he continued cracking his head, Margaret suddenly spoke in a voice that held some guilt and sadness, "I'm a failure as a mother."

Tate was shocked by her choice of words, and he felt a crack in his heart at the sight of Margaret's downcasted eyes. In dismay, he pleaded, "Margaret, don't say that. Stella's a good kid. You raised her well."

Margaret scoffed in disbelief before she said, "If she were good, she wouldn't have run off with her friends like that, right after I've specifically told her not to," After sighing in frustration, she proceeded to say, "Stella used to be good. She used to do as I say. Then, one day, she turned thirteen and poof! It's like the genes of obedience had been flushed out of her system, and all that came out of that teenager after that were nothing but questions which she doesn't need answers to."

"Like what?" Tate asked, now sucked into his mate's voice and her world.

Margaret picked the item on the top of her head, "Her all-time favorite question is, does she have a family, apart from myself. I told her that she didn't, but there's something in this teenager's brain that will process anything a parent says before it goes 'Mom is definitely lying'."

"Were you?"

"NO!" Margaret exclaimed at a volume that made Tate flinch a little in his seat, and the noisy crowd fell silent at her sudden high-pitched voice. The rogue leader closed her eyes and flustered in embarrassment as she muttered, "Oh, Goddess."

Tate smiled awkwardly at everyone before he said, "We're good, guys. Just...go back to whatever you were doing. Sorry about that."

The indistinct chatters started again, but most of their postures straightened, and their eyes were darting in Margaret's way more often than before now. Some of them stole glances at her because of her beauty, others were just being careful as they reminded themselves of how lethal Lucianne was on the training and battleground even when she was the smallest wolf in the room.



Margaret didn't seem to be as skillful, but that didn't mean that she wasn't dangerous.

After a few quiet moments, Margaret murmured, "Sorry."

Tate's lips curled up into a soft smile as his hand closed in on hers on the armrest when he assured her, "Hey, don't worry about it. I'm glad we're talking."

She saw how close their hands were, and her wolf was pushing her to close the remaining distance but her human was still scared despite not showing it, so all she did was offer Tate a small smile and confessed, "I'm glad we're talking, too. You're a good listener."

That statement made his wolf coo in happiness. They were finally getting somewhere with their mate. But what Margaret just said was also devastating, about him being a good listener. Life as a rogue wasn't just hard, it was lonely. Fear equated weakness. Inner frustrations and turmoils were fought alone. Margaret probably had no one to hear her out, so Tate and Lucianne bore the brunt of all her bottled-up anger and frustration in the interrogation room on that first day.

Come to think of it, Stella didn't have anyone to talk to either. But the solitude affected her differently though. Whenever Tate started a conversation with the teenager on their way to and from the police station, he never seemed to have to do or say anything after asking one question.

Stella would babble about sceneries, angles, lighting, and sometimes even share stories about her childhood, how she was allowed to skip firewood duty if it was her birthday, or how she killed her first snail with salt when she was four before feeling bad after the animal died from her efforts and praying to the Goddess to send the dead snail to heaven.

"Thank you...for taking care of her," Margaret said gratefully.

"You don't have to thank me. I did it for purely selfish reasons," Tate admitted.

Her confused orbs met his affectionate ones when Tate explained, "I want to take care of her, look out for her, and so does my wolf."

"Mm," Margaret muttered meekly as she returned his smile, and started diving into her own thoughts again. It was so strange to her that her daughter's birth

father didn't care if Stella existed, and was more than willing to cast Margaret out even with the possibility of her bearing his child.

Now, Tate, who hardly knew her or Stella, was protecting her daughter like she was his own. She saw the willingness in his eyes and heard the sincerity in his husky voice. It wasn't done as an act of duty, or a way to make her fall in love with him. He looked after Stella because he wanted to. Period. The thought thawed her cold heart and soothed her damaged soul, and it made her question everything she knew about love and mates.

Her past-mate was nothing like Tate.

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Margaret's first mate was Alpha Draxon, a textbook playboy, alcoholic and a self-entitled b.rat who got everything he wanted thanks to his status. The only good thing about Draxon was that he was brought up to be respectful to the elderly of Fleet Wood.

He helped old men and ladies carry things, get a cat down from a tree, those kinds of things. It wasn't a lot to some, but it was a lot to many. Despite these occasional gestures, every parent who had a pup around Draxon's age couldn't ignore the fact that Draxon was not the kind of creature they wanted their own pup to be around with.

Draxon and Margaret found out that they were bonded mates on her twentieth birthday, which was three months before Draxon was bound to accept the Alpha title from his widowed mother, who ruled Fleet Wood alone as Luna for three years after her husband's death.

Being the naïve girl that she was, Margaret dreamed of taming the untamable Alpha Draxon. She was over the moon to be bonded to the attractive bad boy whom she had a huge crush on since they were children. She'd steal glimpses of him at school, and even found it 'cool' that he skipped classes and talked back to teachers, especially the younger ones. Basically, she liked him for doing things that no one else could do without suffering severe repercussions.

Every girl knew that Draxon was trouble, but it was that very element that made them want him. It was the thrill of the unknown and his indifference in just about everything that made many girls crave his attention, despite their

parents' repeated warnings and advice. There wasn't a girl who didn't flash a coy smile or blush in innocent bashfulness if Draxon threw them a microsecond of a glance. Margaret was, unfortunately, no exception. Her cheeks used to heat up on their own whenever she walked past Draxon, even if he didn't see her.

"Hey, what's on your mind?" Tate's sweet voice of concern brought Margaret out of the flashbacks.

She blinked, met his worried brown orbs and shook her head slightly before muttering, "You're just...not what I expected."

Tate's wolf began whimpering at the thought that she meant they weren't enough, that Margaret expected more for a second-chance mate. His voice turned a little hoarse when he asked, "What are your expectations?"

"Hm?" Margaret's eyebrows raised in surprise. She was sure she heard him wrong.

Tate cleared his throat and tried again, "What do you...want...in a mate? What do you expect him to be?"

His saddened face bothered her and her animal. What did she say? Why did Tate's demeanor take a 180-degree turn in a matter of seconds? After groping for the right words, she settled with, "Well, I didn't expect to get a second-chance mate, especially after thirteen years. So, I never really thought about what I wanted in him. But you're definitely not what I...pictured as a mate, especially when you're an Alpha."

What? Tate was lost. Did Xandar and Lucianne find it this hard to communicate with each other when they first met? What about Juan and Hale? Did they have the same problem? Did Zeke and Zelena have to deal with this?

After swallowing a lump in his throat, Tate uttered sheepishly, "I don't follow, Margaret. What do you mean by that?"

Margaret then realized she was talking in circles. She couldn't make Tate understand without telling him about her past, and she was terrified to share that part of her life with him. What if he judged her naïveté? What if he lectured her on how stupid she was to give into the mate-bond by falling for

someone who reeked trouble from the start? What if Alpha Tate and Alpha Draxon were friends?

But she couldn't deny that she was caving in. Her wolf wanted this. Her human part now saw Tate as a second chance at the type of love that left her broken and damaged the last time. But was he really all that he was showing? Was this really not an act? Alpha Draxon was nice to her because he wanted to sleep with her, and as soon as he got what he wanted, he tossed her out like she was trash.

Margaret negotiated with her wolf, and decided to only tell Tate as much as was necessary for him to understand what she was trying to say. "My first mate...was an Alpha."

Tate knew that, of course. He eavesdropped on her conversation with Stella with the royal family that first day.

"He...wasn't like you."

That was definitely good to hear, seeing how that bastard left Margaret and Stella.

"You're not what I expected because you don't fit into the stereotype most of us have of an Alpha. Apart from the handful of good ones, most young, mateless Alphas are more focused on womanizing than they are on pack business."

"I used to be like that," Tate muttered a shameful admission.

Margaret's ears perked up. "Used to be? When did you stop?"

"Uh..." Tate did a mental count and said, "Six or seven years now, more or less."

"Well, you're definitely in the club of good ones now, and that's what I mean. The Alphas I knew or heard of were controlling and even abusive. You don't seem to be like them. You're not what I expected."

Tate pressed his lips together before updating Margaret on the Alpha stereotype, "I'm flattered that you think of me that way, but I have to break it to

you that those controlling and abusive Alphas are facing extinction...In fact, I think they're already extinct today."

Margaret's head c0cked to one side as her bright eyes urged Tate to continue, so he did. "For years, a few of us have been challenging these ruthless Alphas, even some Lunas, before taking their packs, all with the intention of giving the wolves in those packs better protection and welfare. The initiative started with one of our closest allies, Alpha Juan of Blue Crescent, and the rest of us followed his lead."

"The rest of you?"

"Alpha Zeke and Luna Zelena from Blood Eclipse, Luna Lovelace from Midnight, and myself from White Blood. Alpha Juan did most of it, though. We just picked up what he was too busy to do."

Margaret blinked and leaned back into her seat as she digested these facts before she asked in disbelief, "Alpha Ken of Blue Crescent retired?"

Of all the questions. Tate laughed and nodded. "Yes, he made way for Juan almost a decade ago. You've met Ken?"

"No, but I heard of him. He was one of the good ones. I remember my parents talking about him quite often when I was young. My father admired him a lot. He said something about Ken being kind enough to adopt a child?"

Tate smiled as he nodded in confirmation, "And that child grew up to be the creature who we call our queen today."

Margaret froze for a moment before she questioned in a whisper, "That's her?" She was so absorbed into the conversation that she wasn't even controlling her facial expressions anymore. "That's strange. The news our rogue pack got was that the king visited Blue Crescent one day, and some unranked maid caught his attention with her innocent, helpless demeanor when she was serving him food. And the king forced himself on her before her submission to his dominance and forgiveness in his mistreatment made him fall in love with her, and he eventually crowned her as his queen."

Tate's wolf pulled its ears, wanting to tear them out and throw them away like doing so would rid them of whatever they just heard. His human cringed and pressed his fingers on forehead at that preposterous suggestion before he whispered, "Better not say that ever again after today because that whole

thing is fake. Lucy and Xandar are bonded mates. They met in the annual collaboration hosted by the monarchy. Lucy herself was the fiercest Gamma of our generation long before being bonded to the king. Sex was not forced, and it came much later in their relationship when she learned to trust him.”

“And Lucy is anything but helpless. She trained so many wolves, and then lycans, even the warriors around us right now. She is also nowhere near being submissive or forgiving to mistreatment. The king adores her and protects her with his life. The whole kingdom knows that he’d do anything to please her, even before she fell for him. Seriously, Margaret, where do you and your people get your news?! Whatever you just told me is insane. If the king heard that, he’d throw those creatures in solitary confinement and subject them to an endless cycle of torture. I feel like I’m committing treason right now for not reporting this.”

Margaret responded matter-of-factly, “Well, seeing that we didn’t have access to the Internet because we’d get caught if they tracked our locations with it, we rely on word-of-mouth. I really do apologize for this.” She rubbed the back of one of her hands as she muttered, “Goddess, I feel bad for speaking to her that way now. I thought she was a hypocritical, gutless, spineless wh—”

“You don’t have to finish that sentence, Margaret, really. We’re good,” Tate stopped her when he noticed a few warriors around them, all of whom were fiercely loyal to and protective of Lucianne, seemed to be speaking less as their ears perked up in attention.

Margaret got the hint, and she pondered on everything she’d just learned before she asked, “You said she was a Gamma?”

“Yeah, of Blue Crescent. Alpha Juan gives her full discretion in training and battles.”

“The Gamma of Blue Crescent...as in, Gamma Paw?”

“How did you know?”

Margaret scoffed and said, “Rogues fear that name. If we hear that Gamma Paw had been to a specific pack, we’d avoid it at all costs. Odds are, we won’t survive the warriors he...well, she trained. I always thought it was a man.”

Tate chuckled. "Yeah, me too, until I met her. Her brother called her Gamma Paw in her early years as Gamma, not wanting packs to belittle his sister just because she's a woman."

"That's sweet," Margaret said with a smile, wishing that she had someone like that in her life.

"Yeah, it is," A thought came to Tate, and his smile diminished before he held his breath when he cleared his throat and asked, "Did we...happen to k!ll any of you?"

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Margaret answered Tate's question casually, "Blue Crescent slaughtered ten of our elders about nine years ago. A year after that, Blood Eclipse k!lled about fifteen. We ran into Midnight completely by accident and lost another eight. White Blood k!lled seven out of eight. The last one came back severely traumatized. And the last run-in we had with a pack was with the wolves from Forest Gloom three years ago. We lost two."

Wow. Every alliance member made it to the list. Tate scratched the back of his head and was thinking hard on the best way to respond.

"There's really no hard feelings," Margaret noted when she noticed Tate's uneasiness. After registering Tate's confusion, she explained, "The ones you guys k!lled were stupid to say the least. They do no research because their ego forbids them to ask around or send a wolf or two to check out the level of danger before striking. They were, by no means, careful when they snuck through packs, running through them like it was their territory. And, the most infuriating thing about them was that they didn't know when to retreat. They'd just stubbornly hold their ground and threaten their followers with punishment if they had the brains to know that retreating was the best way forward. Idiots, really. So, you and your friends have actually helped my pack get rid of a lot of unwanted creatures with unneeded opinions. The downside is that some good ones were also k!lled in the process because they couldn't escape fast enough. But they were stupid for following in the first place, so...there really is no hard feelings."

Tate let out the breath he had been holding onto. That was a relief to know. But the question was, "Why did you guys attack? What did you want?"

Margaret shifted in her seat and one hand clutched the hem of her shirt when she cleared her throat and uttered, "For our pack, most of the time, it's just supplies. It kind of s.u.cks to just eat sick animals all the time. And we can't touch the healthy ones, of course, becau—"

"The hunters would k!!! you."

"Yeah. That new law never stopped the elders but it sure stopped me. The right that the kingdom gave hunters to hunt down any wolf who feeds on healthy herbivores without contractual agreement?" Margaret shakes her head. "It's like it was put there to sniff us out and get rid of us."

"It was," Tate muttered, recalling the meeting he attended with other Alphas and Gammas several years back in a mediation with the hunters.

"Well, it worked for sometime. Lots of rogue packs we knew were lost," Margaret said.

Tate knew. Everyone knew. It was considered a small victory for non-rogues everywhere. Lucianne and Toby even joked about how they might befriend hunters one day for helping them get rid of a notable part of the rogue population.

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"I'm really sorry," Tate muttered.

Margaret met his guilty eyes before averting them. She continued pitching the hem of her shirt as she forced a small smile and murmured, "You didn't know. Before I became a rogue, I was also hardwired to hate every wolf who didn't belong to a pack, to look at them in disdain, to show them no sympathy or empathy. I was brought up to believe that, if no one wanted them, there had to be something wrong with them. I was taught that all rogues attacked for the pleasure of destroying our pack and murdering our warriors and pack leaders."  
"



She heaved a sigh, and continued, "But nothing could be further from the truth. I've met a few good ones leading rogue packs throughout the years. They never wanted any trouble. They just wanted to be safe, and to...survive. The more optimistic ones even find little ways to be content with whatever they have. It's not that no pack would want them, they just...don't see the need to...beg to be taken care of, to be accepted, to plead allegiance to a pack leader who might one day turn against them if an alliance is formed with their former pack leaders."

Margaret took a leap of faith and held Tate's gaze for the first time as she said, "What I'm saying is, if I hadn't left my pack, I would've done whatever you and your allies have been doing, kill rogues on sight. Because we've never been taught the other side of the coin. How would anyone expect us to see it?"

Tate got lost in her rosewood eyes for a moment before he uttered in a pained whisper, "I just wish it didn't take you becoming a rogue for one of us to see it."

Margaret's lips curled up at his sincerity. "But it did. There's no way to change that. Besides...only a rogue would know that side of the coin. I...do mind being tossed out, but I don't mind what it has taught me. I used to be so...reliant on the people around me. I used to think that I wouldn't survive a day without my family and friends, especially friends I trusted with every secret and fear. Only after I was forced to leave did I realize that...I was stronger than I gave myself credit for. And I get stronger each day, driven by nothing more than a sheer will to survive. I thought I wouldn't last a day after the rejection. But I did, and that gave me a little hope. Then I lasted another day, and I began to wonder whether I could last a week. When I did, I saw that I could last a month, then a year, even with a child."

She heaved a sigh and admitted with glistening eyes, "I don't like what happened to me. I really don't. I hate it. I hate that it had to be me. But I can't deny that...it has taught me something, something that, I feel, no other experience could have taught me. I never thought I could lead a pack, that's a given, and I planned to just stand by my first mate's side and look pretty as his Luna. I never saw myself as a leader. Being a rogue changed that."

After trying but failing to swallow a sniffle and wiping away her tears, she chuckled depressingly as she said, "I used to be a sweet, bubbly creature-pleaser. After I got tossed out, let me tell you, I became a Grade A bitch, especially after I had Stella. I wasn't just defensive, I became selfish, even

cruel at one point. It wasn't until I met those few good rogues did I change my perception. Just because I was a rogue, it didn't mean I had to behave like the bad batch. Like the good ones, I could choose to be a little different."

She shook her head slightly as she reminisced about her childhood and teenage years before she muttered, "If you met me fourteen years ago, you wouldn't recognize me. I'm just...not a nice creature anymore."

Tate gently took her hand and pecked a kiss on the back before he spoke with a wide smile, "I'm glad."

Margaret was too stunned to move. When Tate started stroking her hand lovingly, she was brought out of her daze and slowly retracted her hand, trying not to show how much she enjoyed the feeling when his skin brushed against hers.

She averted her eyes again and hung her head low. Tate admired her slightly pink cheeks as he thought about what a great Luna Margaret would make. A single mother who had to raise her pup all on her own while rising through the ranks as the leader of a rogue pack which was still surviving when other rogues led by males were eliminated throughout the years. She was truly something phenomenal.

The jet landed, and the whole party escorted Margaret out with Tate by her side. Once everyone had stopped on the field, Chief Dalloway repeated a warning as he held a key before her cuffs, "As explained in the station, the sole purpose of temporarily removing the handcuffs is for you to calm your followers, and to ensure that we bring them back to the kingdom without bloodshed. If, at any point in time, you turn against what was agreed, we have full authorization to kill you and your followers on behalf of the Crown."

Tate's wolf tried to push forward at the word 'kill', despite knowing that Dalloway was a trusted figure. Margaret nodded with an emotionless face and muttered, "Understood."

The cuffs were off, and right before Margaret howled to summon her people, Tate said, "Wait, Margaret. I need to tell you something."

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0 6 minutes read

Everyone looked at Tate in confusion and disapproval, even Margaret herself. Phelton was ready to shift and attack if Tate decided to help his mate escape.

Tate ignored everyone and uttered in his mate's way, "I appreciate you opening up to me, truly. But I haven't been completely honest with you. The truth is..." Margaret's eyes turned wide as she waited. Tate swallowed a lump in his throat before saying, "The truth is that I knew you were rejected by an Alpha, not because Stella told me, but because I've been listening in on every one of your conversations in the station since the first day."

Margaret blinked before she said, "And you're choosing to tell me this right now? You have a serious timing issue, Alpha. I'll deal with you later. Now, if you'll excuse me," she turned to face a dense forest and howled her lungs out.

Tate would worry about how Margaret was going to deal with him later, but the trace of humor he caught in her eyes was not just encouraging, it also made his heart flutter in happiness. She was warming up to him.

He and his animal watched their mate in pride as she howled another two more times across the field. When she was done, the rogues came into view in their wolf forms. The snarling and growling was a declaration that they were ready to attack. The lycan warriors and policemen took their positions. Only Tate seemed confident that everything was going to be fine, and he crossed his arms as he stood casually by Margaret's side, studying the wolves in curiosity rather than with defensiveness.

Margaret's eyes glazed over, and she linked her second-in-command, 'Azalea, we received an offer from the government: there's a new threat against them. If we help them uncover the culprit and get rid of the threat for good, they're pardoning us over all crimes we've committed in the past. I'm going to get everyone to stand down and shift back.'

Azalea, the grey wolf leading the rest snarled and said, 'Like hell you are! We didn't know where you went for days! These creatures took you and the others, and now they're forcing us to work for them? And where is Stella?!'

'Stella is fine. She's with the king and queen. And they—'

'SHE'S WHAT?! AND YOU LEFT HER THERE?!'

Margaret lost her patience, and she took a step forward as she growled to remind them who was in-charge. Some of the warriors were beginning to surround her, suspecting that she may be trying to escape.

Margaret linked her people through their pack-link, 'We are boarding this jet and helping the government. In exchange, we're freed from death or any other sort of punishment they can impose for everything we had to do to survive. No more running and hiding. We help them, and they help us. If any of you choose to walk away from this, these creatures around me will kill you. We can't outrun lycans.'

Azalea argued, 'That doesn't mean we shouldn't try!' And she received support from a few others around her, but the rest were already siding with Margaret.

Azalea continued to shout through the link, 'They've tried to exterminate us in every possible way for YEARS! And now they're offering us this?! It's stupid to think that they want to help us! How do we know this isn't just some plan to coop us up in some cell before killing all of us at one-go?!'

Margaret yelled back, 'Azalea, shut up! If they wanted to kill us, they would've attacked by now. Do you see any of them attacking?!'

A moment of silence. 'Stand down and shift back. We can't win this. Trying is stupid. Any attempt to run will be futile, not just because these are lycans, but because these lycans have been trained by Gamma Paw.'

A few rogues whimpered and instinctively took steps back at the mention of 'Gamma Paw'. Azalea stood her ground but her voice got softer and unsure when she linked, 'That's not possible. No lycan would ever be trained by a wolf. Their ego forbids it. It always has.'

Margaret scoffed, then explained, 'Yeah, funny story. It turns out Gamma Paw is a woman and is bonded to the king, which makes her our queen today.'

Another rogue, Zane exclaimed in shock, 'Holy sh!t, that's a major plot twist! Can't believe we've been running from a girl all these years!'

Margaret and Azalea hit back in unison, 'What's that supposed to mean?!'

'Nothing. Nothing. I take that back. It was absolutely nothing.'

Azalea's heart raced, and her mind went through all the people they lost when some of their pack members ran through any wolf pack which Paw had touched. When her eyes returned to Margaret, she noticed Tate. Registering how his soft gaze kept finding its way back to Margaret when everyone else's fixed glower was on her and the people with her, Azalea put two-and-two together and linked, 'That's your second-chance mate, isn't it, Margo?'

Her teasing question changed the atmosphere in their link completely. Margaret tried to mask her embarrassment by responding, 'That's not relevant, Az. Wha—'

'So that's why you're so sure this isn't a trap. This one must be different.'

'Az, that's a topic for another time. Tate is jus—'

'Tate, eh?' Azalea chuckled through the link when she noticed how the usually-cold leader said that name with a degree of gentleness. Azalea was the first to go behind a tree to shift back as she linked in the same teasing voice, 'C'mon, people. Let's shift back. Don't want to embarrass our leader in front of her new boyfriend.'

'A bonded mate is not necessarily a boyfriend, Az,' Margaret retorted as Azalea and the rest shifted back and dressed up.

Zane, for some reason, saw the need to add, 'This day just gets more and more interesting. I wonder if there'll be more plot twists today. Good plot twists, that is. Can't believe Gamma Paw is a girl. Did you meet her?' He asked as he pulled up his pants.

'Yes,' Margaret entertained one of the earlier friends she made.

'Cool. Is she like how we imagine? Big, scary, k!ll-on-sight kind of creature?'

'No,' Margaret covered her face in embarrassment for a split second before she pestered, 'Would you guys hurry up?'

'Is she pretty at least?' Zane continued to ask.

Azalea scoffed and stepped out from behind the tree as she said aloud, "Zane, you do know you're talking about a queen? A married woman?"

“Az, it’s not like I want to hit on her or anything. And in the midst of all this bad, we’ve got to talk about some lighter things every once in a while. It keeps any sane creature sane.”

Azalea, Zane and a few more senior rogues were more confident in approaching the authorities because they trusted Margaret, and she didn’t sound anything less than firm when she ordered them to shift back and step forward. The new ones were still considering running away, but the fact that these were Gamma Paw-trained lycans made them abort their plan to escape.

Once they were all before Margaret, Azalea gave her a hug before she registered Tate’s aura. Her eyes went back to her leader and she noted, “Looks like you were destined to be a Luna after all. Good luck, sis. We’ll be right here with you.” Her grey eyes shifted to the jet as she said, “Ooo...nice ride.”

Before she took another step, a straight-faced Dalloway stood in her way and ordered the twenty rogues to raise their right hand for his men to fasten the silver bracelet around their wrists.

Tate was going to ask Dalloway to consider losing the bracelets but Phelton whispered into his ear, “It’s a precaution, Alpha Tate. We pledged to the Crown that we’ll get these creatures back without harming anyone. We don’t want any accidents during the flight. Not only would we never forgive ourselves if we let our guard down, our queen wouldn’t be able to forgive herself if lives were lost because of her decision to authorize this extraction.”

That definitely made Tate seal his lips. Phelton was right. They couldn’t risk everyone’s safety, especially when they had just met the rogues. On the plane, most of the rogues were still constantly looking over their shoulders, internally terrified. Azalea and Zane, on the other hand, called dibs on window seats and chatted about the view like they weren’t just arrested by the creatures they had been running away from for most of their lives.

Despite already being told that Margaret and Stella had no other family members, what Azalea said earlier made Tate ask, “Is she your sister?”

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0 5 minutes read

Margaret followed Tate’s sights to Azalea, and she scoffed before saying, “No. Azalea is an old friend. So is Zane, the one in front of her. Azalea and I were

lone rogues before we ran into each other. We found Zane about a year later. Inseparable ever since.”

“That’s nice.”

“Hm. They are the more trustworthy ones. They’ve even helped look after Stella when I’m sick or out hunting.” Margaret stopped herself from saying anything more. She trusted Azalea and Zane more than anyone in the pack, but she never learned to trust them fully. She never trusted anyone fully after her rejection.

Tate studied the ponytailed blonde woman and the olive-skin man pointing out the window with large smiles, and he found himself matching their smiles when he muttered, “I’d love to meet them later.”

Margaret’s surprise was quickly replaced with a small smile. “You’ve already won over Az. I doubt Zane would have a problem with you either.”

Tate’s sights returned to his mate, and he placed his hand over hers before he said, “That’s good to know.”

This time, Margaret didn’t retract her hand, and she bit her bottom lip to press back a shy smile before choosing to look out of the window when she knew that she failed to hide her blushes.

Tate gazed at his mate and couldn’t stop smiling. He had already found her stunning from the first moment they met, but after learning about her past, he didn’t just find her stunning. Margaret was phenomenal! How did he get so lucky? He thanked Goddess for bonding him to Margaret, and then thanked karma for not being too hard on him after the years of messing around. Sitting next to her, Tate had never felt happier.

The police and warriors kept their guard up, and Phelton was eavesdropping on as many conversations as he could to see if any rogue would pose a threat to their safety. As his predatory eyes scanned each rogue, he found his heart softening at the sight of a larger than average rogue wolf. She was looking at him from her seat, and averted his gaze as soon as Phelton’s eyes found hers.

His lycan became curious, and he started studying her. Her almond skin appeared smooth from where he stood, and her bob hair allowed that

beautiful neck of hers to be exposed. No mark. Mateless. Her black orbs shone despite the trace of fatigue in them.

Phelton had never seen a creature this attractive. Who was she?

###

In the police station, Deputy Chief Laurent uncuffed Greg Claw in front of the king and queen after the paperwork was settled. As Greg rubbed his wrists and embraced the return of his lycan senses, Xandar subconsciously held Lucianne closer to his body as his eyes fixed on the cousin he thought was locked up for a longer period of time than this.

Greg noticed his cousin's glare, and his eyebrows raised before he decided to have some fun. "Nice to see you too, cousin. And looking at me like that is not going to burn me to ash or put me back behind bars. Be grateful that I'm helping the queen clean this sh!t up. After that, I'll r—"

Xandar's voice sent a shiver down the deputy chief's spine when he cut Greg off, "One misstep and don't think I won't throw you back in there after breaking every single bone in your body. Your request better not mean trouble, Greg."

Greg scoffed darkly before stepping toward Xandar and looked him dead in the eye as he boldly declared, "Brain is still as slow as it always was."

Xandar was about to throw a punch before Lucianne pushed Greg out of the way, and the duke steadied himself when his back hit the wall. Lucianne swiftly caught her husband's clenched fist that almost flew in her face before she pecked a sweet kiss on his knuckles. His fist loosened, and his eyes softened.

Lucianne's voice came out stern, "Darling, I love you. But for the next few months, I need you to behave. Not only are our people counting on us cooperating, diplomatic relations are at stake. Living, breathing creatures are relying on us getting along in the next few weeks. We are their best chance. Every time you feel like beating up your cousin or anyone we'll be working with, remember to breathe first. Alright?"



If the concoction was successful, the worst case scenario would be making Lucianne control the kingdom while the inventors controlled Lucianne. They couldn't let anything like that happen.

Xandar was already gazing at Lucianne dreamily, and he pecked a kiss on her forehead before running his fingers through her hair as he promised, "Okay." His response was rewarded with his wife's small, adorable smile.

Lucianne then turned to face the duke. "For the record, Your Grace, your cousin helped in arguing FOR the granting of the conditional pardon. And when I told you to play nice, I meant play nice with everyone – your cousins, the ministers, the police, the warriors, the rogue wolves, me. Everyone. Do I make myself clear?"

Greg didn't mind playing nice with Lucianne, but the long list of people she mentioned before herself made his animal groan. With an arm stretched across his chest and a slight bow her way, he uttered in a gentlemanly manner, "As you wish, My Queen. I apologize for my earlier misbehavior...and every other misbehavior prior to that."

"Head up, Your Grace. It's time to discuss business."

Greg raised his head and nodded in obedience. Lucianne began in the same serious voice, "Knowing you, you'd already have a plan in mind. Care to enlighten us?"

Enlighten her? With pleasure.

Enlighten his dim cousin? Ugh. Did he really have to? Wait, where was the other dim cousin? Never mind. The fewer fused bulbs, the better.

Shoving those thoughts aside, Greg said, "With your permission, My Queen, I'd like to mind-link 4 out of the 98 lycans first, to meet you."

Lucianne shrugged and responded with a smile, "Alright, sure."

Greg instinctively matched her smile, which made Xandar glue Lucianne to the side of his body again before Greg's eyes glazed over. 'Get in here. Four of you.'

When his eyes cleared, Lucianne asked, "So, where are they? Where do we meet them?"

Greg watched his people walk in through four separate doors as he answered Lucianne, "Here."

"Here?"

Greg explained matter-of-factly, "You're the queen, Your Highness. There's no need for you to travel to any corner of the world to meet creatures, especially not rogues. They come to meet you."

Officer Katie suddenly yelled out, "THAT'S IVORY HOFFMANN! ARREST HIM!"

"Oh no," Lucianne muttered.

"Damn it," Greg cursed.

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0 5 minutes read

Greg sprinted to Ivory and shielded the man as he uttered to the police in a cold voice, "He's with me."

Officer Katie snarled, "Step aside, Your Grace. This man has b—"

"Katie, everyone, let them through. He's one of the 98," Lucianne's firm voice cut through the space, and every policeman lowered their pistol or baton in compliance to their queen's order. But their fierce eyes stayed on the rogue and the duke.

As Greg and Ivory approached Lucianne, Greg hissed at his man softly, "What did I say about using contact lenses whenever you aren't in the Den?"

Ivory adjusted his eyepatch as he said, "Well, we are meeting the queen, Your Grace. It didn't seem good to disguise my true face."

"Save those smart answers for the collaboration with less smart creatures, Ivory." Greg muttered after he couldn't argue against him.

The duke looked ahead and snapped his fingers once before Lucianne and Xandar noticed that three lycans in caps with their heads hung low were leaning against the wall a meter away from them. Lucianne even flinched at their presence. She didn't see them there.

Greg gestured the four of them to stand before the rulers as he stood next to Lucianne, and everyone felt the awkwardness of the atmosphere. Lucianne was about to thrust out her hand to start the introduction. But before she could, Greg wiped a hand down his face in embarrassment, and spoke in a low voice, "I thought you four would have at least practiced."

Realization hit them, and they got down on one knee and bowed low before they greeted, "My Queen."

Lucianne's eyes widened and she frantically said, "You really don't have to do that. Please, stand. All of you."

They stood and managed polite smiles before the upward curl of their lips flattened when they glanced at Xandar and then back at Greg. Greg said, "Yes, him too. I promised I'll play nice."

Their sights returned to Xandar. And with a synchronized curt nod, they uttered reluctantly, "Your Highness."

Lucianne felt the coldness in that greeting, maybe even a little hate. She tried her best to mask her discomfort as she suggested they continued the introduction in one of the empty interrogation rooms. Officer Katie and Deputy Chief Laurent requested to join them out of concern, and the rulers graciously thanked them for volunteering to sit in, allowing them to enter.

In the interrogation room, Lucianne smiled and thrust her hand in Ivory's way first, "Ivory, was it?"

Ivory looked at Lucianne's hand for two whole seconds before Greg sighed. "It's a handshake, Ivory. Seriously, what is wrong with the four of you today?"

Lucianne turned to the duke as she reminded him, "Your Grace, playing nice includes your own people as well. I didn't think I had to tell you that."

Greg's eyes softened as he responded, "I'm sorry about this, My Queen. These four are normally not this...slow." Xandar snorted at that last word, which garnered everyone's attention and earned a glare from Greg himself.

Ivory got to it, and gave Lucianne a firm handshake with the same polite smile. “Ivory Hoffmann, ma’am. Arrested and indicted for involuntary manslaughter after a mining accident, and—”

He stopped at Greg’s slight shake of the head. Lucianne ignored the duke and urged, “Go on, Ivory.”

“Well, um...” Ivory seemed uncertain, and his three teammates by his side thanked Goddess he went first instead of them.

Lucianne uttered, “Ivory, it’s okay. Just say what you’re going to say.”

Greg closed his eyes and pinched his nose before giving a wave of his hand, the greenlight for Ivory to answer Lucianne. Ivory swallowed a lump in his throat and continued, “And um...after serving the sentence, I’ve worked under His Grace ever since.”

“How long has it been?”

Ivory did a mental count before he said, “Forty-six years, ma’am.”

“I see,” Lucianne muttered, and asked, “Is it because you’ve developed an interest in this line of work?”

Ivory scoffed at first, but quickly turned it into an innocent cough when he inadvertently met Greg’s glare. He cleared his throat and said, “Well, not at first, My Queen. It’s just...” he glanced at Xandar, who was also waiting for him to finish, so he did, “Convicted creatures don’t get second chances in this Kingdom. Not in this reign, not in the reigns before. Unless one could fabricate a résumé AND change his face after being found guilty of a crime that grave, there really is no industry out there that would hire.”

“I see,” Lucianne muttered again, sadness evident in her eyes and uneasiness obvious from her frown.

Greg noticed Xandar’s thumb began stroking Lucianne’s waist, and the duke coped with the discomfort before his hand gesture signaled Ivory to wrap things up. “Anyway, that’s in the past, ma’am. Money was an issue at first when I couldn’t find a job, but after I began working with His Grace, the problem was solved. My ex-fiancé and daughter are doing quite well now, so all is w—”

“I’m sorry. Your ex-fiancé AND daughter?” Lucianne asked in disbelief.

Greg’s animal wanted to tear its fur out. What were they thinking? They probably should have made his people rehearse with him before allowing them to meet the queen.

Greg was considering making the introduction session stop at Ivory, but he knew that he wouldn’t be able to stop Lucianne if she was adamant about continuing this process with the next three. He prayed to the Goddess that they wouldn’t say too much. Whatever happened to the creatures before they were under his supervision was not Lucianne’s fault.

The blame lay with his cousin, his uncle, and the kings before them, who all made no effort to change the system to offer second chances. Watching Lucianne’s subtle look of guilt and despair now was pure torture. She shouldn’t be blaming herself. She didn’t know about any of this. When she was a wolf, she was subjected to equal, if not worse, discrimination from the entire lycan community.

Ivory gave up trying to guess what to say and what not to say. He was getting more and more confused by the minute. Besides, what was the worst that could happen if he told the queen everything? He was already going to be pardoned as long as he helped.

Ivory smiled and spoke to his heart’s content, “Yes, ma’am. She was my chosen mate, and we were scheduled to be married a month after the mining accident. Intercourse was performed but we saved marking for our wedding night, which is rather a relief at hindsight. Her job opportunities would’ve been narrowed as well if the employer knew she was marked by a felon.”

Xandar then asked, “So, what does she tell her employers?”

Ivory’s lilac eyes had faint traces of onyx when he said, “That she slept with an untraceable creature after meeting him at a bar, and became a single mother after that.”

“And your daughter?” Lucianne prompted, bringing his attention back to her.

Ivory smiled again as he said, “Well provided for as soon as the duke offered me a job, ma’am. I visit my family once a week, and Iridessa uh...my daughter has been very good at keeping my anonymity.”

“I see,” Lucianne said almost inaudibly.

Ivory began to understand what the duke didn't want him to say when Lucianne's voice weakened in volume, so he added as cheerfully as he could, “Dessa graduated many years ago, and is now an associate professor in Shlem University, My Queen. So, everything is really going well.”

Lucianne managed a contented smile. “That's good. What does she teach, if I may ask?”

Ivory grinned like a proud father and said, “Criminal Justice, ma'am. Her approved thesis was on criminal psychology.” Only after Ivory said that did he and Greg realize that there was one word that shouldn't have been in that sentence, and they both prayed that Lucianne wouldn't catch it.

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0 4 minutes read

Lucianne's brows furrowed as she asked, “What do you mean ‘approved’ thesis, Ivory?”

Ivory chuckled apologetically, knowing all too well that the duke was probably going to give him a full hour lecture later, and Alissa gave him an encouraging pat on the back while she held back a teasing smirk before Ivory responded, “Dessa wrote another two prior to that, but they were rejected by the faculty.” Please, no more questions. Please, no more questions. Please, no more questions.

Prayers denied.

Lucianne asked, “And what topic were the rejected theses on, Ivory? Prisoner reentry into society in our Kingdom?”

Eyes bulged wide and eyebrows raised from everyone around her, except Greg. The duke wasn't surprised that she guessed that. Desmond, one of the four, muttered excitedly in Hailey's way, “She's good, ain't she?” Hailey pressed back a smile and nod subtly in his way.

Ivory really wanted to wrap things up now so that Greg's lecture wouldn't be longer than it was already going to be. He murmured with a firm nod, “Indeed, ma'am.”

“I see,” Lucianne uttered before she said, “If it’s not too much trouble, I hope I can get a copy of those two theses. I don’t know much about prisoner reentry either. It’ll be great to hear from someone who has gone through the trouble to conduct the research.”

Everyone froze for a moment, even Greg this time before a smile replaced his frustrated features. He was touched, as was Ivory. Registering the silence, Lucianne asked doubtfully, “Unless the theses are no longer available?”

“No, Your Highness! They still exist. My wif— I mean, my ex-fiancé and I are still keeping the hardcopies, I’ll fetch them on my next visit.” A glimmer of hope appeared in Ivory’s eyes when he said that. After so long, it felt like there was finally an authoritative figure who just...cared.

“That would be great. Thank you, Ivory.”

When Lucianne’s sights moved to Hailey, Ivory sighed in relief after stepping to the side. Hailey smiled graciously as she shook Lucianne’s hand and started speaking like a bullet train, “Hailey Hutchinson, ma’am. Former kindergarten teacher. Sued and found liable for civil negligence after one of the children ingested six crayons during my supervision of a class of forty.”

Lucianne blinked a couple of times before she asked in disbelief, “Six crayons? Did those have a particularly flavorful taste?”

Greg found himself snorting and chuckling at her question. Xandar was smiling too until he heard his cousin’s irritating chuckles, making his grip around his wife’s waist tighten.

Hailey had to control her own laughter at the queen’s question when she said, “Well, um...I don’t know about that, ma’am. But he did look like he was enjoying himself before I started panicking.”

Lucianne pondered for a moment before she muttered to herself, “So, surgery was needed.”

“Oh no, ma’am. They gave him a laxative and got the feces out before sending it to the lab. I’m told that the substances in crayons are harmful to our digestive systems, but it’s not fatal if it’s removed within thirty-six hours. But my teaching career was over after that incident.”

Learning from Ivory's mistake, Hailey quickly added, "On the bright side, Your Highness, my negligence made kindergartens in many regions revise their operating procedure. One teacher for every ten children, to prevent these kinds of incidents from happening again. They didn't care about the extra costs of hiring more teachers anymore. The safety of the children finally came first, and not second to their own pockets."

Lucianne's steady eye contact with Hailey held a degree of comfort when she asked, "But your own employment opportunities were hindered nonetheless, weren't they, Hailey? Even though there are numerous other sectors that didn't pose a risk of a child ingesting crayons."

Like Ivory before, Hailey gave a firm nod before she muttered, "Yes, ma'am. Negligence is...well, it's not wanted anywhere. Mistakes are...neither celebrated nor commended in any sector. If anything, it's a flaw that, when serious enough, can scar one for life. Errors might be tolerated in our younger years, but not in the workforce, unfortunately...or fortunately, depending on whether you're the person offering or receiving the service."

"Would you still have been teaching kindergartners had it not happened?" Lucianne asked in curiosity.

No one had ever asked her that question. Hailey tilted her head and stared at the ceiling for a brief second as she said, "I think so. It seemed like the dream job. I was never one to go after those big, glamorous careers like being a doctor or lawyer. I just wanted a simple life. I do like baking. I guess I would've been a part-time baker and a kindergarten teacher, but I don't think I would do anything beyond that. I don't need a lot to be happy. Doing what I love keeps me happy, and teaching kids and baking muffins seemed more than enough."

Lucianne cleared her throat to stop her voice from cracking as she said sincerely, "Teaching children is a big dream, Hailey. It may not be big and glamorous to some but choosing to dedicate your whole life to build the lives of future generations is not only huge, it's noble. Don't let anyone tell you differently."

Hailey's lips parted slightly but no words came out of her mouth as her eyes glistened. When she still had her dream job, it was never validated, valued or praised to be 'huge' or 'noble' by even her closest friends and family. Never in her wildest dreams did Hailey imagine that an authoritative figure would be the one to make her feel like she had dreamt big.



Lucianne touched her shoulder and whispered gently, "Are you alright, Hailey?"

Hailey was brought out of her daze, and she blinked away the tears and turned to wipe away the excess before she chuckled and said, "Y-Yes, My Queen. Thank you."

"No, Hailey. Thank you, for telling me all of this despite having just met me," Lucianne responded.

After Hailey offered her a gracious smile, Desmond pushed Alissa forward, his way of saying, 'You go first'. Alissa's eyes narrowed at Desmond before she turned to face the queen, shook her ready hand and spoke with a wide smile and zero filter, "Alissa Arden, ma'am. Arrested, tried and convicted for manslaughter after castrating my bonded mate and setting him on fire."

## **The Rogues Who Went Rogue Chapter 40 - Tips**

0 8 minutes read

Lucianne's eyes widened before they narrowed in suspicion as she asked Alissa, "What did he do?"

Greg snorted again as one hand covered his mouth to hide his wide smile. This was actually becoming quite entertaining for him and his animal. Xandar's hand went from Lucianne's waist to her shoulder, where he pressed her body to his as he pecked a kiss on her hair and hid his own smile while taking a whiff of her scent. This wasn't so bad for the king as long as he mentally blocked out that black sheep cousin of his.

Alissa seemed encouraged when even the duke was trying to mask his own amusement, so she continued speaking animatedly, "Oh, that's quite the story, ma'am. Let me tell you. So, we met and found out we were bonded at a local grocery store. We both had someone at that time but as soon as we met, he dumped his girlfriend on the spot, like right in front of me, which was VERY romantic at first blush. My then-boyfriend and I had a couple of years of history, so I was kinda reluctant to just break up with him, you know what I mean? Anyway, I caved after a week, which is, by far, THE biggest mistake of my life."

"My mate followed my boyfriend and I home without us knowing. After that, he just kept sending flowers and these cute messages that made me and my

animal melt. When my boyfriend got mad and started threatening to end what we had if I didn't reject my mate soon, I uh..."

Alissa chuckled depressingly for a second before she said frankly, "I got really stupid. I thought that...him threatening to end our relationship meant that he was going to use that against me everytime we had a fight. For some reason, my brain didn't remind me of all the other times we fought, when he never said that he would leave me if I didn't give in. We always found middle ground. Everything worked. Not immediately, but it eventually worked. We even ended up strengthening what we had with each argument. But not this last one."

"Being...blinded, I dumped him, and even had the audacity to move in with my mate the very same day I moved out from my boyfriend's place, utterly convinced that he was 'the one'. For an entire year, things with my mate were..." her eyes zoned out as she reminisced about the past as she spoke, "Great, really. The romance made my heart flutter like butterflies, the sex was addicting. We even had a set of triplets together. The only problem was that he never seemed to want to let me mark him, nor did he want to mark me."

"The reason...no, that's not the right word. 'Excuse' is better. The excuse he gave was that he wanted us to be deeply in love first, then mark each other. I was confused but I didn't say anything, thinking that everything would eventually work itself out. Goddess, was I wrong."

"After that magical year, his job suddenly required him to work late, sometimes a little too late. And it was weird when he smelled...clean when he got back, like he took a shower before he returned. Strawberry body wash. When I got suspicious and started asking questions, he just said I was being paranoid, and that his heart was mine before throwing in a sex session to stave off my doubts. It wasn't until we ran into his ex at a park one day did I realize he was still seeing her behind my back."

Alissa started staring at the floor with a sad smile as she continued, "They were both shocked to see each other there, but it wasn't the kind of awkward shock. He just looked like he was trying to avoid getting caught when he turned away and pulled me along. She wasn't embarrassed or anything, and just threw me a smirk. My brain finally started working right, and I stormed towards her just to take her scent. And there it was, strawberry."

“The most monstrous thing was that she didn’t even budge, like she wanted me to smell her, to rub it in my face that my mate was seeing her, f\*cking her. I pushed her into the fountain, and my mate...went to help her out. It was as clear as day after that. He slept with her, showered at her place before coming back to me and our children.”

“Everything made sense. His sudden need to work overtime, his unexplainable clean scent, the fact that he never wanted us to mark each other. He wouldn’t be able to sleep with another woman behind my back if we were marked, so he delayed it and used it to his advantage. The butterflies I felt turned into a traumatized experience of betrayal. I was so angry that I couldn’t speak, couldn’t scream. Everything just began to bottle-up inside, and my mind went...oddly calm and quiet.”

“My mate brought us home and he apologized, saying that he wouldn’t see her anymore, that I was his ‘one and only’, though he still insisted that we hold off the marking. I didn’t speak for the entire hour that he spoke. I just stared at him blankly. I was hurt, but I don’t understand why I didn’t cry. I just sat there, feeling the fire burning in me. My animal was unusually quiet, too.”

“I tucked the kids in, as usual, and it was the first time my mate helped me out when I did that. We went to bed, and he dozed off quite quickly. Naked, I would add. After two hours of staring into space, it was like something took over me. I got out of bed, went to the kitchen, got a knife, a lighter and a bottle of wine before making my way back to the bedroom. And uh...” she caught Hailey and Ivory’s slight shake of their heads, so Alissa decided to end her story with, “Well, I’m sure you know what happened from there, My Queen. I’ll spare you the details.”

“I want the details, Alissa. Do go on.” Lucianne insisted with wide eyes like she was watching a movie, and was secretly rooting for the female lead, Alissa herself.

Alissa’s eyes widened for a moment before she chuckled lightly and continued, “I pulled over his covers when he lay flat on his back, poured half a bottle of wine around the frame of his body, chopped off his balls, heard him scream when I poured the remaining wine all over his body, and then used the lighter to...light him up?” The men around her cringed as subtly as they could but their discomfort was still visible from their faces.

Xandar murmured in realization, “You’re Arson Arden.” She looked so different from the time she was tried. Her hair used to be longer and her face

was haggard even from the pictures. Now, Arson Arden looked fresher, healthier and her hair only reached her cheeks.

Greg was glaring daggers at his cousin, not that Xandar cared. Alissa forced herself to face Xandar as she suppressed the hate as much as possible, “Yes, Your Highness. That was what they called me in every news report.”

Lucianne remembered this case, too. She then noted, “But the news didn’t mention the events leading up to that incident. They just reported that you started the fire because of a so-called ‘common relationship issue’, making it seem like you overreacted. And what was worse was that your then-mate said that you were mentally unstable.”

Alissa nodded in confirmation and continued explaining, “Which was all fiction, I must add, My Queen. He came up with events that never even happened. His rich family practically fabricated evidence that the court accepted without question because I couldn’t produce evidence to contradict whatever the prosecutor submitted. And I was seen as the crazy one in court when I screamed my lungs out to deny the assertions the prosecutor was making on his behalf.”

This was getting more wrong by the minute. The queen’s eyes glistened as she recalled the last bit of facts she remembered, “Even when your lawyer tried to use the mental instability argument to your advantage, pleading diminished responsibility to absolve you from as much blame as possible, it didn’t really work. Your sentence was lightened so little that it was almost negligible. And your children were taken away because no relatives were willing to take them in, while the court found you unfit to be a mother.”

“Yeah,” Alissa forced a brief smile before she wiped away her own tears. “But uh...” she looked at Greg, her way of asking for permission, which he granted with a nod.

Alissa said, “I’ve seen them grow up. All three were adopted by different families, and I make time to see each one.”

Lucianne asked with hopeful eyes, “Have you ever gotten a chance to meet them?”

Alissa shook her head with a sad smile. “It’s too risky, My Queen. My case took six years to complete. And in the years I’ve been in police custody and in court, my triplets were raised by creatures who told them that their mother

was a psychiatric patient who incapacitated their father who subsequently died from his injuries. I have thought about meeting them, telling them, but with the law and history against me, I came to terms that they might report me to the police who would've then taken me away. I didn't see them for six years because of what I did to my bonded mate. I can't risk not seeing them for Goddess knows how long more if I'm caught and put behind bars."

"That's understandable," Lucianne muttered. She gently detached herself from Xandar's grip before stepping forward to wrap Alissa in a hug. Arson Arden was shocked before her animal instinct made her squeeze Lucianne in return as tears flowed down her cheeks when Lucianne whispered, "I am so sorry, Alissa."

The sight even made Xandar sad. Arson Arden. How could the media label someone who was treated so badly by combining their name to a crime like it was funny or catchy? It was so insensitive and inhumane. The system back then even confirmed a creature to be clinically-insane just because her mate had the means to fabricate such evidence? And the fact that she denied it in court by screaming just magically cemented the fiction that she was insane? What bullsh\*t! How was it that the need to authenticate evidence never crossed the judge's or the lawyers' minds?

Greg watched the two women in each other's arms, and he couldn't help but feel moved. Lucianne had no responsibility over what happened to Alissa, yet it was so obvious that she cared, despite the fact that Alissa was labeled a criminal by the system that Lucianne automatically had to defend when she became the queen.

Greg didn't recall a single instance where his late aunt, Queen Vera, would take the mildest interest in a subject. Heck! The late queen didn't even take an interest in him, and he was her nephew!

Lucianne was now listening to her people's plight like she was a friend or a sister, even when she didn't have to. Everything about her was just so...different.